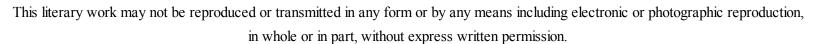


THE STUBBORN ACCOMPLICE

13 KINGDOMS #2

H.LDAY

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Intended for an 18+ audience. This book contains material that may be offensive to some and is intended for a mature, adult audience. It contains graphic language, explicit sexual content, and adult situations.

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<u>Thanks</u>

Huge thanks to my beta readers Barbara and Sherry.



BLURB

A missing artifact. A kingdom of secrets. Two men versus a multitude of magical beasts.

Jack and Sebastian are on the move once more. This time, to the frozen mountains of Askophai in search of a kingdom's missing artifact. The journey alone would be perilous enough, but how are they supposed to find something that no one can describe? And what does the mysterious man who can make himself invisible have to do with any of it?

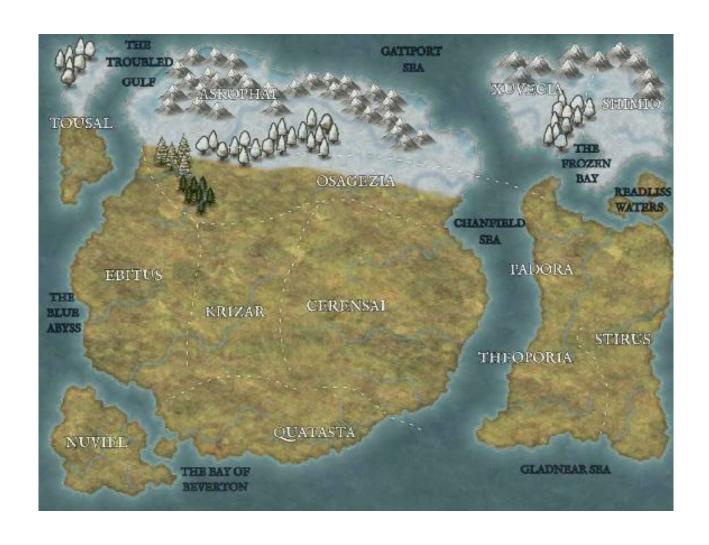
Jack has enough of Sebastian's secrets to deal with, without taking on a whole kingdom's. He and Sebastian might be together, but Jack still has his doubts about their long-term future. Assuming they have one that is, given Sebastian's penchant for walking them headlong into danger at every opportunity.

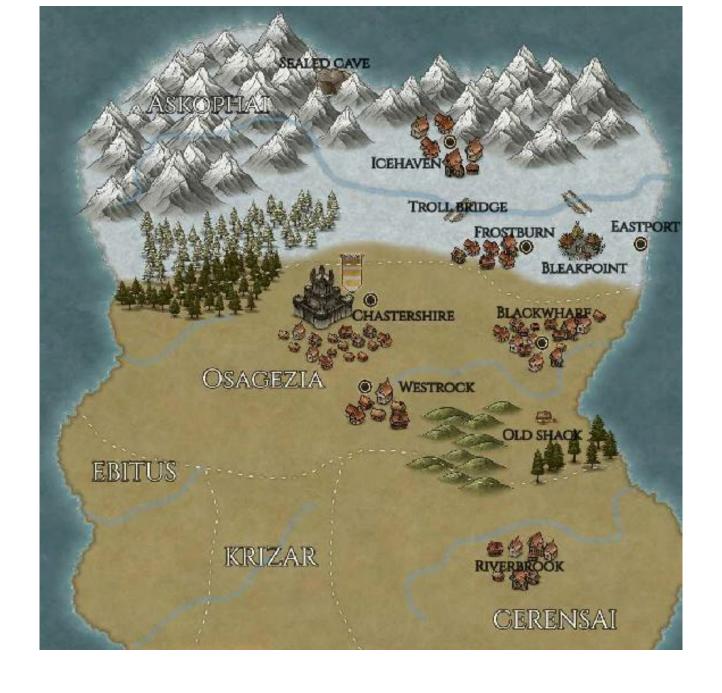
One thing's for certain, they're going to need an awful lot of luck to succeed in this mission and return home safely.

The Stubborn Accomplice is an 84k sequel that features trolls, magical knights, an unwanted orc suitor, a wizard only too familiar to one of the main characters, and two men who really need to get better at talking about their feelings. If you enjoyed The Reluctant Companion buckle up for more banter, magic, and adventures in the continuation of the 13 kingdoms series.



MAPS







CHAPTER ONE

JACK

As we crested the hill, I cast a quick glance across to my companion. Sebastian Beau. Summoner of magical animals. Thief of whatever took his fancy. The vainest man I'd ever met. Argumentative. Oblivious to danger. Completely insufferable. I dipped my chin to hide a wry grin should he look my way. He was also my lover, the man I was prepared to face insurmountable odds with, as long as he was by my side.

I hadn't always felt that way. It was hard to comprehend that a couple of months ago, this man hadn't been in my life. And then one day, there I'd been, minding my own damn business and bothering no one, and I'd been robbed by a monkey. Not a real monkey. No, there could be nothing so mundane where Sebastian was concerned.

The monkey had been a summon. Sebastian could wave his hand and produce animals and birds out of thin air. Did his recent confession that the act of taking my money pouch had actually been a bid to get my attention make it better? Possibly. But whatever the reason behind it, it didn't change the fact that my life had changed irrevocably from that point. I may have started off determined not to fall prey to his considerable charms, but that determination had been slowly ground down during the trials we'd faced together. Until friends had become lovers. And lovers had become... Well, I still wasn't a hundred percent clear on that one.

When had my feelings changed? Was it when he'd rescued me from bandits? Or when he'd refused a prince's hand in marriage and chosen me instead? Or maybe it was when he'd insisted on escorting me home when there was no need to do so? I wasn't sure. The timeline didn't really matter. All that mattered was that I'd come to terms with my feelings for him.

Mostly.

So here we were, embarking on another adventure, this time in search of a kingdom's missing artifact. My stupid feelings had a lot to answer for.

"Why are you scowling?"

I turned my head to fix him with a glare. "I was thinking about things."

Sebastian stopped, crossing his arms over his impressively broad chest and raising his chin in a question. "What things?"

I subjected him to my most scathing look. "Since when are you privy to my innermost thoughts?"

A slow smile spread across Sebastian's face and his blue eyes twinkled. "Oh, I see! You were thinking about me."

It stung because it was true, and I rounded on him. "You're so vain that you would assume that. I do have thoughts, you know, that have absolutely nothing to do with you. Thoughts about..." I drew a blank and ended up staring at him.

Sebastian's smile grew wider. "Your family?"

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"Yes... and..."
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"Your farm?"

"That too... and..."

"Sex?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. "I told you that I wasn't thinking about you."

Sebastian pressed a hand to his chest—which for once was covered by a shirt—in a feigned gesture of innocence. "Did I mention myself at all? You could have been thinking in the abstract. I am extremely flattered, though, that as soon as I mention the word sex, you immediately associate it with me."

I gave him a none too gentle push that had him staggering backwards. While he was busy regaining his balance, I took the opportunity to set off without him. I got a few blessed moments of solitude before he was back at my side. He opened his mouth and I held up a hand. "Don't!"

He closed it. Five seconds passed before he couldn't help himself. "But—"

"No."

"You're mean."

I opened my mouth to dispute that fact, but before I could, a dark shape in the sky caught my eye. It was too big to be a bird, and it was moving far too fast. "What's that?"

Sebastian didn't look up, his gaze staying resolutely fixed on the ground. "Oh, now you want me to talk, do you? I wasn't aware that Jack Shaw's word had been made law today. I feel I should tell you that..."

I stopped listening, all my focus on the dark object growing steadily larger, details starting to make themselves known. It had wings and a beak, but that was where the resemblance to a bird ended. The back of it definitely wasn't bird-like. The most worrying thing was that it seemed to be headed straight for us. "Sebastian?"

He was still talking, his words a constant stream of nonsense. Or at least in the current scheme of there being far more important things to worry about, it was nonsense. I grabbed his hair and yanked his head back, forcing him to look up. "What. The. Fuck. Is. That?"

Sebastian's forehead creased. "Huh! Interesting. I would say a griffin, but there are no griffins in Cerensai or in Osagezia. They're only found in Tousal, and even then, they're rare. Most of them died out due to a lack of food."

"What do they eat?"

"People, mostly."

"Right." Using my hand to shade my eyes from the sun, I studied it. "If it's not a griffin, what is it?" There was a long pause, Sebastian's head tilting to the side while he contemplated the question. "It's definitely a griffin. Nothing else has the head of a bird and the body of a lion."

I nodded. "So... if it's a griffin and it's heading our way, and they eat people, shouldn't we, I don't know... run or something?"

Sebastian's nod was a little too enthusiastic. "I think... Jack Shaw, that that is an excellent idea." We ran, the downhill slope giving us extra speed, but at the same time providing a danger of losing our footing if we went too fast. I stole a look over at Sebastian, who was matching me stride for stride, his hair flying behind him. "Are we running anywhere in particular? Or just running?"

"House. Over there."

I looked to where he was pointing, most of my attention prior to that having been focused on the uneven ground beneath my feet to ensure I didn't go tumbling down the hill. There was a house. It was a tiny thing. More of a shack, really, but it was better than nothing. "And what if... the occupants of that house... aren't happy about us... bringing a griffin... to their door?" I forced the question out between pants, my breath starting to burn in my chest.

"Then they can tell us that. From the inside of their house."

I had to admit that I was on board with that sentiment. I'd happily swap a lecture and outrage for safety. I could hear it now, the distinct flap of wings, the fact that the noise was growing steadily louder a telltale sign that the griffin was gaining on us. We reached the bottom of the hill, the flat

ground enabling us to increase our pace. The house was no more than twenty meters away, the wooden slats of the door taunting us with their close proximity.

Sebastian got there first. He bypassed knocking in favor of going straight for the door handle and twisting. We both swore as the door refused to open. Sebastian gave it a rattle, but the result was the same. "It's locked."

I peered through one of the windows, the outside of the glass so grimy that I had to wipe it with my sleeve before I could see in. The house gave every appearance of nobody having been there in quite some time: the interior dirty and neglected. I gave brief consideration to smashing the window, but that didn't seem wise given that we wanted the inside to be a place of safety without access points. "Empty. No one's going to be letting us in no matter how politely we ask. Can you summon something to get us inside?"

"It would take too long." Sebastian was searching the ground, the answer to what he was looking for, provided when he bent over and picked up a large rock. "I can break the lock."

With his brow furrowed in concentration, he heaved the rock against the door. It shuddered but held fast. I turned around, just in time to see the griffin land. It was about ten meters away, apparently having decided that we weren't going anywhere and it could take its time. "You might want to hurry."

Sebastian shot me a look of irritation. "Doing the best I can."

"Well, do better." I pulled my bow off my shoulder and notched an arrow, aiming it at the griffin's massive chest. In different circumstances, I might have found the creature impressive. It was certainly huge, the top of its head reaching at least eight feet. Its front resembled an eagle, right down to the vicious curved beak and the sharp talons pawing at the ground, but just as Sebastian had said, its body was that of a lion. A very muscular, very large lion. It had yellow eyes, its gaze fixed on Sebastian as it stalked closer. It tilted its head back and let loose a cry, the sound shrill enough to go right through me. There was another thump as the rock rebounded off the door, but no cry of success as the door held fast.

Was the griffin intelligent enough to know what he was up to? I had no fucking clue. In case it did, it seemed important to distract it. "Hey, sort of birdie. Over here." Its head swiveled my way and it cocked it to one side, one yellow eye fixing on me. "That's it. Come this way. Don't worry about the man playing with a rock. He's not important."

The griffin came a few steps closer, its wings lifting in an impressive display of wing span as it let out another deafening screech. It was close enough now that I could see the patterns on its feathers.

Too damn close. Sebastian needed to summon something. Except if he did, that would mean him

giving up on the door. And there was no telling how long whatever he summoned would last before it got ripped to pieces and we were back to square one, which meant I was the last line of defense.

Forcing myself to breathe slowly and to not give in to the panic gripping my chest, I closed one eye to sight along the arrow and then I let fly. My aim was true, the arrow striking the griffin in the center of its chest. I didn't know what I'd expected. At the very least maybe for the griffin's forward momentum to slow, but apart from a quick glance down at the arrow buried in its plumage, it didn't seem unduly concerned. Fucking marvelous. Perhaps the griffin had just been lucky about where it landed.

I notched another arrow, this one finding a target on the left side of the griffin's chest. It had no more effect than the first had. I let loose another, this time aiming for the griffin's head. It ducked, the arrow sailing over the top of it and embedding in the grass a few meters away. Arrows five and six fired in quick succession found homes in the griffin's neck, while number seven embedded itself in the griffin's leg. None had any effect whatsoever. The griffin may as well have been made of stone. I took a deep breath and mentally prepared myself to be skewered by its beak as it got closer. Or at least as much as you could prepare yourself for such an eventuality.

And then I was grabbed by the collar and dragged backwards. Not by the griffin, but by Sebastian. I'd been so fixated on the creature that the cessation of the thuds as Sebastian had battered at the door hadn't registered. He dragged me inside, both of us turning to prop our backs against the damaged door to hold it closed. The shack didn't look any better from the inside than it had through the window, everything covered in a thick layer of dust and cobwebs. There were several pieces of furniture, though, Sebastian already levering himself off the door to push and shove a bookcase in front of it instead. We both went for the sofa, clouds of dust coming off it as Sebastian grabbed one end while I got the other. Together, we maneuvered it over in front of the bookcase. Sofa in position, we spent the next few minutes working together to firm up the barricade.

It wasn't until we'd finished that I looked up. "Fuck!"

Sebastian followed my gaze, both of us staring at the huge hole in the roof. "That's not ideal."

I let out a breath and then counted to ten. Neither action did anything to quell the churning in my gut. "I hate you!"

Sebastian turned to me with a look of surprise on his face. "Again?"

"Still."

He looked thoughtful for a moment. "I'm not sure that works. Because there have definitely been times in the past week or so when that didn't seem to be the case at all. Just to give you one example,

what about when you were..."

Whatever he'd said was drowned out by a screech so loud that I was forced to cover my ears. "It sounds pissed."

Sebastian peered over my shoulder, taking in the one remaining arrow in my quiver. "You did just embed most of your arrows in it. I shouldn't think it took that as a friendly greeting."

I glowered at him. "What else was I supposed to do while you were taking a million years to break a lock?"

Sebastian looked decidedly affronted. "It was a thick door and a very small rock. I got there in the end."

I rolled my eyes. "I always suspected the muscles were just for show." Before he could provide a comeback, which would probably have been something along the lines of how I never complained about his muscles in bed—which would have been true—I returned to my study of the roof, the hole seeming to get bigger every time I looked at it. "Can it get in?" The griffin might not have noticed the hole in the roof yet, but it was probably only a matter of time. And we'd just piled all the furniture in front of the only exit point.

Sebastian's expression spoke volumes as he tipped his head back to stare at the hole. "Erm..." "Don't tell me the truth. Lie to me."

He blinked. "Definitely not. That hole is nowhere near large enough for the griffin to fit through. Have you seen the size of its wings?"

I lifted my gaze to the hole again, the hole that was big enough for two griffins to fit through. "You're a dreadful liar."

Sebastian crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the wall. From his casual stance, you would have thought the enraged griffin flapping its wings outside the window was nothing but a figment of my imagination.

We were less than a couple of days' travel from Riverbrook, having only just crossed over the border from Cerensai to Osagezia, and already trouble had found us. It was like we were a magnet for it. Yet, even with the pulse of blood in my ears, I couldn't bring myself to regret it. I wasn't about to admit that to Sebastian, though. Not while I still had breath in my body. I settled for a weary sigh. "So... let me see if I've got this right. We're stuck in here. We can't leave because the griffin will hunt us down and eat us. At some point, it's probably going to realize that there's a huge fucking hole in the roof and take the open invitation to come right in. At which time, we can't escape because"—I

gestured at what I could still see of the door, which wasn't much—"we've barricaded ourselves in. Have I missed anything?"

Sebastian shrugged. "I would say that's quite an accurate take on the situation." He wandered over to the opposite side of the shack. "I could summon something to plug the hole in the roof, but then of course, my magic would drain quickly, and we'd be back to square one. Better to wait it out and keep our fingers crossed that it lacks the intelligence to find the access point."

"Great! Crossing our fingers... sounds like a plan." Standing still wasn't working for me so I started to pace. At least it felt like I was doing something, even if that something wasn't remotely useful. At regular intervals, a high-pitched shriek would ring out, each one making every muscle in my body go taut and setting my teeth on edge.

"You might want to stay away from the windows. Every time it can see you, it makes that godawful sound."

I turned to glare at Sebastian. "Don't tell me what to do. This is all your fault."

"How is it my fault?" He sounded genuinely shocked by the accusation.

I took a few more steps but stopped before I reached the window, the griffin staying silent. God, I hated it when Sebastian was right about something. It only made me more furious. "Would I be here if I'd never met you?" I didn't pause for him to answer. "No, I wouldn't." I held up a finger. "Would I be here if you hadn't talked me into coming on this wild goose chase in the first place?"

The wild goose chase I was referring to had been triggered by the arrival in Riverbrook of Frederick, an envoy from the royal palace of Chastershire, who had been searching for Sebastian after news of his rescue of Prince Montgomery had reached their ears. They'd decided that if Sebastian could rescue a prince, then he was the perfect candidate to find a stolen religious artifact that no one else had been able to track down. Apparently, Princess Surander was unable to wed without it.

If you asked me, the whole thing was quite frankly ridiculous. Who needed some sort of trinket in order to get married? You either got married or you didn't. Perhaps the princess was just looking for some sort of out. Maybe.... she'd even been involved in its disappearance. It was definitely something to bear in mind should we ever reach the palace, which was looking decidedly unlikely at the moment.

"I don't remember talking you into anything. What I remember is asking you if you wanted to come, and you saying yes. Do you remember that, Jack?"

With my back safely to Sebastian, I pulled a face. Was there any need for him to bring actual facts into the conversation? "You looked at me plaintively."

"I don't remember that either."

"I..." Something squeaked under my foot. Frowning, I stopped pacing to stare at the rug beneath my feet. Underneath all the grime, it looked like it had once been red.

Sebastian arrived at my side. "What's wrong?"

I crouched down to take a closer look at the rug. It was a large one, covering almost half of the floor. I poked at the place I'd previously been standing, and the floor squeaked again, giving far more than it should have. Interesting, and definitely worthy of investigation. I flicked a glance to Sebastian. "Help me move this. There's something underneath it."

Between us, we managed to roll the rug back to reveal a wooden trap door in the center of the stone floor, one of its wooden slats responsible for the squeaking sound. I'd been lucky to stand on it in just the right place. So much for my pacing not having been useful. There was a large iron ring embedded in the trapdoor. Sebastian rolled the sleeves of his shirt up and tugged at it, his biceps bulging. It took him a few goes, but eventually it opened with a loud groaning noise, leaving us staring down into the space below, only two stairs visible until it turned into a dark abyss. It did not look at all inviting.



CHAPTER TWO

SEBASTIAN

Jack's exhale next to me was noisy as he stared into the darkness. "Okay..."

He went to move forward, and I grabbed his arm. "Wait! There could be anything down there."

Green eyes brimming with cynicism turned my way. "Well, there's an eight-foot griffin up here, and a huge hole in the roof, so I figure I'll take my chances. You can stay up here if you want. Let me know if the griffin gets bored and leaves. If I don't hear from you, I'll assume it's eaten you."

I wiggled my fingers, the firefly I formed the magic into much bigger than one would normally be, and therefore giving out far more light. It was easier to maneuver it in front of myself than it was to do so in front of Jack. Which I guessed meant I was going first, the idea not exactly filling me with joy. Stepping in front of Jack, I placed my foot on the first stair, the step reassuringly solid. "Follow me." I waited for Jack's nod before stepping down to the next stair, the firefly enabling me to at least see the next step, even if I couldn't see much beyond. I was ten steps down and surrounded by darkness when Jack spoke. "Do I close the trapdoor?"

I considered it. "Better to leave it open for now in case we need to make a quick escape." Besides, that square of light above my head made me feel better. How many steps were there anyway? I had a lot of questions. Like who had lived here and why they'd needed a pit to hell below their house?

"How far does it go down?"

"I don't know. I'll let you know when I reach the bottom." Ten more steps. Still no end. The farther we went, the colder and mustier the air grew. And then finally, after about forty steps, the patch of light through the trap door seeming a very long way away above my head, I reached a flat rock surface. "This is the bottom."

I moved over to one side, Jack coming to stand next to me. "Where are we?"

It was a good question and one I couldn't answer, the darkness surrounding us absolute. Closing my eyes, I sent the firefly forward. After a few meters, it reached a solid rock wall. From there, I had it

follow the wall all the way round until it became clear that we were in a circular room. "Some sort of cave."

Jack made a humming sound, but apart from that, and unusually for him, he didn't make any other comment. Once I'd established that we were in an enclosed space, I sent the firefly to explore, maneuvering it closer to the floor, something immediately grabbing my attention. "Candles."

Jack's shoulder brushed against mine. "Where?"

Opening my eyes, I turned toward him, but without the close proximity of the firefly, it was too dark to make out anything. If it wasn't for the sound of him breathing, I might have doubted he was even there. "Wait here. I'm going to locate the candles and light them." I'd made it sound easy, but in reality, it was anything but. If I brought the firefly back to me, I risked losing track of where the candles were, and then I'd have to start all over again. Therefore, the best course of action was for me to head to the firefly rather than the other way round. Arms outstretched in front of me, I took a cautious step in the right direction. And then another, being careful not to trip over anything.

"How are you going to light the candles?"

Jack's voice from out of the darkness made me jump. "Why don't you let me worry about that?" "Oh, of course. I'll just stand here in the dark. Like some sort of damsel in distress while you rescue me. Whatever makes you happy. Let's just be clear on the fact that I found the trapdoor, though. Not you. Me. Therefore, none of this would be possible without me."

I grinned, Jack's belligerence making me feel better. "Duly noted." I'd gotten close enough to see the faint glow of the firefly. Once I reached it, I crouched down, bringing the firefly closer as I retrieved the candles. There were about thirty. Big candles too. Ones that would last a long time. Whoever had used this place previously had kept it well stocked. It was just a shame they hadn't thought to put the candles closer to the stairs. But then, they probably hadn't ventured down here without a lantern.

"Sebastian?"

It was mean, but I stayed silent, pausing with my hand wrapped around one of the candles.

"Sebastian, if you've disappeared, I'm going to kill you."

It was a typical Jack statement, all emotion without worrying about whether his words actually made sense. "If I've disappeared, how are you going to find me to kill me?"

"You fucker! I'd find you somehow." He might have been calling me names and making threats, but there was no mistaking the relief in Jack's voice for anything other than what it was. Smiling, I drew the magical energy back in, and then transformed the firefly into a tiny dragon small enough to fit on the palm of my hand. One puff of flame and the candle lit up.

"WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?"

"Just lighting a candle."

By the time I'd repeated the action with four or five of the candles, it was bright enough for Jack to find me. He came to stand by my side, frowning at my hand. "Oh, a tiny dragon. That's..." He shook his head. Whatever he thought it was, he'd obviously decided against sharing.

I passed him a lit candle, and a handful that weren't, Jack immediately setting to work on rectifying that. Between us, we lit all the candles and positioned them around the room. Once we'd finished, Jack went to close the trapdoor while I evaluated our surroundings. Not that there was much to see. The only furniture was a mattress and a single wooden chair. At least the mattress meant we wouldn't have to sleep on the floor, because I assumed we were going to be stuck here for the night. The griffin would give up eventually, especially now that we were out of sight, but I had a feeling that giving up on its dinner would take at least a few hours.

"What's that?" Jack was back, and he was frowning at a small door in the wall I hadn't noticed. It was about a third of the size you would expect a door to be.

I shrugged. "I guess there's only one way to find out."

Jack tugged the door open and dropped to his knees. Clasping a candle in his right hand, he crawled into the space headfirst until his shoulders were out of sight. His position on his hands and knees left me with a stupendous sight of his ass, and zero risk of getting caught ogling it. Not that I wasn't allowed, but Jack could be notoriously difficult when he felt there were more important matters at hand, and I suspected this would be one of those times. It was a very nice ass. Rounded and firm, and extremely fuckable. And thinking about his ass was far more pleasurable than contemplating what lay behind that door. Except, I supposed I had to. I cleared my throat. "What can you see?"

"It's some sort of passageway." Jack's voice was muffled and slightly echoey. "Very narrow, and without going any farther in, I can't tell how long it is and where it might lead." He backed out and straightened to standing, his eyes glinting with optimism. "This might be our key to getting past the griffin. The stupid beast stays outside waiting for us while we pass right under its oversized bird feet."

I contemplated the tunnel, a lump forming in my throat. "Perhaps. But we'd be better to wait until morning, and only use it as a last resort if the griffin hasn't given up by then. We have no idea where it

might lead. It could be a dead end, or it could lead into some other creature's lair. Something worse than a griffin."

Jack's forehead creased. "It's not like you to be so cautious." He moved closer to me, his eyes narrowing. "You're sweating as well." His lips twitched. "You're scared of enclosed spaces, aren't you?" His gaze raked down my body, pausing at the swelling in my trousers from my protracted scrutiny of one of his best assets. "What the hell were you thinking about while I was in there?"

"Which question do you want me to answer?"

Jack crossed his arms over his chest and arched an eyebrow. "Both. Neither question is that difficult."

"I distinctly remember a certain someone being afraid of the sea."

Jack gave a slow shake of his head. "That's not answering the question."

"And the sea is very open. A lot of people equate the sea with freedom."

"Sebastian, answer the question."

I let out a frustrated breath. He would pick away at it until I admitted it. Therefore, I might as well get it over with. I gestured at the tunnel, the door still wide open. "If you're going to build a passageway, why not build it a decent size? Why make it that small?"

Jack smirked. "So, you are afraid."

I stared at him. "No need to sound so delighted about it."

His smile grew wider. "Oh, but I am." Flicking imaginary long hair back over his shoulder in what I assumed was meant to be a parody of me, he put his hands on his hips and pushed his chest forward. "My name is Sebastian Beau, and I have vanquished creatures and put fear into the hearts of men. I have run into danger without a moment's thought. I have bedded more than my fair share of both men and women, many of whom would give their right arm to spend another night in my company should I be generous enough to throw them a few crumbs of affection. But..." Jack paused for dramatic effect. "I will not go into small dark passages because they're scary."

I glared at him. "Shut up. I didn't mock you for being scared of the sea."

Still smiling, Jack bent over to close the small door. "No, but you threw me over your shoulder and forced me up on deck when I didn't want to go. You made me face my fears." He grinned wickedly. "Perhaps I should shove you into the passage headfirst. You know, it's only fair that I return the favor."

I stared at him mutinously. "Try it and see how far you get."

Jack gave a throaty laugh. "It's exceedingly tempting."

Refusing to look at him, I stalked over to the mattress. I lay down on it, spreading my arms and legs wide enough that they covered the entire thing. "Oh look! There's no room for you on here. Sorry, Jack."

"I'll sleep on top of you."

I sat up. "You think I'm going to object to that."

Jack's gaze trailed back down to my crotch, my unruly cock now back under control after all the talk of enclosed spaces. "You still haven't answered the second question."

"You were on your hands and knees. What was I supposed to think about?"

"Not that!"

I shrugged and lay back again, my fingers hooked behind my head. "Don't have such a nice ass and wiggle it in front of me."

"There was no wiggling."

"There was wiggling. I was there."

"If there was, it wasn't in a sexual way. That's just your mind turning it into something it wasn't."

Jack grabbed the chair and pulled it over to the side of the mattress before gingerly lowering himself onto it. He relaxed once he realized it would hold his weight. "When were we supposed to meet Frederick at The Freezing Steed in Westrock?

I turned my head Jack's way. "In two days' time. We're going to be late."

Jack let out a sigh. "He'll have gone by the time we get there." He scanned the room with a slight wrinkle to his nose that I found adorable. "If we get there."

"We'll get there, and he'll wait."

Jack leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, his expression curious. "How can you be so sure?"

Jack was delightfully naïve sometimes about how things worked in the world. "He got us to agree to undertake a dangerous mission. The fact that he traveled all the way to Riverbrook, a place where he had no guarantee of finding me, means he'd already exhausted all other possible options." I'd only been in Riverbrook because Jack was there. From now on, I didn't intend to let him out of my sight for longer than was absolutely necessary. I was stuck to him like glue whether he wanted me to be or not. And if I did have to leave him at any point, I fully intended to return to him at the earliest opportunity.

Jack looked thoughtful. "Perhaps."

"Definitely."

"What if we're a week late getting there?"

"He'll still be there."

"A month?"

I gave him a lazy grin. "What are we going to do for an entire month?" Jack rolled his eyes but seemed somewhat mollified by my reassurances. He was beautiful in candlelight, but then, he was beautiful in any light. He reminded me of a kitten. He had the ability to look all cute and fluffy, but if you tried to pick him up, he was all claws and teeth, hissing and spitting furiously. A couple of strokes in the right place, though, and he'd soon calm and start purring. Yeah, I knew what made Jack tick even if he'd deny it to his last breath. "And if we did get there, and he was gone, it wouldn't be any big deal. We could just make our own way to the palace."

"What, just knock on the door and say we're here to deal with your missing artifact problem.

Please excuse our tardiness, but we had a run-in with a griffin that shouldn't exist on these shores."

I nodded. "Exactly that. It is, after all, the truth."

Jack was silent for a few moments. I watched him, wondering what thoughts were going through his head. When his gaze strayed back my way, there was an intensity in his expression that I recognized. It meant he was determined to get to the bottom of something and woe betide anyone who stood in his way. "How long have we known each other, Sebastian?"

A lifetime! It felt that long, but I doubted Jack would accept it as an answer. I'd been smitten with him from the very first time I'd seen him through the eyes of a monkey. He could have fought me tooth and nail for years, and I still wouldn't have given up on him. I levered myself up so that my back rested against the stone wall. "A couple of months."

Jack's brow furrowed and he sat up straighter. "And yet, I know nothing about you. I didn't even know you had a fear of enclosed spaces."

The casual statement had my fingers curling into my palms. So much so that I had to make an effort to relax my hands. "That's not true. You know lots about me."

Jack's noise of disagreement was incredibly vehement. "Meeting a long line of your ex-lovers doesn't count as knowing things about you."

"Hardly a long line."

He held up a hand and started ticking names off on his fingers. "Leofric?"

Given that he'd asked it as a question, I felt forced into providing an answer. "A very long time ago. We were teenagers. It was more experimental than anything, so I'm not sure that counts."

"It counts." Jack scowled as he lowered another finger. "Mister my ship is bigger and better than anyone else's."

I laughed. "Do you mean Cassemir?"

"If we have to call him by his name."

I sighed. "That was a very short-term thing."

He lowered another finger. "The oh so wonderfully named Mad Dog Keaton."

I stared at him. "How come you're less annoyed by him than you are by Cassemir? Cassemir didn't imprison you with the intention of selling you to a slave trader."

"No. but he was far more arrogant. And he did accuse me of being a whore."

I shook my head. "Mad Dog doesn't count. That was one night."

"Did you or did you not have sex with him?"

"Is that your definition of a lover?"

Jack's eyes narrowed. "Let me guess, it's not yours."

"No, it's not. And... even if they were all lovers, three is not a long line."

Jack suddenly stilled. "You're trying to distract me. You want us to argue about this so that I'll forget about wanting to know more about you." He tipped his head to one side and studied me. "What are you hiding, Sebastian?"

I forced a laugh even as my heart sped up. "Hiding? I'm not hiding anything. Why would I hide anything from you? What would be the point?"

Jack didn't so much as blink, his eyes never once leaving my face. "I don't know, but I intend to find out."



CHAPTER THREE

JACK

A couple of months was long enough that I should know far more about Sebastian than I did, but he was being evasive. He did it a lot. He was incredibly adept at steering the conversation away from anything he didn't want to talk about. All he had to do was get me riled up. Well, it wasn't going to work this time. I was going to be calmness personified, and I was going to strip back some of the layers that made up Sebastian Beau until I discovered what was lurking on the inside. "I can't be with you if I feel like you're hiding things from me." The words were out before I could stop them.

Sebastian jerked, the expression on his face as shocked as I'd ever seen it. "You don't mean that."

Did I? Could I walk away? I guessed at the moment it didn't matter, as long as Sebastian believed it was a possibility. I raised my chin and looked him square in the eye. "I do mean it."

Sebastian waved a hand in the direction of the stairs. "Go on then. I'm sure the griffin will be very pleased to see you."

I gave him a scathing look. "I wouldn't leave now *obviously*, but as soon as we're out of this mess, you wouldn't see me for dust."

An expression of hurt settled on Sebastian's face, and I had to stop myself from taking my words back. "You could walk away? Just like that."

I sighed. "I don't want to. I'm not asking for a lot, Sebastian. Just the answers to some basic questions."

"You think now is the time?"

Evasive again. My heart sank. What if I ended up having to keep my promise? What if Sebastian forced me into having to walk away? It didn't bear thinking about. I'd had a taste of life without him in Riverbrook when he'd stuck around but hadn't bothered to inform me of that fact, and I hadn't enjoyed it one little bit. It had been empty and boring, time stretching in front of me with seemingly

little purpose to it. A few weeks with him had ruined me when it came to returning to my humdrum existence.

I drummed my fingers on my knee while I considered how best to proceed. There was nothing unusual about Sebastian and I being locked in a battle of wills, but it was usually over trivial things. This wasn't trivial. This was important. I'd basically told him that I would leave if he didn't give in to my demands, but it wasn't as if they were unreasonable demands. All I was asking for was a piece of his history. He'd met my family. He'd visited my home village. He knew where I came from. All I wanted was for him to return the favor. I shook my head. "What else are we going to do while we're stuck down here?" I pointed an accusatory finger at Sebastian. "And don't say sex."

"I wouldn't."

I raised an eyebrow, the slight flush on Sebastian's cheekbones showing it for the lie it was. He stared at me for a moment, and then he shrugged. "Fine. Ask your questions. I don't have anything to hide. My background isn't very interesting, but if you're so determined to hear all the mundane details that you're threatening to leave, I guess I can bore you with it for a little while." He cocked his head to one side. "What do you want to know?"

A bubble of excitement rose up in me at Sebastian's apparent compliance. One, because it meant I was finally going to be able to fill in some of the blank spots, and two, because he wasn't going to call my bluff on my threats to abandon him, because I suspected I would have caved anyway when it came down to it.

My words came out in a rush. "Everything. Where you grew up, what it was like, who your parents are, brothers and sisters, pets, childhood memories. You can tell me about Leofric, how the two of you ended up in another kingdom. You can tell me how you first discovered you had magic and what it was like, whether it came as a shock to your parents. You can..."

Sebastian held up a hand, and my words trailed off. "Too much?"

"A little. I'm beginning to feel like I'm on trial. What happens if I get the answers wrong?" I shook my head. "There is no wrong."

Sebastian's gaze settled somewhere just above my right shoulder. "It all started in a very ordinary house in Padora. Very ordinary. So ordinary, you wouldn't even notice it. Small as well. Very small."

I frowned. "Why does this feel like you're telling me a story? It shouldn't sound like a story."

Sebastian arched a brow. "Oh, I'm sorry. So there's no wrong answers, but there's a wrong way of doing it. You are a very hard man to please, Jack Shaw. Do you want to know about my humble beginnings or not?"

I waved a hand. "Go on. Just... less story-like."

Sebastian rolled his eyes. "As I was saying, I had very humble beginnings—"

"There's been a lot of words so far, and no actual information."

His blue eyes narrowed. "Possibly because someone keeps interrupting."

I held up my hands in a gesture of surrender.

After a pause, Sebastian started up again. I willed myself to stay silent. "Kara, my mother... she..." He looked pensive for a moment as if he was struggling to remember. "She was a

washerwoman. She did the laundry for the entire village, and she mended clothes as well. Whereas,

Fergus, my father..." He tapped his fingers on the mattress. "He hunted. What we didn't eat, he sold.

That's how we made money. What else did you want to know? Oh, right, brothers and sisters... I have three sisters and two brothers."

I frowned, already forgetting my intention to let him talk. "That's a big family when you're struggling to make ends meet."

Sebastian shrugged. "You'd have to ask my mother and father about that."

I leaned forward. "Tell me more about your brothers and sisters."

Sebastian's face said he'd rather pull his own fingernails out one by one than do that. "Troy is the oldest by two years. Then me. Then came Amelia, Jasmin, and Lilly. And lastly, my brother,

Laurence. There's a gap of nine years between Troy and Laurence."

"You don't get on with your siblings?"

"We're very different."

"Because you've got magic?"

Sebastian nodded, the movement almost too eager. "Exactly." He examined his fingernails. "I expect they were jealous. Filled to the brim with it. Silently seething."

"And Leofric?"

"Leofric was... another boy in the village. We used to... you know, play the games that young boys like to play, the ones you can play in villages. He was the same age, so we gravitated together."

I turned the chair round so I could straddle it, with my arms on the chair back, and my chin resting on the back of my hands. "He told me about you putting a snake in his bed."

Sebastian's lips curled up in an expression of fond remembrance. "Did he tell you why I did that?" I shook my head and Sebastian rolled his eyes. "He filled my boots with spiders. They must have taken him hours to collect."

I laughed. "He left that bit out."

"He would."

"How old were you when you first discovered you had magic?"

"Five... six, maybe." Sebastian's brow furrowed. "I don't remember exactly. I used to go off into the forest on my own to look for animals, and when there weren't any, I wished for one, and there it was. I thought everybody could do it. I started small, mainly mice and squirrels, and then I worked my way up to bears and lions."

"Is that how your parents realized you could do magic?"

"Probably. What else do you want to know?"

I thought about it. "Were you happy?"

Sebastian's expression clouded slightly, but only for the briefest moment. It was so fleeting that I decided I'd probably imagined it. "Of course."

"So why did you leave?"

"The"—he paused as if he'd been going to say something else and then changed his mind—"village was so very small, and the world is so very big. I wanted to see more of it."

Something wasn't adding up. Something he'd said previously which didn't quite match. What was it? The only time Sebastian had shared anything about his early life had been on Cassemir's ship, so it had to have been then. And then it came to me. "Before... you said something about expectations, about having left because there were too many. What did you mean by that?"

Sebastian's gaze lifted to that same spot over my right shoulder. "You must have misheard me. What expectations would there be in a small village in the middle of nowhere?"

Had I misheard him? I didn't think so. There was something else as well. "Why do you speak like that?"

"Like what?"

I laughed. Was he for real? "Oh, come on, Sebastian. You speak very proper. Almost like you should be one of the upper classes. I noticed it the first time I met you. Even through my rage."

"Everyone in Padora speaks like that?"

I considered the information for a moment. It was possible. Accents did vary from kingdom to kingdom. "Leofric doesn't."

"Then you should ask *him* why he doesn't speak the way he should."

"He's not here."

Sebastian crossed his arms over his chest. "I wish he was. We could get him to distract the griffin while we make a run for it."

"That seems unfair."

Sebastian grinned. "Life is unfair." He lay back and patted the mattress next to him. "Now that you've extracted all the information from me that you wanted, come to bed. We should try and get some sleep."

I moved from the chair to the mattress, lying down at Sebastian's side. "Should we blow out the candles?"

Sebastian propped himself up on one elbow, his gaze drifting over to the small door in the wall. "That depends. Do you want to wake up in the dark?"

"Not particularly." I turned onto my side and wrapped my arms around myself, the cold mattress only highlighting what I'd been doing my best to ignore, that the cavern beneath the shack was not only cold, but damp too. It was going to be a long, miserable night, with the only bright spot being that we were safe from being eaten by a griffin. It was doubtful I was going to be able to sleep that much.

Sebastian's warm breath on the back of my neck told me that he'd turned my way. "Do you feel better now that you know about my childhood? I did warn you it wasn't very interesting."

"It's what makes you, you."

"Do you think?"

I frowned at the strange question as I rolled over so I could see Sebastian's face. "You don't think that?"

His expression was unusually solemn. "I'd like to think that we make our own paths in life, that we're not tied to the one laid out for us."

It was a rather cryptic statement, but I guessed if he'd grown up in a large family where they'd struggled to make ends meet, it made sense. He'd left to find a better life. No one could think badly of him for that. And nobody could blame him for not wanting to go back to it. I shivered, Sebastian's gaze narrowing in on the action.

"Are you cold?"

"No. I'm just shivering for fun."

He shifted over to the edge of the mattress. "Move to the middle, farm boy."

Despite my confusion. I did as he'd asked. I was too tired and too cold to argue. "Where are you going to sleep?"

The answer came as Sebastian draped himself on top of me. Sebastian was warm. He was always warm, once having admitted to running hot because of the magic in his veins. He was heavy as well, but it was a price I was willing to pay not to freeze to death during the night.

"Is that better?"

"Yeah."

My eyes drifted closed, and with Sebastian providing more heat than a furnace, I revised my earlier thoughts about not being able to sleep.

"Would you really have left me?"

I opened my eyes to meet Sebastian's intense blue gaze, the expression on his face making me feel like I'd kicked a puppy. I felt pinned down, both figuratively and literally. "I don't know." My answer sounded wholly unsatisfying even to my own ears. "It doesn't matter, does it? Not when it's not an issue anymore."

"It matters to me. You could keep all the secrets in the world, and I'd still want to be by your side." He may as well have kicked me in the gut. "I don't have any secrets."

Sebastian's fingers lifted to brush the hair back off my brow. "I know you don't. You're very straightforward, Jack Shaw. Straightforward. Steadfast. Stubborn. All the words beginning with st."

"Strong, stylish... a stud."

Sebastian rubbed his nose over mine. "Those too."

I wrapped a lock of his hair around my finger and tugged on it gently. "I might have tried to leave, but I doubt I'd have gotten far."

A slow smile crept over Sebastian's face. "You wouldn't have, because I would have found you and persuaded you to come back."

"You were going to leave. You were going to do this journey on your own."

Sebastian let out a weighty breath. "I would have told Frederick no, if you'd refused to come."

"Really?" I studied his face for any telltale signs that he was lying. There were none. "Oh!"

Sebastian tucked his chin into my neck, his hair a warm blanket against my skin. "Sweet dreams, farm boy."

"Night, Sebastian." I went to sleep thinking about the griffin. Was it still outside? Or had it already given up and gone in search of easier prey? I guessed we'd find out in the morning.



CHAPTER FOUR

SEBASTIAN

Hands shoving at my shoulders forced me awake, my eyes opening to meet Jack's concerned gaze. As early morning awakenings went, it wasn't the best. I much preferred a hand around my cock or a blow job.

"Listen." Jack's entreaty was almost a hiss. I rolled off him and sat up, not having to wait long to find out what had gotten him so rattled, the heavy footsteps way above our heads loud enough to make the wooden slats of the trapdoor shake. There was only one thing that could be responsible for that noise.

Jack let out a shaky breath. "It got in."

I nodded, still struggling to shake off the last vestiges of sleep as I stated the obvious. "It must have found the hole in the roof at some point in the night."

"Do you think it can open the trapdoor?"

That was a good question, wasn't it? How intelligent were griffins? Its hooked beak provided the perfect tool with which to grab hold of the metal ring of the trapdoor, and it was certainly strong enough to pull it open, but did it have the mental capacity to know that's what it needed to do?

Either we could sit around and wait to find out the answer to that question, or... I didn't even want to glance at the small door in the wall, never mind contemplate crawling into the small space that lay beyond it. Even if it was a passageway to outside, how long would it go on for? A few meters? Or miles? Meters, I might be able to cope with. But the latter didn't bear thinking about.

Jack was already halfway across the room, apparently having reached the same conclusion I had but in less time. Once he reached the door, he turned to look back at me, one eyebrow raised. "We don't have a choice. It's obviously not going anywhere. Even if it can't get in, we're trapped here without food or water, unable to get past it."

I propped myself up on one elbow and stared at him. "You don't have to sound so pleased about it." If I didn't know he'd been trapped beneath me all night soaking up my body heat, I might have thought he'd lured the griffin into the building just so I was pushed into a course of action I really didn't want to take.

Jack's lips twitched. "I hope you're not suggesting that I would ever take pleasure in your discomfort."

I let out a snort. "You? As if." Standing, I grabbed a candle and joined him in front of the small door. "Who goes first?"

Jack considered the question for a moment. "You. I have a feeling that if I went first, you might not bother to follow, and take your chance with the griffin instead."

The notion was indeed tempting. I pinned him with a steely glare. "Are you calling me a coward?" Jack gave an exaggerated eye roll. "I don't like the sea. You don't like dark enclosed spaces." His gaze flicked up, the griffin having gone suspiciously quiet. "We can argue about which one of us is more of a coward later. Once we've found our way out of here."

I sighed, the inevitability of what was about to happen pressing down on me. I didn't want to go first. I didn't want to go in there at all, but Jack was right about there being no other option. "Fine." "Get down on your knees, Sebastian."

I gave Jack a flirtatious glance from beneath my lashes. "You're going to say that later, and you're going to mean it in a very different way."

Jack gave a long, slow nod. "I will. I promise. Just get your ass in the tunnel."

I knelt and opened the door, my heart already starting to beat faster. "It's very dark. And very small. I've got broader shoulders than you. What if I get stuck?"

"Then I'll shove you from behind. There you go! There's another reason why you need to go first." I forced myself to crawl forward an inch, nothing except darkness in front of me. Even lifting the candle higher barely seemed to penetrate the gloom except for a very small patch of rough stone wall. "I don't like this."

"Duly noted. Now get moving."

I couldn't. No matter how much I willed myself to move forward into that all-encompassing blackness, it seemed an absurd thing to do. Something that scraped against all my nerve-endings and went against all of my natural instincts. It was only the loud screech of the griffin from above, and another rattle of the trapdoor that got me moving. If I didn't, and the griffin got in, it would be Jack left vulnerable to its attack.

The blackness swallowed me up as I moved into the passageway, the walls pressing in on me from either side. Not only metaphorically, but literally too, the tunnel only just wide enough for the breadth of my shoulders just as I'd speculated. As such, there was no way of turning to look behind me. "Jack?"

"I'm here. Staring at your ass."

"It's too dark to see it."

"I've memorized it."

"Yeah?" I smiled into the darkness. If Jack was willing to throw out compliments like that, he was obviously intent on making me feel better. They were usually incredibly rare, Jack hiding his true feelings behind a wall of insouciance. My palms were slick as I inched forward a little more, overcoming the part of my brain that kept telling me that going back would be a far better option than venturing into the unknown. "Just be careful with your candle. Don't accidentally set me on fire."

"I'm not that clumsy. I assure you that I have no wish to be stuck in an enclosed space with you while you're on fire."

I kept going, Jack's lapse into silence making the whole thing worse. At least when he spoke, I knew he was still there, that I hadn't been abandoned. "Keep talking to me."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Anything."

"Where do you think this passage might come out?"

"Underneath The Freezing Steed would be nice. Where I can take a long bath, eat the largest meat pie known to man, and turn most of my blood to ale."

Jack chuckled, the sound muffled and alien within the confines of the tunnel. "That would be nice. Unlikely, but nice. I could do with a bath."

We both could. And actually, it wouldn't be that nice, considering Westrock, and therefore The Freezing Steed, lay at least a couple of days' travel away. I had no wish to be stuck down here any longer than was necessary. Despite the evidence to the contrary, I was still holding out hope that the passageway would come to an end soon. Even if it did leave us closer to the griffin.

Jack's voice cut into my thoughts. "Can we stay at The Freezing Steed for a couple of nights?" "Yes."

"What if Frederick wants to leave immediately for the palace?"

"Then he can find someone else to locate his artifact."

"You'd give up the money?" There was surprise in Jack's voice.

Right now, I didn't give a damn about the money. But then, it was hard to care about anything except whether I'd ever feel fresh air on my skin again. And just as I thought that, the passageway came to a sudden end. Panic filled my chest, my breaths coming out short and sharp. I couldn't go back because Jack was there, and I couldn't go forward because there was nowhere to go. I was going to die stuck in here.

"Sebastian, what's wrong?" There was an unusual level of concern in Jack's voice. At another time, I might have reveled in it, but this wasn't that time. It was hard to think past the level of dread that had settled in my stomach, sweat trickling down my neck. "Dead end."

"Are you sure? Feel around. There's no rhyme nor reason to there being a passageway that leads nowhere."

"I'm not stupid. I can tell when something ends."

"I'm not saying you're stupid. I'm saying that you're probably not thinking straight. Like me, remember, when I wouldn't go up on the deck of the ship. Sometimes, we let our fears build up into something they shouldn't be, and we let them gnaw away at us until there's nothing rational left." Jack paused, his voice softer and more patient than I'd ever heard it. "Just take a couple of deep breaths and then reassess the situation."

"Are you trying to hypnotize me?"

"If it helps."

I dragged in a lungful of air, or at least what passed for air in the passageway, which was something musty and tinged with damp. And then I reached out, my fingers probing the rough stone. It wasn't until I moved forward that I realized that rather than ending, the passageway took a sharp turn to the right.

"Have you found something?"

I rolled my eyes. Admitting that Jack had been right was almost worse than finding myself stuck here. "Maybe."

"So it doesn't end?" There was amusement in Jack's voice, the desire to make me feel better apparently having died a very quick death.

"There's a very sharp turn to the right that *nobody* could have known about."

"I'm surprised you haven't just summoned an animal that can see in the dark."

I closed my eyes and counted to ten, telling myself that it wasn't Jack's fault and that I shouldn't take it out on him when he really had done his best to help. He just hadn't been as helpful as he could have been. "Why didn't you suggest that before?"

"Because I assumed you'd already thought of it and discounted it for some reason."

"I had other things on my mind, didn't I?" I shook my head, droplets of sweat flying in all directions. I really needed that bath now. "What animal can see best in the dark?"

"An owl."

"Not enough room for it to fly."

There was a slight pause. "A cat."

I let out a noisy exhale. "That works." The gold sparks were bright in the tunnel as I wove them together to form a small tabby. It immediately let out a small meow.

"I'm hoping that was the cat and not you."

"Since when do I meow?"

"You make strange noises sometimes."

I frowned. "Like, when?"

"Like when we're—"

I cut him off before he could mention sex, and I found myself in the strange predicament of being both scared and aroused at the same time. "Not now."

Jack stayed silent and I concentrated on the cat I couldn't see. As soon as I looked through its eyes, the whole world lit up, the passageway visible for meters. "It worked." I kept the candle, the cat needing some light to be able to see, and moved forward with renewed purpose, the cat padding along in front of me.

"Sebastian?"

Jack's voice sounded a lot farther away than it had before. "What?"

"Not too fast. I still can't see, remember."

I slowed, allowing him to catch up before setting off once more. "This is much better?"

Jack muttered something underneath his breath.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. Why don't you tell me what you can see?"

"The tunnel stretches straight ahead." We continued on for a while until I could see more. "It turns to the left here. Another sharp turn." I sent the cat ahead a few meters to check out the turn. "After that, it continues in a straight line again. I can't see the end of it, so it goes on for quite some time."

We continued on in that same vein for what felt like forever, the action of crawling on my hands and knees on the unforgiving rock surface taking its toll, so I assumed it was the same for Jack. Whoever had built this passageway had certainly wanted it to stretch a long way. Every now and again, Jack

would ask what I could see. I could hardly blame him when he was still stuck in that world of darkness, save for the one bright spot of his candle that wouldn't last forever.

Finally, when it was beginning to feel like there would never be any end to this torture, I found some good news to share with Jack. "There's a cavern ahead. One where we can sit and rest. And there's some light there as well."

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"Light?" Jack said it like I'd offered him a small bounty in gold. "Daylight?"
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"Yes."

"How far?"

"About another thirty meters or so."

We did the thirty meters in silence, Jack groaning as we both crawled out into the cavern, and he was able to stretch his legs out in front of him and rest his back against the wall. I did the same by his side, but without the groan. Jack was filthy, his face smeared with dirt, so I had to assume that I was too. I quashed the urge to use the cat to check. It would only have Jack accusing me of being vain, something he liked to throw out at regular intervals despite there being absolutely no evidence to substantiate his claims.

I sent the cat over to him, making it climb on his lap and rest its front paws on his chest so that it could rub its face against his. He smiled, stroking its back as it started to purr. "Normally, I'd tell you to get your animals out of my face, but I have to admit this is quite nice. Relaxing."

He closed his eyes, and I lifted my head to seek out the source of the light. The tunnel had been man-made, but they'd obviously built it to lead into a system of caves, which was where we now found ourselves. There was a big crack in the rock above our heads, sunlight streaming through it. Unfortunately, it was too high to climb to, and even if we could, the crack didn't look wide enough to squeeze through. Which left us with no other alternative but to press on, another more natural but just as dark passageway leading out at the other side of the cavern. At least this one was slightly bigger. Not tall enough to be able to walk, but it was progress of a sort.

Moving the cat out of the way, I leaned over and dropped a kiss on Jack's lips. "The exit is close. I can feel it."

He opened one eye. "So your fear has now turned into optimism, has it?"

I returned to my original position against the wall. "Something like that." Jack looked exhausted. He needed something to spark life into him and get him moving again, and with Jack there was nothing that fired him up more than anger and irritation. "I think monkeys can see in the dark."

His eyes flew open, a dark flush staining his cheek bones. "If you swap this sweet cat for that damn monkey, then I swear on my mother's life that I will never speak to you again."

"There's nothing wrong with the monkey."

"Nothing wrong? Do you want me to tell you all the things that are wrong with that monkey?"

I moved the cat off Jack's lap and with it in front of me started crawling toward the passageway, Jack so incensed at the thought of me summoning the monkey that he automatically followed without a single word of complaint. "Sure." Darkness swallowed me up once more and I switched back to viewing the world through the cat's eyes as Jack ranted and raved at my back.

"Well, firstly, its hands are far too human. If they weren't, it wouldn't be so adept at picking up things that didn't belong to it, like... oh, let me think, money pouches for example. Secondly, it's got beady eyes. You can't trust an animal with eyes like that. Thirdly, it moves too fast. Anything that moves that fast and can be on the ground one minute and on the roof the next isn't right. Then, there's the noises it makes, that annoying chattering sound. I can't think of a more irritating sound." He paused for a moment. "Are you listening to me, Sebastian?"

I smiled into the darkness. "I can promise you that you have my full attention."

"Good. Because I haven't finished."

No surprise there. "What else bothers you about the monkey?"

"Its teeth. Its ears. Its tail. You name it, it bothers me."

"You don't think that's a little unfair? It can't help looking like a monkey considering it is one."

"Unfair!" Jack's voice rose to a screech. "I'll tell you what's unfair, shall I? It—"

"There's daylight ahead."

"There is? Do you think it's another cavern?"

"I think it's the way out."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"I can see light."

I could too, switching back to my own eyes as we rounded a bend and the passageway suddenly flooded with sunlight, both of us increasing our pace in a desperate bid to discover whether it was indeed an exit.

When we emerged from the tunnel to grass under our feet, the warmth of the sun on our skin, and the sound of a river close by, we both let out a whoop. And best of all, there was no griffin.

Following the sound of the water, we stumbled down to the river, neither of us stopping to remove our clothes before wading in up to our chests. After a protracted period of drinking as much water as we could stomach and washing away the worst of the sweat and grime, we lay on the riverbank, heads tipped up toward the sun.

Jack was the first to speak. "Where are we?"

I sat up, shading my eyes with my hand as I scanned our surroundings for anything that might constitute a landmark, but there was nothing except grass and trees as far as the eye could see. I reached for the map, which thankfully, I'd remembered to remove from my pocket before embracing the delights the river had to offer. Flattening it out on the ground, I studied it. "Next to the river."

Jack's head turned slowly my way. "You don't say. I think I could have worked that one out for myself."

I shrugged. "That's all we need to know, really. If we follow the river west, we'll eventually come to Westrock, which is where—"

Jack provided the end of the sentence. "Where we're meant to be meeting Frederick."

I nodded. "But we should make sure we're properly dry before we go anywhere. So that we don't catch a chill."

Jack closed his eyes and spread his arms out to the side, his fingers combing through the grass. "What do you think that tunnel was for?"

I gave it some thought. "I would say given its proximity to the river that it was built for smuggling purposes."

"Smuggling what?"

"No idea. But it obviously hasn't been used for years."

Jack made a considering noise in his throat. "We need to tell someone, you know."

"About the griffin?"

He nodded. "Preferably before it eats someone."

I sighed. "Well, unless we bump into someone along the way, it will have to wait until we reach Westrock. I'm not prepared to deviate from our route more than we already have."

For once, Jack didn't bother to argue with me.



CHAPTER FIVE

JACK

Sebastian watched me as I dangled the piece of string with a worm tied to the end into the water. He was good at that—watching. Although, he was more than willing to eat the fish when my patience paid off and I actually caught one. With only one arrow left, it had been the easiest way of catching something to eat.

"Do you want me to summon a bear?"

I squinted at him. "A bear?"

He propped himself up on one elbow, his hair catching the sun and turning it in a golden cloud around his shoulders. "Bears are good at catching fish."

"I'm good at catching fish."

"If you say so."

"I am."

He waved an imperious hand in my direction. "Have at it then. I can't wait to eat all the delicious fish you catch."

Gritting my teeth, I returned to the task in hand. "Someone should consider whether they'll be offered a share of the fish if they don't keep their tongue under control."

The corner of Sebastian's mouth lifted, his voice almost a purr. "Oh, I assure you, Jack, that my tongue always has to be in control when I'm around you, because if I put it where I wanted to most of the time, we'd have been in serious trouble with the authorities a long time ago."

I rolled my eyes as I turned away, the latter action necessary to readjust my suddenly tight trousers without Sebastian noticing. "You have to make everything about sex, don't you?"

Sebastian released a gusty sigh. "You're nearly naked. And wet. I can hardly be expected to think about anything else, can I?"

There was some truth to his words, my shirt having been abandoned on the riverbank, and my trousers having been rolled up as far as they could go. I swore as a fish darted between my legs, completely ignoring the tasty treat I'd spent so long locating and then attaching to the piece of string, neither task that simple.

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"Ready for the bear yet?"

"No!"

Sebastian's lips twitched. "Just trying to help."

"Well, you're not."
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I turned in a slow circle, my gaze fixed on the surface of the river in an attempt to work out where the fish had disappeared to, but there was no sign of it. It was a shame, given that it had been quite sizeable. There would have been enough meat on it for breakfast *and* lunch. Dinner wouldn't be a problem if Sebastian's calculations were correct, since we would reach Westrock before nightfall. We'd discussed the possibility of Sebastian summoning a horse to cut down on the journey time, but as it drained his magic so quickly had decided that it would be far more prudent to save it in case something unexpected should arise on the way. We had no wish to find ourselves vulnerable to attack by a griffin or any other creature.

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Sebastian cleared his throat. "I could—"
"No."
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I waggled the piece of string, hoping the movement might catch the eye of something beneath the water I couldn't see. The worm came loose and floated off downriver, Sebastian rolling onto his front and following its progress until it drifted out of sight. I pointed a finger at him. "Not. One. Word."

He might not have said anything, but the bear that suddenly materialized by his side spoke volumes. I waded out of the water as it waded in. To add insult to injury, it took less than three seconds for the bear to catch something, one flick of its huge paw sending the fish careening my way. My mood took an even bigger turn for the worse as the wet, thrashing mass bounced off my chest before falling to the ground, Sebastian letting out an ill-advised bark of laughter. "I will shoot you."

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"You've only got one arrow!"
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"One will be sufficient when it goes right through your heart."

For once, Sebastian demonstrated enough self-preservation to fall quiet, fishes two and three landing next to the first within minutes. Blood still boiling, I lowered myself cross-legged onto the ground and set about gutting the first fish.

"Are you imagining that's me?"

I glanced up to find Sebastian standing over me. Of the bear, there was no sign, Sebastian having apparently decided that three fish was enough. Refusing to give him the satisfaction of responding, I concentrated on the task at hand.

"I did tell you that it would be quicker with a bear."

I lifted the knife to point it at him, a string of fish entrails dangling off the end. "Who caught the fish yesterday, Sebastian?"

Sebastian cocked his head to one side. "You did."

"And how long did it take me?"

"A couple of hours."

"And how many times during that couple of hours while you watched and offered unhelpful comments about what I could do better, did you ever broach the subject of summoning an animal to do the job much quicker and save me the effort?"

Comprehension gradually dawned on Sebastian's face. He shrugged. "You like being busy. You get tetchy when you've got nothing to do."

"Do I like being made a fool of?"

"No?"

"Right answer. I'll ignore the fact that you phrased it as a question." I lowered the knife back to the fish again. "I have no idea why I put up with you. Sometimes I think your monkey not only stole my money pouch, but it must have taken my sanity as well. That's the only explanation that makes any sense."

"It's because you love me."

I suddenly lost the ability to breathe, the fish I was working on swimming out of focus as my vision blurred. The knife slipped, a ribbon of red opening up across my palm. "Shit!"

Sebastian was on his knees immediately, urging me over to the river to wash the wound, and then tearing off a strip of his shirt to staunch the bleeding. He nursed my hand in his lap, concern written all over his face. "You need to be more careful, Jack."

I needed to be more careful. He'd been the one throwing out the L word like it meant nothing. Neither of us had so much as mentioned that word. And if he was going to use it, then convention dictated that he should have been telling me he loved me. But then, this was Sebastian. It was probably inconceivable to him that anyone wouldn't love him when he attracted people the way a rotting animal carcass did flies.

Unless, of course, he hadn't meant it in that way, and he'd meant it in a platonic way. In which case, I was completely overreacting. I snatched my hand back. "I'm fine. I just wasn't concentrating." At least injuring myself had prevented me from saying something stupid. Whatever that might have been.

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Westrock was a welcome sight. Especially considering that it should have taken us three days to reach from Riverbrook, and it had taken us almost double that amount of time. "Should we speak to the authorities first?"

Sebastian shook his head. "No. First, we drink, and eat something that has never swum in a river. Then we'll worry about alerting the authorities to the overgrown bird-lion rampaging around their land that shouldn't be here."

Too fatigued to argue, I simply nodded and followed as Sebastian made his way through the narrow higgledy-piggledy streets. We passed three taverns, none of them the one we were searching for. When we finally located The Freezing Steed, a breathless Frederick spilled out of the door before we could reach it. "You have arrived!" He caught himself, seeming to remember what his role in society was and how he was supposed to behave as he smoothed his dark hair back, cleared his throat, and pulled himself up to his full height, which was considerably shorter than either Sebastian or me. He swept an arm out in front of him. "What I meant to say was, welcome."

He paused to take a breath. "I was concerned that you had perhaps changed your mind, that our accord in Riverbrook might no longer be adhered to. Therefore, I am greatly relieved at your safe and felicitous arrival."

I shouldered my way past him, not willing to wait while he trotted out every big word under the sun that he could think of. Politeness was Sebastian's department, not mine. I didn't look back to see if either man was following as I made a beeline for the bar, the smell of ale in the air making my mouth water. When a tall blond elf with very pointy ears hesitated, I seized the opportunity to jump in front of him and request two tankards of ale, the busty barmaid delivering them quickly. Picking up one of them, I gulped down half of its contents without taking a breath, the barmaid clearing her throat in a reminder for payment. I jerked my head toward Sebastian as he arrived at my side. "He's paying."

Sebastian pulled his tankard close and turned his gaze on Frederick expectantly. Frederick eventually took the hint, pulling a money pouch out of his pocket and extracting a coin which he passed across to the barmaid. At Sebastian's less than subtle cough, Frederick frowned, but dutifully

added another coin. Sebastian treated the barmaid to one of his sunniest smiles. "Two more." He lifted his tankard to his lips and took a drink, a soft little sigh escaping from his lips.

Once the barmaid had brought more drinks, we retired to an empty table, Sebastian choosing the one closest to the roaring fire, a decision I wholly agreed with, the heat of the flames a welcome warmth after days of sleeping rough with only Sebastian to warm me. Frederick joined us, perching on the edge of his chair like a man who wasn't used to being allowed to sit down. Perhaps, he wasn't. I didn't have the slightest clue about royal protocol.

It was noticeable that there was no tankard of ale for him, which made me wonder what he'd been doing while he'd been waiting for us. I hid a smile behind my tankard as I imagined him standing ramrod straight in the road for days on end as he watched for our arrival.

Sebastian lowered his tankard to the table. "We apologize for our lateness, but unfortunately we ran into some trouble that made it unavoidable."

"Trouble!" Frederick's thin eyebrows arched. "What sort of trouble? Nothing too abominable, I hope."

When Sebastian took his time in answering Frederick's question, I flagged down the barmaid and asked for food. I assumed Sebastian was deciding whether now was the right time for such a revelation. Eventually, he seemed to come to a decision, his elbows on the table as he leaned conspiratorially close to Frederick, his voice as low as he could get it and still be audible. "Griffin trouble. We had to take evasive action to avoid being eaten."

Frederick let out a little chuckle, both Sebastian and I frowning in unison. "Oh dear! I'm afraid you must have been mistaken. I can assure you that there are no griffins in Osagezia. Perhaps it was a..." His brow furrowed as he gave it some thought, his expression suddenly brightening. "An ostrich. Yes, an ostrich is the most likely explanation. They can be quite large and rather ferocious at times, or so I've heard. I've never actually set eyes on one myself, but there are stories."

I sat forward, my eyes narrowing on Frederick. It took a supreme effort to keep my voice low. "An ostrich? How many eight-foot ostriches have you seen?" Frederick opened his mouth to respond but I didn't give him the opportunity. "How many ostriches have you seen with the head of an eagle, and yes, I'm damn sure it was an eagle. White head, yellow beak, and all. How many ostriches have you seen with the body of a lion?"

"I—"

That was the only word I allowed him to get out before I pushed on. "How many ostriches have you seen that can take seven arrows to the chest and still keep coming as if they were nothing but a

gnat bite? How many, Frederick?"

Sebastian leaned forward to place himself between me and Frederick. He was probably concerned that I might grab Frederick by the collar, drag him across the table, and show him that an ostrich's ferocity was nothing in comparison to mine when people asked stupid questions. He was right to be concerned. It was definitely tempting.

Sebastian offered a placatory smile. "What Jack is trying to say is that it was most definitely a griffin, that this isn't something we saw from a distance, that we got far more up close and personal than we had any wish to." Sebastian paused to take a swallow of his ale. "Our lives were in danger. It was only through great ingenuity and guile on our part..." I frowned. I wasn't sure crawling through a tunnel could be classed as ingenuity. Or guile. But at least I was included in Sebastian's exaggeration this time. I was usually left as nothing more than a bystander while Sebastian insinuated he'd saved the world singlehandedly. "...that we escaped with all our limbs intact."

Frederick sat back in his chair with a look of a man who had just been told some rather disturbing news. "A griffin! It can't be possible." He caught himself. "That is... not to say, that I do not believe you. If you say it was a griffin, it was a griffin, but it's..." He shook his head in wonderment. "How can that be? Here in Osagezia. I must send word to the king immediately."

I snorted. "What's he going to do? Ponder its existence while he sips wine and counts his money? Perhaps he can say 'oh dear' a lot as well. That will solve the problem."

Sebastian shot me a warning glance, one presumably intended to remind me that I was speaking ill of someone who I was meant to have an audience with soon. Someone who, should the whim take him, could have my head removed from my body with nothing more than a click of his fingers.

Luckily, Frederick seemed too lost in thought to have picked up on my slight. Finally, he roused himself enough to sit up straight, his spine returning to its usual rigid position. He waved a hand, and a large bald-headed man detached himself from the shadows. "Earl, we have a most unusual predicament."

I blinked at Earl. It was odd that a man as tall as he was had seemingly appeared out of nowhere. I eyed him curiously, trying to work out who or what he was, and what his relationship to Frederick could possibly be.

Friend? No, the look on Earl's face didn't exactly scream friendship. Lover? I nearly spat my ale out at the thought. It was difficult to imagine Frederick even removing his clothes, never mind indulging in the sins of the flesh. Guard? That was more likely. But then why hadn't we seen him in

Riverbrook? Frederick had been alone there. Or at least I'd thought so. Had he left Earl here while he traveled on to Riverbrook? That didn't make him much of a guard, did it? It was all a bit of a puzzle.

Frederick gestured for Earl to come closer, the man obediently stooping so that Frederick could whisper urgently in his ear. Wanting to know what was being said, I leaned forward, but Frederick's words were too quiet to catch. Frustrated, I sat back in my chair with a scowl I didn't even attempt to hide. Sebastian's hand closed around my knee underneath the table to give it a squeeze. Intent on telling him that now really wasn't the time, I didn't get that far, his chin rising in a silent instruction to look up. I looked up to see a hawk—a hawk with hearing far keener than either mine or Sebastian's—perched in the rafters, just as Frederick brought his conversation to an end and Earl left without so much as an introduction.

Frederick linked his fingers together over the bulge of his stomach. "Rest assured, the matter will be dealt with in a timely fashion. The palace of Chastershire thanks you for bringing it to our attention, and we are sorry that your time in Osagezia started in such an egregious way. I hope you will not hold it against us."

We were saved from having to respond by the arrival of the food, Sebastian and I both tucking into the meat pie and potatoes like two men who had gone without food for twenty-four hours, and then spent the next two days eating nothing but fish. I hid a smirk behind my fork as Frederick once again found himself handing over coin. It seemed that Sebastian had decided that Frederick was going to pay for everything, and quite honestly, I didn't have a problem with that.

There was no guarantee of us being able to locate the stolen artifact. In which case, there would be no reward. Therefore, it was wise to get what we could out of this arrangement while we could. It wasn't like we were stealing the money from Frederick. He should count himself lucky on that score, given Sebastian's habit of taking what wasn't his. No, we were simply allowing Frederick to act as our generous benefactor. He should thank us for making him feel good about himself.

"We will leave tomorrow for the palace of Chastershire." Frederick's announcement was bright and breezy.

Sebastian shook his head before shoveling another forkful of food into his mouth, his words forced out around a mouthful of flaky pie crust. "Not tomorrow."

"No?" Frederick's eyebrows met in the middle. "I thought you would want to reach the palace as soon as humanly possible. The trail to the missing artifact grows ever colder, the longer we dally here."

I laughed. "It's been missing for weeks. I'm not sure the trail can get any colder."

Sebastian chimed in. "He's right. Besides, we need to rest for a couple of nights." He reached across the table for my hand, holding it up so that Frederick could see the scabbing wound across my palm where the knife had slipped. "Jack's injured. He needs sleep and some good food in order to heal properly. Not to mention a bath and"—his gaze slid sideways to me, heat sparking in it—"some careful attention."

I knew exactly what sort of attention he was thinking of, and I was all for it. Who knew when we'd next get the chance, given that we were going to be traveling with Frederick, and then we were going to be staying in a palace. Not to mention that after that, our quest would take us into the frozen mountains of Askophai, a place where if one of us should be brave enough to get our cock out, it would probably freeze and snap off if anyone should try and touch it.

Frederick looked slightly perturbed. "The day after?"

Sebastian shook his head and held up two fingers. "Two days. Make sure you tell them that when you pay for the room."

"When I..." Frederick blinked. "I don't think we discussed—"

Sebastian cut in. "I assume the king and queen will want to cover our expenses. After all, we're only here because we're eager to do everything we can to help them." He gave an exaggerated shrug. "But... if you have someone else lined up, that's fine. To be honest, after the quite frankly terrifying run-in with the griffin, Jack and I did discuss just returning home."

We hadn't discussed any such thing. If anything, Sebastian had seemed energized by the whole thing, his love of danger coming to the fore once more. However, Frederick didn't need to know that, so when he looked my way for confirmation, I gave a solemn nod. "Coming face to face with a beast like that makes you evaluate a lot of things." I pasted a wistful expression on my face. "I miss my farm! All the cows and the sheep. All the chickens."

Sebastian reached over to squeeze my shoulder. "You forgot to mention the goats. I bet you miss them most of all, don't you?"

It took all of my willpower not to glare at him. "And the goats." I snuck a peek Frederick's way, calculating that he hadn't quite reached the point we needed him to. "And the way the wheat sways in the breeze. The smell of freshly-cut grass. My mother's cooking. The..."

Frederick cleared his throat. "All expenses will be met, of course. And I completely understand your need to take some time to rest and recuperate. You shall have your two days, and then on the third day we will embark on our journey to the palace. I shall send word so they know when to expect our arrival."



CHAPTER SIX

SEBASTIAN

I paused in the doorway to give the bedchamber a quick scan before stepping fully into the room, Jack doing the same at my side. After a few moments of careful scrutiny, he gave a nod of approval. "Not bad."

"Not bad at all. Although"—I held up a finger—"I did catch Frederick trying to negotiate a deal for a room with no windows, which was presumably a lot cheaper."

Jack raised an eyebrow. "I informed him that you have a bad chest, that if you don't have a constant supply of fresh air, you may succumb to poor health. In which case, our stay here would need to be much longer while I nurse you back to health. So, if you could just cough now and again while he's around that would help."

Jack let out a cough on cue.

I shook my head. "Louder."

The next one was better but still not right.

"Throatier. Make it sound like it's coming from the depths of hell."

Jack released a long drawn-out cough that made it sound like he was on the brink of death.

"Better."

He laughed, relieving himself of the quiver with one lonely arrow before propping his bow against the wall. "Poor Frederick."

"Pfft... you think that he hasn't been given a generous allowance for this journey? He was probably hoping to keep most of it for himself."

"Do you think?"

Jack looked like he couldn't quite wrap his head around that concept. He was delightfully naïve sometimes.

"I know so."

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"How?"
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"What?"

"How would you know that?"

I shrugged. "It's just the way things work, isn't it? Or so I've heard."

"From who?"

"People."

I walked over to the steaming bath that had been left in front of the fire. It was a huge bathtub, one of the biggest I'd ever seen.

"What people?"

"Huh!" I trailed my fingers through the water. "Jack?" When he looked my way, I inclined my head toward the bath. "Big enough for two?"

He frowned. "I doubt that."

Lowering my fingers to the buttons of my shirt, I smiled. "I bet you it is. We should try it out. See if I'm right."

He rolled his eyes, but there was no missing the sizeable swelling in Jack's trousers, or the speed with which he shed his clothes to reward me with an unobstructed view of that magnificent cock. Even so, by virtue of having started first, I beat him to it, and was already easing myself into the water by the time he was naked. I let out a groan as the perfumed heat hit me. Two days of bathing in the river had been better than nothing, but I wouldn't go as far as to say it had been enjoyable, especially considering the cooler weather in Osagezia compared to Cerensai. But this... This was perfect. Relaxing back, I spread my legs to make space, Jack eying the bath with a distinct lack of conviction. "It won't work."

"It will work. Get that peachy ass in here."

He gingerly stepped over the rim and lowered himself until his back was flush to my chest, my knees drawn up on either side of his hips. It was a squeeze, but with a bit of wriggling—which my cock was only too happy with—we managed to find a semi-comfortable position. I wrapped an arm around his chest and slid down a bit farther, water sloshing over the side of the bath, the chambermaid responsible for filling the bath obviously not having taken into account the displacement effect of two human bodies instead of one. I supposed I could forgive her for that.

I'd been wrong about it being perfect before. Now it was perfect, with Jack's naked body plastered to mine, his head resting on my shoulder, and the pretty pink tip of his erect cock poking above the surface of the water. "I can't hear you telling me I was right."

"We can barely fit in here."

"You're welcome to get out whenever you wish." I tightened my arm around his chest just in case he believed me, but he didn't shift so much as an inch. Once I was satisfied he wasn't going anywhere, I relaxed, letting my fingers play over Jack's chest, teasing one nipple to stiffness before doing the same to the other, my cock pressing against his ass in a silent plea for things to get more interesting.

"Where did Earl appear from?" Jack asked the question in a way that said he'd already given it a great deal of thought. "I swear he wasn't in the tavern when we came in and then... poof... suddenly there he was, like he'd appeared from nowhere. Except he's huge, so I don't know how that's possible."

"A better question would probably be what Earl is that he can blend in with his surroundings like that?"

"You mean like some sort of chameleon?"

"He'd be a very overgrown chameleon, and I didn't notice him being particularly lizard-like." Jack was silent for a moment. "If he's not a chameleon, then what is he?"

I'd been asking myself that same question since, just as Jack had said, Earl had appeared out of nowhere. Unlike Jack, I'd had the benefit of another pair of eyes on the table, partly from force of habit and partly because you could never be too careful, and Earl really had materialized out of the ether in less time than it took to blink. "I don't know. Some sort of wraith maybe."

"Can they appear out of nowhere?"

"No idea. I've never seen one." I slid my hands over Jack's stomach until springy hair brushed my knuckles. "He could be a warlock. It could have been some sort of invisibility spell."

Jack let out a grunt. Whether it was in response to my theory, or to my fingers brushing his cock, I wasn't sure. "What did Frederick say to him? I assume the hawk could hear it."

"He said..." I paused to make sure I was recalling it accurately. "That the effects were obviously worse than they'd previously thought, that they needed to send word to the king, and that his advice to the king would be to step up the patrols and to extend them to a wider area. But obviously he said it in much fancier words."

Jack laughed as he craned his head back to meet my gaze. "Of course he did. Why use two words when you can use eight? What effects? Effects from what? And what are they patrolling for?"

"Well, that's the question, isn't it? I think there are things that the palace of Chastershire is not being fully honest about."

"Like what?" Jack almost sounded excited by the idea. And he accused me of seeking out danger. He was just as bad if not worse.

"No idea. Perhaps we'll discover more once we're at the palace."

Jack gave a slow nod. "We should keep our eyes peeled and not take anything at face value. They could be lying to us."

"They could be, but... we don't need to worry about that for the next couple of days. The next couple of days"—I made my voice deliberately husky—"are for you and me, a well-earned rest after our terrible ordeal with the griffin. Time for good food. Time for good ale. Time for lots of sleep." I curled my hand around Jack's stiff cock. "And plenty of time for..."

"Sex." Jack released the word on a breathy moan as I slid my fist over his cock, my thumb brushing his sensitive glans.

I stilled my hand. "Of course, you tell me off for thinking about sex all the time, so maybe we should just concentrate on food, ale, and sleep."

Jack bucked his hips up, more water splashing over the side of the bath as he forced his cock into the tight tunnel my hand made. "I tell you off for thinking about it. I don't tell you off for doing it."

"Ah, I see. I didn't realize they were such different things." I resumed the movement of my hand, the rise of Jack's hips to meet the action grinding his ass against my cock.

"Of course, they're different. You think about sex at some really inappropriate times, like when I'm trying to investigate a mysterious tunnel."

I shifted my hips, my cock slipping between the cleft of Jack's ass. "I can think of one mysterious tunnel I'd love to investigate. I could investigate it all night long."

Jack chuckled. "Later."

We both watched as my hand slid up and down over his cock.

"Sebastian?"

There was something strange about the way Jack had said my name, something almost cautious like he was already second guessing himself.

"Yeah?"

"Your magic? Can you use it without forming it into an animal? You know, like just the sparks? Because... there was a time when you used it, and I was close, and I could feel it like a tingle over my skin."

I frowned, not sure where Jack was going with this line of questioning. "It doesn't form into an animal until I shape it. I have to visualize what I want the end product to be and will it to be that

way." I was confused why we were talking about this when I was in the middle of doing something far more interesting. And then I got it. "Oh, you want me to...?"

Jack's cheeks flamed, the physical reaction having absolutely nothing to do with the heat of the water. "Only if you want to, and it's not dangerous."

"Dangerous?" I slowed my hand, barely giving Jack any friction, not wanting him to come until we'd seen whatever this was to its inevitable end. It seemed like my farm boy was a little kinky underneath that gruff couldn't give a shit exterior. "What do you mean?"

Jack's skin slid against mine as he squirmed in an effort to get my hand moving at an agreeable pace again. "Like... I wouldn't want to open my eyes and find my cock in a rat."

I smiled against his hair. "What about a monkey? Or a goat?"

He batted my hand away. "I knew you'd be like this. That's why I've never mentioned it before. Forget it."

He tried to stand with the intention of getting out of the bath, and I was forced to wrap my arm around his chest and hold him in place. "Where are you going?" I turned his head and captured his lips, kissing him until he gave up on escaping from the bath and relaxed back against me once more.

Lifting my hand from the water, I released a trail of gold sparks from my fingertips into the air. "Give me your cock, farm boy?"

Jack thrust his hips up, the entire length of his cock leaving the water. At the first touch of my magic-infused fingers against his sensitive flesh, he let out a cry that was almost a howl. "Oh, God! That feels… Yes! Do it to me, Sebastian. Do it. Don't stop."

Amused by how loud he was being and wondering if Frederick had the next room to ours and would ever be able to look us in the eye again, I did do it to him, Jack reacting like he was on fire, his body straining against mine in a bid for more. He'd never been this wild before, and it made me wonder why it had never entered my head to try this with a lover, but then, I'd never viewed my magic as anything sexual. Whereas Jack had, apparently. And he had the nerve to accuse me of always thinking about sex. I moved my hand faster, keeping the gold sparks going but being careful to keep them under control.

It didn't take Jack long to come, his whole body shuddering with the intensity of his orgasm, his cock continuing to spurt long past the point where it would normally have stopped. And trust me, I'd devoted myself to learning all there was to know about Jack's cock. I was a very eager student when it came to him.

Unable to wait until he was fully back in the land of the self-aware, I killed the magic and grasped hold of Jack's hips to lift him, entering his satiated body in one easy thrust, the perfumed oils in the water providing enough slickness to prevent any pain as I took him. He was nothing more than a willing passenger as I used him to slake my lust, my orgasm following his within minutes.

Still breathing hard, I lay back against the rim of the bath, Jack's head coming to rest on my shoulder. "Where can you produce magic?"

I grinned, knowing exactly what he was getting at. "If you're asking me if I can produce sparks from my cock, then I'm sorry to have to break it to you, but no." Jack let out a soft little sigh of regret that had my grin growing wider. "But of course, my fingers are very adept at getting into certain places." And I was already imagining how much wilder Jack might get with the tingle of magic against his prostate. My magic had always been a means of making things easier, or in times of peril —which, granted, came a little more often than they should have—a survival tool, but it may have just become my favorite sex toy.

Jack let out a shuddering breath. "I'm not sure I'd survive that."

I kissed the top of his head. "We'll have to find out one day."

"One day..." He closed his eyes and slid lower in the bath. "But not today."



CHAPTER SEVEN

JACK

We'd barely seen Frederick for the last two days. Whether that was because we'd been avoiding him, or he'd been avoiding us wasn't clear. I had an inkling that after Sebastian manipulated him into paying for everything, Frederick might be having second thoughts about requesting Sebastian's help. I had no idea in what form the story of Prince Montgomery's rescue had reached the palace of Chastershire, but I expected it had been missing the finer details, such as Sebastian's unwillingness to do anything for free. As for the mysterious Earl, there'd been no more sightings.

On the day of our departure, we'd dragged ourselves out of bed late and taken time over our breakfast. We'd still been consuming the last few mouthfuls when a commotion had broken out in the street. Sebastian and I had shared a glance, and then gone out to see what all the fuss was about. We'd found a procession of tired soldiers, their drawn faces saying they'd fought a great and bloody battle, which was odd considering that as far as I knew there were no wars going on in any of the thirteen kingdoms, never mind Osagezia.

All became clear when we spotted the cart at the back of the procession, the dead griffin carcass spilling over the sides, wickedly curved beak and all. There were some familiar arrows sticking out of its chest that I hadn't thought to see again.

I could almost feel sorry for the griffin in that state, when it could no longer hurt anyone. Whatever had brought it to these shores had proved deadly.

It had completely slipped my mind that only a few days ago, I'd been the one trying to kill it. I'd had a lot of pie since then. A lot of sleep. A lot of ale. And even more sex. It seemed that the majority of Westrock's citizens didn't share my empathy for the griffin, a young woman letting out a scream before sinking to the floor in a dead faint. Frederick didn't look pleased either as he strode over to one of the higher-ranked soldiers and said something in his ear, the soldier immediately turning a fetching shade of red.

Hooking my arm around Sebastian's neck, I pulled him close to whisper some words of my own into his ear. "What do you think has upset Frederick?"

Sebastian took a moment to survey the scene before responding. "I would assume that although they wanted the griffin dead, they were hoping to keep its presence in Osagezia a secret so as not to cause unnecessary alarm. Parading it through the streets is the opposite of that. News is going to spread like wildfire that Osagezia has a griffin problem."

It made perfect sense. Although, the last sentence had me slightly concerned. "Do you think there might be another griffin? One's more than enough if you ask me."

Sebastian shrugged. "It's possible. One good thing about us leaving today, is that the farther north we go, the less likely we are to run into one. They're not overly keen on cold climates."

The procession resumed as Frederick spotted us and came to stand by our side. I pointed at the cart as it trundled by. "That's a big ostrich, isn't it?"

A faint flush crept into Frederick's cheeks, and he gave a slight bow. "I believe apologies are in order. I am sure that the king and queen will want to thank you personally once we reach Chastershire for your assistance in bringing the issue to our attention. As you can see, the threat has been nullified, and is no longer a danger to our people. It is lucky that such swift actions were taken as the griffin was..." His lips pursed. "Well, there is no easy way of saying this, but it was with child, and immature griffins are well known for being particularly volatile when they come into contact with humans."

"It was pregnant?" The question burst out of me before I could stop it. Now, I felt even worse about the whole thing. It made her desperation to get food all the more understandable, and while I wasn't prepared to sacrifice either my own life or Sebastian's in order to aid the development of a baby griffin, it did make the whole thing that much sadder. Frederick lifted a hand to gesture at the cart before it disappeared out of view. "Would you like your arrows to be returned? I can send word and have it arranged."

I shook my head. I didn't want to carry arrows that bore the memory of a griffin mother prepared to go to any lengths she could for her unborn child. "I'll get new ones."

Frederick nodded. "We can sort that out at the palace when we outfit you with suitable clothes for the journey to come." He straightened both of his sleeves, his coat immaculately pressed, while both Sebastian and I were in shirts that didn't even have the buttons done up properly. At least I'd tried, even if I now realized that I'd missed a button. Whereas Sebastian's shirt was open to the navel.

Frederick's gaze fastened on the missed button for a beat before offering a tight smile. "I assume you are both ready to embark today?"

Sebastian gave a slow nod. "Sure. Just give us... an hour or so."



Frederick had apologized profusely for the fact that he had only been able to secure one extra horse rather than two at such short notice. He'd seemed surprised to find that we usually traveled on foot. I guess it did seem strange when traveling by horse was so much quicker, but if I thought back to our previous journey in Cerensai, we would have lost that horse several times over. And assuming Cassemir would have even allowed it on board, it wouldn't have traveled well on the ship. Not that I had either. In that sense, we would have been soulmates.

I didn't mind sharing a horse when it came with the added benefit of having Sebastian plastered to my back, he being the most proficient rider. According to him, anyway. I went along with it, with nothing more than a slight roll of my eyes because it meant him doing all the hard work while I just sat there. There was still no sign of the mysterious Earl, and I had to assume he hadn't returned from the palace.

Halfway through the first day of travel, I cast a quick glance over at Frederick, the man even managing to maintain that rigid posture when he was on the back of a horse. "Do you normally travel alone?"

"When circumstance requires it."

Which was no answer at all. I wasn't about to let it go that easily. "What does that mean?"

Frederick pulled on the reins to slow his horse to a trot. "Our resources are better served elsewhere at this time."

"You mean you've run out of men?" Sebastian said.

I grinned at Sebastian's reading of the situation. Frederick didn't seem to share my amusement, his chin lifting and his Adam's apple bobbing furiously. "Of course not. Don't be ridiculous. Chastershire is an extremely prosperous royal household. We have plenty of men at our disposal."

Sebastian was quiet for a moment. "But nobody else you can send after the artifact? What is this thing anyway? Is it dangerous?"

Frederick gave a haughty sniff. "It is not my place to fill you in on the details. Once we reach the palace, all necessary information will be provided before your journey to Askophai by people far more knowledgeable than I."

My lip curled at the mention of Askophai. I could already feel the bite of cold in the air, and we

were miles from the border. Bitter cold hadn't seemed such a daunting prospect back in Riverbrook, but it was beginning to feel a little more real now that we were getting closer. Sebastian's chin came to rest on my shoulder, his lips brushing my ear. "It will be fine."

I managed no more than a grunt in response. Sebastian's version of fine was very different to mine.



The trip had proved surprisingly straightforward, which was to say that we hadn't stumbled over any creatures trying to kill us. That had to be a first for Sebastian and me. Frederick had been aloof but polite, and we'd made good time, reaching our destination each evening so that there was no need to sleep rough. Although, there was a small part of me that would have quite liked to see how Frederick might handle such a situation. I was beginning to think that he didn't retire to bed like a normal person, but instead stood in the corner of the room so as not to get unnecessarily wrinkled and be deemed as less than perfect. He'd stopped protesting about paying our expenses, and Sebastian and I were perfectly happy to let him cover everything.

The closer we drew to Chastershire, the tavern we were staying in tonight less than a couple of hours ride away, the moodier I became. Therefore, it didn't come as a complete surprise when after a bout of energetic sex, and a most satisfying orgasm, Sebastian propped himself up on one elbow, fixed me with an amused stare, and asked me what was wrong.

"Nothing."

One blond eyebrow rose in a silent question.

"Why would there be anything wrong?"

He reached out, his finger probing at the corner of my mouth in an attempt to drag it upwards. "Because your smile has been about as rare as..." He paused for a moment, his brow furrowing.

"A griffin?" I batted his hand away. "And keep your fingers out of my damn face." He leaned in with the intention of... Actually, I wasn't sure what his intention was. To rub noses, maybe. To kiss me. Who the hell knew? Whatever it was, coming as it did on the back of his question, I wasn't feeling it. I spread my fingers across his face and pushed him away. "And keep everything else out of it too."

Sebastian flopped onto his back in the perfect interpretation of a stranded fish. He let out a long and overdramatic sigh. "You see, you only get like this when there's something on your mind."

I lifted my head to glare at him, Sebastian refusing to look my way. "Get like what?"

"Prickly. Irrational. Ready to bite my head off at the slightest thing. Sullenly quiet. You were almost as ramrod straight as Frederick today on the ride. It was like hugging a tree trunk."

Well, of all the... "I just had sex with you!"

"And that was nice. It's always nice."

"Nice!" My anger was building. "I'd suggest you find a better word to use if you ever want to experience it again."

"Pleasant... most enjoyable... an agreeable use of time."

I lunged at him, but Sebastian managed to wriggle out of the way so that I was left with nothing but an armful of pillow for my efforts. He ran as I dived off the bed, putting a chair between us as I pursued him, intent on inflicting bodily harm. I looked around for some sort of weapon, but apart from my bow and its one lonely arrow, which seemed like a step too far, there was nothing.

"Calm down, Jack."

"Calm down!" I almost shouted the phrase at him. "You just made sex with me sound about as interesting as having a good pie."

Sebastian tipped his head to one side and looked thoughtful. "I've had some really good pies."

"Good. Well..." I located my trousers and struggled into them. "I hope the solo eating of them brings you many more years of pleasure." Were we still talking about pies? I had no idea anymore. I sat on the edge of the bed and stared up at Sebastian through my lashes. "If you must know, I'm not exactly over the moon about reaching the palace tomorrow."

Sebastian came out from behind the chair to join me on the bed. Still naked. I cast a disparaging look at his cock. "Can you put that away. It's distracting."

Grinning, he retrieved his trousers, stepping into them but not fastening them. "What have you got against palaces? They're just buildings. They're just a little more elaborate than most with more people in them."

"It's hardly the elaborateness that bothers me. And if you recall, I wouldn't even know that because I didn't get past the gate of the last one."

Sebastian's lips twitched before he quickly schooled his face. "Are you still sore about that? You didn't miss much. And you weren't exactly eager to spend more time with Prince Montgomery, were you?"

"Well, no, but..."

"Look on the bright side. You were saved from enduring a rather awkward gathering where I broke the news to Prince Montgomery that I had absolutely no wish to marry him because I only had eyes for a green-eyed farm boy."

"I know you didn't tell him that."

Sebastian shrugged. "Well, maybe not the last part, but if he'd been remotely observant, he would have realized that anyway."

Sebastian's stroking of my ego was starting to make me feel a bit better. I sighed, searching for what it was I wanted to say, the twist of emotions in my gut making it difficult to verbalize. "People like me don't belong in places like that."

Sebastian frowned. "People like you?"

I turned to face him, throwing the words he liked to use frequently back at him. "Farm boys."

To give Sebastian his due, the snort he let out came within seconds without the slightest pause or moment of reflection. "That's absolute poppycock. They're just people."

"Important people."

"Spoiled people." A muscle ticked in Sebastian's jaw.

"Rich people."

"Lucky people for being born in the right place." He laid a hand over mine, his gaze warm on my face. "They're no better than you are. In fact, most of them are far worse. They're not as brave. They're not as intelligent." A slow smile spread across his face. "And they're certainly not as handsome as you are."

A warm glow spread through my chest and as much as I tried to stop it, I couldn't help the corners of my lips from lifting. "Even if sex with me is only *nice*."

Sebastian gave an exaggerated eye roll. "Oh, come on, you know I wasn't serious. If you thought for one minute that I really meant that, I'd be sitting here with an arrow through my cock. You needed to be distracted so that you'd finally spill what was going on in that head of yours." He held my gaze for a moment. "Just say the word and we'll go home. No palace. No stupid artifact that nobody seems to want to talk about. No trying to work out what Frederick is actually saying, and how he manages to stay on his horse when there's no bend in him whatsoever. No cold. No griffins. No kings and queens."

I stared at him. "Home?"

He smiled. "Riverbrook. Your home."

"Not yours?"

He lifted my hand and pressed his lips to the back of it in a move that really didn't fit with the fact that we'd fucked like rabbits less than an hour ago. "My home is wherever your home is."

I swallowed down the emotion threatening to explode from my chest. For once, I had no pithy comeback. "You'd do that? You'd just turn around and go back to Riverbrook if I said the word?" Sebastian nodded. "If it's making you miserable, yes. Nothing's worth that."

I took a moment to imagine it, but the image was difficult to conjure up. I let out a sigh. "I kind of want to know what's going on. It's obvious that there are things we're not being told, and that someone is hiding something. And we'll never know what it is if we don't go to Chastershire."

"True."

I resigned myself to the fact that we were going, that I was clearly just as bad as Sebastian was when it came to walking into danger. "Just... let's make sure we keep a low profile in the palace. You know, arrive discreetly and keep our heads down so that we don't get into trouble. We don't need to be making a show of ourselves. Can we agree on that?"

Sebastian nodded. "Oh, definitely. I couldn't agree more."

He lay back on the bed and I crawled over to lay my head on his chest. It made for a good pillow. I picked up a tendril of his hair, letting the silky-soft strands run through my fingers. "I wouldn't shoot you through the cock."

"No?"

"No. It's not a big enough target."

We both chuckled.



CHAPTER EIGHT

SEBASTIAN

I lifted a bucket and looked underneath it, Jack fixing me with an incredulous stare. "What, you think it shrank down to a teeny-tiny horse and you're going to find it under a bucket?"

I shrugged. "Strange things happen sometimes."

Jack snorted. "Not that strange. It's far more likely that you didn't tether it properly. And therefore, it just wandered off into the night, so it didn't have to spend another day carrying your giant arse on its back."

I craned my neck to peer over my own shoulder at the body part in question. "Giant. I think you mean muscular and toned. And..."

Frederick's voice cut into our conversation, his tone slightly wearier than the situation warranted. "Gentlemen, I do not think it matters where the horse has gone. Only that it is clear after having carried out a preliminary search of the surrounding area that we are not going to be able to locate our missing equine friend. Therefore, it is imperative that we make alternative arrangements so as not to be unnecessarily delayed any longer than we need to be." He turned in a slow circle. When no horse cantered out of the ether, he faced us again. "I see no other recourse except for you to"—he waved a lazy hand—"do the thing that you do."

I raised an eyebrow. "The... thing?"

Jack leaned in close, his voice an exaggerated stage whisper. "I think what Frederick is trying to say is that you need to use your magic to produce something we can ride to the palace on."

Frederick nodded eagerly. "Obviously, perambulation as a method of transportation would be far too time consuming."

Jack's forehead creased. "Perambu—what?"

I smiled. "...lation. It means walking."

Jack threw me a dirty look. "If that's what people mean, they should just say that."

I tugged Jack away by the arm as he turned his glower on Frederick. "Let's not start an argument when we're so close to the palace."

Jack gave a weary shake of his head. "I don't remember him being so infuriatingly pompous back in Riverbrook. If he had been, I wouldn't have agreed to come. The farther from Riverbrook we get, the worse he seems to get. I can only imagine what he's going to be like by the time we get there."

"I doubt we'll see much of him. I expect his role in this will be complete once we reach Chastershire."

The thought seemed to cheer Jack somewhat, a sparkle returning to his eye. He cast a quick glance back at Frederick. "Well, that's good news at least. I can't say I'll miss him." He released a sigh as Frederick placed a foot in the stirrup and swung his body over the horse to mount it. "I guess we're leaving. You better..." He waved his hand in a perfect parody of Frederick's earlier gesture. "Nothing flashy, mind. We want to blend in at the palace, not bring unnecessary attention to ourselves. A nice simple brown horse should do the job nicely."

I let a trail of gold sparks spill from my fingers. I didn't get as far as forming them into anything, though, before I noticed the rather strange expression on Jack's face. What was that about? In search of what could possibly have caused it, I let my gaze drift down over Jack's chest until I reached his crotch, the bulge there—one that definitely hadn't been there moments before when we'd been talking about Frederick—confirming my suspicions that the look on his face had been arousal. "Oh, really!" The words spilled from my mouth in a low drawl. There was no way I wasn't going to crow from the rooftops about this. "Is that all I have to do now to get you going?"

Dark flags of color materialized on Jack's cheeks. "Shut up!"

"What if the king and queen of Osagezia ask for a demonstration of my magic? What are you going to do then?" I let my gaze linger on his crotch. "You'll cause a complete scandal if it gets out that you love royalty so much that their mere presence causes you to have an erection."

"I said, shut up."

"What if when we're back in Riverbrook, I have to carry out an important task for your mother, like...?" I thought about it for a moment. "Something has rolled under the bed and she can't reach it, and I have to conjure a mouse to help her out?"

Jack closed his eyes, and I could almost see the numbers dancing in front of him as he counted, trying to keep his temper. While his eyes were closed, I threaded the magic together into the form I wanted it to be.

"Good god! Is that a...?"

Frederick's announcement had Jack's eyes snapping open. He blinked a few times in a way that said he hoped his vision might adjust if he gave it a bit longer. I nudged him. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

He turned accusing eyes on me. "Sebastian, what is that?"

I ran a hand over its snow-white flank. "It's a horse. A white one."

He moved to stand in front of it, his eyes narrowed. "Then why does it have a horn? A horse with a horn is not a horse. A horse with a horn is a unicorn."

I shrugged. "If you say so. Horse. Unicorn. There's very little difference if you ask me." A small crowd had gathered around us by now, people jostling each other out of the way just to catch a glimpse.

Jack let out a loud sigh. "I said nothing flashy. Do you not listen to me at all?"

I took the saddle and the bridle out of the stable boy's hands, the boy having ground to a halt a few steps away with his mouth wide open. "I listen to you. It's just that I don't always agree, and I sometimes do my own thing."

"Sometimes..."

I turned away so Jack couldn't catch my smile at the muttered word. Saddle secured and bridle attached, I swung up into the saddle before holding out my hand to Jack. "Come on, farm boy, time is a-wasting, and Frederick isn't getting any younger. We have a palace to visit. They're going to be green with envy when we show them our unicorn."

For a moment, it looked like Jack was going to balk, and then very slowly, the expression on his face saying it was completely against his will, he grasped hold of my hand. One good tug had him settled comfortably in front of me, the crowd parting as I spurred the unicorn into a trot, and Frederick fell into step behind us on his far plainer and far less impressive horse. Poor Frederick.

"Did you let the horse go deliberately?"

Jack's question had me frowning. "Why would I do that?"

"So you could arrive at the palace on a unicorn."

I tightened my arms around him and rested my chin on his shoulder. "No. I didn't let the horse go deliberately, but we might as well make the most of it."

Jack's silence said he wasn't sure whether to believe me or not. One thing Jack could never be accused of being was trusting.

We arrived at the palace in good time, my magic lasting due to it not having been used for days. Jack grew quieter the closer we got, and I knew he was back to worrying. Having seen Jack's farm, I tried to view the palace of Chastershire through his eyes. I suppose it did make for an impressive

sight with its tall stone walls and its central bell tower. It was far bigger than the palace in Arrowgarde had been, and where Arrowgarde had been surrounded by a thriving community of its own, everything in Chastershire was contained within its walls, protected by a pair of huge wooden gates. It was to these that Frederick rode ahead, the guard not admitting us until Frederick had vouched for us.

And then we were inside the walls of Chastershire, a long, straight path stretching out in front of us that led to the palace, while on either side were neat rows of houses. Jack grew increasingly rigid against me as word spread about our arrival and people spilled from their homes to form a crowd on either side of the road, incredulous expressions seeming to be the order of the day.

"Mummy, why does that horse have a horn?"

I offered the young boy who'd immediately been shushed by his mother a cheery wave, Jack keeping his gaze fixed firmly ahead. "Everyone's staring at us."

I leaned closer to him so my whisper wouldn't carry. "No. Everyone is staring at the unicorn. That's all they're going to talk about. Whereas if we were on a horse, they would be staring at us. Look." I gave him a nudge to go with my directive. "No one's remotely interested in you."

Jack's head slowly turned to the right before swinging back the opposite way. I smirked as he took in the truth of what I'd said. He let out a huff. "Doesn't that bother you? You normally love people looking at you. What if they can't tell anyone about how blond your hair is, or how big your muscles are? What if they don't even ask what your name is?"

"It will be devastating to my ego, but I'll live."

Jack fell silent again, but he was far less rigid than he'd been before. The crowds thinned as we grew closer to the palace, the neat rows of houses giving way to parade grounds and fields.

Frederick turned to look back over his shoulder. "Impressive, isn't it?"

He seemed far more animated. I supposed he was pleased to be home. He had, after all, been away for a few weeks. Perhaps there was even a Mrs. Frederick. Or children. Perhaps Jack and I had been unfair in judging him so harshly and should have taken more time to get to know him.

Frederick steered his horse to the right, a stable block visible in the distance, adjacent to the palace. Something caught my eye, and I nudged Jack, his gaze following mine to where a battalion of soldiers were being put through their paces. "Not short of men, then."

Jack shook his head, keeping his voice low. "Which again begs the question why Frederick was tasked with traveling alone. It's very odd."

I had to agree with him. Frederick might think he had survival skills, but had he run into any trouble at all, I doubted he would have lasted two minutes. He certainly wouldn't have gotten very far had *his* path crossed with the griffin's rather than ours. Instead, the griffin would have enjoyed a rather tasty snack. "Hey, Frederick?" I waited until he'd turned my way. "What happened to Earl?"

He blinked. "Earl?"

Seriously, we were going to play that game. Jack got in there first, his response as blunt as ever. "Huge man. Moody expression. Seemingly at your beck and call, given that you gave him instructions and he rushed off immediately, never to be seen again."

"Earl is a busy man. He had... important things to carry out."

I smiled at the word "things." For a man like Frederick, who prided himself on an extensive vocabulary that he wasn't afraid to use, it was incredibly suspicious for him to be so vague. We were prevented from asking more questions about Earl as we arrived at the stables, a stable boy appearing to take the reins as Frederick dismounted from his horse. The stable boy looked over and did a double-take. "Sir, should I take your... your..." He cleared his throat, his eyes wide.

I took pity on him. "My unicorn?"

He nodded, his curly hair bouncing with the movement. Jack leapt to the ground, and I followed, a wave of my hand dispensing with the unicorn within seconds of us touching the ground. "Not necessary, but thank you. And you don't have to call me sir."

The stable boy blinked and turned his attention to Jack, who spoke before the boy could utter so much as a word. "And definitely don't call *me* sir. That would be beyond odd."

"Bass!"

I turned with a frown as my name rang out from inside the stables, the shadows hiding the man's identity until he stepped into the sunlight and his chestnut brown hair became apparent. "Roger?" It was funny where people turned up. The last time I'd seen Roger had been in a tavern close to the border of Cerensai and Quatasta. We'd shared a few tempestuous nights together and then parted as friends. That had been at least three years ago, and I hadn't heard so much as a whisper either from him or about him since. His presence in Osagezia would go a long way toward explaining that. Did he work in the stables?

Before I could question him, I was swept into his arms, his lips landing on mine, the strong smell of horse emanating from him answering my earlier question.



CHAPTER NINE

JACK

If I was ever tasked with coming up with a list of things about Sebastian that drove me absolutely crazy... Well, firstly, it would be a very long list, and secondly, this... this right here would be at the top. It wasn't that Sebastian seemed to know absolutely everyone. I was only too aware that he'd traveled a lot and was a very social person, so it was to be expected that he'd made more than a few acquaintances along the way. I'd come to terms with the fact that during those travels he'd sowed a lot of oats. After all, that was his past, and it wasn't like it hadn't been obvious from the very first moment when I'd met him, when he'd been inexplicably shirtless while lounging indolently against a wall. It was one of the reasons I'd hated him on sight.

But this, this penchant for letting people greet him in this way made my teeth grind together. It had happened with Cassemir. It had happened with Prince Montgomery. Not as a greeting maybe, but later—the image of the prince suctioned onto Sebastian's face still etched in my brain. Leofric might not have kissed him at their reunion, but they'd shared a naked hug, Sebastian being the naked one. And yes, you could argue that all of those events had happened before we were together, but now we were, and if I was truthful, I'd assumed it would stop. Yet, here Sebastian was in the arms of another man whose sole aim in life seemed to be to kiss Sebastian as thoroughly as he could.

His horse having been taken care of, Frederick came to stand next to me with a rather perplexed expression on his face as he took in the sight of the two men kissing. Or Sebastian being kissed if you wanted to be pedantic. He gave an embarrassed little cough. "Excuse me for prying into your intimate affairs, but my understanding was that the two of you were courting. Therefore, I have to admit to being somewhat befuddled at the evidence of my own eyes, and what it means."

I took a deep breath as the kiss carried on, my blood long past boiling point and heading to inferno. "You and me both, Frederick. You and me both."

Roger finally let Sebastian go, his eyes shining with joy as he stepped back. "It's so good to see you, Bass. It's been far too long since our paths last crossed. What the devil are you doing here? Are you going to be here for long? Long enough to catch up? There's a little tavern I could take you to where the ale's far tastier than its price would lead you to believe."

I didn't wait for Sebastian's response, instead turning to Frederick. "Any chance you could take me somewhere else? Anywhere that's not here would be fine. Preferably before the temptation to do something in a royal palace that might get me executed becomes too much."

Frederick's gaze flicked between me and Sebastian a few times before he gave an awkward little bow. "Of course." When he scurried off in the direction of the palace, I followed. The irony of me being so keen to get inside a building I'd professed to have no business visiting wasn't lost on me. How times changed when your lover couldn't keep his lips to himself.

"Jack!" The call was strident and laced with a satisfying degree of confusion. "Where are you going? Wait for me."

I didn't wait. In fact, I sped up, almost overtaking Frederick in my eagerness to evade Sebastian as Frederick led me in through the servants' entrance and up a long, curving flight of stairs. Frederick gave an embarrassed little cough. "Please excuse the shabbiness of this part of the building."

Shabbiness! This was supposed to be shabby. To my eyes, it was a far cry from shabby with its cream walls and floor-to-ceiling oil paintings of everything from landscapes to people. Even the ceiling was ornate with its delicate swirls and patterns. If this was shabby, I dreaded to think what the rest of the palace must look like. I'd never felt less like I belonged anywhere in my entire life. I was all too aware of being every inch the farm boy Sebastian liked to call me.

Frederick stopped outside a door, my mouth dropping open as he opened the door to reveal the room inside. It was gorgeous. Light, airy, and with a four-poster bed in the center that looked like four people could easily have slept in it with room to spare. Frederick gave another little bow. "I hope you will be comfortable here. Someone will be along shortly to lead you to your first appointment of the day. I'm afraid that you have quite a packed schedule today, but I'm sure you're keen to discover more about the missing artifact." He paused, tiny ridges appearing between his eyebrows. "Would you have me show Sebastian to this room, or to another?"

"Can you do that? Show him to a different room?"

"Of course. There are twenty-five bedrooms in this palace, not including the servants' quarters. We have no visiting royal dignitaries this week. Therefore, Chastershire has plenty of rooms at our disposal."

My lips curved into a smile as I imagined Sebastian's face. "Oh yes! Please do show him to another room. The peace and quiet would be most appreciated."

As it was, after Frederick's departure I barely had time to test out the bed and to admire the rather pleasant view from the window before the door handle rattled. Given that I'd made sure to lock it after Frederick's departure, it held firm.

"Jack?" I turned in the direction of the door but chose not to respond. "Frederick showed me to a room, but there must have been some sort of mistake because you weren't in it. I can't be in a room that you're not in. It's lonely." The door handle rattled again. "I know you're in there. Frederick was trying so hard not to look at this room while doing the complete opposite that it was obvious." I cursed Frederick for not being a better liar as I crossed the room silently to stand in front of the door. "Let me in, Jack."

If he thought I was that weak, then he didn't know me as well as he thought he did. A night on his own would do him good. In fact, he could go to Askophai on his own, and then he could kiss anyone he wanted, and I would be none the wiser. I could go home and be... I sighed. I'd be miserable, but he didn't need to know that.

Sebastian let out a sigh, loud and dramatic enough to carry through the door. "I know why you're annoyed at me."

I unlocked the door and yanked it open to glare at him. There just wasn't the same satisfaction to be had from giving him the evil eye through wood. My glower only grew more pronounced as Sebastian's face lit up, his lips curving up into a wide smile. "Jack! I missed you."

"You know why I'm annoyed at you, do you?" My words were short and sharp. "Well, I guess that would be progress because you're usually too wrapped up in yourself to even notice. So why don't you enlighten me, Sebastian." I stepped forward and poked him in the chest for good measure. Mainly because I knew he hated it. "Tell me why I'm annoyed."

A cautious expression settled on Sebastian's face as he stepped back out of poking range. "Roger?" I lifted my chin. "What about him?"

"He... kissed me?"

I shook my head as I retreated back into the room, Sebastian not bothering to wait for an invitation before following. "If I was annoyed at Roger kissing you, I would be annoyed at him."

"Right." He rubbed his chin and looked confused. "So...?"

"I'm annoyed that you let him kiss you."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

I gave him a dirty look. "They're two completely different things. One is his actions, and one is your actions. I don't know Roger. I've never met Roger." And I still hadn't, given that I'd stalked off before any sort of introduction could be made should one have been forthcoming. "Roger can do whatever the hell he wants. However, you..." Sebastian danced out of the way as I went in for another poke. "You have *me*." I punctuated that last word by jabbing my finger in my own chest. Ouch! That hurt. Sebastian might be warranted in trying to avoid it. "Therefore, you shouldn't be remotely interested in kissing anyone else."

"I'm not."

I threw up my hands in frustration. "Then don't do it. It's as simple as that."

Sebastian blinked a few times. He looked like someone had just tasked him with solving a particularly difficult problem. "How am I supposed to stop people?"

I stared at him incredulously. "You can't be serious. You're an adult, Sebastian. If you don't want to kiss someone, you don't kiss them."

I was dimly aware of footsteps in the corridor where neither of us had bothered to close the door. I ignored them. This was a big palace, and there were undoubtedly a lot of people in it. People who I didn't give a damn about at the moment. What I did give a damn about was driving this point into Sebastian's thick skull until he got it, because I couldn't be with Sebastian if I had to spend the next however many years watching my lover kiss all and sundry. Not without being convicted for murder, anyway. And whether that would be murdering Sebastian, or one of his ex-lovers, I wasn't sure. Possibly both. Roger might get a pass for not having been objectionable apart from throwing himself at Sebastian, but that wasn't the case with all of them.

Sebastian frowned. "It would be rude not to greet old friends."

"They're not friends, though, are they? You don't kiss your friends with tongues."

Someone cleared their throat, and I held up a hand. "Not now. This is important." Sebastian's gaze flicked to the side, and I snapped my fingers in front of his face until his gaze swung back my way. "Concentrate. Now, tell me what you're going to do next time someone tries to kiss you." His brow furrowed and I let out a snort. "You're not even doing this to wind me up, are you? You really can't think of a single strategy you could employ to stop it from happening."

"Not without being rude."

I let out a noisy exhalation. "Okay. Let's role play. I'm going to be one of your pointless flings from the past, and you're going to be you."

Sebastian's gaze slid sideways again. "Erm... Jack."

"Don't erm, Jack me." I fixed him with a steely stare. "We need to sort this, Sebastian, or I'm not going to be responsible for my actions. "Are you ready?"

"I really think we should—"

"Are. You. Ready?"

He nodded but didn't look remotely happy about the situation. Well, if he had any boundaries whatsoever when it came to others, I wouldn't have to treat him like a child. Therefore, he only had himself to blame. I rolled my shoulders back and got into character. "Bass! How lovely to see you again! We must screw like bunnies for old time's sake. And no, I haven't given any sort of consideration as to whether you're with anyone." I affected a high laugh. "Why would I?" Throwing myself forward in what could only be called a lunge, I pressed my lips to Sebastian's.

He let me. And even worse, he kissed me back.

I grabbed him by the shoulders and pushed him away. "What are you doing? You're not meant to be kissing me. You're meant to be practicing how to avoid kissing me. You know, that little thing called willpower."

Sebastian looked completely nonplused. "Why would I ever not want to kiss you? I can't practice that."

I ignored the surge of warmth in my chest and reminded myself that I was mad at him. "But I'm not me."

"Who are you?"

"Roger, or Cassemir, or that pompous idiot Prince Montgomery. Take your pick. Whatever man decides to throw himself at you." I gave him a cajoling look. "Come on, try."

"Okay. For you."

Another throat-clearing. Gaze fixed on Sebastian, I held a hand up again. "Give me a minute."

I leaned forward again. This time I was much slower, giving Sebastian plenty of time to push me off, or to move his head so that I missed his lips. He did neither, our lips meeting in a kiss that lingered, heat immediately building between us. By the time the kiss finally ended, I was breathless, and although I could recall being mad at Sebastian, I couldn't conjure those same emotions, my lips curving upwards of their own accord. "You're absolutely hopeless."

"Should I tell the king and queen that you're otherwise disposed?"

King? Queen? I turned to find a footman standing there. He was dressed in a dark blue palace uniform, the collar of his shirt so well starched that it looked painful. How long had he been standing there? Footsteps. The throat clearing. I swallowed. A while, then. He'd obviously had a front row

seat for the whole exchange between me and Sebastian. I turned accusing eyes on Sebastian, but he merely shrugged. "I tried to tell you."

"Not hard enough." Heat rushed to my cheeks, and I struggled to find words. Any words. "The king and queen?"

The footman didn't miss a beat. "They are eager to meet the men who are going to retrieve Chastershire's sacred artifact. They have asked for an immediate audience."

Immediate! The word reverberated through my skull. I'd kept the king and queen waiting. I was still keeping the king and queen waiting.

Sebastian took my arm and steered me toward the door. "We would be honored to meet the king and queen, wouldn't we, Jack?"

I managed a nod as we followed the footman down the long corridor, my mind a tumble of chaotic thoughts as I replayed what the footman had seen. I'd kissed Sebastian, but that wasn't exactly a crime. And I'd been in my own room, or at least the room allocated to me, which meant it was temporarily mine. It wasn't like I'd bent Sebastian over the queen's throne and had my wicked way with him. Had I said anything? I grimaced as one particular snippet came to mind. "Erm... what I said about Prince Montgomery... it was..." It was the truth, but I could hardly say that, could I? "It was..."

I looked over at Sebastian, but he was too busy admiring a painting we were passing to offer anything in the way of help. That figured. "What I mean is..."

The footman turned to look back over his shoulder. "I have worked in the royal residence for a long time. I see nothing. I hear nothing. It is the best way to be."

Relieved, I braced myself for a meeting with royalty. It would be my first formal meeting and hopefully, my last.



CHAPTER TEN

JACK

My first sight of the throne room, with all its ornate carvings, marble statues, and the multitude of gold everywhere, including the ceiling, took my breath away. No wonder Frederick had described the lower reaches of the palace as shabby. In comparison to this, anything would be shabby. Had the interior of Arrowgarde been this grand? I'd have to ask Sebastian how they compared. If it had been, perhaps it was as well I hadn't been allowed access. I was at home in a barn surrounded by straw. Here, I wasn't just a fish out of water. I was a fish who'd woken up and found themselves in the desert.

I craned my head back to stare at the ceiling as we walked. It wasn't just a ceiling. It was art—its surface covered with all manner of flora and fauna. There were birds fluttering around a hedgerow; woodland creatures darting in and out of burrows; tall trees portrayed so accurately you could almost feel the breeze through their leaves; brightly colored flowers stretching up to a sun so accurately painted that I imagined I could feel its heat on my skin.

"Jack?"

I ignored the voice as I studied an intricately painted butterfly above my head, its wings perfectly iridescent. How did you get it to be so realistic? And who had painted it? I'd like to meet the artist who could create such beauty. I tried to picture them. An elf, perhaps? They always had such long, graceful fingers. It was easy to picture the paintbrush being held in a pale hand as they created magic. Maybe not the same sort of magic that Sebastian had, but something just as impressive.

Fingers fastened around my shoulder and gave me a gentle shake. "Jack?" Sebastian's tone was more urgent this time, an edge of something in his voice. He was probably upset that I was admiring something other than him. Well, he might be devastatingly handsome, but he wasn't festooned in woodland creatures and butterflies. Therefore, upsetting as it may be for him, he lost out this time.

Smiling, I tore my gaze away from the ceiling to tell him as much, only to find two people in front of me—a man and a woman. A man and a woman dressed in the finest silks. A man and a woman wearing a crown and sitting on golden thrones. They were both extremely attractive, the woman's long blonde hair glistening like silk as it fell around her shoulders.

Sebastian cleared his throat, his next words spoken out of the corner of his mouth. "This is the king and queen of Chastershire, Jack."

Of course they were. He didn't need to tell me that. They wouldn't be sitting on thrones and wearing crowns if they weren't, would they? I wasn't stupid. What were you supposed to do when you met a king and queen? It wasn't like my time on a farm had ever covered such an eventuality, but I guessed the answer wasn't stare at the ceiling and completely ignore them. My mind had gone blank, my throat dry. This was Sebastian's fault. If he hadn't distracted me with Roger, I would have had ample time to prepare myself for this meeting. And he might have realized that briefing me on expectations was a good idea. *Royalty. Think, Jack.* Some sign of respect.

I lifted a hand in greeting. No, that wasn't right. No wonder the queen was looking at me like one of the palace dogs had dragged something in and dropped it in front of her. I'd tried to tell Sebastian that I didn't belong in a palace, but had he listened? No, of course he hadn't. And now here I was, making a complete fool of myself.

"Bow, Jack."

I shot Sebastian a quick glare. "I know."

I bowed, bending so low that I was in danger of toppling over. It was tempting just to stay down there. The carpet, rich and luxurious as it was, though, was a lot less interesting than the ceiling. Therefore, with reluctance surging through every sinew of my body, I came back up. The king and queen were both staring at me with a slight furrow to their brows, and given the queen's lack of lines on her face, I didn't think she frowned a lot. She'd known me approximately three seconds, and she was already frowning at me. It didn't bode well.

I sought to regain my equilibrium and do a bit of damage control. "I apologize your highness..." Was that the correct address? It was what Sebastian had used with Prince Montgomery, but he had just been a prince. Just? I tamped down on the bubble of hysterical laughter that threatened to erupt from my chest. I hadn't been concerned about how to treat him, but then, we'd been rescuing him, and he hadn't been in a palace. Here, it seemed so different. So official. So intimidating. Were you meant to address a king and queen differently? Why was this so complicated?

Someone should definitely have given me instructions before leading me straight into the lion's den. If they had, I wouldn't be floundering so badly. I pressed on. It was better to say something than nothing at all. "I was just so stunned by the beauty of your ceiling." I gave a quick glance up to punctuate my words. "I've never seen anything quite so..." I shook my head, unable to find the right words. "It's..."

The queen's face softened, a hint of a smile teasing at the corner of her lips. "It is, isn't it? I understand why you were so taken aback. I was stunned the first time I saw it too." She pressed her hands together on her lap, her poise so undeniably perfect that I had to wonder if she practiced it in front of a mirror. No wonder Frederick stood the way he did. It was apparently a sin in the palace to slouch. I straightened my back and lifted my shoulders, glancing over to find Sebastian also ramrod straight. Except, it seemed to come far more naturally to him, like he'd just slipped back into a role he'd played many times before. I guessed he'd had to do the same thing at Arrowgarde, and perhaps he'd been in a palace before that. I may have found out about his childhood, but there was still a huge chunk of time between him leaving Padora and our paths crossing that we hadn't spoken about.

The king's face was a blank slate as he studied us both, his gaze lingering for far longer on Sebastian than it did on me. "So, you are the man who risked his own life to rescue Prince Montgomery and return him safely to his family?"

"I am."

No mention of me, but for once I was fine with that. I was happy for the attention to be elsewhere. It would hopefully give me a chance to regain my composure.

The king tilted his head to one side, his gaze scouring Sebastian from head to toe. I tried to picture Sebastian from his point of view. He was wearing a shirt—and a coat. The king should be grateful for that, given Sebastian's usual state of undress. He looked a little worn, but then neither of us had been given a chance to freshen up before we'd been summoned, so they could hardly expect us to look our best. And Sebastian's hair always seemed to be ready for an audience, even in the direct of circumstances. It was most annoying. Therefore, I wasn't quite sure what the king was finding so interesting about him.

The king lifted a hand to rub his chin thoughtfully as he continued to stare at Sebastian. "You seem familiar. Have we met before?"

Sebastian smiled. "I'm afraid not. I would remember if I'd ever had the pleasure prior to this meeting. I just have one of those faces. People have often said on meeting me that they feel like our paths have crossed before."

Sounded like a line to me, but I was wise enough not to say that out loud.

"Hmm..." The king didn't sound too convinced. "And you have magic?"

"George"—the queen reached across and patted his arm—"do not interrogate the poor boy. He is here to do Chastershire a great service. We must remember that."

The king cleared his throat and sat up a little straighter. "Of course." He forced a smile but there was still a hint of a question in his eyes. "Perhaps you remind me of someone. I only wish I could remember who it was, but it eludes me at the moment."

Sebastian reminded him of someone. I nearly swallowed my tongue at the thought of there being two men like Sebastian in the thirteen kingdoms. One was more than enough. Although, I supposed it could be useful. The other Sebastian could sleep with whoever he wished while I hung onto the original.

The king's gaze skated back to me. "And may I ask what your involvement is?"

Sebastian cut in before I could respond. "Jack was actually instrumental in the rescue of Prince Montgomery. He's just very modest and doesn't like to boast. We come as a package. Neither of us are as good without the other."

I stared at him, his words making me forget the king and queen's presence once more. "Do you really believe that?" It was a question which would probably have been better saved until we were on our own. But it was out there now, and I needed to know the answer.

Sebastian's blue gaze settled on my face. "I do."

Heat crept up my neck and I didn't know what to do with my hands. What I would have liked to do was wrap them around Sebastian's head and pull him down for a kiss, but I had a feeling that staring at the ceiling would be a far lesser crime than kissing my lover in front of royalty. Therefore, I was left with no choice but to clasp my hands in front of me and attempt not to look absurdly pleased.

"I see." The queen looked like she didn't see at all. Something about Sebastian's statement seemed not to have gone down too well with her. "Well, I suppose that two people are better than one when it comes to retrieving what we have lost. You will want to know about the artifact, of course, before you embark on your journey."

Sebastian nodded. "We will need to know as much as we can, both about the artifact and its disappearance."

"Of course." The king sat forward slightly. "All necessary meetings have been scheduled. I'm afraid you will be quite busy today before your departure tomorrow." He was about to say more when the door of the throne room opened to admit the same footman who had shown us to the room. A

series of long strides brought him to the king's side, where he proceeded to bend down and whisper something in his ear. I was beginning to think there was a lot of whispering that went on in Chastershire. First Frederick, and now the footman. It was almost like Chastershire had things to hide.

The king listened carefully, his expression giving nothing away. When the footman stepped back, he stood. "My sincere apologies. I fear there is an important matter that cannot wait and needs to be dealt with immediately." He rested his hand on the back of the throne, the multiple gold rings he wore glinting in the light. "In case I do not have another chance to converse with you properly before your departure to Askophai, I wish you good luck on your journey, and I look forward to giving you the hero's welcome you deserve when you return with our artifact."

He left, the footman following him. Which left us alone with the queen. Was that allowed? Was it appropriate? I guessed it must be or it wouldn't have happened. In the absence of her husband, the queen's whole demeanor changed, her body leaning slightly toward Sebastian in a manner I recognized only too well. "Sebastian..." Her voice was a purr. "Can I call you Sebastian, or is there another name you prefer?"

She held out her hand, and Sebastian dutifully stepped forward to take it, lifting it to his lips to lay a gentle kiss on the back of it. "My friends call me Bass."

"Bass! What a charming name." Her gaze raked over him in a very different way than the king's had. It was all too easy to see what was on her mind.

I felt my lip curl. Thankfully, the queen was so fixated on Sebastian that I'd become invisible to her.

Sebastian gave her a sunny smile. "Thank you, your majesty."

Your majesty? Damn it! That was the term of address I was supposed to use.

"Tell me, Bass"—she gestured for him to come closer, and Sebastian had no choice but to do as she'd asked, not that he seemed unduly bothered by it—"do you think you can succeed in this mission? Do you really believe you can find our missing artifact when so many have failed?"

"I do, your majesty. Jack and I will leave no stone unturned. We can promise you that."

I quickly schooled my face at the mention of my name, just in case the reminder of my existence should have her looking my way, but her gaze never shifted from Sebastian. "I don't doubt that you are brave. And strong." Her gaze lingered on the breadth of his chest as she said that. "And fearless. And that you have the heart of a lion, but…" She reached out and lay a hand on his chest. "You must be careful. There are many dangers in Askophai. I would hate to see you fall foul of some of them."

"I'll be careful, and Jack and I will watch each other's backs."

Still not so much as a glance my way.

Her fingers slid up Sebastian's chest to curl around his neck. "When you return, we must become better acquainted. The king is a fine man, but he is also a very busy one. Sometimes I am left to my own devices for days on end with no one to entertain me."

"Over my dead body." Shit! Had I said that out loud? One day my mouth was going to get me into trouble, and this might just be that day.

The queen blinked, her gaze sliding over to me. "Did you say something?"

"I said—"

"Jack said that we would be honored to entertain you, just as much as anybody would."

The queen's hand dropped from Sebastian's chest. "I see." Her lips settled into a thin line. "Well, we will have to see if you return first, shan't we?"

It sounded suspiciously like a threat. Only, I wasn't sure whether it was aimed at Sebastian, at me, or at both of us. Could you be executed for rejecting the queen's advances? I wasn't sure. I suspected, though, that you could definitely be executed should the king find you in his marital bed doing things to his wife that you shouldn't be doing. I needed to cover Sebastian's head. His looks always seemed to get us into trouble.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

SEBASTIAN

We all stared at where the priest was pointing, the floor around the empty space so faded by the sun streaming in through the windows of the chapel that you could clearly make out where an object had once stood. Father Riley had come as something of a surprise on our introduction, given that he was not only young for a priest, but handsome too. He had red hair and freckles, and in another life—before Jack—I might have seen him as something of a challenge. He wouldn't have been the first priest I'd steered away from religion and into my bed. There was something delightful about a man releasing years and years' worth of pent-up sexual frustration. But alas, as he didn't have green eyes, and he didn't glare at me like he wanted to kill me at least half of the time, he did absolutely nothing for me. Not even rouse the slightest stirring of desire or interest. That was all reserved for the man at my side, who was still bristling with indignant irritation over the queen expressing an interest in me.

Jack braced his hands on his thighs as he leaned forward to take a closer look. "So, the artifact is rectangular?"

Father Riley shook his head. "The artifact is kept in a locked chest at all times. The chest is rectangular."

I frowned. "And who has the key? You? Who else?"

Father Riley looked somewhat confused by the question. "No one has the key."

Jack gave a slight eyeroll. "Then how do you unlock it? You know, to get the artifact out, when you use it for... whatever you use it for. Weddings and such. Or does someone wave a hand and say abracadabra, and the chest pops open?"

Father Riley continued to stare solemnly at the empty patch of floor. Perhaps he thought if he stared long enough, the artifact would reappear and the whole business could be over and done with. "We don't open the chest. There is no need to. It is simply enough that it is here."

It was beginning to feel like the priest was talking in riddles. As it had been made clear that Jack and I still had several appointments after this one, I preferred us to get to the point sooner rather than later. "What is the artifact exactly? No one has actually told us."

"What is it?" Father Riley's blue eyes held mine with a solemnness that probably came from years of practice. "It is the heart of Chastershire. It is the lifeblood that sustains us through the dark winter nights. It is the past. It is the future. It is the glue that holds us all together. It is—"

Jack's patience was wearing thin. I could tell that even before he interrupted. "But *what* is it? A sword? A necklace? A skull? A rock that someone's drawn a face on?"

A muscle ticked in Father Riley's cheek. "I do not know."

I shared a look with Jack, his expression reflecting my own thoughts. How could you wax lyrical about something when you had no idea what it was? I crossed my arms over my chest and levelled the priest with a hard stare. "So why are we talking to you if you don't even know what it is? The king should have given us this information."

"The king does not know what it is either."

Jack laughed, but it was short-lived, the laughter dying in his throat as he realized that the priest was serious. His eyes narrowed on Father Riley. "Does anyone know what it is?"

Father Riley shook his head. "That's what I've been trying to tell you. We do not open the chest. The chest has been in the kingdom of Chastershire for thousands of years. Legend has it that it was a gift from one of the gods themselves, an offering to bring wealth and prosperity to the palace. The gods will be angry when they realize that it is no longer in our possession. They will exact terrible revenge on Chastershire. Therefore, it must be found and returned to the sanctity of this chapel where we can continue to take care of it."

Jack closed his eyes. I recognized that look. It meant he was struggling to hold on to his temper. It was strange to witness it when I wasn't on the receiving end of it. He released a breath and then opened his eyes. "How do you know the chest isn't empty?"

"It... er"—Father Riley looked downright uncomfortable, his freckles standing out starkly against his pale skin—"rattles."

"It rattles." Jack's repetition of Father Riley's words was delivered in a scathing tone that left no doubt how little regard he had for the statement. "What sort of rattle? The rattle of numerous things? Or the rattle of one thing? The rattle of metal? Or the rattle of wood?"

The priest placed his hands in front of him and interlocked his fingers. "I do not feel it's appropriate to talk about the artifact in such a way."

"Listen..." Bright flags of color appeared on Jack's cheeks, and his eyes glittered with irritation. It made me want to back him against the wall of the chapel and kiss him senseless. "We're leaving tomorrow to find your artifact. How are we supposed to find something if we don't know what it looks like, and we don't know anything about it?"

Father Riley tilted his chin slightly in a stubborn gesture. Well, there was no way he was going to out-stubborn Jack. There wasn't a man alive who could do that. Not even me, but I was going to enjoy watching the priest try. "I can tell you about the chest."

Jack's fingers curled into his palms. Would he punch a priest? I hoped not, but I wouldn't put it past him. I steeled myself to leap in and intercept should he try. Jack would be annoyed, but it would save the whole having to rescue him from the palace dungeons and flee in the middle of the night thing, and I did still want that reward. Jack inclined his head toward the empty space on the floor. "About that size and made of wood?"

"Yes." Father Riley sounded downright sulky.

Jack folded his arms over his chest and looked smug. "And what if they've removed it from the chest?"

Father Riley's eyes went wide, and he let out a gasp. "They wouldn't."

I shook my head. "They stole it. I don't think we're necessarily dealing with people who hold as much regard for the artifact as you do. I assume the lock was breakable?" He gave a jerky nod. "So how about you just answer the questions to the best of your ability, and then Jack and I can get on with the rest of our day. Hopefully then, we'll be able to find the artifact—whatever it is—for you."

Despite looking like he wanted to argue, Father Riley nodded.

Jack repeated his earlier question. "The rattle of one thing? Or more than one thing?"

"One thing." Father Riley's expression reflected actual physical pain at having to refer to the artifact as a thing, forcing me to have to turn away to hide my smile.

"Metal or wood?"

"I don't know if the rattle is loud enough to be metal, but I couldn't say for sure that it's wood."

The inclination of Jack's head said he was prepared to accept that as an answer. I chipped in with a few questions of my own. "How heavy is the chest?"

"Not that heavy."

"So easily liftable?"

Father Riley nodded.

"By one person?" Another nod.

Jack turned in a slow circle to survey the chapel. "Who in the palace had access to it?" "Everyone."

Jack raised an eyebrow. "Everyone?"

Father Riley's nod this time was emphatic. "No one in Chastershire would touch it."

Jack lowered his gaze pointedly to the empty space, and Father Riley flushed a deep shade of crimson, but stayed silent.

"When was it taken?"

Father Riley seemed relieved to turn back my way, and away from Jack's less than friendly interrogation. "In the middle of the night. It was gone when I opened up the chapel in the morning. I immediately raised the alarm, and the palace and grounds were searched, but there was no sign of the artifact." He shook his head, his eyes downcast. "It was a very sad day in Chastershire. A very sad day indeed. I, of course, did not have the luxury of wallowing in my own grief. I had to be there for the king and the queen, who were understandably devastated. And then there was poor Princess Surander. Imagine being told that your wedding cannot go ahead when it is only a few weeks away. The poor child." Father Riley reared back as Jack snapped his fingers in front of his face. "What are you—?"

"We don't need to know all that. It's not relevant."

It was harsh, but true. I attempted to smooth over Jack's sharp jagged edges. "It must have been a difficult time for everyone concerned. You have our utmost sympathy." Ignoring Jack's snort, I hastened to find out more relevant information. "Who had access to the chapel during the night?"

Father Riley's gaze turned pensive. "The door is always open."

Jack's eyes narrowed in contemplation. "Are you talking metaphorically, or physically?" Father Riley's smile was nothing short of proud. "Both."

Well, that wasn't great news. When Jack tugged me away out of the priest's earshot, I already knew what was coming, Jack pulling no punches in his summation of the situation. "So... we're looking for something that no one has ever seen that could have been stolen by absolutely anyone in the palace."

"So it would seem." I scrutinized him carefully, taking in the slight glitter in his eyes and the restless tension coming off him in waves. "It's not too late for us to walk away, if that's what you want us to do. After all, it's becoming increasingly unlikely that we'll actually find this thing. Chances are that we're going to end up being led on a wild goose chase with nothing to show for it at the end, except for sore legs from far too much walking, and an in-depth knowledge of Askophai that neither of us ever wanted or will ever have cause to use again."

Jack gave a slow shake of his head. "But imagine if we do solve the mystery and find this thing. I don't think we should give up that easily."

"Can I remind you of these words when we find ourselves in danger and you try and lay the blame at my door for us being there?"

Jack gave me a scathing look. "Certainly not. That's not how our relationship works. I blame you, and if you have any sense, you accept that. We don't need to bring logic or previous conversations into it."

I grinned at him. "Good to know."



After finishing up with Father Riley and not really being any the wiser about the artifact, we were shuttled along to another room where we were greeted by an officious man brandishing a tape measure in the same way someone else might a weapon. If you asked me, he was far too free with his hands as Jack was subjected to every measurement under the sun, including some I was pretty sure he'd made up. The only thing he didn't do was take Jack's cock out and measure it. Although, I could have provided any information he required on that front: length, girth, taste, average amount of cum produced, time taken to get to full erection.

Once he was satisfied with Jack, the same process was repeated with me, Jack looking no happier than I had as the man shoved one end of his tape measure into the crease of my groin, his other smoothing over my thigh as he leaned forward to peer at the tape measure. The meeting culminated with the news that warm winter clothing suitable for Askophai would be ready before our departure the next day, the measurements taken apparently necessary to alter existing clothing as there wouldn't be enough time for suitable clothing to be made from scratch. There would be provisions as well—a cold-weather tent for when we found ourselves exposed to the elements, new arrows for Jack, and two horses: one to ride and one to carry our equipment as far as the border of Askophai. At which point the snow and uneven terrain would make the going unsafe for the horses, and we would be on foot. That was nothing new, though, Jack and I were used to that.

From there, we were escorted to another room. This one had very little furniture except for a large table, its polished wooden surface almost completely covered by a map. Ramrod straight at the opposite side of the table was a portly, mustachioed man whose firm, almost punishing, handshake

didn't match his name of General Flowers. He introduced himself as Chastershire's chief military strategist, his chest puffing out with pride as he relayed the information.

Flowers seemed eager to get started, the three of us gathering around the map, and Jack leaning forward to get a better view of the northern part of the map, his

grimace making it clear how he felt about what he could see even before he opened his mouth to speak. "So that's Askophai, is it? Looks like a fun place. What, with all the mountains and the snow." He gave it another protracted scrutiny. "And the lack of civilization if this map is anything to go by."

The general gave a solemn nod. "Askophai is not the easiest terrain to navigate. Therefore, it is my job to ensure you are prepared for what you will face. I assume neither of you have visited Askophai before?" We both shook our heads, the general stroking his chin thoughtfully. "I see. Then it will be an interesting experience for both of you. "But I can help with that lack of knowledge. I can tell you the places to avoid, and the places that will welcome weary travelers."

Jack frowned. "Places to avoid?"

General Flowers gave a solemn nod. "Of course. Sadly, there are unsavory elements in every kingdom that it is best to give a wide berth to, and Askophai is no exception. In fact, it probably has more than its fair share of inhospitable areas. There are few people who would visit if they didn't have to." He gave a great booming laugh, his moustache quivering. When neither Jack nor I laughed, he sobered quickly, the subsequent throat clearing far more prolonged than it needed to be. "Excuse me. I probably shouldn't be saying that. I wouldn't want either of you to change your mind about taking on this quest. The king would never forgive me."

Bracing my arms against the side of the table, I leaned forward to study the map. "How do you even know the artifact is in Askophai? The priest made it clear that anybody could have taken it. Therefore, if you don't even know who took it, how could you possibly know where it's gone?"

General Flowers looked momentarily uncomfortable. "We consulted a..." His voice dropped, the final word of his sentence delivered in no more than a whisper and accompanied by a quick glance toward the door. "...witch."

Jack smirked. "A what, sorry? I couldn't hear you."

Color leached into General Flower's cheeks, giving him a florid complexion. "I assure you that it wasn't my idea."

"What wasn't your idea?" Jack wasn't going to let it go until he'd forced the words out of the man's mouth.

General Flowers cleared his throat again. "Talking to the..."

"The...?" Jack tipped his head to one side and raised an eyebrow. "We need to know everything, General. We can't possibly hope to be successful in this venture if we don't know the full story."

"We... They... and when I say they, I of course mean the king and queen, in all of their great wisdom thought it would be prudent to obtain outside help. They called in a..." He rubbed at his chest like the memory caused him actual physical pain. He glanced my way, but I wasn't about to help him out. I'd met men like General Flowers before. Men who were so opposed to magic they spent most of their lives simply pretending it didn't exist. My fingers itched with the urge to summon something he wouldn't be able to ignore. An anteater right in the middle of the map? Or a monkey to perch on his shoulder? Although, there'd be hell to pay with Jack if I went for the latter. It might still be worth it, though, just to see the expression on the general's face.

General Flowers took a deep breath. "A witch." He looked absurdly pleased with himself for having forced the word out at a volume detectable by humans. "They consulted a witch, a"—he waved his hand in the air—"a purveyor of the black arts. One who takes people's money in exchange for casting spells. A—"

I interrupted before he could work himself up into a frenzy. "We know what a witch is, and we know what they do. How about you tell us what she had to say?"

General Flowers gave a curt nod. "She said that a shadowy figure had taken the artifact north, that their target was the farthest reaches of Askophai."

Jack snorted. "A shadowy figure?"

General Flowers reached up to scratch his left ear. "Yes, she said that no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get a read on who it was, couldn't even tell if they were male or female. I have to admit that she seemed a little confused by her own findings, but she was adamant that they were enroute to Askophai." He paused for a moment, his brow furrowing. "I have to confess that I was loath to believe her because... well..."

"Because she was a witch." Jack supplied the answer when the general again seemed to struggle for words.

The general didn't respond, but then he didn't need to, his expression giving it away anyway. "It was the only lead we had, so of course, I sent some of my best soldiers in pursuit. They left the next day."

I waited for him to say more. When he didn't, I prompted him. "What did they find out?"

He tapped a finger on the map, both Jack and I leaning in close enough that we could read the name of the village. "They found the chest here in Icehaven." A desolate expression settled on his face and

for a moment, I thought he might actually cry. The people of Chastershire really did love their artifact. "The lock was broken, and the chest was"—he paused to take a shuddering breath—"empty. No one had seen anyone with it. No one had reported any mysterious strangers acting suspiciously around that time." So much for Father Riley's assertion that no one would dare to open the chest. I presumed the information hadn't been shared with him due to concerns about how he would take it.

General Flower's finger drew an imaginary circle around Icehaven. "As you can see, there is nothing beyond Icehaven except mountains. My soldiers were short on provisions and poorly equipped to proceed any farther. Therefore, they returned immediately to share their findings. Another group of soldiers were sent out within the day." His nose wrinkled, his gaze falling on the map speculatively. "They never returned."

Jack's eyebrows arched. "How long ago was that?"

"Five weeks." The general shook his head sadly. "Even if they had traveled to the farthest reaches of Askophai and back, that journey should have taken them no more than three."

Interesting. "How many soldiers did you send?"

General Flowers lifted his gaze from the map to meet mine. "Ten." He rubbed his chin. "Ten soldiers can't simply disappear into thin air. If you would be so kind as to keep an eye out for them on your travels, I would be eternally grateful. Even if it is only news of what sad fate befell them. Most have families who do not know whether to mourn, or to continue living in hope that someday they may return."

I gave him a nod. "Of course."

He brightened somewhat before clearing his throat officiously. "So... we should get down to business. It should be clear that your journey must take you to Icehaven. I have given much thought to the best route over the last few days while we awaited your arrival." He lowered his hand to the map, his fingers hovering over the middle of it. "We are currently here." His finger traced a line heading north. "One day's ride will take you to Blackwharf on the border of Osagezia and Askophai. Here, you will spend the night at The Excited Mandolin, where a stable hand has already been notified to take care of the horses until your return... or until such a time as..."

He dropped his gaze, Jack supplying the rest of the words in his usual blunt manner. "Or until you decide we're dead."

General Flowers paled. "I would never say such a thing."

He didn't have to. It was obvious. Just as it was obvious that they'd decided the soldiers weren't coming back.

Jack reached over to point to a place on the map. "What's this place? Is that where we head to once we cross the border into Askophai?"

General Flowers shook his head so hard his jowls flapped. "Oh no. I wouldn't advise going there. I wouldn't advise that at all. That's an orc settlement. I don't know how many orcs you've encountered on your travels, but they're not exactly known for their hospitality and their willingness to welcome strangers into their fold. They have very different customs to you and me, so even the mildest wrong action can offend. And you do not want to offend orcs. I would give Bleakpoint a very wide berth if I were you. Better to sleep in a freezing cold tent, and still have your head in the morning than in the midst of a large group of volatile orcs. No, your next safe place to rest would be..." He drew an imaginary line on the map with his finger, the digit traveling a long way before it came to a stop. "Here. Frostburn, on the banks of the frozen river. From there, you'll cross the river. Make sure you use the bridge closest to Frostburn. There are others, but they're not safe."

Never a fan of being told what to do, Jack frowned. "Why? What's wrong with the next bridge? It would make far more sense to cross at the one farther up the river if we're heading to Icehaven. Crossing at the bridge you've indicated will require us to double back on ourselves, adding extra hours onto the journey."

General Flowers gave a shudder. "Some of those unsavory elements I was talking about operate farther along the river." He leaned forward and tapped the side of his nose. "There are reports that a troll can be found in those parts, and that he doesn't take kindly to anyone setting foot on his bridge. And then, of course, there is the river beast to worry about."

"A river beast?" Jack looked unimpressed by the general's announcement. "If the river is frozen, how can it contain a beast?"

"The river is deep. Only the surface is frozen. It dwells deep below the surface. I have pondered whether that is what became of my missing soldiers."

Jack's smile was dripping with condescension. "You think some sort of river beast ate ten soldiers without any of them being able to escape and raise the alarm? What do you think they did, formed an orderly queue to wait for their turn?"

General Flowers blinked. "It is not inconceivable that ten men should have been taken by surprise."

Jack met his stare without blinking. "It's extremely unlikely. And what sort of river beast is it meant to be anyway? Beast is a rather vague word. What is it? A dragon? A kraken? A big fish? A log that in the wrong light looks like it might have teeth?"

"I do not know, and I pray you do not get to find out." The general turned his attention back to the map, his shoulders a little stiffer. "Once you've crossed the river, it is less than half a day's travel to Icehaven, the last known location of our precious artifact. There is a mage there you can talk to. If you ask for her in The Lonely Horse, you will be given directions to her cabin in the foothills of the mountains. And from there..." General Flowers offered a tight smile. "I'm afraid you are on your own. There are paths through the mountains, and there is a safe route, but I cannot tell you what you will find there as I have never ventured that far, nor have I ever spoken to anyone who has. I can only wish you good luck."

Neither Jack nor I said anything. It wasn't as if General Flowers had painted a very promising picture of what the future would bring. Although, his tales of trolls and river beasts didn't seem based on any factual evidence, so it was clear that Jack and I should take them with a pinch of salt.



CHAPTER TWELVE

JACK

Once the meeting with General Flowers had come to an end, Sebastian and I found ourselves alone in the long corridor. Either someone was shirking their responsibilities, or they'd forgotten their designated role in escorting us around the palace. After a few moments of no one showing up, Sebastian turned to me, the glint in his eye immediately recognizable. "We should explore. See what we can find out."

I met his grin with one of my own. "Together, or...?"

Sebastian palmed my cheek, his thumb tracing my lower lip in a sensual caress. "Much as I hate to be separated from you, farm boy, it makes more sense for us to split up. We can cover more ground that way."

I wrapped a tendril of his hair around my finger and tugged so that Sebastian was forced to come closer. "What do we say if we get caught snooping? Won't they find it strange that we're not together?"

Sebastian didn't even hesitate in coming up with a solution. "We can say that we've had an argument."

I grimaced. "Will they believe that?"

Sebastian's throaty laugh was accompanied by wrapping an arm around my waist and tugging me against him until our bodies were flush against each other. "I think they will find it all too believable."

Hands flat against his chest, I wrenched myself back so I could see his face and narrowed my eyes at him. "Why did you say it like that?"

"Why?" He pasted a look of innocence on his face that I didn't buy for one second. "Everybody argues. I simply meant that *some* people, obviously people that don't know any better, *might* claim that we argue constantly."

"What people?"

Sebastian gave an expansive shrug. "I don't know... maybe the footman for one, you know, given that the poor man was forced to stand there while you were haranguing me earlier."

"Haranguing you? I was not haranguing you. I was simply trying to teach you a lesson in keeping your lips to yourself, which for the record, you failed miserably." A sudden moment of inspiration hit. "I'm going to start kissing everyone I meet and see how you like it."

Sebastian's eyebrows shot up. "Really?" His lips twitched. "What a shame you've only just come up with the idea. I would have enjoyed watching you kiss the king. Perhaps, we could have passed it off as some sort of quaint farm greeting."

I shoved him away, Sebastian's grin only growing wider. "You think I'm joking. I'll do it."

Sebastian nodded. "Be my guest. But first..." He pulled me back into him. "How about one for me?"

I kissed him if only to shut him up. Sebastian always kissed like it was a prelude to getting naked, and this one was no exception. It made me want to forget exploring the palace and drag him back to our room. Well, my room, anyway. It had been such a busy day that it had temporarily slipped my mind that I'd relegated him to a different one for the crime of getting up close and personal with Roger.

Bringing the kiss to an end, I reluctantly stepped away from him. "I'll meet you back in the room and we can share our findings."

"Your room?"

"Our room."

Sebastian brightened considerably at the announcement. Taking a few steps back to put some space between us before I could be tempted into another kiss, I pointed a finger at him in warning.

"Assuming you can stay away from Roger, that is. And the queen. And anyone else who has lips."

Sebastian's brow furrowed. "Wouldn't that be everyone?"

I turned my back and walked away, smiling as I felt Sebastian's gaze lingering on my ass.



I'd thought it might be difficult to avoid people in the palace, but the first few minutes of my exploration were characterized by nothing but empty rooms, with nothing of interest in them unless you counted the décor. And even then, there was nothing anywhere near as impressive as the ceiling of the throne room. It had spoiled me for all the other palace decorations. I'd just reached the point of

contemplating how pointless this was, and how I could be doing something far more interesting with Sebastian, when the scuttling noise reached my ears.

I turned, slow to locate the noise since the mouse causing it was so tiny and so close to the wall, its furry body almost perfectly camouflaged. I crouched down and held out my hand, the mouse running straight up to me and perching on my palm. Sitting back against the wall, I lifted my hand so that the mouse was at eye-level, its whiskers twitching. "Sebastian?"

The mouse simply stared at me, and it struck me that if this wasn't Sebastian, that rather than having a touching moment with my lover, I was befriending the palace vermin. Did palaces have vermin? I guessed they must have. It wasn't like mice cared how much money people had. All they cared about was food and where to find it. "If you're Sebastian, can you stand on your hind legs?"

There was a pause long enough to make me doubt myself before the mouse dutifully stood on its hind legs. Relieved, I treated the mouse to a smile. "I guess you figured you can find out more this way. Good plan. Better than mine. So far all I've done is wander around. And I haven't seen a single soul so far. I thought palaces were meant to be full of people." I let out a sigh. "Well... I guess I better let you do your thing and then you can tell me what you find out later." About to lower the mouse to the floor, I hesitated. "By the way, I quite like this, the talking to you without you being able to answer back. And you're far cuter than the fully-grown version."

I laughed as the mouse gave an indignant squeak in response to my words. I'd no doubt pay for that comment later. Crouching down, I let the mouse go, keeping my eye on it as it ran up the corridor before disappearing around the corner. Less than two minutes had passed since the mouse's departure, two minutes I'd spent viewing more empty rooms, when an ear-piercing scream rent the air. Without thinking, I ran toward it, only to find a scene of complete chaos when I skidded to a halt in the doorway where the noise was coming from.

Three women were standing on a sofa, one, who I had to assume was the one who'd screamed, completely hysterical, while the other two seemed to be attempting to calm her down. On the floor on their bellies were two men, their attention focused on the tiny space beneath a chest of drawers. "Is everything okay?"

The hysterical woman started to sob loudly, the handkerchief held to her nose doing nothing to muffle the noise. "There was a mouse. It looked right at me." She turned to one of the other women, the dark-haired one that kept patting her shoulder. "I know you said it didn't, Princess, but I promise you it did. It looked at me like it wasn't a mouse at all."

Princess! Oh, shit! I'd inadvertently stumbled into the princess's drawing room, which wasn't great on quite a few counts considering I wasn't meant to be wandering around the palace on my own. It also meant that the two men on the floor must be guards, neither of whom were going to be pleased when they gave up on searching for the mouse and stood to find me there. They'd no doubt insist on escorting me back to my room, bringing an end to what could only be described as the most pointless and unproductive fact-finding mission ever. And as for the mouse, it was quite obvious that it had been Sebastian, who had done such a poor job of being covert that he'd frightened the living daylights out of one of the women. Both Sebastian and I were making a total hash of this.

Just as I was contemplating whether I could walk away without anyone having registered that I'd even been here, Princess Surander turned curious brown eyes my way. She had her father's dark looks, but her mother's beauty, the mixture incredibly flattering. She wasn't wearing a crown, but she did have on an exquisite pale blue silk dress that made me all too aware of my own rumpled clothes. "Who are you?"

All eyes turned my way, even the previously hysterical woman's, who seemed to forget her woes for a few seconds as she studied me. I cleared my throat. "Jack Shaw."

Princess Surander arched one perfectly shaped eyebrow. "Should I recognize the name?"

I laughed at the incongruity of the question. "Not unless you've ever been to Riverbrook and talked with my mother."

The princess frowned. "Riverbrook?"

"It's in Cerensai. I don't expect you to have heard of it. It's a very small place. Even some people in Cerensai aren't aware of its existence. There's nothing there really, except farms, and I wouldn't suppose you have much cause to visit a farm."

She smiled, a very fetching dimple appearing on her left cheek. "I confess that I have never visited a farm."

Of course, she hadn't. She was a princess. It wasn't like she was going to help with the harvest. I racked my brain for something else to say but came up blank. What were you supposed to say to a princess?

Luckily—or unluckily depending on how you wanted to view the situation—I was saved from having to say anything as the two men rose to their feet, both sporting impressive heights of well over six-foot. The murderous glare on their faces told me that I'd been right about their attitude to finding me here. As they took a step in my direction, I braced myself to be removed in a less than pleasant way, only for Princess Surander to raise a slim hand. "Wait."

Both men stopped dead. "I'd like to speak some more with Jack." She aimed another smile my way, that same dimple appearing. "I get so few visitors here in the palace. Could you spare me a little of your time, Jack? I would be most grateful if you could. Perhaps we could have tea."

She'd be grateful to spend time with me. Me? A nobody. Why? I guessed there was only one way to find out. "I would be... honored to have tea with you, your highness." Unlike my time with Prince Montgomery, I had no issue with calling her your highness. It probably had a lot to do with her smile seeming genuine and the impression that she wasn't a pompous ass.

Princess Surander's smile grew wider. "Excellent." She turned to the guards. "Ralph, please escort Amelia and Jennifer to the healer. I'm sure that he will have something to help Amelia recover from her shock, and Jennifer should stay with her to keep her company during her recuperation." Her gaze slid across to the other guard. "John, you may station yourself outside the door in case I need to call for you, close enough that no one can question the appropriateness of me taking tea with Jack. I assume our little rodent friend has disappeared?"

John nodded glumly in a way that said he felt bad for not having caught it. It was a shame I couldn't tell him that had he, he would only have held it in his hands for a few seconds anyway before it disappeared in a cloud of gold sparks. Ralph offered a hand to Amelia, who let loose one final sob before stepping gingerly down from the sofa and letting him lead her out of the room with Jennifer in tow. John followed them out, and the door closed to leave me alone with the princess.

She let out a sigh. "You must think we're ridiculous." She gestured to the end of the recently vacated sofa. "Please do sit down."

I didn't want to sit, but then I also didn't want to ignore a princess's request. For a few moments, the two opposing urges warred with each other. Eventually, good manners—Sebastian would probably be surprised to discover that deep down I did actually have them—won out, and I lowered myself onto the expensive sofa that no doubt cost more coin than I'd ever seen in my lifetime. I perched on the end like someone ready to flee at any given moment, probably when Princess Surander came to her senses and realized she was talking to someone not worth her time. "I don't think you're ridiculous at all. Why would I think that?"

She seated herself decorously on the other end of the sofa, and pulled a small, wheeled trolley to her side, the sofa long enough to leave a respectful distance between us. On the trolley was a tray laden with a silver teapot, and cups resting on actual saucers. Picking up the teapot, she poured a stream of brown liquid into two of the cups. "Because it was just a mouse, a tiny little thing that is no

doubt traumatized by Amelia screaming so loudly. Jennifer and I only joined her on the sofa because we thought there was an assassin in our midst."

She poured milk into both cups and added a lump of sugar. "Amelia, bless her, has always been a little highly strung. Don't get me wrong, I am beyond grateful for her and Jennifer's company. Without them, I would have gone insane years ago. But..." She smiled wryly. "Let's just say that some days, like today, I am glad of someone else to talk to."

She passed over one of the cups, and I took it, my fingers never having felt huger or more unwieldy than they did wrapped around the delicate china. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." She took a sip of her tea, her gaze remaining fixed on me over the rim of her cup as she did so. "So... am I right in assuming, Jack, that you are one of the men I have heard so much about, one of the pair who has agreed to seek out Chastershire's missing artifact?"

I nodded, not brave enough yet to bring the dainty cup to my lips and attempt to take a drink without dropping it. Perhaps I'd just sit and hold it. Was that rude?

"Sebastian and I are—"

"Sebastian..." Princess Surander's smile turned into a most un-princessly grin. "He must be the one who struts around, flicking his long blond hair back, and striking a pose every now and again."

"Yes!" Amazed by the accuracy of her description, I forgot my vow not to drink any tea and brought the cup to my lips. Thankfully, I managed it without incident, the tea sweet with a slight hint of jasmine. "That's exactly what he's like. You just described him perfectly."

"And he summons unicorns. Even though they have been extinct for years."

I nodded eagerly. "He has a flare for the dramatic. The more dramatic the better, as far as he's concerned."

Princess Surander studied me with a slight smile. "Is that why he likes you? Are you dramatic, Jack?"

I hid my slight discomfort beneath the ruse of taking another sip of tea, Princess Surander's words making a surprising amount of sense. I could be dramatic if pushed to it. Was that why Sebastian had taken a shine to me? Was that what he'd been attracted to? I shrugged. "I don't know."

She gave a serene nod, her eyes still shining with amusement. "You disapproved of the unicorn?" Princess Surander was far too perceptive for her own good. She gave a tinkling laugh. "I'm sorry. I've spent years in this palace with nothing better to do than study people. I guess I've taught myself to read between the lines, to pay more attention to people's expressions and gestures than to the words they say. Because"—she leaned forward conspiratorially, her hands holding her cup steady despite

the movement—"people often lie to themselves, Jack. Did you know that? They ignore their true feelings, and they convince themselves of what they want to be true."

I took a moment to consider her words. I'd been guilty of that when I'd tried to convince myself that I wasn't attracted to Sebastian and would never sleep with him. "Do you do that?"

"Sometimes. Everyone does." She sat back and took another sip of her tea. "So you and Sebastian will travel to Askophai and do what a battalion of soldiers couldn't and retrieve the artifact?"

When she put it like that, it did sound somewhat ridiculous. "That's the plan. And then you can get married."

"I can get married." Her voice was flat as she parroted my own words back to me.

"You don't want to get married?" My fingers tightened around the cup. Had I been right when I'd considered the possibility of the princess being involved in the disappearance of the artifact? She certainly didn't sound like someone keen for it to be returned so she could complete her nuptials.

She took a slow breath, her smile returning but noticeably not reaching her eyes. "It is not a case of whether I want to or not." She lifted an arm to indicate the room. "I'm sure that you see all of this, and you think I'm horribly privileged, but..." She glanced toward the door and then lowered her voice. "Privilege comes with expectations. It is my duty to marry well and to provide the best possible future I can for the kingdom. I have known that since I was a child, that the choice of who I would marry would not be down to me. Have I dreamed that it could it be different? Maybe, a time or two." She shrugged, the silk of her dress rustling against the cushions. "But it is what it is."

"Who are you marrying, if you don't mind me asking?"

She placed her cup back on the tray. "A prince from Theoporia who I have never met. He was meant to travel here a few weeks ago so we could become better acquainted before the wedding. But with the artifact going missing, his trip was postponed." Her eyes narrowed for a moment. "I can see what you're thinking." Could she? "You're wondering if I had anything to do with it, that maybe I put someone up to stealing the artifact."

My heart began to beat uncomfortably fast. She really was good at reading expressions. "Did you?" "No." The word was delivered without a hint of emotion. "The disappearance of the artifact is just as much a mystery to me as it is to anyone in this kingdom. To be honest, I would rather the wedding was over and done with by now." Her fingers clenched on her lap. "I don't mind admitting that I am rather nervous about what life in Theoporia will be like." At my slight frown, she elaborated. "I will return here when it is time for me to take the throne, but until then, my home will be in Theoporia." She forced a smile. "I hear it is very warm there. That will be nice."

"I'm sorry."

She waved a hand. "Don't be. It will be fine. I hear my fiancé is extremely handsome, so at least that is something." It was all I could do not to grimace. Prince Montgomery had been handsome, but he'd also been self-obsessed, coddled, and completely oblivious to the feelings of those around him.

Princess Surander sat up straighter, her smile genuine this time. "Perhaps you and Sebastian will stumble over the treasure while you are in Askophai searching for the artifact."

"Treasure?"

She leaned over to take my empty cup from my hands, placing it on the tray next to hers. I hadn't even realized I'd finished drinking the tea. "You haven't heard?"

I shook my head.

"There is an old legend that back in the days where there were more dragons in the world than people, that one such dragon kept his hoard in the mountains of Askophai. I say... legend, but people have been searching for the treasure for years, so there are plenty who believe it to be true."

"And no one has found it?"

She shook her head. "Not yet."

"Interesting." I could already picture Sebastian's excitement when I told him of the possibility of treasure. "We'll certainly keep an eye out for it."

"I bet you will." She sat up straighter. "Is there anything else I can help you with, Jack?"

"Do you have any idea who could have taken the artifact?"

She considered the question for a moment, her nose wrinkling slightly. "I honestly can't think of anyone who would take the risk of being caught. I wish I did know."

I could tell she spoke the truth. Sensing that my time with the princess had come to an end, I stood. "There is one more thing."

She looked up at me with a question in her eyes.

"Can you tell me anything about Earl? We saw him back at the tavern, but we weren't offered an introduction, and let's just say that Sebastian and I have been more than a little curious about him."

"Earl?" The princess's expression darkened slightly. "That is a very sad story. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

I nodded.

"Earl used to be a... I suppose the closest description would be a guard, but there was an incident with a witch, and to cut a long story short, he was cursed, and ever since then, he... well, he hasn't

been the same. The curse means that he struggles to be..." Princess Surander looked like she was searching for the right word. "Solid."

"Solid?"

She tapped a hand on her arm. "Yes, like you and I are solid. He is more... I don't know how to describe it. He spends most of his time unable to be seen. He can appear, but only for short periods of time." She looked around the room with a slight smile. "He could be here now, but we wouldn't know it."

Well, that was a creepy thought. And it also explained why he had appeared out of nowhere at the tavern. It sounded like a very unpleasant curse to be stuck with. "Can't they find a way to break the curse?"

Princess Surander shrugged. "I don't know. I'm sure that everything that can be tried, has been tried. My mother and father wouldn't simply give up, but alas it has been to no avail. Poor Earl."

"And now he works with Frederick?"

She frowned. "I'm not sure what his role in the palace is now. I hadn't heard that he worked with Frederick, but it's possible. I leave the workings of the kingdom to my parents. There will be plenty of time in years to come for me to have to worry about that."

Walking over to the door, I paused for a moment with my hand on the handle. "It's been nice meeting you." And for once, I actually meant the words. She hadn't been what I expected at all.

Princess Surander gave a sweet smile. "The pleasure has been all mine, Jack Shaw. Good luck on your journey. I pray that you and Sebastian will stay safe and that I will see you return to us, with or without the artifact."

I gave a nod and then left, John shooting me a suspicious look as I passed,

his gaze lingering on my pockets as if he expected to see the spout of the silver teapot sticking out.

There didn't seem a lot of point in continuing my exploration, and I didn't want to push my luck, so after taking a moment to orient myself as to whereabouts I was in the palace, I headed back to the room I'd been allocated earlier. It had been a long day.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JACK

Sebastian was already in the room by the time I'd found my way back. Actually, given he'd done his explorations via mouse, he'd probably never left. I didn't get as far as asking him what he'd discovered before finding myself swept into a bone-crushing hug. After an initial attempt to extricate myself, I gave in. Sometimes with Sebastian it was better to weather the storm. "What's this for?"

Sebastian's arms tightened a bit more, my face squashed in his shoulder. "I missed you."

I wrenched my head to the side so I could breathe. Sebastian frequently had a habit of forgetting that that was a prerequisite for life. One day he was going to find himself hugging a corpse. Mind, at least then he'd be able to say as many obnoxious things as he wanted, and I wouldn't be able to argue with him. "We've only been apart an hour."

Sebastian's breath feathered my hair. "It was a long hour. It's always long when you're not there. Didn't you miss me?"

I braced my hands against his chest and pushed, Sebastian relinquishing his hold for long enough that I could create a gap. It was a small gap, but it was a gap nevertheless. "I was busy."

A wounded expression settled on his face. "So that's a no, then." He pressed a hand to his chest, his fingers splayed. "You cut me to the quick sometimes, Jack." I'd barely had time to enjoy the few seconds of liberation I'd gotten before he pulled me back into him, the hold just as tight as the first time. "I'll just have to hug you until you stop taking me for granted."

My eye roll was lost against his chest, but I did it anyway. "We should talk. You know, tell each other what we found out."

"In a bit." His hands slid down and curled around my ass.

"Sebastian?"

"Shhhh..."

"Sebastian?" I said his name louder this time.

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"That's not shushing."
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"I'm aware of that. Since when do I do what you want?"

"Never."

"Exactly. So it's very unlikely I'm going to start now, even if you are slowly crushing the life out of me." Sebastian remained silent. "Not joking, by the way, about that last bit."

Sebastian made a grunting sound.

"Sebastian!"

He sighed loudly and then finally released me, giving me a sulky look that wouldn't have been out of place on the face of a child as I stepped back out of reach.

I went over to the window, Sebastian following. When he stayed quiet, I was forced to prompt him. "Well? What did you and your mouse friend find out? Nice work almost frightening the princess's friend to death by the way."

Sebastian's brow furrowed. "How do you know about that?"

"Because... strangely enough, when the bloodcurdling scream filled the corridor, I felt I needed to investigate. I thought someone was being murdered. At which point, I blundered right into the princess's drawing room. Although... I will admit that it did lead me to having quite a nice chat with the princess."

"Really?" Sebastian's eyebrow rose.

"Really. We had tea."

"You, Jack Shaw, Mr. I don't belong here and shouldn't be anywhere near royalty, had tea with a princess."

"I did. And she was..."

"She was what?"

"Nice. Normal. Friendly. Nothing like I expected her to be. It surprised me. It was weird. I think in other circumstances, like if she wasn't a princess, and I wasn't a farmer, we could have been friends. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I liked her."

Sebastian stared at me for a moment without blinking. "Had you really never considered that a princess... or a prince... could be a person worth knowing?"

"Prince Montgomery wasn't."

"Prince Montgomery doesn't represent all royalty."

"And we are all eternally grateful for that." I frowned as something occurred to me. "Princess Surander can do magic, right? I wonder what she can do. I should have asked her." I shook my head to

make myself focus. "Anyway, I asked her some questions and she was very forthcoming." I relayed what the princess had told me about Earl, and about the mountains of Askophai, Sebastian's face brightening just as I'd known it would at the latter.

"Treasure!" I watched with amusement as he started to pace. "What sort of treasure?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. What does treasure usually consist of?"

"It can be different things. One man's treasure is another man's trash."

"I don't think that's true. There's definitely treasure that is always treasure. I don't think anyone's going to be throwing diamonds and rubies away any time soon." Sebastian's far-away look said he wasn't even listening to me. "Sebastian?"

He wrenched his attention back to me. "What?"

"I'm guessing that while we're there, we're going to be looking for this treasure?"

"It would be a shame not to."

Predictable! So now we not only had an artifact to find, we had treasure to search for as well. "It probably doesn't even exist. Princess Surander said it came from a legend. And people have been trying to find it for years without success. Therefore, it's very unlikely we'll just happen to stumble across it."

"Unlikely but not impossible." Sebastian's face creased into a grin. "Do you know what else was unlikely but not impossible?"

Something in his expression said I'd be better off not knowing. Ignoring my instincts, I asked anyway. "What?"

Sebastian's grin grew wider. "Winning you over."

I fixed him with a glare. "And who says you've done that?"

Sebastian gave an expansive shrug. "Okay, so it's still a work in progress, but I'll get there."

I let out a weary sigh. Sebastian really was a lot sometimes. "Did you find out anything? Or am I the only one who gained some useful information?"

Sebastian sat himself on the side of the bed and started pulling his boots off. "It would seem the griffin isn't the only beast problem that Osagezia has been experiencing."

"Oh?"

He flashed me a smile. "There have been outbreaks of trouble all over the kingdom for the last few weeks. I assume that's why they couldn't spare any soldiers to accompany Frederick. They're stretched thin as it is."

"Beast trouble?"

"Mostly. But there's also been a rather alarming number of natural disasters. A fire here. A flood there. All in areas where they wouldn't normally occur. It's like Osagezia has had nothing but bad luck ever since the artifact disappeared. They've obviously been trying to keep it quiet so as not to cause panic."

"Where did you hear this?"

"From snippets I pieced together. The cook was having an interesting conversation with one of the maids, and two soldiers on the parade ground were none too happy about the fact that they've spent hardly any time in the palace over the last few weeks."

"Hmm." I considered the information and what it meant. "So that would mean the artifact brings actual luck rather than just them believing it does."

"It would seem so."

"In that case, no wonder they're so desperate to get it back. And no wonder, Osagezia has always had a reputation as being one of the safest kingdoms."

Sebastian gave a slow nod, his expression thoughtful.



It shouldn't have come as a surprise that the food in the palace was divine. Dinner had followed the bath that had been brought to our room, Sebastian and I finally getting a chance to wash the dust of the early morning ride off our bodies. Much to my relief, no invitation had been extended to dine with the king and the queen. I didn't need to witness the queen shooting covert appreciative looks at Sebastian when the king wasn't looking. It made me wonder if she was always like that, or whether it was something Sebastian brought out in people? After all, even in my early hatred of him, I'd still been only too aware that he was incredibly handsome. I just hadn't wanted to admit it.

At the moment, my incredibly handsome lover was lying on the bed with his hands hooked behind his head, completely oblivious to me standing naked beside the bed. I stared at him for a moment, testing out that adage that if you stared at someone for long enough, they would notice. It seemed Sebastian was immune, his gaze remaining fixed on the ceiling. If it had been the ceiling of the throne room, I might have understood, but this ceiling was nothing special. It certainly shouldn't have provided a more interesting view than my cock.

"Are you thinking about treasure?"

"Yes."

No hesitation. None at all. "And thinking about treasure is more interesting than me?"

Sebastian's brow furrowed. "I've already found you. I haven't found the treasure. I was pondering

where it could be for so many people not to have found it. There are only so many hiding places in the mountains." I yanked the blanket back to reveal Sebastian's naked body, Sebastian continuing speaking as if he hadn't registered what I'd done. "Maybe it's inside a mountain. Although, I don't know how that's possible. Some sort of cavern maybe..." Climbing onto the bed, I bypassed the empty side of the bed to crawl between Sebastian's legs instead. Sebastian shifted slightly. "Maybe... there was a cave, and then... some sort of landslide happened that buried the entrance." His frown became more pronounced. "Although, if that's the case, it's going to be extremely difficult to find."

I smoothed my hand up Sebastian's thigh, his cock semi-hard despite the fact that I hadn't touched it. "I can see you're very excited by the thought of treasure."

"... and assuming that it happened hundreds of years ago, any landslide would long since have blended into its surroundings. You'd have to have incredible luck to stumble across it. It's going to be like looking for a needle in a haystack."

Grasping Sebastian's cock at the base, I slid my lips over the tip.

He jolted, his head lifting off the pillow to look down at me. "Oh!"

I lifted my free hand and gave him a little wave. "Hi, I'm Jack. I'm telling you that because you seem to have forgotten all about me, which is strange considering you keep telling me how much you miss me when I'm not here." I gave the head of his cock a lick. "Now, do you want to talk about treasure, or do you want to make the most of this rather luxurious bed?"

Sebastian's eyes turned a stormy blue, the pupils darkened by lust. "What treasure?"

I smiled. "Right answer."

Sebastian's fingers slid into my hair to encourage me back onto his cock. "I was expecting you to be reluctant. Given your somewhat strange ideas about royalty, I thought you might have decided that a palace was a sex-free zone. I expected to have to seduce you."

I slid off him again, stroking his spit-slick cock with my hand. "It did cross my mind, but I figure Princess Surander wasn't a present from the gods, that she was conceived in the usual way, with the king and queen engaging in carnal activity, so... that would mean that a palace is just like any other building." Hand still wrapped around his cock, I leaned over Sebastian to press a kiss to his lips. It started off light and then developed into something that contained far more heat, Sebastian's tongue only too eager to tangle with mine, his hand gripping the back of my head to hold me in place. Once Sebastian was thoroughly kissed and definitely wasn't thinking about treasure, I slid back down his body and took him in my mouth once more, his thumb lightly stroking my cheek as I treated him to the very best of my oral experience.

"Jack..."

Nothing else. Just my name. I smiled around his cock, taking him deeper and making him gasp. Sebastian was like putty in my hands.

When he was good and wet, I let him go. Sebastian's cheeks were flushed and his eyes heavy-lidded as he watched me. "Have I ever told you, farm boy, that you're absolutely gorgeous?"

"A time or two." I lifted up over him, lining his cock up with my hole. When I sank onto him, we both gasped.

"Are you going to ride me?"

Hands braced on his chest, I took the last inch of Sebastian inside me, the stretch just on the right side of pleasure. "I suppose so. You're not a unicorn, but you'll do."

Sebastian's hands smoothed over my thighs on the way to grasping my hips. "Oh, unicorns do it for you as well, do they? Don't let the goats hear you say that. They'll get an inferiority complex over their lack of horn." His fingers tightened on my skin, a silent instruction that he wanted me to move.

I didn't make him wait long, the slow undulation of my body over his driving us both rapidly toward a climax. When Sebastian's hand wrapped around my cock, and he thrust his hips up, I was lost, my orgasm cresting in a wave of unadulterated pleasure that sent shockwaves through my body.

One more deep thrust had Sebastian burying himself as deep as he could get as he groaned out his own orgasm. Still coming down from my own pleasure, I had enough presence of mind to cover his mouth. "Shhhh. Royal palace, remember. We don't want anyone coming to investigate the noise."

Sebastian flopped back on the bed, his hand draped across his face, a slight sheen of sweat highlighting those delectable muscles of his. He made quite the picture. One that made me want to repeat what we'd just done over and over again until neither of us were even capable of getting on a horse, never mind traveling to Askophai. He let out a little satiated sigh. "Let them come. If they have a problem with noises like that, then they've obviously been having sex with the wrong person."

Disengaging from Sebastian, I rolled onto my side and propped myself up on one elbow. "What about you? Have you been having sex with the wrong people?"

I was asking for trouble, but I couldn't seem to stop myself. I would fully deserve it when all I got was a pithy response.

Sebastian's gaze settled on me, amusement sparking in his eyes. "Undoubtedly."

Undoubtedly! That would do. I shifted across to lay my head on Sebastian's chest, closing my eyes once Sebastian's arm had encircled me.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SEBASTIAN

Jack hated every single second of the ceremony that had been put on to see us on our way. He didn't say as much, but he didn't need to. It was in the set of his jaw, and the way he kept his gaze fixed on the ground for most of the time. Everyone was there—the king, the queen, the princess, whose sweet smile aimed at Jack made me frown—Father Riley, General Flowers, Frederick. I'd even spied Roger in the crowd. Thankfully, Jack's fixation with the ground meant he hadn't noticed him. There was no sign of Earl, but given what Jack had discovered about him, that didn't mean he wasn't there, just that we couldn't see him. It must be a strange existence to spend most of your time invisible.

There was a speech, the king uttering sincere words of good luck. Then there was a blessing from the priest designed to keep us safe on our journey. I had an inkling it was going to take far more than the waving of incense and a prayer to do that, but I guess it was the thought that counted. And then finally we were on our way, the gates opened to allow our exit.

We were laden down with equipment: warm weather clothes, a thick fur blanket, a tent that we'd been given instructions on how to erect—hopefully, Jack had been listening because I hadn't—suitable footwear for snow—our usual boots deemed less than useless—food, water. You name it; we'd been given it. As someone used to traveling light, being tasked with the transportation of so much equipment was somewhat daunting, and I was mystified as to how we were supposed to carry it all once we surrendered the horses at Blackwharf and made our way over the border into Askophai.

Jack and I had elected to ride one horse, the other carrying the supplies. It wasn't until we'd put a few miles between ourselves and Chastershire that Jack seemed to snap himself out of the strange reverie he'd fallen into. "Was all that really necessary?"

"All what?"

"That..." An edge of distaste had crept into his voice. "All that rigmarole."

"Do you mean the ceremony?"

"Like I said, the rigmarole."

"You would have preferred them to push us out of the back door with barely a backward glance." I grinned as Jack's lack of response proved that he would indeed have preferred that. "Okay, so you might have preferred it, but it would have been rude, especially considering that we're doing all of this for them."

"Maybe."

"Besides you got to see your princess again. Don't think I didn't notice the smile you two shared. Should I be worried?"

Jack let out a snort. "Given that I only sleep with men, and she's engaged to be married to the prince of Theoporia, I would say not."

I rested my chin on the top of his head. "I know. You only go for men and goats. Oh, and unicorns." "Idiot."

I smiled and dipped my head to brush my cheek against Jack's. "I love it when you use terms of endearment."

"That is not a term of endearment."

"If you say so."

He twisted in the saddle to pin me with a glare. "It isn't."

"And I'm agreeing with you."

"No, you're not. You're being an idiot."

"There you go again. I'm not sure I can take all this adoration you're throwing my way without swooning."

Jack sighed as he looked back over his shoulder to check that the second horse, which was tethered to ours, was still following, his subsequent question an echo of my own thoughts. "How are we meant to carry all this stuff once we leave Blackwharf?"

"No idea. We'll work it out. We always do."



It had already grown dark by the time we reached Blackwharf and located The Excited Mandolin. Once we'd eaten and bathed, we were too exhausted after the day's riding to do anything but fall into bed and sleep, morning arriving far too soon for my liking. I woke before Jack, lying there in silent contemplation of whether we could get away with spending a few days here.

"No."

I turned around to find Jack awake and staring at me. "No, what?"

"No, we can't stay here."

It was eerie how well he could read my mind. "Why not?"

Jack sat up, his hair sticking out in tufts in every direction in a way that made me smile. "Because Osagezia is under attack from strange creatures, so it wouldn't be fair to hole up here and have sex while people's lives are in danger."

"It's not like they bothered to inform us of that fact. They were more interested in keeping their secrets."

"True. But it still wouldn't be fair."

I let out a weary sigh. Things had been so much easier when I didn't travel with a walking conscience. "Fine. Askophai, it is then. I suppose that means we need to get ready to cross the border."

We took our time over breakfast, both of us all too aware that hot meals were likely to become a scarcity. Once we'd finished eating, we dressed for Askophai, a chuckle escaping me at the sight of Jack all bundled up in fur. He threw a glare my way. "What? Do you think you look any better? I don't know how you're going to cope without being able to take your shirt off."

"It will be difficult, that's for sure."

Our answer to how we were supposed to transport the supplies without the horses came in the discovery of the sled. The only problem was that as there wasn't yet any snow on the ground, it meant we were left not only carrying the supplies, but the sled as well, making the journey across the border infuriatingly slow. It was mid-morning before the terrain gradually changed, a few flakes of snow gradually segueing into a fully white landscape as we traveled farther north.

We both stood for a moment, the cold biting as we contemplated the challenge ahead. At least it meant we could use the sled, Jack and I taking it in turns to pull it with a rope tethered around our waists. I'd given thought to conjuring an animal that could travel across snow to pull the sled, a polar bear or a dog, but I'd learned the hard way that my magic was better saved for emergencies.

Jack ground to a halt, staring at the snow-covered vista in front of us. He turned back and I followed his gaze, green no longer visible behind us either. We were surrounded by white, surrounded by snow. "Are we crazy?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Is that meant to make me feel better?"

"You didn't say you wanted to feel better."

Jack shook his head. "Remind me why we're doing this again."

"Six hundred gold coins as a reward for finding the artifact. The possibility of finding treasure. The curiosity of knowing what this damn artifact actually is. And..." I paused before delivering the last reason, knowing it would be by far the most convincing. "More places to ask about Annabelle."

Jack grimaced. "Not that it's done us the slightest bit of good so far."

It hadn't. We'd continued to make enquiries about Jack's missing sister wherever we went, including in the palace of Chastershire, even though it was highly unlikely circumstances would have placed her in a royal residence, but it was always dangerous to discount a place. There'd been no sightings of a mysterious girl, red-headed or otherwise. We had more chance of seeing Earl than we did Annabelle, but that didn't mean we were going to stop asking. I'd already been invested in discovering her whereabouts, but that desire had only increased after meeting Jack's family and witnessing first-hand the sadness in their eyes whenever her name came up. "She's got to be somewhere."

"She's probably still on the ship. Assuming it hasn't already sunk."

I reached across to squeeze Jack's shoulder. It was doubtful he could feel my fingers through all the layers of fur, but hopefully, he understood it for the gesture it was. "Ships have to dock somewhere.

They have to resupply."

"We don't even know if she came this way. They could have sailed in the opposite direction." Jack shaded his eyes against the sun, the reflection from the snow making it all the brighter, even if it didn't bring any warmth with it.

"We'll find her."

"You don't know that."

I didn't, but I knew my optimism helped Jack even if he wouldn't admit it. He needed distraction, and as I couldn't lay him in the down in the snow and distract him that way, more's the pity, I knew just the thing. I gave him a shove in the back, Jack stumbling forward a few feet. "Come on. We need to reach Bleakpoint before nightfall." I set off walking, bracing myself for the inevitable explosion. As always, Jack didn't disappoint, his hand grabbing my arm and bringing me to a halt within the space of a few seconds. He swung me around to face him, his red nose a startling contrast to his green eyes. "Bleakpoint?"

I nodded. "Good to see that your ears are still operational, that they haven't filled up with snow. We'll make a cold weather explorer of you yet."

Jack's eyes blazed. "Oh, I heard. I was just confused why you would say an outlandish thing like that. Bleakpoint—as in the place we were expressly told to avoid?"

I frowned. "I think so. Unless there's two places with the same name, which would be ridiculously confusing. Imagine asking for directions and being sent in completely the opposite direction to the one you wanted. So... I assume it's one and the same."

"The place with orcs?"

"The place with shelter. With civilization. Well, of a sort." I pulled the map that we'd been given out of my pocket and unfurled it between us. "Apart from Bleakpoint, what do you see?"

Jack scoured the map for a moment. "Nothing."

"Exactly." I folded the map and put it back in my pocket. "Somewhere always wins over nowhere." Jack blinked a few times. "We have a tent."

I nodded. "And we'll be forced to sleep in that once we reach the mountains, but until then I vote that if there's any alternative, we take it."

"But it's full of orcs."

"Orc settlements usually are."

Jack narrowed his eyes. "Do you remember Ulgan? Big orc? One that you cheated out of a lot of money who would like nothing more than to roast you on a spit and eat you for dinner. And then he'd like to have me for dessert for the crime of associating with you, and possibly for threatening to put an arrow through his cock, if you want to be pedantic."

My hand automatically strayed to my neck. "Remember him? Sometimes I imagine I can still feel his fingers squeezing. He had very strong fingers. I wonder if he spends his spare time squeezing things. He must have built up that strength somehow."

"So...?" When I didn't respond to Jack's unspoken question, he let out a weary sigh. "So it would be unwise to blunder into the midst of a group of orcs. What makes you think they're going to be remotely friendly? General Flowers expressly advised us to steer clear for a reason."

"General Flowers..." I pulled a face. "Pfft... that man doesn't even know what a risk is. I bet he moves his boots out of the way at night in case he trips over them."

Jack frowned. "Doesn't everyone?"

I waved a dismissive hand. "Whatever. It probably wasn't the best analogy, but you get my point." Jack shook his head. "No. No, I really don't."

I stared at him. "Just answer me one question. Do you want to sleep in a tent tonight?"

"Well, no, but..."

"So the only other option is Bleakpoint."

I started walking, Jack hurrying to catch up with me, the crunch of the snow under his boots already a familiar sound. "One day you're going to get me killed."

"Is that you agreeing that it's the right option?"

"I didn't realize I got a vote."

"Of course, you get a vote. You're quite welcome to take the tent and spend the night on your own. Meanwhile, I will be tucked up somewhere cozy in Bleakpoint, making new friends."

"Or turning slowly over and over on a spit."

"'Or turning slowly over and over on a spit." I grinned at him. "What are you going to do?"

Jack's sigh said that the words that were about to come out of his mouth were made with great reluctance. "I can't let you walk into a dangerous situation on your own, can I? What sort of person

"A sensible one?"

would that make me?"

"I gave that up the day I met you."

"You say the sweetest things."

Jack rubbed at his brow. "I speak the truth. Nothing more. Nothing less."



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JACK

There were times with Sebastian where I genuinely thought he might be wired differently from everyone else. As we crouched behind a rocky outcrop with Bleakpoint in sight, the thought returned once more. "Were you dropped on the head as a child?"

Sebastian's gaze turned my way, mock outrage written all over his face. "That is a horrible accusation to make about my mother. I'm sure she was extremely careful with me, just as any mother would be."

"I'll take that as a no then. So it's just insanity that is to blame." I fixed my gaze on Bleakpoint. Although there was a rough wooden fence surrounding the settlement, the gates lay wide open, meaning we could just stroll right in. I'd hoped that Sebastian's half-baked intent to stay here might be curtailed by us not being able to gain access, but it seemed the orcs weren't at all concerned about uninvited guests. Probably because they were at least a foot taller, far outnumbered them, and could crush their bones to make bread as easily as breathing.

I attempted to swallow, the saliva in my mouth having decided that it didn't want to hang around any longer. "What's the plan?" I cringed as the words left my mouth. This was Sebastian. He hadn't even had a plan when we'd faced dragon-shifting knights during our rescue of Prince Montgomery. Therefore, it was highly unlikely he had one now. "Never mind. I expect you're just planning to waltz in there and hope that your natural charm will win the day. Perhaps you should offer to have sex with them."

"All of them?" Sebastian blinked. "I fear that even for someone of my capabilities that task might take some time. And you should do your share. We're a team, remember."

I let out a sigh. "Apart from us sexually satisfying the entire orc community, do you have anything else tucked up your sleeve?"

Sebastian grinned. "Do you see that painting? The one close to the gate. What's it of?"

I peered at where he was indicating, the white paint not the easiest thing to make out amongst all the snow. "A horse. No, not a horse, a unicorn. So they like unicorns... so what?"

Sebastian's grin grew wider. "They don't *like* unicorns. To them, a unicorn is a sacred creature. I should have thought about that when Ulgan had me in his oh-so-brutal grip, but for some reason, I wasn't thinking straight, probably because I was struggling to breathe. If we go in there with a unicorn, the surprise and awe we received in Chastershire will be nothing in comparison to what we'll get here. They're going to be falling over themselves to befriend us."

I stared at him. "That's your plan?"

Sebastian gave an enthusiastic nod, his blue eyes shining.

I let a few curse words slip from my lips. They were certainly warranted. "And what about when they realize the unicorn isn't real, that it's nothing but woven strands of magic?"

Sebastian frowned. "How would they find that out?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe when it disappears in a shower of gold sparks." Even saying gold sparks had me remembering how Sebastian's hand had felt wrapped around my cock in combination with the tingle of his magic. It was quite disconcerting to no longer be able to control myself where his magic was concerned.

My face must have given something away, Sebastian's gaze dropping to my crotch with a knowing expression. "Oh, really. Even just talking about it, does it?"

I pinned him with a stony glare. "I don't know what you mean."

His smile said that he didn't buy it even for a second. "Easy. The unicorn will escape before that point."

"Escape?"

"Run away. Run free. Disappear so that it can't be found."

"I know what escape means. I'm just thinking of all the ways this could go horribly wrong."

"Trust me, Jack."

God, I hated those words. Nine times out of ten, they culminated in us running for our lives with something chasing us.

"Turn your back."

I cast a suspicious look Sebastian's way. "Why?"

"Because I'm about to use magic to conjure a unicorn, and I'm thinking that you walking in there looking extremely excited in the trouser department might not work in our favor. We might have to revert to the first plan if you look that pleased to see them."

"Idiot." Despite the insult, I turned my back. He did have a point. "Let me know when you're done." As it was, he didn't need to, the soft velvety nose brushing my cheek enough of a clue. I pushed it away, too concerned about being skewered by its horn to enjoy the attention of what was to all intents and purposes an extinct animal.

Sebastian grabbed the sled rope with one hand and wound the other through the unicorn's mane. "Are you ready?"

"No, but as that's a state of affairs not likely to change any time soon, I guess we may as well proceed." Would sleeping in a tent have really been that bad? It struck me as we approached Bleakpoint that perhaps Sebastian and I had become spoiled. "How many orcs do you think live here?"

"No idea."

Sebastian sounded cheerful, which was a complete contrast to my own feelings on the situation, a heavy pool of dread residing where my gut should be. "Fifty? A hundred?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Once we're friends, we can ask them to stand still while we count them if you're really that keen to know."

If it wasn't for the fact that we'd already reached the gate, I would have told Sebastian that he'd completely missed the point, but I was distracted by my first proper look at the orc settlement. It consisted of a large, central wooden cabin, smaller cabins radiating out from it in a rough circle. In front of the large cabin was a fire built so high that I imagined I could already feel the heat of it from where I was standing.

And there were orcs. Lots of orcs. At least twenty of them milling around. My breath froze in my chest as our presence was noted, heads starting to turn our way, the look on their faces not one that could ever be called friendly. "Sebastian, I really don't think this is a good idea. Maybe we should..." But it was too late, and they were already coming our way. There was no option but to stand our ground and hope for the best.

An orc let out a shout. As the word wasn't in any language I recognized, I had no idea what he'd said. It could have been anything from "Hello" to "Kill." The result of it was quite clear, though, as more orcs spilled from the buildings in response to the call, with what felt like a hundred pairs of yellow eyes all fixed on us. There were more shouts, all just as incomprehensible as the first had been. I sneaked a glance at Sebastian. "Do they even speak the same language?"

"Probably not."

"So how are we going to communicate with them?"

Sebastian shrugged. "We'll work something out."

Typical Sebastian answer. As one, the orcs started walking toward us. "What are they doing?" "Just wait."

A fierce-looking orc was at the center of the approaching horde, his protruding canine teeth particularly large and sharp. What would an orc bite feel like? I hoped I wasn't about to find out. He came to a halt about a foot away, his muscles bunching as he lifted one massive arm to point at the unicorn. "Bachew."

Sebastian nodded. "Bachew."

I rolled my eyes. "You don't even know what he said. He might just have called you a bastard. If so, I'm inclined to agree with him."

"I expect it was the orc word for unicorn."

A wave of "Bachew" started up among the crowd. I smirked. "Now, they're all calling you a bastard."

"Jack!" There was a note of warning in Sebastian's voice that told me that now wasn't the time. It was a little too late for caution. Where had it been when he'd come up with this crazy idea in the first place?

As the orcs edged closer, they formed a circle around us. Even running away wasn't an option now. If they weren't friendly, we were well and truly trapped. Why had I let Sebastian talk me into this? When would I learn not to be swayed by his pretty face and his unswerving belief that everything would turn out alright in the end?

"Ochoo anta kaichoo?" The way Mr. Unfriendly's voice had gone up at the end clearly delineated it as a question. The only problem was that we had no way of knowing what he'd said. I nudged Sebastian with my elbow. "Answer him."

Sebastian raised his hand in a wave. "Hi. I'm Bass. And this is Jack. We were just passing through, and we thought we'd stop by and show you our unicorn." He waved a hand at the unicorn. "Bachew."

I prayed he was right about it being the orc word for unicorn because if not, he'd just called the orc towering at least a foot above us a bastard.

The silence that greeted Sebastian's words seemed to last forever. Finally, the orc did something strange with his mouth, the edges stretching, his teeth protruding even more. What was that? A smile? Or a grimace?

And then the orcs pressed forward. I closed my eyes and prepared to be torn limb from limb. It seemed like it would be easier without the visual. Not that being ripped to pieces by a horde of

vicious orcs could ever be classed as easy. I just hoped it was short, and that they would be kind enough to separate my head from my neck first.

Seconds passed, my muscles taut. When the expected violence never came, I cautiously opened one eye to find that none of the orcs were remotely interested in either Sebastian or me, their huge green fingers pawing at the unicorn instead. Sebastian lowered his head, his lips skimming my ear. "Told you."

There was definitely a look of awe in the orcs' eyes, their touch, although clumsy on account of their sheer size, strangely reverent. "Now what?"

Before Sebastian could answer, a booming voice rang out. "Strangers!"

I turned my head to see a mighty orc bearing down on us, this one even bigger than the first had been, his naked green chest gleaming, and the muscles in his equally bare thighs bulging as he strolled toward us. Come to think of it, there was an awful lot of bare skin on display, the males dressed in nothing but a leather loincloth, while the females, in a slight nod to modesty, also wore a leather breastplate. Did orcs not feel the cold? The evidence of my eyes said they didn't. Although, they did have the fire.

The new orc came to a stop in front of us, his yellow eyes narrowed. "You bring unicorn to Bleakpoint. Where find?"

Given the question he'd asked, there was no time to be relieved that he spoke our language. Where was Sebastian going to claim he'd obtained an extinct animal from? Except Sebastian wasn't saying anything. He was just staring at the orc in a way that said he found him fascinating. I said a particularly violent curse word in my head. It looked like it was going to be down to me to make something up. Again.

I took a deep breath, not even sure what I was going to say until the words spilled out. "It was a present. From a wizard. A very skilled wizard who specializes in giving people their heart's desire. He's an... unusually kind wizard."

Sebastian nodded. "A wizard."

"We retrieved something for him. Something that he'd been struggling to find for years. An ingredient for one of his spells."

Sebastian nodded again. "Spells."

"He was so grateful that he gave us this unicorn."

"Unicorn."

It was all I could do not to shoot Sebastian a glare. Did he think his parrot act was remotely helpful? He probably did. I gestured toward my own chest. "I'm Jack." I jabbed a thumb in Sebastian's direction. "And this is Sebastian. We're both friendly." Taking a chance, I pointed in the orc's direction. "And you are?"

He regarded my hand for what felt like an eternity. "Grat."

"Grat, that's a..." I stopped short, having intended to say lovely. I didn't think there was an orc alive who was interested in being told that anything about them was lovely. "Strong. It's a strong name."

The orc did that thing with his mouth that the other orc had done. I was beginning to think it was a smile. "My father was Grat. And my mother too."

"Yeah?" Well, that was... weird. "Handy. I bet it saved a lot of time when coming up with a name."

The orc released a great rumbling sound from his throat. What the hell was that? Was that a laugh? A growl? I looked toward Sebastian, hoping he might have some insight, but he still seemed transfixed by Grat. "It's great that you speak our language."

The orc pounded himself on the chest in a move that had it been directed at either Sebastian or me would have knocked us clear off our feet. "Grat is fluent in many languages. Grat has traveled."

I offered him a smile, my neck starting to hurt from craning it back far enough to see his face. "Grat is obviously very clever."

"Yes! Grat very clever. Very wise. Grat also powerful and fertile."

I nearly choked on my own tongue. "Really? Do you have many children?"

Grat lifted his hand and stared at his fingers for a very long time, the silence growing uncomfortable a long time before he finally provided an answer. "Thirty-six."

"Thirty-six. Wow! That is a lot."

"Thirty-seventh due soon."

"Congratulations. You are indeed very fertile."

Grat nodded. "Not like humans. Human sperm very weak. Orc sperm more persistent. Make strong babies."

I nodded sagely, taking the lull in conversation as an opportunity to look around. A couple of the orcs seemed interested in our conversation with Grat, but most were still fascinated by the unicorn. It seemed that Sebastian had been right again, the git. I turned back to Grat. "You have an impressive place"—I waved a hand around the camp—"what with the buildings, and the fire, and the..." I had a

moment of inspiration. "The beautiful painting. We saw the painting while we were passing. That's why we thought you might want to see our unicorn, wasn't it, Sebastian?"

He nodded. "Painting."

Grat's brow furrowed in a way that made it look like he was thinking hard. "You should stay. Have food. Sleep." The more suggestions he made, the keener he seemed to become on the idea. "Yes. You be guests of Bleakpoint. You and unicorn. We have feast."

"Oh, we wouldn't want to put you to any trouble."

"No trouble." Grat held out his hand and I went to shake it. Instead Grat grabbed hold of my hand, lifting it to his mouth and licking the back of it with his massive tongue all the way to my wrist in an action that was both disturbing and extremely wet. He looked pointedly at Sebastian, and I turned his way too. "Give him your hand."

"I don't want to."

"Sebastian..." I laced my voice with a false cheeriness I was a long way from feeling. "Give Grat, the nice, friendly orc who has offered us food and shelter your hand, or I will chop it off and give it to him as a separate appendage. This is an orc settlement, so we need to abide by orc customs."

Sebastian lifted his hand with great reluctance, Grat seizing on it with enthusiasm. He repeated the same action as he had with mine, Sebastian looking pained throughout the whole process.

And then Grat held out his massive green hand, Sebastian and I sharing a look. I nudged Sebastian. "You first."

He shook his head. "No, that would be rude of me. It's your turn."

"Oh, I insist. This was, after all, all your idea. I was happy with the tent. Well, not happy, but resigned."

Sebastian leaned forward and delivered a lick to the back of Grat's hand. It was nowhere near as extensive—or as lengthy—as Grat's had been, but the orc didn't seem to mind. I might have found the whole thing amusing if I wasn't keenly aware that my turn was coming. Sebastian stepped back, and there was nothing left to do but step forward myself. I curled my fingers around Grat's palm to keep it in place, because I only intended to do this once. Sticking my tongue out, I touched the tip of it to the back of his hand. It tasted surprisingly salty as I dragged my tongue from the point where his fingers started to his wrist, the action seeming to take a while when there was so much skin to cover. And finally, it was done, the taste of orc skin lingering as I stepped back.

Grat nodded, his mouth stretching once again. "Friends."

Both me and Sebastian parroted "friends" at the same time.

"Humans follow." He started to walk, Sebastian and I falling into formation behind him. Grabbing hold of Sebastian's arm to stall him, I dropped back a bit to leave space to talk without Grat being able to hear. "What about the unicorn?"

It was still being mobbed, Sebastian's hold on the mane having been replaced by one of the orc's, her fingers stroking through it while she made guttural noises that I assumed were meant to be reassuring. Sebastian gave the scene a quick glance over his shoulder. "There's too many of them at the moment. I'll have to bide my time. As soon as I get an opportunity, I'll take it."

"Make sure you do. I don't know how we're going to explain it if it disappears in a cloud of gold sparks. We'll probably have to lick a lot of orcs to make up for that one. And quite frankly, one was more than enough."

Sebastian chuckled. Grat stopped by the steps leading up to the large cabin, and we hurried to catch up. We took the stairs together, Grat having to duck to fit through the doorway at the top, while Sebastian and I had no such problem. The cabin opened into a large room dominated by rows of wooden tables, the surface already covered in huge platters of food, most of it slabs of meat. It seemed the orcs liked to eat well.

Grat led us over to one of the tables, a female orc standing by it, which I assumed meant we were going to be afforded some sort of introduction. I just hoped that this one would be without the licking. We came to a stop in front of her, Grat holding up a massive arm to point at her. "Eldest daughter."

Holy crap! If this was the most attractive daughter, I really hoped I didn't stumble across any of the others in the dark. She was terrifyingly close. And getting closer, her gaze fixed on me in a way that said she found something particularly interesting about me. Why me? Why not Sebastian? He was used to it, whereas I usually got to blend into the background when he was around.

I froze as a huge hand landed on top of my head, the weight of it considerable. What was she doing? Was it another way of saying hello? Or something else? Her fingers curled inward, the hold growing tighter. She could probably pop my head like it was a grapefruit. Why, though? What had I done to her? "Atchook etcha vark. Hantoon min gon."

What did that mean? I wanted to look over at Sebastian, but I didn't dare move in case it annoyed her. That same rumbling sound as earlier came from Grat again. "Atchook yin forhar ast. Etchoo hof yata."

Gluronk made a rumbling sound too. "Hintoo bon yasta. Oychong rar hatuta?"

"My daughter has taken shine to you, tiny human. She would like to take your sperm and make puny baby. Are you willing?"

Was I willing? She'd known me all of three seconds. Was that how it worked in the orc world. You saw something shiny, or in my case, not shiny, but breathing, and you decided you wanted it. Ignoring the weight of the hand on my head, which it seemed was some sort of courting ritual, I wrenched my head to the side in search of Sebastian, my eyes flashing a warning at him.

For once, despite the amusement lurking in his blue eyes, he heeded it. "I'm sorry, but Jack is mine. His sperm is unfortunately not available to make orc children, beautiful as I'm sure they would be. Just think of his green eyes with your green skin."

Grat frowned as he turned to his daughter. "Hoycho ban watcha ardan oylo."

The hand was removed from my head, and I found myself able to breathe again, the relief so great that I almost felt guilty at the sad expression on Gluronk's face. Well, that had been an interesting experience. At least, it hadn't involved any licking, which was something to be grateful for. Grat gestured for us to sit, the sheer height of the table and chairs meaning that Sebastian and I couldn't reach the floor, our legs dangling uselessly once we sat.

As Gluronk and Grat seated themselves opposite us, I cleared my throat. "I hope I haven't offended your daughter." I was all too aware of how tenuous our position could become should Grat decide we weren't welcome after all. The wrath of a considerable number of orcs would be turned our way with nowhere to run.

Grat shook his head. "No. She thinks you will change mind." He picked up a carafe, pouring the liquid into two tankards which he then pushed across the table toward us. "Drink that."

I stared at the tankard, really hoping that the changing of my mind and the drinking of whatever it was he'd offered me weren't connected. "What is it?"

Grat waved a hand. "Is orc ale. Is good. Will put hair on your balls. Make sperm stronger. Not as strong as orc sperm, but stronger." I took an experimental sip. Not because I needed more hair on my balls or for my sperm to be stronger, but because it seemed like the polite thing to do. While it didn't taste like any ale I'd consumed before, it did taste good: sweet with a slight warmth to it. It didn't seem to hold a lethal amount of alcohol, and as I could hold my ale far better than Sebastian could, all I needed to do was keep a close eye on him, which considering he'd already drunk half of his should be easy. Placing my tankard back on the table, I made the appropriate appreciative noises as Grat stared at me waiting for my verdict. "Very nice."

"Yes!" He slammed his hand on the table, a bowl emptying as all the fruit in it abandoned the bowl and made a bid for the floor. "Orc ale better than human ale. Many orc things better than humans, but ale in particular. Plenty more where that came from Drink. Drink." I obediently took another sip.

The room started to fill up, a few orcs joining our table and being introduced as more of Grat's children. Fortunately, none of them seemed to be as enamored of me as Gluronk had. Or perhaps being the eldest, she got her first choice of suitors. Whatever the reason was, it came as a great relief. As did the fact that my rejection seemed to have been taken well. All Sebastian and I needed to do was have dinner, find somewhere to sleep, and then the next day we could be on our way. Easy.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SEBASTIAN

Jack didn't seem remotely flattered by Gluronk's interest in him. It was amusing to watch him pretend a fascination in the conversation going on around him, and the copious amounts of food on offer, just so he could avoid so much as glancing in her direction. It was quite an impressive feat given that she'd seated herself directly in what should have been his eyeline.

The female orc clearly wasn't pleased with Jack's rejection, a pronounced frown on her face and lines marring her brow.

To be honest, I could empathize. After all, hadn't I pretty much done the same thing? I'd taken one look at Jack and decided that he was the one for me, that my casual liaisons had been brought to a sudden end by one green-eyed farm boy. Not that it had been that easy, since it took far longer to convince Jack of that fact, and at times you could be forgiven for thinking that he was still fighting it. But he was here, and he wasn't going anywhere.

Just because I would fight tooth and nail with anyone who thought they could take Jack away from me, didn't mean that I was going to miss the opportunity to wind him up, though. With that in mind, I brought my lips close to his ear and kept my voice low, the room full of the raucous sound of orcs feasting. "She can't stop looking at you. She really likes you."

Jack went still. "Shut up."

Biting my lip to stop from smiling, I pressed on. "She's pretty. Don't you think she's pretty? Skin as green as a leaf. Eyes as yellow as a sunflower. And those teeth. Imagine feeling those teeth on your skin, Jack. I hope she's careful with them when she sucks things. I'd hate for a certain part of your anatomy to suffer any damage."

Jack gave a shudder, my smile escaping despite my efforts to hold it back. Luckily, Jack's gaze was fixed on his plate. "You're not funny, Sebastian."

"Just think what your union could do for orc/human relations. You could be, I don't know, an envoy or something. You could learn the language, and—"

Jack made a noise a little like a growl. "You're very lucky that orcs don't do cutlery." They didn't. Whatever the food was, they ate with their hands, table manners nonexistent. "Because if I had a knife in my hand..."

My grin grew wider. I'd never get tired of how passionate Jack could be, or how easy he was to rile. "What would you do?"

"I'd get creative with it. Model your cock into something else."

"Interesting! Wouldn't that mean you'd miss out, though? Because you really do enjoy my—"

Jack turned my way, his glare enough to reduce most grown men to tears. "Shouldn't you be sorting out the"—he threw a glance over at Grat, only continuing when he established that Grat was deep in conversation with one of his sons—"the unicorn problem?"

"It's all in hand." It was. I'd been keeping a close eye on the unicorn. Unfortunately, though, some of the orcs were so fascinated by it that they'd foregone dinner in favor of staying close to it, the unicorn still surrounded by too large a circle to have a chance of slipping free without one of them managing to grab it. "I need to wait until the right time. As soon as there's an opening, I'll take it."

Jack frowned. "And what if you run out of magic first?"

I shrugged. Jack was a worrier, while I was more of a take-things-as-they-come person. I didn't see the point in tying myself in knots over things that might never come to pass. Given all the scrapes I'd found myself in over the years, I would have given myself an ulcer by now if I'd given too much mental space to them. "It'll be fine."

Jack looked less than convinced, but he did return to eating, the turkey drumstick he picked up with both hands almost as big as his head. He'd only taken a couple of bites when Grat leaned over the table. "I have other son. He important man in Cerensai. Perhaps you meet him on your travels? He Ulgan."

When Jack started choking on a mouthful of turkey, I leaned over and patted him on the back without taking my eyes off Grat. "Excuse Jack. He sometimes eats too fast. No matter how many times I tell him to chew his food first, he persists in trying to swallow it whole." I pasted a thoughtful expression on my face. "What did you say your son's name was?"

"Ul-gan." Grat said it slowly like he thought the language barrier was to blame for my lack of recall.

"It doesn't ring a bell. What does he look like?"

"Tall. Handsome like father." A chorus of rumbling laughs echoed around the table. "Very strong orc." My fingers automatically went to my neck, massaging the place where Ulgan's fingers had once dug in while he'd dangled me off the ground and threatened to remove all of my fingers and toes. I might argue the handsome description, but I was definitely on board with strong. "Good-tempered."

I nearly followed Jack in choking myself at that one. I gave a slow head shake. "I don't think I've ever had the pleasure, which is a shame. What about you, Jack? Have you ever met Ulgan, the handsomest orc in all the thirteen kingdoms, apart from his father, of course?" I accompanied the compliment with a wink in Grat's direction, the orc lapping up the attention.

Jack had quickly regained his composure after his bout of choking, enough for his thoughtful expression to be convincing. "No. I think I would have remembered." He gave the room a slow scan. "Is he here?"

He definitely wasn't in the room, or we would have heard the bellow of rage as he made a beeline for us, determined to smash us into a million pieces and grind our bones to make bread. But that didn't mean he wasn't somewhere else in camp.

Grat took a bite of an apple, half-chewed bits of it flying everywhere as he spoke. "No. He busy orc. Much in demand." He leaned forward again. "He won important card tournament with big prize three years in row?" He crossed his massive arms over his chest and looked less than pleased. "Not this year, though."

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. "No? Who won this year?"

Deep ridges appeared on Grat's brow. "Some human. Ulgan say he cheated. He going to kill human when he find him."

"Is he?" I forced a smile as I picked a stray bit of apple off my arm. "Well, I guess that human will be sensible enough to stay away from orcs." I gestured at myself and Jack. "Luckily, we have no such problems with orcs. We get on with everybody, don't we, Jack?"

Jack nodded for so long that I began to wonder if he'd forgotten that he was supposed to stop. "Yes, Sebastian and I just like a quiet life. No card tournaments. No run-ins with angry orcs." He gave a weak smile. "We just like an early night, don't we, Sebastian?"

I joined in with Jack's nodding, Grat busying himself with filling our tankards up to the brim once more, even though Jack had barely drunk any of his. Jack and I shared a look as conversation resumed once more, most of it in the orcs' native language.

My magic was starting to run low by the time I finally got my chance with the unicorn, hunger having won out and the crowd of admirers having thinned considerably. Once a gap opened up, I sent

the unicorn charging toward it, one of the orcs jumping out of the way with a gasp. From there, it was easy, the orcs trying to stop it no match for the unicorn galloping at full pelt toward them. I took the unicorn out of the gate and sent it running off into the barren landscape. Only once I calculated it was far enough away for there to be no witnesses did I let the magic unravel, the unicorn disappearing into the ether.

Another ten minutes passed before a pair of orcs burst into the room, their expressions suitably solemn as they made their way over to Grat. A rapid-fire conversation conducted completely in the orc language followed, Grat's face growing stormier the longer it went on. Finally, the pair of orcs departed, their shoulders drooping and their heads downcast. Grat turned to Jack and me with an expression on his face that almost made me feel sorry for the deception. "Bachew gone."

"Bachew?" It was probably best to check we were on the same page as we still hadn't established the definite meaning of the word.

Grat's nod was loaded with deep regret. "Unicorn. It ran away."

Jack pressed a hand to his chest and let out a loud gasp. "Our unicorn? Please tell me there's been some sort of mistake."

I squeezed my lips into a tight line, Jack's over the top reaction making me want to smile. He apparently didn't share my guilt. Probably because he was still being eyed up by a horny female orc who was virtually undressing him with her eyes every opportunity she got. "How?"

Grat shrugged his massive shoulders. "He ran. Unicorns are fast. Like horses."

Jack leaned forward. "But wasn't anybody holding onto him?" I could answer that for him. Thankfully, nobody had been, or we'd be sitting here having a completely different conversation about why the unicorn had disappeared in a cloud of gold sparks.

Grat looked uncomfortable. I was definitely getting better at reading orc expressions. The clue was in the eyebrows and the brow. "We thought bachew was tame. We send out search party. We hunt all night. We find bachew by morning." He slammed a hand across his chest. "Orc promise. Orcs take promises seriously." He translated for the other orcs around the table, and there was a chorus of what I assumed was agreement, lots of tankards raised, and one or two of them thumping the table so hard I was surprised it didn't crack.

Jack opened his mouth to speak but I got in there first. "Honestly, don't worry. He'll come when we call tomorrow morning. He is tame, but only for us. He probably just wanted an adventure. He'll come back when he gets hungry. Isn't that right, Jack?"

Jack gave a slow nod. "Yeah, don't worry yourselves. It's pointless to send out a search party." It wasn't only pointless, but it would no doubt raise suspicion when they found the tracks come to a sudden end not far from the camp. We didn't want any of them questioning the reality of the unicorn. Not until we were nothing but a memory to them anyway.

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Once dinner was done with, we were led out to the fire, music and what I assumed was meant to be dancing breaking out. Although, it was more of a slow lumbering thing which seemed to involve a lot of stomping, thigh slapping, and the occasional roar, which to my great amusement never failed to make Jack jump.

Grat threw an arm around each of our shoulders, gathering us in until both Jack and I almost had a mouthful of green nipple. "We throw party in your honor."

Jack blinked. "This is for us? You really didn't need to. Just a bed for the night would have sufficed."

Grat squeezed us a bit tighter. "You have bed. You have best bed. Lots of furs. You have most comfortable night of your life. But first, we have fun." He waved a hand at an orc carrying a silver tray on the opposite side of the fire. As it was the arm around my shoulders he'd lifted to point, I took the opportunity to slip out from underneath it, Jack offering me a poisonous glare from where he was still wedged tightly beneath Grat's other armpit. I offered him a sweet smile in response to his glare, batting my eyelashes at him.

The orc with the silver tray appeared at our side and held it out. Jack and I both stared at the brown shriveled things on its surface. Finally relinquishing Jack from underneath his armpit, Grat picked up one of the objects between his finger and thumb and held it up. It didn't look any more appetizing up close.

Jack frowned. "What is it?"

Grat popped it in his mouth and chewed slowly. "Is dried Moombat plant. Orc delicacy. Will make party more fun. You try."

The tray was pushed our way and I reached out to take a piece. Before I could, Jack's fingers wrapped around my wrist and I found myself pulled away into the shadows, Jack's eyes blazing as he rounded on me. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Taking a piece of what's offered. It was you that said we needed to follow orc customs. You made me lick him, remember. So I'm being polite and taking Grat up on his kind hospitality."

"Yeah, but"—Jack shook his head—"You know what that is, right? It's a drug. It's meant to induce

hallucinations."

I looked back over to the orcs, most of them still taking part in that same lumbering dance. Grat hadn't joined the dancing, choosing to chew on another piece of Moombat instead. "Do they look like they're having hallucinations?"

Jack followed my gaze, his scrutiny taking much longer than mine had as he carefully searched for any signs of lack of control. "Well, no, but..."

"Exactly. It can't be very strong. It's probably all in their heads."

Another loud roar echoed around the camp, Jack jumping again. I grinned at him. "It might even help to settle your nerves."

He glared at me. "My nerves are fine. It's just that there's no rhyme nor reason to when they do that."

"They're enjoying themselves. It's an expression of that joy."

Jack looked unconvinced. "Do you think they're going to do that all night?"

"Even orcs sleep, so I assume at some point they'll go to bed. Apparently, an orc's snore is something to behold."

"Great! Something to look forward to." Jack sighed. "Do you reckon the Moombat will help me sleep over the sound of the orcs snoring?"

"It's bound to."

We returned to Grat, the orc looking overjoyed—or as overjoyed as an orc could manage to look—to see us. The tray was shoved our way again, and I picked up a piece of the Moombat, Jack hesitating for longer, but finally reaching out to take the smallest piece available.

Grat nodded enthusiastically. "Chew slow. Makes effects last longer. You not regret it."

I popped it in my mouth and chewed, the feeling not unlike chewing on a piece of leather. Perhaps it was an orc joke, and what we were really consuming was an orc loincloth. Jack didn't look particularly happy about it either, his expression one of concentration as he sought to manipulate the piece of Moombat with his teeth and tongue into a piece that could actually be swallowed.

Ten minutes later, Jack and I shared a look. He raised an eyebrow. "Do you feel anything at all?"

I shook my head. Apart from the slight buzz that was down to the two tankards of orc ale I'd imbibed earlier, I felt completely lucid. At least it proved how ridiculous Jack had been to worry so much. "Nothing at all."

As if on cue, the orc in charge of the silver tray appeared once again. The tray had been re-filled, the pieces on this one much larger and darker. Jack gave me an enquiring look and I shrugged. This

time, he was the first one to reach out and take a piece. In solidarity, I also took a piece, the two of us popping it into our mouths in unison. The problem with it being bigger was that it took even longer to chew. Long enough to wonder why I was bothering with a second piece when the first had had zero effect.

Grat had joined in with the dancing, his roars particularly fearsome, and his stomps hard enough to shake the ground. I cast a sideways look at Jack. "Want to dance?"

He snorted. "Not if you offered me a thousand gold coins."

"Two thousand?"

"Not even then."

I grinned. "I'd pay to see you slapping your thighs."

"Not enough to make me actually do it."

"Shame."



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JACK

Someone had stuck a metal skewer in my ear and was wiggling it around. That was the only explanation I could think of for the sharp pain in my head, the slightest movement inducing a wave of nausea. An attempt to open my eyes came to nothing when it only exacerbated the explosion in my head. Instead, I concentrated on working out as much as I could with my eyes still tightly shut.

I was on something soft. A bed would be the obvious answer to that one. Except, I couldn't recall going to bed. Why not? How much had I had to drink? I'd never gotten drunk enough that I couldn't remember going to bed before, though. I was naked. Not that strange if I was in a bed. I often slept naked. It was warm. A little too warm. Almost bordering on stuffy. So I was inside. Where? Why couldn't I remember?

There was something pressed up against my back. Skin just as naked as mine. Who? Sebastian? It had better be Sebastian. If it wasn't Sebastian, then..." An image of Gluronk staring at me longingly like she wanted to drag me away and have her wicked way with me floated into my head. What if?

My throat was dry. So dry that when I opened my mouth to speak, nothing came out on the first two attempts. Eventually, I managed a croaky version of Sebastian's name. No response. Did that mean it wasn't him? There was no erection pressing into me, which if it was Sebastian was unusual. Barely a day had gone by over the course of our relationship when I hadn't woken to an aroused Sebastian, my lover all too eager to start the day with a bang.

There was no noise, the room—or wherever it was—completely silent. I sought to remember the previous night, going over what I could recall. I remembered arriving at the camp. I remembered dinner. I remembered Sebastian finally making the unicorn escape in the nick of time. I remembered the truly awful dancing around the fire, the orcs neither coordinated nor seemingly having any sense of rhythm whatsoever. I remembered Sebastian using my own logic against me to convince me into trying the Moombat, and it having no effect. I remembered us having another piece.

And then nothing.

My eyes snapped open. Except if I couldn't remember anything after that, that would indicate the Moombat had had an effect, that I'd been so much under the influence of a drug that it had stolen all my memories. Which would also mean that anything could have happened in that missing chunk of time. Did that include being seduced by a female orc? I hoped not. More than I'd ever hoped for anything in my life.

Steeling myself for what I might be about to discover, I levered myself into a sitting position, my head letting me know that it wasn't entirely on board with the idea. Nausea hit once more, and I was forced to close my eyes for a few seconds and breathe through it until it had receded enough for me to open my eyes again and turn my head to the side.

A naked Sebastian lay sprawled across the other side of the bed, his long blond hair spread out across the pillow. I slapped my hand down in the middle of his chest, and his eyes flew open immediately. "Wake up."

Even though his eyes were open, I slapped him again in the same spot. The thought of discovering myself in bed with the female orc had been incredibly disturbing, and there was only person who could possibly be to blame for that. And I was looking at him.

Sebastian's hand flew to the spot on his chest where I'd hit him twice to rub at it. "I'm awake. You don't have to keep hitting me."

Still struggling to focus over the pounding in my head, I scanned our surroundings. We were in a small cabin, the walls made of tree trunks. A roaring fire in the hearth accounted for how stuffy it was. We were alone in the cabin. Given the amount of light streaming in through the window and the position of the sun, it was already mid-morning, Sebastian and I having slept much later than we'd planned. Apart from that, there wasn't a lot else to see, so I turned my attention back to Sebastian. "What do you remember about last night?"

"Grat. Dinner. Orc ale. The fire." His brow scrunched up. "Not a lot after that. In fact, nothing at all." He shook his head as if he was trying to clear it. His head was obviously faring better than mine because if I tried to shake it like that, I was pretty sure I'd be seeing some of the previous night's dinner again. "Moombat. That second piece must have sent us over the edge."

Sebastian punctuated his summing up of the situation with a laugh and I glared at him. "What could possibly be funny about neither of us remembering what happened last night?"

Sebastian relaxed back against the pillows, his lips curved up in a smile. "Oh, come on. How bad can it have been?" He lifted an arm to gesture around the cabin. "Someone obviously put us to bed.

Bad would have been waking up face-down in the snow."

"But what happened?"

He shrugged. "I doubt it was that exciting. We probably said some stupid shit, and then someone dragged us in here. We obviously didn't say anything incriminating, or they would have thrown us out rather than tucking us in for the night. Relax, Jack."

"Relax..." I stared at him. "It feels like a troupe of wild animals have taken up residence in my head. I may vomit at any time, and I've never felt less like a day's walking, which is what we need to do if we're going to reach Frostburn before nightfall. And..." I pointed an accusatory finger at him. "Don't even think about suggesting spending another night here. I think we've already pushed our luck as far as we can, you know, given that Grat is apparently Ulgan's father. Ulgan, who wants us both dead, who for all we know could arrive back at any time to find that we're guests of his father, and that we've told him more than a few lies including not having a clue who Ulgan is." I lifted my hand to push my hair back off my brow, frowning at the circle of what looked like matted hair and leaves tied around my wrist. I shook it in Sebastian's direction. "What the hell is this? I apparently started wearing ore jewelry in my drug-induced mania."

Sebastian grabbed hold of my wrist and brought it closer to examine it. "That's not jewelry. Well, not just jewelry."

"What is it, then? Tell me it's not some sort of curse. If I've been cursed by orcs, I'm not going to be happy."

"It's not a curse, and orcs don't curse people. It's..." Sebastian let go of my wrist, and lifted his arms to examine his own wrists, both of them bare. "Huh! I don't have one."

He sounded disappointed. "Now's hardly the time for jealousy, Sebastian. If you're that bothered, you can have mine." I gave the bracelet, or whatever it was, another cursory glance, my lip curling. "It's not exactly the height of fashion."

He shook his head. "No, you don't understand. These are given out as part of an orc wedding ceremony. You must have got married last night. And if you didn't marry me, who did you marry?"

Dread settled in the form of a solid lump in my chest. Tamping it down, I examined Sebastian's expression for any signs that he was making shit up just to mess with me. Unfortunately, Sebastian's expression was about as earnest as it ever got. "That's not funny."

He held his arms out in an expansive gesture. "Am I laughing?" His expression turned thoughtful. "I guess it was Gluronk. The Moombat must have made you see her in a completely different light." He

pressed a hand to his chest, his lips turning down slightly. "I'm not going to pretend that my feelings haven't been hurt."

"Hurt!" My voice came out in a painful screech that did absolutely nothing to improve the thudding in my skull. "What about me? What am I going to do with an orc wife?"

"Take her home to meet your mother? Or move here? I suppose it would be difficult for your future children to grow up in Riverbrook with no other orcs apart from their mother."

"I can't take an orc home to meet my mother."

Sebastian frowned. "Why? I've met your mother. She's lovely. She might find it odd at first that you went from me to an orc so quickly, but she'll come around eventually. She'll embrace her. Well, not actually embrace her because your mother is quite short, but if she stands on a chair, she'll be able to."

Levering myself off the bed, I started to pace. At least the nausea had subsided to a dull roar. Funny, what a burst of adrenaline could achieve. "There must be some way to dissolve the marriage."

Sebastian shrugged. "I don't know. The orcs take marriage incredibly seriously. They see it as a lifelong commitment. You shouldn't have married her if you didn't mean it."

Sebastian wasn't helping. Not one little bit, the panic in my chest starting to swell into something far more overwhelming. "I didn't marry her. Well, apparently, I did, but I don't remember any of it, so that must mean something, right? If I wasn't in my right mind, then the wedding shouldn't be valid. I'll talk to Grat. I'll explain that there's been some sort of mistake. I'll—"

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"Why not?"

Sebastian sat up. "Because he'll take it as a personal insult. You marry his daughter, and then a few hours later, you say you don't want her. What father wouldn't be appalled at that sort of behavior?"

I ran a hand through my hair, my thoughts spiraling. "There must be something we can do. We could find a... a witch and get her to do some sort of forgetting spell so that no one can remember anything about last night."

"Jack?"

I ignored him. Sebastian had already said more than enough. "What if she died? That would end the marriage, right? I could hire an assassin." It was brutal, but then so was staying married to an orc for the rest of my days.

"Jack?"

"I could make it look like an accident. Something tragic where she'd be remembered fondly."

"Jack?"

I turned to find Sebastian dangling something between his thumb and forefinger. "What's that?"

He pointed at my wrist and then back at the object. "Another one. I was lying on it. I guess it was me after all." Smiling widely, he slid it onto his wrist. "I guess we got married last night. That must be a relief."

Relief wasn't chief among my feelings as I stared at Sebastian. "We're not married."

He raised an eyebrow. "The matching wedding bracelets say that we are. You know what they say about drugs, don't you?" He didn't wait for me to answer. "That they bring your true feelings to the surface. I expect you begged for a marriage ceremony, and they eventually gave in just to shut you up."

Married! To Sebastian? My gut had turned into a whirlpool. I sank back onto the bed and buried my face in my hands, forcing myself to breathe slowly as I took stock of the situation. He wasn't an orc, or female, so that was good. A chin landed on my shoulder, Sebastian draping himself across my back. "Are you okay, husband?"

"Don't call me that. We're not married."

"If you say so."

I shrugged him off and rounded on him. "We're not. Even if it did happen, which is extremely unlikely.... it's far more likely that you stole the bracelets, you know, given that you have a habit of taking things that aren't yours. And even if you didn't steal them, there's the fact that neither of us is an orc, so an orc wedding ceremony means absolutely nothing to either us."

Sebastian looked sad. "You don't mean that. You're just not thinking straight."

I started hunting for my clothes, eventually finding them over by the fireplace, which was a relief, as it meant we hadn't been running around outside bare-ass naked. "I mean exactly what I say."

"What's wrong with me?"

Trousers now safely on and fastened, I turned to find Sebastian posing in his most alluring fashion across the bed. I let my gaze drift over him, tracing the familiar planes of his taut muscles and golden skin, my cock immediately expressing an interest in forgetting about getting dressed altogether and returning to bed instead. "I wouldn't know where to start." I tore my gaze away, the action requiring a superhuman effort. "Get dressed."

"Someone's like a bear with a sore head this morning. You should stay away from drugs. You can't handle them, apparently."

My glare cut into Sebastian's back as he rolled off the bed and started to pull his own clothes on. "I didn't want to take any drugs in the first place. You talked me into it."

Sebastian shrugged. "Well, then we've both learned something from last night."

"What did you learn?"

Sebastian flashed a quick grin my way. "I learned that I really should be lucid for the important events in my life, like my own wedding ceremony."

I let out a frustrated sigh. "We didn't get married."

"If you say so."

Any further arguments on the matter were curtailed by Sebastian tugging the door of the cabin open to admit a blast of icy wind. We'd barely taken a step outside before we had Grat bearing down on us. It was like he'd been waiting for us to appear, his arms outstretched in a way that made me fearful he was about to go in for a hug, something I wasn't sure my head could cope with. Thankfully, he didn't attempt it, his hands falling to his sides. "My friends. We have good night, yes? You better dancers than I expected."

Sebastian nodded enthusiastically. "We had a great night. We're really grateful for your hospitality."

Grat joined in with the nodding. "Strong Moombat last night. Orcs have shared dream about creature."

I frowned. "What sort of creature?"

"Creature with head of wolf, body of rhinoceros, and tail of fox. Was seen in many places around camp. And then it"—he pressed the palms of his hands together before thrusting them apart in a rapid movement—"Poof! It disappear." He shook his head. "Good Moombat. The best."

I cast a sideways look at Sebastian, but he was busy examining a tree. We were lucky that all the orcs had apparently been as high as kites. Or else they might have been asking far too many probing questions. Questions that might have led them to also doubt the veracity of the unicorn's existence if they thought about it for long enough.

Large green fingers wrapped around my wrist and tugged me toward the larger cabin. "Come. Have breakfast before you leave. You cannot walk on empty stomach."

I allowed myself to be led where Grat wanted us to go. Food might not be such a bad idea. At least it would settle my stomach. Thankfully, Gluronk was nowhere to be seen during breakfast, and my head felt a lot better by the time we'd finished eating. No further mention had been made of any incidents the previous night, which made me even more sure that no marriage ceremony had taken place. If it had, surely, Grat would have mentioned it.





CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

JACK

Despite the late start from Bleakpoint, we'd made good time to Frostburn, Sebastian and I finally getting used to the constant snow underfoot. Once there, we'd spent an uneventful night in the tavern, life a lot less wild than it had been the previous night. Not that I'd remembered any more of it, and trust me, I'd tried, convinced that if I only concentrated hard enough, snippets of it would eventually return to me. It hadn't happened, everything after that second piece of Moombat remaining a blank.

There were no recollections of Sebastian summoning a strange creature. No flashbacks to how we'd gotten to bed. And definitely no memories of a wedding ceremony having taken place. One thing was for sure, I was never taking drugs again. No matter what the circumstances might be. Fitting in with customs, be damned. They could take me as they found me, even if they were ferocious orcs who towered over me.

One more day's travel would take us to Icehaven, our final target before we headed into the mountains. I looked over at Sebastian to find his brow scrunched as he studied the map. "Do you need help reading it?"

"That's a very sweet offer, husband of mine, but no."

My nails curled into my palms hard enough to leave dents. "Don't call me that."

Sebastian raised an eyebrow. "You used to say that about me calling you farm boy. You got used to it eventually."

"That's different. I come from a farm. I can't dispute that, but if you keep calling me husband, people are going to think we're actually married."

Sebastian didn't bother to lift his eyes from the map to answer. "In the eyes of the orcs, we are married."

My blood started to boil. Sebastian couldn't be serious. He couldn't actually believe that a ceremony conducted when we were both under the influence of drugs, that neither of us could even

remember, could possibly have been anything but a huge mistake. "Do you see any orcs?"

Sebastian did lift his head then, to scan our surroundings, as if he thought there was a chance an orc might have meandered into view while he hadn't been looking. "No."

"Well, then." I grabbed his wrist, fighting my way under the numerous layers until I found what I was searching for. "Oh, for God's sake, you're still wearing it. Why?"

Sebastian gave me a strange look. "Because I take my vows seriously. Aren't you wearing yours?" I snorted. "What vows?" I lifted my arm and pulled my coat back to reveal my bare wrist. "And of

course, I'm not. I threw it away."

"The vows I'm sure we must have said." He grabbed my other arm and rolled my sleeve back to reveal the edge of the wedding band. "You're such a liar, Jack Shaw. I knew you wouldn't have thrown it away." He tapped a finger against it. "This means something to you."

"Yeah, it serves as a useful reminder to never take drugs again as long as I live, that crazy things happen when I do." Sebastian shook his head, but he was smirking, a gesture that infuriated me all the more. That smirk said he didn't believe a word I was saying. I settled for changing the subject instead. "Why were you frowning at the map?"

Sebastian dropped his gaze back to it. "I was thinking about the bridge situation. It would be so much easier to cross at the one farther down the river. If we don't, we have to backtrack, and it will add hours to our journey time."

"Remind me... why were we told to avoid the other bridge?"

"Possibility of trolls."

"Right." Using the closest bridge would get us to Icehaven well before nightfall, leaving Sebastian and I with far more alone time. We hadn't had the opportunity to be intimate since the palace, exhaustion and lack of time combining to force an abstention from sex that neither of us were used to. However, Sebastian and I didn't have a great track record when it came to taking shortcuts. "Do you remember the forest in Cerensai?" When Sebastian arched a brow, I carried on. "The one that we traveled through to cut hours off our journey time, the one that ended up being full of bandits, including your oh, so charming ex-lover. It led to the whole kidnap thing. And then you had to come and rescue me. What I'm trying to say is that what was meant to make our journey shorter actually made it far longer. So... perhaps we should err on the side of caution for once."

The curl of Sebastian's lip made his feelings all too clear. I walked over to the riverbank and stared down at the ice, the opposite bank no more than thirty meters away. "Do we even need a bridge? Can't we just walk across it?"

I went to place a foot on the ice, figuring it wouldn't hurt to experiment, Sebastian grabbing my arm and pulling me away before I could. "Too dangerous. If it cracks, you'll be in the water before you know it. How well do you think you'll be able to swim in all these clothes? And then there's the risk of hypothermia.

Just because it might be thick enough here doesn't mean it is all the way across."

Knowing he was right, I let out a sigh. "You could fly us across." While being carried by a giant bird was second only to ships in my list of transportation options I'd vowed never to experience again, it was only a short distance. Sebastian turned to look back at Frostburn, the settlement not that far away. A man lifted his arm and waved. We waved back. Maybe not. We were trying to keep a low profile. Or as low a profile as Sebastian was ever able to keep. "What happens if we get there, and there is a troll, and he won't let us pass?"

Sebastian shrugged. "I doubt there's a troll. It's probably nothing but a story."

I fell into step beside him. I hoped he was right.

It took an hour of walking before the bridge came into sight. As bridges went, it was fairly nondescript: just a series of wooden planks and a crude railing on either side. If a troll had taken up residence here, then he really could have found a better bridge to guard, one that people might actually want to cross.

My earlier suggestion to Sebastian, made once Frostburn was out of sight, that there was no one around to see if he summoned a large bird had fallen on deaf ears. It had become very clear that Sebastian was far more interested in finding out if there really was a troll than reducing our journey time. It was yet another example of him deliberately seeking out danger. He'd been right about the orcs, though, so I supposed I should probably cut him some slack.

I paused for a moment to survey the area, Sebastian also drawing to a halt by my side. "It looks clear."

He nodded. "Looks like." There was no hiding the disappointment in his voice.

"You really wanted a confrontation with a troll, didn't you?"

Sebastian shrugged, the action less than convincing. "I've never met a troll."

I sighed. "Neither have I. But the difference between you and me is that I'm quite happy for it to stay that way."

A few steps forward had us standing at the edge of the bridge. One more step would take us onto the wooden planks. Some sixth sense had me believing that that wasn't a good idea, though. "Let's just fly across." Sebastian shook his head. "We're here now. Why would I waste my magic when I don't need to? Besides, you were the one that said you weren't doing that again."

I rolled my eyes at Sebastian using my own words against me. "If it's a choice between flying or a troll, I'll take the flying."

Sebastian waved a hand at the bridge. "Can you see a troll?"

"Well, no, but..." Whatever my argument might have been became pointless as Sebastian started striding across the bridge. Not wanting to be left behind, I hurried to catch him up. Sebastian was about a quarter of the way across when something strange happened at the midpoint of the bridge, the air shimmering. Still a few steps behind Sebastian, I shouted his name as a warning, Sebastian coming to a stop and turning to look back over his shoulder. "What? There's nothing here."

I pointed at the center of the bridge, the shimmering having intensified, the air tinged with pink and blue. Whatever it was, was growing by the second. "What's that, then?"

Sebastian turned back in time to witness the edges of the shimmering mass solidify until an arm could be seen, and then a leg. Then a nose and an ear, the magic taking its time to fill in all the details. And then there was a figure standing there, the man reaching no higher than Sebastian's waist. He had thick white hair, both on his head, and in the form of a long white beard which stretched all the way to the ground. Bushy white eyebrows dominated his brow. Between them and the beard, few of his features could be seen. Although, going by the bulbous nose, that was probably a blessing.

He was dressed in a coarse gray robe, huge, hairy toes peeking out from under the hem. In his left hand, he held a long, wooden staff, which he wasted no time in holding up toward Sebastian, his voice surprisingly loud for a man of his stature when he spoke. "Stop right there. You do not have my permission to cross this bridge."

Shaking my head, I went to stand next to Sebastian. The damage was already done, so why not. Sebastian had gotten his wish and he'd met the troll, so there was no point in dwelling on what could have been avoided if he'd just heeded my warning. All that mattered now was working out what ramifications there would be to being confronted by this rather strange little man.

Sebastian smiled at the troll, and I gave brief consideration to pushing my lover over the railing to test how firm the frozen ice really was. It was one thing to walk us straight into danger, but he didn't have to look so happy about it, like meeting a troll had been on his top ten list of things he wanted more than anything. Sebastian held his hand out to the troll. "Hi, I'm Bass. What's your name?"

Making no move to accept the hand that had been offered, the troll eyed Sebastian curiously, the large ears protruding from tufts of white hair twitching. "Did you not hear me, human?"

"Bass, not human. I heard you, but that doesn't mean we can't treat each other with a bit of common courtesy. There are better ways to forbid me from crossing your bridge. More polite ways."

The troll looked somewhat taken aback, his fingers tightening around his staff. "Most humans have a different reaction. Surprise or shock usually. Some are scared."

"Scared!" I winced as Sebastian let out a hoot of laughter. It might be better if he didn't antagonize the magical troll when we didn't know what other tricks he might have in store for us. "Really?"

The troll's impressive eyebrows met in the middle. "Why would they not be?"

"Because..." Sebastian made a point of looking down, the journey taking quite some time before he reached the top of the troll's head. "How can I put this politely? You're not very tall."

The troll banged his staff on the bridge, the reverberations passing through the wooden planks to my feet. "I think you will find that for a troll, I am very tall indeed."

"Yeah?" Sebastian gave a slow, contemplative nod. "But in comparison to Jack and me, you're not. It makes me wonder how you think you can stop us from crossing this bridge."

The troll gave a sly smile, the certainty in his expression setting my teeth on edge. "Try it and see how far you get."

Sebastian and I exchanged a look. As one, we rushed forward, both of us bouncing back immediately. There may as well have been a wall there. I reached up, tentatively touching the air, my hand unable to push past it even though the evidence of my eyes said that there was nothing there.

The troll let out a throaty chuckle as I probed the invisible barrier. "I did try and warn you."

Sebastian's smile had dimmed somewhat as I grabbed his arm to get his attention. "Let's just walk back to the other bridge. Or you know, do the other thing." I made a vague flapping motion with my arms in a parody of having wings.

He shook me off, his eyes narrowed. I recognized that look. It meant he wasn't going to back down. He crossed his arms over his chest, his gaze skewering the troll. "How do we get your permission to cross the bridge? I'm assuming there is a way."

"Of course." The troll gave a smug smile. "It's simple. All you have to do is win a sword fight." I frowned. "A sword fight? We don't have a sword."

The troll tipped his head to one side, his beard sweeping the ground. "I can provide one."

Sebastian regarded the troll with a look of quiet contemplation. "So... if I win this sword fight, you let us cross?"

The troll gave a mocking little bow. "Of course."

"What's the catch?" Unfortunately, my question was drowned out by Sebastian's ready acceptance of the challenge. I grabbed his arm again, this time dragging him all the way back off the bridge, so that we were out of the troll's range of hearing, or at least I hoped we were. Although, he did have very big ears, and I knew nothing about trolls, so it wasn't a given. "What do you think you're doing?" When Sebastian blinked at me, I was forced to elaborate. "You've just agreed to a sword fight. Not an I'll-summon-an-animal fight, but one with a sword, a sharp metal thing that can kill you."

Sebastian's brow furrowed. "I know what a sword is."

"You might know what it is, but do you know how to use one?"

"Sure."

I stared at him. Did he? Or was he just saying that? I'd never seen him with any sort of weapon. He always relied on his magic.

Sebastian inclined his head in the direction of the troll, the troll still in the exact same spot in the middle of the bridge. "Look at him. How old do you think he is?"

I gave the troll a quick scan. "How should I know? He's the first one I've met. Do you know?"

Sebastian thought for a moment. "From what I know about trolls, I'd say about five hundred, maybe even six hundred."

"Great! What's that got to do with anything?"

He placed a hand on my shoulder, his expression earnest. "I appreciate your concern, Jack, really I do, but if I can't beat a five-hundred-year troll who is only three foot tall, there's no hope for me, is there?"

I sighed. "But you don't need to beat him. We can just fly over the river. In fact, we could fly right over the troll's head. I doubt his magical barrier thing stretches that high."

Sebastian frowned. "Where's the fun in that? We've flown before, but I've never had a sword fight with a troll." He gave me a beseeching look. "Don't spoil my fun, Jack."

Fun! If I'd ever needed proof that my lover was insane, here it was, staring me right in the face. Who called dueling with a troll fun? I threw my hands up in the air. "Fine. Battle a geriatric troll to show how macho you are, just so we can cross a bridge that we don't even need to cross. It's not like you need my blessing anyway."

Sebastian beamed at me, and then bent forward to drop a lingering kiss on my lips. "No, but it's nice to have, hus..." He stopped mid-word as I reared back and fixed him with a glare, clearing his throat before finishing his sentence in a different way. "...farm boy."

When we broke apart, it was to find that the troll had left the bridge and was standing right behind us, a golden sword lying across his outstretched arms, the staff safely tucked into the crook of his arm.

Sebastian's face lit up. "Look at that. How pretty is that? It's gold, Jack. Can you see that?"

I nodded, a lot less impressed than Sebastian was. It was a sword. And if you asked me, swords were far less useful than a bow and arrow. Could you use a sword to take out an attacker at a great distance? No, you couldn't. Therefore, you were limited to your opponent needing to be right in front of you. But if Sebastian wanted to wax lyrical about a sword like someone who'd never seen one before, who was I to stop him?

He nudged me. "Which end do I hold?" He waited a beat too long, my face probably turning ashen before he laughed. "I'm joking. Of course I know which end to hold." He picked up the sword and held it in front of him, testing its weight. "It's heavy."

I rolled my eyes. "About time you put those muscles to good use."

Sebastian aimed a wink my way. "I put them to good use all the time. You've never complained before."

Heat rushed to my cheeks. Flirting in front of an ancient troll who hadn't even cared to tell us his name like it was some sort of secret seemed all kinds of wrong. "Just... get on with it, would you? I'd like to get to Icehaven before nightfall. This is meant to be the quick route, remember."

Sebastian turned to the troll, his brow furrowing. "Where's your sword?"

The troll smirked. "Why would *I* need one?"

The air next to the troll started shimmering, a sense of dread settling in my gut. I'd known there had to be a catch. I'd even tried to warn Sebastian, but of course he hadn't listened. The shimmering died away much more quickly this time, the figure it left behind dressed from head to toe in armor, and at least a foot taller than Sebastian, his face obscured with a helmet. The sword he held was at least twice the length of Sebastian's as well. I turned my glare on the troll. "Now, hang on, you said he was going to fight you."

The troll's smirk turned into a grin, his mouth opening to reveal uneven teeth complete with a large gap between the top two. "I said no such thing. I said you had to win a sword fight. I didn't say who that sword fight was going to be with. You assumed it was going to be with me." He pointed a finger in Sebastian's direction. "That would hardly be a fair fight, would it? Little old me against that muscular brute. Do you think I'm stupid?"

I'd hoped he was, but I should have known better. I craned my neck back as far as I could to take in the knight. Was he a knight? His appearance would indicate he was. "Who is he?"

The troll reached out to lay a hand against the knight's thigh, probably because that was about as high as he could reach. "He's my right-hand man, the protector of the bridge, the one I can call on in times of need."

"What are you protecting the bridge from exactly?" I asked.

The troll frowned. "People crossing it."

"And why is that such a terrible thing?"

The frown deepened. "It's my bridge. It is not permitted for anyone to cross it except me."

"Yeah, but why? You know, there are other bridges, right? It doesn't make a lot of sense. How many people do you actually get trying to cross it?"

The troll held up his hand, at least a minute passing as he carried out some sort of complicated calculation that involved a lot of tapping of fingers with the fingers of the other hand. "Six."

"Six people!" I couldn't keep the scorn out of my voice. "In how long?"

The troll shifted slightly, his bare toes leaving grooves in the snow. Weren't his feet cold? "Two hundred years."

I laughed. "Six people in two hundred years. That's like one every..." I paused to do my own calculation, proud that no fingers needed to be utilized in its execution. "One every thirty-three years. And how many of those have crossed?"

The troll's lips curved into a wicked smile. "None. Nobody can beat my knight."

Well, wasn't that just marvelous. I turned to tell Sebastian it was time to go, only to find him a few steps away, busying himself with removing his fur coat. "What are you doing?"

He laid it across a log before looking up. "I can't fight in that. It would restrict my movement too much."

I stared at him. "You're not serious? You're not actually going to fight that... thing, are you?" I glanced back, hoping the knight wouldn't take offence at being referred to as a thing, but it hadn't so much as stirred since its appearance. In fact, it was eerily still in a way that didn't seem at all natural. "Sebastian, let's just go."

"Oh no!" The troll sounded delighted with himself. "The challenge has already been accepted. It's too late to walk away."

I rounded on him. "And what are you going to do if we do?"

"I won't do anything." The troll jerked a thumb in the direction of the knight. "But he will. And instead of fighting the challenger, it will be both of you."

I considered that for a moment. At least it would be two against one, but it wasn't as if my arrows would have any effect against its armor, and I'd never even held a sword, never mind fought with one. That knowledge left me feeling completely useless. I was still struggling with the dilemma when Sebastian appeared in front of me. "I've got this, Jack. Don't worry."

"You've... got this!" My voice rose to a crescendo, and even I could hear the note of panic in it. If Sebastian heard it, he didn't react to it. He was already moving to stand in front of the knight, the troll backing off to clear a space for the two opponents. Heart beating far faster than was normal, I did the same, not wanting to get in the way. I hoped to hell that Sebastian knew what he was doing, because if not, I was about to find myself stuck in the middle of the freezing wilderness of Askophai completely alone, and even worse than that, there would be no Sebastian.

And if there was no Sebastian, then who was I going to argue with? Who was I going to get annoyed at? Who was I going to call an idiot? Who would give me toe-curling orgasms, and take up all the space in the bed? Who was going to drive me to depths of anger I'd never experienced before, and then take it all away again with nothing more than a brief press of his lips against mine or a roguish smile?

I felt sick, my fur coat suddenly feeling far too restrictive. "Sebastian?" I waited until he turned my way. "Be careful. And remember, that if you do something stupid, like die, I'm going to kill you."

He grinned, pulling the sleeve of his shirt back to reveal the orc wedding bracelet. "Don't worry, I'm not going to leave you a widow."

My hand slid to the matching one I wore around my wrist, something about it feeling reassuring as I wrapped my fingers around it. "Widower."

Sebastian grinned. "I knew you'd come round eventually."

I glared at him. "No, I meant..." I didn't bother finishing my thought, returning instead to the statement he hopefully could understand. "We're not married."

"We can argue about that later."

I only hoped there would be a later. The troll put a stop to anything else I might have said as he held his staff high in the air, his voice nothing short of maniacal as he screeched, "Let's begin."

The knight burst into action, his sword coming down in a wide arc in front of him, forcing Sebastian to jump out of the way if he didn't want his abdomen ripped open in the first few seconds of the fight. Given his sheer size and the fact that he was dressed from head to toe in heavy armor, I'd expected the knight to be slow. Maybe even lumbering. But he wasn't. He was fast, the weight of his

armor not seeming to hold him back in the slightest, which wasn't good. It wasn't good at all. If he was stronger than Sebastian and just as fast, what chance did Sebastian have?

The air became filled with the loud clash of swords coming together, the knight striking out once more, Sebastian absorbing each and every blow with his sword without buckling. My heart was in my mouth as I forced myself to watch when every sinew of my being wanted to turn away and pretend it wasn't happening.

It didn't take long, though, before something became abundantly clear. Sebastian was good. Not just good, but very good. I might not know how to use a sword myself, but I recognized good swordsmanship when I saw it. Sebastian was clearly no amateur, everything from his footwork to the way he blocked the knight's sword strikes before countering with some of his own nothing short of perfect. Someone had obviously taught him well, which raised the question, who? And why? People who grew up in small villages didn't usually have access to master swordsmen, and from Sebastian's technique, it was hard to believe he could have been taught by anybody lesser. So how had he come by his skill? It was yet another question in the puzzle of all the things that made up Sebastian. I couldn't help feeling like I found out one thing about him, only for ten more questions to pop up in their place.

At least it reassured me somewhat, that this fight might still have a good outcome, Sebastian easily able to avoid the heavy swings of the knight, his footwork far nimbler than that of the knight's. Sebastian ducked as the knight swung, taking the opportunity to bring his own sword across into the knight's abdomen, the impact leaving a sizeable dent in the breastplate. How was he meant to win, though? Sebastian seemed to be thinking the same, his expression thoughtful as he backed off to give himself some space.

The fight had already been going on for some minutes, Sebastian breathing hard, but not so out of breath that I was worried. Not yet, anyway. But how long could he keep going? Would the knight tire first? It didn't look like it. Despite the monstrous size of his sword, he wasn't showing any signs of fatigue.

The fight continued, Sebastian seeming to concentrate more on avoiding the heavy blows than providing any of his own. He seemed to be positioning the knight, but I wasn't sure for what.

All became clear as they approached the bridge, Sebastian using the railing to gain height. He lunged forward, his muscles bunching as the sweep of his sword from right to left knocked the helmet clean off the knight's shoulders. I automatically looked away before chastising myself. Sebastian was the one actually doing it, so the least I could do was bring myself to watch.

Steeling myself for the sight of blood, I looked back. Only there was nothing to see. No face unmasked by Sebastian's blow. No blood because Sebastian had taken the head along with the helmet. Just empty space where the head should have been. Yet, despite having no head, the knight was continuing to fight, the sight of the headless body still focused on Sebastian more than a little disconcerting.

The troll let out a cackle. "How do you like my knight?"

I'd been so focused on watching the fight unfold—and maybe a little transfixed by how impressive Sebastian was—that I'd failed to notice the troll constantly raising his staff, little shimmers of light emanating from the end. I cupped my hands over my mouth to make myself heard more clearly. "Sebastian, it's a magic knight. The troll's controlling it."

Busy fending off the latest series of rapid-fire blows, Sebastian didn't acknowledge my words until he'd created enough space between them for a few seconds' respite, sweat now dripping down his face from his exertions. "What do I do?"

Now, he was asking. It was oh so tempting to point out that had he listened to any of my numerous warnings, he wouldn't be in this situation, but it wasn't really the right time, not when we had far more pressing matters to deal with. Telling Sebastian I told you so would need to wait until later. "Go for the troll."

Perhaps it hadn't been the wisest thing to shout it out like that, or perhaps it wouldn't have made the slightest bit of difference either way, but as Sebastian actually listened to me for once and changed direction, his sword on target to thrust into the troll's abdomen, it ended up in nothing but thin air, the troll disappearing in that same shimmer of light, only to rematerialize at the opposite side of the clearing with another maniacal shriek of laughter. Why, that cheating son of a... It wasn't enough apparently that its knight was nothing but an empty suit of armor, it had made itself invincible as well. No wonder no one had ever beaten it. The fight was far from fair. It couldn't be won.

As if to rub that very fact in, the troll raised his staff high in the air, blue light emanating from the end of it. The knight stilled, Sebastian pausing as well. "What's he doing?"

I shook my head, and we both watched in horror as the helmet rolled over the ground, levitated into the air, and attached itself once more to the knight's shoulders, taking Sebastian right back to square one, only a lot more fatigued than he'd been before.

The troll did a little dance, the action most unbecoming of someone supposedly hundreds of years old. "You can't win," he crowed. "My knight is going to kill you." His gaze slid my way, his eyes alight with glee. "And then he's going to kill your husband."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "He. Is. *Not*. My. Husband. And *he*, has a few more tricks up his sleeve yet, you cheating bag of bones and hair." At least, I hoped Sebastian did. Notching an arrow in my bow, I fired it straight at the troll, aiming for his head. He disappeared before it made contact, but while he was transporting from one place to the other, he seemed to have less control over the knight, Sebastian able to relieve it of his head once more before the troll rematerialized. The knight lost an arm in a similar way. It wasn't his sword arm, but at least it was something. The only issue was that we were both aware that as soon as I ran out of arrows, and the troll had long enough to collect himself without fear of getting hit, he'd reunite the knight with the missing parts of its body.

Gold sparks fluttered from the fingers of Sebastian's free hand. I held my breath. What had he come up with? They formed into a large eagle, the bird swooping down to pick up the helmet in its talons and flying off with it. It flew so far that it became nothing more than a speck in the distance before disappearing altogether. And then there was another eagle, Sebastian having decided it would be quicker to make a new one than have the previous one return. It did the same with the arm as it had with the helmet, the troll letting out a bellow of rage. I took that as a good sign that he couldn't just create a new one out of thin air.

The lack of its arm hadn't slowed the knight much, Sebastian still having to fend it off with all his strength. I had three arrows left, but I was saving them, one notched at the ready. There was a crash, the other knight's arm dropping to the ground, metal fingers still fastened around the sword. In a perfectly timed maneuver, the eagle swooped down once more to make off with both arm and sword.

Now, it was both armless, and weaponless, there was very little the knight could do except stand there, the sight somewhat incongruous. The troll rushed forward to lay a quivering hand on the knight's thigh before turning angry eyes on Sebastian. "What have you done? Give me back the pieces of my knight. You have no right to steal from me. You cheated."

Sebastian's laugh was full of scorn. "I cheated. You produced an invincible knight out of thin air." I raised an eyebrow, the knight still standing stock still as if it didn't quite know what to do with itself. "Well, not quite invincible, and I'm sure you can find the pieces if you look hard enough."

The troll turned my way, his scowl something to behold. "You will pay for this. Both of you."

Great! We'd added another vengeful enemy to our list. Perhaps he could team up with Ulgan, and the two of them could pursue us across all thirteen kingdoms. Unwilling to spend any more time in the troll's company, I grabbed Sebastian's arm. "Let's go. We have a bridge to cross."

Sebastian lay the sword down as I quickly gathered up all my fallen arrows. I was surprised. I would have laid odds on him trying to keep it, but perhaps he'd had enough of it for one day.

Despite the antagonism rolling off him in waves, the troll—whose name we still didn't know—made no move to stop us as we walked toward the bridge. I guessed even he couldn't argue that Sebastian hadn't won the sword fight. Our prize, one crossing of a bridge we hadn't needed to cross. Sebastian and I would definitely be having words later.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

SEBASTIAN

The journey to Icehaven would have been far more pleasant if Jack had been talking to me, but it seemed I was to be the recipient of absolute and complete silence. At first, it had made for a refreshing change, given that usually when Jack was angry, he had rather a lot to say. But after about an hour of Jack's temperament being as frosty as our surroundings, the novelty had definitely worn off

I sighed loudly. "How long are you going to be like this?" Silence.

"I know you can hear me, Jack." I gave him a little nudge with my shoulder, the scowl Jack sent my way in response to the contact as stormy as I had ever seen it. "Just... tell me what's wrong. I'd rather you did that, than this..." I waved a hand at him, the gesture meant to demonstrate his rigidity, tension coming off him in waves.

"You really don't want me to tell you what's wrong."

I stifled a smile at having forced words out of him. "I do, or I wouldn't have asked. You can't just never speak to me again."

"Watch me."

We walked on for a few more minutes, the only sound the sled dragging behind us, and the crunch of our boots in the freshly powdered snow, until it became too much to bear once more. "You're annoyed about the bridge. I get that. But it all worked out okay in the end. Things always do."

Jack ground to a halt, his eyes blazing. "And one day, it won't. And you won't care because you'll be dead, immortalized by people talking about your last reckless act forever more. Poor Sebastian. What a beautiful corpse he made. He was so strong. So brave. Isn't what happened to him a great tragedy?"

Wow! That was a bit dark. I opened my mouth to tell him as much, but it seemed Jack was a long way from finished. "But what about me? What do I do then? I guess it didn't matter how reckless you were before because you were on your own. I remember Leofric telling me how you really needed someone to keep an eye on you. At the time. I thought he was exaggerating, but he obviously wasn't." He forced himself to take a breath, his speech slightly slower when he continued as if he was doing his best to stay calm, which wasn't like Jack at all. "It's one thing to find yourself in danger for a reason. It was stupid to walk into a tower full of dragon-shifting knights, but at least there was a purpose to it, even if it was to rescue the most annoying man I've ever met in my life." Jack's nostrils flared. "Sorry, not the most annoying, the second most annoying. You would beat Prince Montgomery to that prize. And just for the record, I don't want to see any more knights. Real, or otherwise. I've had my fill of them."

He set off walking again and I stared after him for a moment before hurrying to catch him up. "What are you most annoyed about?"

Jack managed to combine both an eye roll and a head shake. "I don't know. I'm just..."

"Mad?"

He gave a curt nod. "All that back there, it was just so unnecessary. You could have died."

"But I didn't."

"But you could have. And it would have been for no reason other than you wanted to meet a troll. Well, you met a troll, and he was a power-crazy dick. Are you happy now?"

"No."

Jack's gaze swung my way, the look on his face one of genuine confusion. "Why not?"

"Because you're genuinely upset."

"I've been genuinely upset before."

"Not this upset."

"I'm surprised you noticed."

"Of course, I noticed. I don't set out to upset you, you know. I just... don't always think. Like you said, I'm used to being on my own."

"What if you'd gotten me killed?"

Something sharp twanged in my chest at the thought of there being no Jack. That would be the silence to end all silences. It would be so silent that it would kill me. I pulled him to a stop, his green eyes lifting to meet mine. Now that Jack had gotten a few things off his chest, his anger seemed to be

seeping away, sadness left in its place, and if there was one emotion I hated to see on Jack's face, it was that one.

It was my turn to be lost for words, nothing I could say seeming enough when I knew that there was a great deal of sense in what he was saying. We hadn't needed to cross the bridge. I'd just been driven by a mixture of curiosity and the desire to have a bit of fun. And the fight had certainly reached a point, probably when I'd realized there was nothing beneath the armor, when it hadn't been fun anymore. "I'm sorry."

Jack sighed, our faces close enough that his warm breath whispered across my cheek. "I'm not saying that I expect you never to seek out any adventures. It's part of who you are, but they should have some purpose to them. There's no point in pushing your luck when things are avoidable. And I tried to tell you that, but you just weren't listening. And then when you don't listen, I get dragged into your messes too. That whole thing with the troll could have ended really badly for both of us."

I pasted a meek expression on my face. From the slight raise of Jack's eyebrow, I got the impression it hadn't been wholly successful. "Yes, Jack."

He rolled his eyes. "At least try and sound like you mean it."

"I do mean it."

"So you'll do what I say in future?"

I stared at him. Agreeing to that would be akin to admitting that Jack was always right. He might have a good case when it came to the troll, but there were plenty of situations, like taking us into a bandit-infested forest in Cerensai, that Jack hadn't been right about.

"Sebastian!" There was a low note of warning in his voice.

"How about we agree to discuss things for longer, to really think through all the possible outcomes before doing anything? You have to agree to that as well, though. I'm not the only impulsive one."

Jack opened his mouth to argue, but I got in there first. "Admit that you make bad choices too sometimes. Maybe not as often as me, but it has been known."

"Fine." He didn't look like it was fine. He looked like he was still fighting a losing battle to rip my head off.

Unable to resist, I dropped a kiss on his unsmiling mouth. It didn't yield in the slightest under the pressure of my lips.

"That won't work this time."

I softened the kiss, refusing to give up on it. "It usually works."

Jack drew back an inch. "Yeah, well, I haven't normally had to witness you battling a magical knight that can't be killed."

"No, but it could be stopped."

Jack's eyes narrowed. "That reminds me. "Where did the sword skills come from?"

"Sword skills?"

"You're..." He tilted his head to the side, scrutinizing me carefully. "Much as I hate to feed your already over-inflated ego, you're one of the best I've ever seen. Most men wouldn't have lasted two minutes against that knight. They wouldn't have had time to come up with an alternative plan. The only reason you could is that you were good enough to keep him at bay. He was bigger and stronger, but you were able to hold your own against him. You don't pick up skills like that from a small village."

"No?"

Jack frowned. "No. So where did you get them from?"

I turned to study the vista in front of us, the snow as blindingly white as ever. "We should probably concentrate on reaching Icehaven. There'll be plenty of time for talk when we get there, but we can do it with some food and ale inside us. What do you say?"

For a moment, Jack looked like he wanted to argue, but eventually he gave in. "You're probably right."

It was a relief when Jack let the subject drop. No doubt it would be revived at a later date, but hopefully by then I would have come up with something convincing to steer Jack away from the truth.



Icehaven was surprisingly large for a settlement that marked the farthest point north. After this, there was nothing but snow, ice, and mountains on this continent, the terrain about as inhospitable as it could get. There certainly wouldn't be anything approaching civilization, so Jack and I needed to make the most of it. It took a while to locate The Lonely Horse, the tavern where we'd been instructed to make enquiries about the mage who might be able to help us.

At least Jack was back to normal after venting, his abject anger having given way to the more usual glowering. We'd settled in the bar, the hot meal delivered to us just the thing after a day spent walking. I brought the tankard of ale to my lips and took a large swallow. "At least there was no ice beast."

Jack shook his head wearily. "You don't know that. Just because we didn't see it, doesn't mean it doesn't exist."

"True."

"And no, we're not going to look for it on the way back, assuming we survive our time in the mountains." He turned his head to stare out of the window, a slight grimace marring his handsome face as he took in the mountains dominating the skyline.

I smiled. "I wasn't going to suggest it."

We enjoyed a moment of quiet solitude while we finished our meals. There were few people beside us in the bar, The Lonely Horse seeming to be one of the least popular taverns in Icehaven, if lack of clientele was any indication.

Jack inclined his head toward the bar, the barmaid who'd brought our meals seeming lost in thought. "So I guess we ask her for directions to the mage's house."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

The deep, gravelly voice had come from right next to us, which was an impossibility considering we were the only people at the table. Except, when I jerked my head toward the noise, we were no longer alone. There was a man sitting there. A very large man with big muscles and a bald head, who despite our questions, we hadn't laid eyes on since his conversation with Frederick back in The Freezing Steed in Westrock.

Earl.

While Jack and I both gawped at him, he seemed completely relaxed, his hands loosely clasped together in front of him on the table. His expression, though, was deadly serious.

Jack was the first to regain his composure. "Where the hell did you come from?"

Earl turned his head in Jack's direction, his eyes a cold gray color. "That's not important at the moment."

Jack let out a short, sharp laugh. "Oh, I think it's pretty important, considering we're miles away from Chastershire, and you've just popped up out of nowhere like you've been with us all along." His eyes narrowed. "Have you?"

Earl lifted his massive shoulders in a shrug. "Some of the time."

"Why?"

Earl's gaze turned my way in response to my question. "Frederick asked me to keep an eye on you, but I thought it was wise to keep my distance. Plus"—he frowned—"there are times when even if I wanted to be visible, I can't."

"Why? Why appear now, I mean?"

I was aware that I was just asking the same question over and over again like a child who wanted to know more about how the world worked, but as it was the question that needed to be answered, I asked it anyway.

"There are things you don't know."

I met his gaze. "Like the fact that the artifact is not really a religious artifact at all, but something imbued with a luck spell, and without the influence of that luck spell, the kingdom is being besieged by creatures who shouldn't be there, like the griffin we ran into. Like that?"

Earl inclined his head in acknowledgement. "Among other things."

Propping his chin on his hand, Jack leaned forward with an interested gleam in his eye. "What other things?"

There was no way to miss the way Earl cast a quick glance around the nearly empty tavern before he spoke, or that he lowered his voice. "Like the fact that you need to stay away from the mage."

"Why?"

At least Jack had said that one, giving me a much-needed respite from parroting the word again.

"The mage is not to be trusted. She may even be involved."

I sat back, taking a moment to contemplate the information. "Involved with who? Involved in what way? You need to tell us everything you know, and not leave anything out."

Earl gave a curt nod. "I will tell you what I can. You will of course be aware that I can be in places but not be seen. That gives me insight into situations that others may not have." His gaze settled on me for a moment. "Much like you and the mouse you sent snooping around the palace."

He really had been watching. Had he seen everything at the palace? As color crept into Jack's cheeks, I knew we were both recalling what had followed my investigation, Jack riding me to a very satisfactory orgasm. Had Earl been there then? While I might pride myself on being far more sexually liberated than most, I usually drew the line at having an audience. And Jack certainly wouldn't be happy with the idea that we might not have been alone. It wasn't just the flush in his cheeks. It was in the set of his jaw and the way his fingers had curled into his palms.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts. Whether Earl was somewhat of a voyeur wasn't the priority at the moment. Finding out what the hell was going on was. "Start talking."

Earl gave a nod. "I don't know everything, and what I do know has been pieced together so it may not be wholly accurate. What I do know is the location of the missing soldiers."

"Where are they?"

Earl turned his head in another covert scan of the tavern. "The mage has turned them into statues."

Jack's eyebrow arched. "Statues? What sort of statues?"

Earl's fingers flexed on the table. It was the first sign of discomfort I'd seen from him. "Ice statues. If you visit her house, which I don't recommend unless you're happy to run the risk of joining their ranks, you can see them. She passes them off as realistic sculptures." His mouth twisted. "It's a somewhat macabre sight. Some of them are"—he grimaced—"Well, let's just say that they are not pretty, that it is obvious that the process of having been turned into a statue wasn't pleasant. I can think of no other reason for her to do such a thing unless she's involved in some way." He leaned forward, his look encompassing both of us. "She's not going to help you."

I sat back with a sigh, rubbing my brow. It had been a long day. And I was fairly certain that Earl's appearance, and the words of doom he had brought with him, would put paid to any plans of spending the evening fucking the scowl off Jack's face. "So this mage may be involved, and is powerful enough to have overcome multiple soldiers. Which leaves us where?"

"You should go home."

I frowned at Earl. "What about Chastershire? What about all the problems they're having? Surely, you should be the last person telling us simply to abandon them. Don't you have loyalty to Chastershire?"

He looked affronted at the question, his craggy face settling into a scowl that put Jack's to shame. "A wise man knows when to quit. You cannot find the artifact. It cannot be done."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Everything can be done. You just have to find a way."

Jack let out a snort. "And it's that exact attitude that gets you into trouble."

I turned my head to meet his gaze. "Are we back to talking about the troll again? I thought we were done with that subject."

"Done!" Jack's laugh was edged with bitterness. "You wish. We're not done with that by a long shot. Stupidity like that isn't overcome with a five-minute conversation. Just so you can do the same thing again. I'm a patient man, but even I have my limits."

"Patient! That's a joke, right?" When Jack didn't so much as blink, I continued. "You have many good attributes, but patience certainly isn't one of them."

Jack opened his mouth, presumably to tell me in no uncertain terms what he thought of my character assassination, but Earl got in there first, his voice pained. "While I appreciate that you two clearly have things you need to sort out, and I am aware of your... run-in with the troll, I'm not sure how much longer I can stay visible. Therefore, I wonder if any further discussion of the subject could possibly wait until I am no longer around?"

Jack and I shared a look before nodding.

Earl rubbed a hand over his face. "Do you want to know why you can't retrieve the artifact?" We gave another nod.

Earl sat forward slightly. "Think about it. The artifact contains a very powerful luck spell.

Whoever possesses it receives the benefits of that luck. I believe the way it works is that if someone is touching it, they are the sole benefactor of that luck. How can you find someone if they're constantly lucky? There's a reason why the witch hired by the king and queen couldn't see who it was, and why we are none the wiser about who took the artifact in the first place. When the artifact was owned by Chastershire, most of that luck was centered on the palace, but locked away in the chest as it was, the spell was powerful enough that its effects could be felt across the whole kingdom. Now, all that luck is only being experienced by one person. In order to track them down, you would need to be luckier than they are."

Jack's brow scrunched up. "So we would need a stronger luck spell?"

Earl shook his head, his frustration growing. "That's not possible. Unless..."

I leaned forward. "Unless what...?"

"Forget it. Go home. Return to your lives and forget Frederick's hare-brained scheme to drag other people into Chastershire's business. Frederick has always been somewhat impetuous."

Not a description I would ever have used for Frederick, but I supposed Earl knew him better than I did. "Well, he did drag us into it. So you might as well finish what you were going to say. Unless what?"

Earl sighed. "There might have been someone who could help, but they were sealed in an ice cavern years ago."

Jack sat up straighter, his interest obviously piqued. "Sealed in an ice cavern? Why?"

"They used their magic for nefarious purposes," Earl said. "Therefore, they're not the sort of person you want to release simply so they can provide a luck spell, especially when there's no guarantee they would even agree to help. Go home. I've done my part. I've stopped you from being turned into an ice statue." He gave a wry smile. "Although, it might have stopped you from arguing for a while."

Ignoring Earl's last comment, Jack frowned. "Why didn't you just tell the king and queen of Chastershire all of this?"

Earl looked suddenly weary. "I tried, but they're not particularly rational when it comes to discussing the artifact."

Jack let out a laugh. "No one in Chastershire is."

Earl didn't try and deny it. He lifted his hand and stared at it, presumably checking whether he could still be seen or not. "You're not going to go home, are you?"

Jack and I exchanged a look, Jack's lips eventually curving into a slight smile. "We've come too far. If we go home, the last few weeks will have been for nothing. It's not even about the reward... Although, I'm not saying that wouldn't have been nice. But we can't have invested all this time for nothing. We're here now. We might as well see this thing through to the bitter end. Whatever that end might be." He looked to me, and I inclined my head in agreement. "So"—Jack propped his chin on his hand—"you better tell us about this person that can help us, where to find him, and how we release him from his icy prison."

A muscle ticked in Earl's cheek. "It's really not a good idea. People don't get sealed in caves for no reason. He may be dangerous."

Jack rolled his eyes. "What's new?"



CHAPTER TWENTY

JACK

I didn't like the mountains one little bit. They were cold and harsh, and steep, the sled taking a lot more physical strength to pull than it had across flat terrain. I untied the rope from my waist and let it drop. "Your turn."

Sebastian frowned. "Already? It doesn't seem that long since I last pulled it."

That's because it hadn't been. Except, I wasn't about to admit to that. I shrugged. "Time passes quickly, and you've got bigger muscles than me."

Sebastian stared at the rope without making any move to pick it up. "You're a farmer. You're more used to manual labor than I am."

"I was a farmer. Now, I'm a..." I left the sentence unfinished. I didn't know what I was now. Sebastian's accomplice, maybe, and wasn't that a terrifying thought. I shielded my eyes against the sun to peer into the distance. "If Earl's directions are correct, the cave should be somewhere over that next ridge." Earl had provided more than just directions to the cave. He'd told us as much as he knew about the man sealed within its confines too, a powerful wizard who went by the name Achalos Bane, his powers having been used for things they really shouldn't have, including accusations of necromancy. I hadn't asked who or what he was supposed to have raised from the dead because quite honestly, I was happier not knowing.

Sebastian seated himself on a flat rock and proceeded to stare at me. I sighed. "Fine. I'll pull the sled again."

"It's not that."

I took the opportunity to take a well-earned rest myself, my muscles already screaming at me from the rough terrain we'd covered so far. "Then what is it?"

"There's something I should tell you."

"Now?"

Sebastian nodded. "If I don't tell you before we unseal the cave, you're probably going to get mad, so it's probably safer to tell you now." He cast a quick look around. "Especially when there are rocks around."

I waved a hand at him. "Go on, then."

Sebastian turned his face to the sun, his gaze distant. "The wizard... the one we're going to release..."

"Achalos Bane?"

He nodded.

"What about him?"

"I might... know him."

"Might? You either do or you don't. There's no might about it."

Sebastian gave a slight grimace. "Okay... so, I do know him."

I released a breath, already sensing what was coming. "And when you say *know* him, you mean, the two of you were lovers, don't you?" I waited for Sebastian's nod before continuing. "How long were you lovers for?" The words tasted bitter in my mouth.

"Does it matter? I just know how grouchy you get about things like this, so I thought it was better to tell you before you meet him, so you can't accuse me of keeping things from you."

Despite the irritation desperate to rise to the surface, I made an effort to keep my voice even. "And you couldn't have told me this last night?" Sebastian's shrug in response was decidedly half-hearted. "How long?" I was determined to get an answer to that question, Sebastian's reluctance to provide a response making it all the more important.

"A while."

Something contracted in my chest. Sebastian's lovers were always a brief thing, usually spanning a single night or a week at most, so for him to say a while meant there had been something more there. "I see." I didn't see at all, but it seemed like the right thing to say while I struggled to get my head around what he was telling me. "How long ago?"

"A couple of years."

I laughed, Earl having speculated that Achalos had been sealed up in the cave for about that long. "I guess it does put a dampener on your sex life when your lover can't leave his cave."

"It wasn't like that. We'd already gone our separate ways."

I regarded Sebastian silently for a few seconds, studying his face. I knew I should be grateful that for once, he'd actually shared something about himself willingly, but at the moment any gratefulness

was buried deep beneath jealousy. "What's he like, this big, nasty villain who needs to be locked up for the safety of the kingdom?"

Sebastian's brow furrowed. "That's the thing. I wasn't aware he was a villain. I'm not saying that Achalos was perfect, but he certainly wasn't into necromancy when I knew him. Not unless he did it behind my back."

"You were probably too busy robbing people to notice."

If Sebastian registered the jibe, he didn't react to it. "We don't have to release him."

"If he's a *friend*"—I put extra emphasis on that word, unable to hide my disdain—"then I would have thought you had more reason to release him."

Sebastian's shrug was just as half-hearted as the last one. "He was sealed in there for a reason. Perhaps we shouldn't mess with that. I promised to give situations more thought, remember. Rather than rush into doing the first thing that comes into my head. This seems like a good place to start."

I was silent for a moment, caught in my own trap of warning Sebastian against acting so impulsively. "If we don't release him, then, according to Earl, we have no chance of finding the person who took the artifact, so our quest ends here. I let the truth hang between us for a moment before I continued. "So... I don't see as we have much of a choice." I sat up straighter as something suddenly occurred to me. "How do we know they're still here, anyway, this person who took the artifact? That would mean they've been wandering around these mountains for weeks. Who does that? What are they eating? What are they even doing here?"

"I'd assume they're looking for the treasure." Sebastian looked suddenly pained. "And if they haven't found it yet, despite the fact that they're carrying a good luck spell, it probably means it doesn't exist."

My lips twitched. "That thought really cuts you to the quick, doesn't it?"

Sebastian's nod was weighted. "It does." He climbed to his feet, his arms outstretched. "So much so that I need a hug."

I didn't have time to protest before I found myself pulled into a bone-crushing hug, my face pressed into the fur of Sebastian's coat. It was like being suffocated by a polar bear. "Is he handsome?"

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"Who?"
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Even though it was the best answer he could have given, I rolled my eyes. "Was he good in bed?" "Not as good as you."

[&]quot;The evil wizard."

[&]quot;Not as handsome as you."

I pushed Sebastian away, shoving my finger in his face so he knew I was serious. "Just a word of warning... if you kiss him, wizard or no wizard, I'm likely to punch him in the face. I'm guessing he won't like that and will probably turn me into a frog or something, and that will be all your fault." Grasping his shoulders, I gave him a little shake. "Have you got that?" I frowned at the beaming smile on Sebastian's face. He couldn't have looked any more pleased if he'd tried. "Why are you grinning like that?"

Sebastian strolled over to the sled and picked up the rope, fastening it around his waist. "You're so possessive."

Indignation filled up every pore of my body. So much so that when I opened my mouth, it took a while for any words to come out. "No, I'm not. I just don't like to be made to look a fool, that's all. Don't turn it into something it's not."

Sebastian set off up the path, the smile still very much on his face. "So possessive."

I followed him. "I'm not."

My protest was met with silence. Since Sebastian was far too arrogant to ever believe me, I gave up.



Sebastian paused for a moment with his hands on his hips to let out a gusty sigh. I didn't know why he was acting as if he was exhausted. He'd summoned a polar bear to do all his digging. I was the one doing it manually with a shovel that we'd brought with us from Icehaven. We'd been at it for hours, and we'd still found no sign of the cavern that Earl had described to us. I threw the shovel down in disgust, turning to view the series of holes we'd left in our wake, every single one having been a waste of time to dig. "Perhaps this is not the right mountain."

"This is the one that Earl said."

I wiped the sweat off my brow. "I know, but..."

"And we haven't covered it all yet."

I sighed and picked the shovel up again. "Fine. Let's dig up an entire mountain." I started digging, the polar bear appearing at my side, his paws far more effective but not as precise.

It took us another hour to find the entrance, and another thirty minutes after that to unearth the stone slab that bore the magical seal. I stared down at the uncovered seal, the rough symbols etched in a circle meaning nothing to me. "Is that blood?"

Sebastian leaned closer to get a better look. "I think so."

"Lovely." I stared at it for a bit longer. "So we just...?" I mimed dragging the shovel we'd brought

with us from Icehaven through it.

Sebastian nodded. "That's what Earl said. The magic only works when the seal is left intact. And of course, there was little chance of it getting accidentally broken when it was buried under snow, and no one could see it. Especially considering how few people even come this way. It could have lain undiscovered for decades."

"So he would have stayed trapped in here forever?"

"I guess so."

Before I could think better of it, I dragged the edge of the shovel through the circle to break the line. There was an immediate grinding sound, the wall of the cave receding to reveal the entrance. I gave it a disparaging look. "Another tunnel. Great." I cupped my hands together over my mouth. "Achalos! Achalos Bane!" Apart from the slight echo of my own voice coming back at me, there was nothing but silence. I sighed. "I guess we're going in. At least, it's bigger than the last one. We can walk. We don't have to crawl."

There was a flicker of gold sparks, my jaw clenching as my groin responded to it the same way it had ever since Sebastian had wrapped his hand around my cock and let me feel the tingle of his magic on the sensitive flesh. For once, he seemed to have other things on his mind, so I was spared the knowing look in his eyes or his sly grin at the knowledge he could arouse me so easily.

We followed the large firefly Sebastian had summoned, Sebastian seeming much calmer in the larger tunnel than in the one we'd been forced to crawl through to escape the griffin. His fear was definitely more about enclosed spaces than it was about the dark. The passage proved surprisingly long and winding as we headed deep into the mountain, a sense of unease settling in my gut. "Maybe one of us should have stayed outside."

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"Why?"
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"They'd need magic to reactivate the seal. The worst they could do without it is cause an avalanche." Sebastian inclined his head toward the shovel still clutched in my hands. "In which case, we could dig ourselves out again. Plus, by that time, we should have a wizard on our side."

I nodded, his words making me feel slightly better. "Assuming we can find him."

"We'll find him."

[&]quot;Someone could seal us in."

[&]quot;Who?"

[&]quot;I don't know. We could have been followed."

It took another five minutes of walking before the passageway opened up into a large cavern, the sight that met me making me blink with its unexpectedness. When I'd pictured someone sealed in a cave, I'd imagined someone trapped in the dark, their life made a living torture. I'd even considered that Achalos Bane might have been driven mad from loneliness. At no point had I envisioned a lavishly decorated and well-lit space complete with furniture, including bookshelves. At its center was a red velvet sofa, the man reclining on it as he idly turned a page of his book, appearing about as relaxed as it was possible to be. He seemed so engrossed in whatever it was he was reading that he hadn't registered our presence yet. I cleared my throat loudly. "Achalos Bane?"

He lifted his head from his book with a slight frown, and I was disappointed to find that Sebastian had lied. Achalos was far handsomer than I was, his cheekbones sharper and his hair long and shiny enough to rival that of the queen of Chastershire's. In fact, the two of them could have passed for brother and sister. Except where the queen's eyes had been blue, Achalos's were a deep gray color. He placed his book carefully next to him on the sofa before shifting his position so that his feet were on the floor and he was facing us, his bare toes curling into the luxuriant cream rug in front of the sofa. "Who are you?"

It was at that moment that his gaze strayed from me to Sebastian, his expression changing into one of recognition that I'd become all too familiar with. Sebastian was right. I would have been spitting feathers if he hadn't warned me that they were already acquainted. Even with that knowledge, I was still none too happy. "Bass! Of all the people. Did you come to rescue me?"

He was halfway across the floor, his movements rather too sinuous and graceful for my liking, before either of us could respond. Sebastian backed away from him, his arm outstretched as if he intended to fend him off if he got any closer. "DON'T KISS ME!" I bit my lip to stop a smile from escaping. It seemed my lessons in making Sebastian keep his lips to himself hadn't been a complete waste of time. He just needed to make it a little less obvious.

Achalos stopped dead, his expression reflecting abject confusion. "Why would I kiss you? Have you forgotten how we parted ways?"

I turned toward Sebastian, my curiosity piqued. "This sounds interesting. It's so rare that we meet anyone who doesn't want to kiss you. What did you do?"

It was Achalos who answered. "What did he do?" He waited until I was looking his way. "After weeks of being together, he told me that, although I was an amusing distraction, that there was no long-term future for us."

A muscle twitched in Sebastian's cheek. "I didn't use those exact words."

"No, but it's what you meant. I could read between the lines." Achalos's gaze skated back to me. "I told him it was late, and we'd discuss it the next day. Except, when the sun rose the next day, the bed was empty, and there was no Bass to discuss it with. He'd taken off without a word. I haven't seen him since." His jaw tightened. "Until now."

I winced. I might not have wanted there to be any connection between the two men, but I wasn't callous enough not to feel the pain of Sebastian's rejection on Achalos's behalf. It was all too easy to imagine how gut-wrenching it would be if I woke one morning to find Sebastian gone. I'd had a taste of that back in Riverbrook, and it hadn't been remotely pleasant. It also left us in the rather awkward position of needing the help of a man who wasn't feeling particularly kindly disposed toward Sebastian, something it might have been wise for him to mention before we'd gone ahead and unsealed the cave. But then that was typical Sebastian, wasn't it, giving only half the story? "At least he didn't rob you."

Achalos gave a mirthless laugh. "That's true, but only because he knew I would have hunted him down, turned him into an ant, and then stomped on him." His gaze turned assessing. "You still haven't said who you are."

"Jack. Jack Shaw. I'm..." What was I going to introduce myself as?

"Jack's my husband."

Achalos's eyebrows shot up at Sebastian's announcement. His shock soon changed to amusement. "No. No way. The Bass I knew would never have gotten married. Not unless there was a great deal of money in it for him." Narrowed gray eyes turned my way once more. "Are you rich, Jack?"

I met his gaze head-on. "I'm a farmer."

"A farmer!" The eyebrow arch was back. "So, not rich. So what do you have to offer that had Bass here willing to marry you? Do you have magic?"

His careful choice of words didn't pass me by. He hadn't said wanting to marry you, he'd said "willing" to marry you, as if I must have conned him into it in some way. I shook my head. "I don't have magic. I don't have anything."

Tempting as it was to let Achalos believe the lie, I knew it wouldn't help our cause in the long run. I needed him to sympathize with me. Not look at me as the man who had achieved what I was beginning to think he'd wanted and hadn't been able to get. "We're not married."

A slight frown marred Achalos's brow. I held up my wrist, the sleeve of my coat falling back to reveal the bracelet of hair and leaves. "Sebastian just likes to claim we are because of these. They're orc wedding bands." Having no idea of how much knowledge Achalos had of orcs and orc customs, I

sought to elaborate further. "Orcs wear them once they're married. Due to an ill-advised intake of Moombat, neither of us can actually remember what happened that night. But"—I accompanied my words with a frosty glare in Sebastian's direction—"as I keep pointing out, even if it did happen, neither of us are orcs so it doesn't mean anything."

Achalos's lips curved slightly. "Yet, you're still wearing it. Do you tell yourself lies often, Jack?" The words were far too similar to the ones Princess Surander had aimed my way. Why did everyone think I was in denial? What was I supposed to be in denial about? I let my sleeve fall back. "Anyway, none of this is important. We came to release you. In exchange, we could use your help."

Achalos returned to the sofa. He seated himself elegantly, bringing his ankle to rest on the opposite knee, his hands loosely linked together in his lap. "My help with what?"



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SEBASTIAN

I knew what Jack thought, that I'd deliberately withheld information about mine and Achalos's relationship, but to be honest I'd forgotten how it had ended. And then there was the fact that my version differed slightly from Achalos's. I would have said we'd already established that we were doing nothing but marking time, that there was no point in prolonging it, and by leaving I'd saved us one last awkward conversation.

Seeing the angry glitter in Achalos's eyes, though, I'd decided it would be wiser not to share my thoughts on the subject. I knew what he was capable of. He was one of the strongest wizards I'd ever encountered. Therefore, the last thing I intended to do was antagonize him more. And maybe, just maybe, it hadn't been one of my better ideas to say that Jack and I were married, but I hadn't liked the way Achalos had been looking at Jack, like Jack was inferior in some way. Jack was worth ten of him, every last bristling, indignant inch of him. Even if he was so blunt and to the point that he'd immediately told Achalos we needed his help. Jack didn't play cards. He didn't understand that sometimes it was better not to give away everything you wanted within the first few seconds.

With that in mind, I ignored Achalos's inquiry about what we needed help with, to ask a question of my own. "Why were you sealed in here? We were told you'd been dabbling in necromancy."

Achalos blinked and then threw his head back and laughed. "Me, a necromancer? I'm not the necromancer." He looked momentarily pensive. "But I suppose it suited her agenda to turn it around like that. I guess when she sealed me in here, her sins became mine." His lips twisted. "What else am I supposedly guilty of?"

Jack blew out a breath. "Everything. Apparently, you're a danger to society who should never be allowed to step outside this cave. Was it the mage in Icehaven who sealed you in here?"

Achalos tilted his head to the side slightly, his gaze focused on Jack without blinking. "Why would you assume that?"

Jack pulled up a chair and sat. "Because you said she, and we've already been warned not to go near her. She has ice statues. Except, they were once people, soldiers from the palace of Chastershire who were searching for something, and they thought she might be able to help them. That mistake cost them their lives."

Achalos gave a slow nod, not so much as a hint of surprise reflected in his expression. "She uses a lot of dark magic. It's the reason she lives a distance away from Icehaven, so that no one will know what she's up to. She passes herself off as a sculptor, with her medium being ice, but as you already know there is no skill involved besides magic. Unfortunately, I was as unaware of that fact as those soldiers when our paths crossed."

I came to stand behind Jack's chair, my hands resting lightly on his shoulders. "What happened?"

The fingers Achalos had wrapped around his ankle tightened momentarily before he seemed to catch himself and relaxed them once more. "She tried to add me to her gallery of trapped souls. Luckily, my magic was strong enough to hold her off. However, she had another spell up her sleeve. One that brought me here. She used her blood to seal me in here..." He gave a slight shrug. "And the rest is history. From what you've said, she turned herself into the hero of the piece and made me the villain to turn eyes away from her, and to ensure that no one would ever dare rescue me."

Jack turned his face up to me, and I knew what he was asking, even without a single word having been uttered. "I already told you that I recognized nothing of the Achalos I once knew in the one Earl described."

Jack gave a nod. He turned back, leaning forward and fastening his gaze on Achalos. "What will you do once you get out of here? Will you return to the mage?"

Achalos's smile was nothing short of chilling. "Are you asking me if I will seek vengeance on the person who stole nearly two years of my life and spread lies to blacken my reputation? What would you do if you were me?"

That was an easy question to answer. There was no point in fooling myself that I'd take the higher ground. There wasn't a person alive faced with that situation who would be capable of simply walking away, not when they had the means to do something about it.

"Can you rescue the soldiers?" Jack asked. "They have families back in Chastershire. People who don't have the slightest clue what happened to them. We promised that if we had any news, we'd let the palace know, but I doubt they'll be able to do anything about it. They'll probably lose more soldiers trying."

Achalos's lips quirked. "That's what you want my help with?"

Jack grimaced. "Not exactly."

"Oh?"

I took over. "We're looking for a stolen artifact. One that has been in Chastershire's possession for thousands of years but was recently stolen. Unfortunately, the artifact is imbibed with a luck spell. Therefore—"

Achalos let out a hoot of amusement before finishing my sentence. "Therefore, the person who has it has all the luck, whereas you have none."

I nodded. "We're hoping to even the odds somewhat."

Achalos looked from me to Jack, his gaze speculative. "I presume you get a reward for retrieving this artifact?"

We both nodded in unison.

He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "And what do I get out of it?"

Jack's laugh was tinged with disbelief. "I would have thought that was obvious. You get to leave this cave." He gave the cavern a quick scan. "Despite the fact that you have far more creature comforts than I would have expected for someone imprisoned in a cave, I'm sure there's only so many books you can read before you're bored to tears. Two years is a very long time without anyone to talk to. And without..." Jack's pause was so long that it was obvious he was having second thoughts about finishing his sentence the way he'd initially intended. When he finally forced the word out between gritted teeth, I understood why. "...sex."

"Sex?" Achalos gave a slight eye roll. "I can see why you and Bass are together."

I frowned, sensing there was an insult in there somewhere if I looked hard enough for it. Before I got the opportunity to, Achalos stood. "Now that you've broken the sigil that was holding me in here, I can leave any time I want." He arched an eyebrow, one side of his lips quirking upward. "Unless you think you can stop me?"

For once, Jack stayed silent. I might be able to summon animals, but my magic was nothing compared to Achalos's, and Jack knew that. And he couldn't keep Achalos here through sheer stubbornness alone, no matter how much of it he might possess.

Achalos waved a hand, everything in the cavern except for the lanterns disappearing in the blink of an eye. He was apparently generous enough not to plunge Jack and I into darkness. Not generous enough, though, for Jack not to suddenly find himself without a chair, narrowly avoiding falling on his ass. Achalos kept walking, his steps taking him toward the tunnel where we'd come in. He got as far as the entrance before Jack spoke. "I get that you're annoyed at Bass. And trust me, I know more than

anyone how completely infuriating he can be. He could win prizes at it." Achalos halted, his fingers resting lightly against the wall of the tunnel. However, he didn't turn. "He's vain and self-centered. He's reckless to the point of insanity. He has questionable morals."

I frowned and opened my mouth to defend myself in light of Jack's character assassination. He aimed a glare my way and held up his hand. "But... despite that, he has a special something that goes beyond the handsome face and the muscles." At least he'd called me handsome. That was something, even if I was still smarting from the previous comments.

Jack let out a sigh. "I'm sorry that he hurt you, but that's just the way Sebastian is. He bowls into your life, and then departs from it just as quickly without so much as a backward glance. I can't tell you how many people I've met over the last couple of months who all share that same story. That's why they're always so pleased to see him again. They think they can bask in his warmth for a few more days, that this might be the time when his feelings toward them will change."

Achalos turned slowly, a strange, unreadable expression on his face. "And you think you're different?"

Jack laughed but it was missing the humor that should have been there. "Probably not."

Hang on! Was he saying what I thought he was saying? That he thought I would treat him the same way. If so, he couldn't be any more wrong. I wasn't going anywhere. Jack was different from all the other men I'd been with. There wasn't one single person I could name that I'd pursued like I'd pursued him. Yet, that apparently wasn't enough to convince him. It was clear that Jack and I needed to have a serious talk at some point. One where we both dropped our barriers and said how we really felt. Despite the overwhelming urge to defend myself, I stayed silent. It wasn't going to help our cause for me to tell Jack in front of a man apparently still smarting over my perceived rejection that he wasn't like the rest.

Jack took a step toward Achalos. "All I'm saying is that the past is the past, and while I'm sure you've had little else to do in this place but mull things over, it might be time to move on. There is a reward for the artifact, and yes, that might have been our initial reason for taking on this quest"—he threw a glance my way, the look in his eye daring me to argue with what he was about to say—"but there's more at stake than that. Without the artifact, the people of Osagezia are suffering. We have a chance to put that right, but we can't do it without your help."

Jack's lips suddenly curved into a smile. "And think about it, it would be an excellent first step in repairing the damage that's been done to your reputation. When we retrieve the artifact, we can tell

everyone how instrumental your help was, how we couldn't have done it without you. That's what you get out of it." Jack dropped his voice, his tone coaxing. "What do you say?"

A muscle twitched in Achalos's cheek. Seconds ticked by without him saying anything. Finally, he lifted a hand, his index finger pointing my way. "I want an acknowledgement of what he did wrong from him. And an apology. And then I'll think about it."

Jack's gaze turned my way, his green eyes narrowed. "You heard the man."

I gave him my most imploring look, but I might as well have been aiming it at the sheer rock wall for all the good it did. I kept my eyes on Jack. "I…" He raised an expectant eyebrow. "I didn't take our relationship seriously." This was hard, especially when I truly believed I hadn't done anything wrong. How was it my fault if Achalos had become rather more attached to me than I had to him? I hadn't made him any promises. Not that I could recall, anyway. "I took your affections, and I…" I paused to search for inspiration, Jack's gaze boring into me in a silent reminder that I needed to get it right. "I cruelly threw them away."

Jack scowled at me. "Don't tell me. Tell him."

I shifted my gaze to Achalos. "And I am truly sorry for any hurt I might have caused. It wasn't intentional, but I admit that my actions may have been misconstrued, and that I may have caused pain that could have been avoided." I didn't know how it could have been avoided short of pretending to have feelings I didn't have, but it sounded good.

Achalos swept back into the room, the sofa appearing once more as he sat. He waved a hand. "Fine. Whatever. I assume the luck spell will need to include both of you?"

"Is that possible?" Jack asked.

Achalos nodded. "It is. However, you should know that the most I can do is cast a spell that lasts forty-eight hours. Once the forty-eight hours are up, you will both return to normal, artifact or no artifact." He gestured to the space in front of him, Jack and I both following the silent command to stand in front of him. "Kneel please."

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him why we had to kneel, why he couldn't just stand, but with Jack already halfway to the ground, I bit back the urge to protest

and did as Achalos had asked. Achalos placed a hand on both of our heads. He closed his eyes and said a few words in an archaic language I didn't understand but that I'd heard him use before. There was a slight feeling of warmth, of something passing between Achalos and myself, and then Achalos was sitting back.

Jack straightened, his brow furrowed. "That's it?"

Achalos smirked at him. "What did you expect?"

"I don't know." Jack's frown grew more pronounced. "I thought it would take longer, or something a bit more dramatic would happen. How do we know it's actually worked?"

Achalos reached into his pocket and drew out a coin. He held it up in the air. "Heads or tails. If you're lucky, you'll get it right."

Jack thought for a moment. "Heads."

The coin went spinning into the air, Achalos catching it and revealing that it was indeed heads. It wasn't until Jack had repeated it another five times, getting it right every time that he finally believed it, his eyes going wide. "It worked."

Achalos climbed to his feet once more, the sofa again ceasing to be. "And now it's time for me to bid you farewell. I have a mage to deal with." He smiled wickedly. "One who has no idea that karma is heading her way. Oh, and I'll see what I can do about the soldiers. It depends how easy the spell is to break." He headed for the entrance, pausing to look back over his shoulder. "Remember, you've only got forty-eight hours. Take any longer than that and the spell will have worn off." He raised a hand. "And don't forget to tell everyone how wonderful I am."

He disappeared, Jack staring after him for a few moments before turning my way. "Forty-eight hours isn't very long."

He didn't need to tell me that. We had a chance, but it only had a very small window of opportunity.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

SEBASTIAN

With the forty-eight-hour deadline never far from our minds, Jack and I were forced to press on for the rest of the day. We covered as much of the mountainous ground as we could, trusting in the effects of the luck spell to ensure we were going the right way. The punishing pace we'd maintained had left little time for small talk. Either that or Jack wasn't talking to me again, which was a distinct possibility. Only when visibility grew increasingly bad, did we admit defeat and find a flat enough space sheltered from the worst of the icy wind to erect our tent.

It was the first time since leaving Chastershire we'd had to use it, Jack taking charge of its construction while I gathered what firewood I could without straying too far from our makeshift camp. When I returned, it was a toss-up what was more surprising, the fact that the tent already looked tent-like, or that Jack had a huge smile on his face. I dropped my armful of firewood in the snow, eyeing him warily. "Why are you looking so happy?"

He turned his grin my way. "This spell is quite something." He waved a hand at the tent. "I haven't got a clue what I'm doing, but whatever I try works. I'm just lucky, I guess. Oh, and"—he bent down to retrieve something from the snow, brandishing it in the air—"would you believe I found this?"

I squinted at it. "Is that...?"

"U-huh. One magic knight's arm. Obviously dropped here by your eagle. The right arm as well in another amazing stroke of luck, which means that the troll hasn't found it, and that his knight isn't going to be using a sword on anyone anytime soon." He paused. "I wonder what happened to the sword. Anyway, I vote we bury it."

"Or we could keep it."

Jack shook his head. "Too risky to have it with us when we'll be returning that way. Better that it stays as far away as possible." He lay the arm back in the snow and returned to adding the finishing

touches to the tent while I set about making the fire, the dragon I summoned easily able to overcome the dampness of the wood in order to get a blazing fire going.

Tent complete, Jack came to sit next to the fire, taking his gloves off and stretching his hands out to the fire, the sky now so dark that the only light came from the flames. "So, what was the real story of what happened between you and Achalos?"

I came to sit next to him. "The real story? I thought you'd already made your mind up about that."

Jack turned his head my way, his gaze boring into me. "I told Achalos what he wanted to hear. We needed him to help us, didn't we? He was about to walk away. I had to say something to stop him. That doesn't mean I think it was quite that simple and straightforward. Relationships rarely are. So... now I'm giving you the chance to tell your side of the story."

"There's not a lot to tell."

"It shouldn't take you long then."

I sighed. Jack was nothing if not persistent. "How much do you want to know?"

"The whole story from beginning to end without you leaving anything out."

I inclined my head in agreement. "We met—"

"Let me guess... You were in a tavern, and you were drunk."

I fixed Jack with a steely stare. "Actually, no. I'd run into a horde of pixies." I gave a shudder. "Evil little things. Incredibly aggressive. Worse than any orc or troll. They might be small but what they lack in size, they certainly make up for in sheer numbers." I paused to rifle through the supplies strapped to the sled, pulling out two pieces of dried meat, one of which I offered to Jack. He pulled a face but took it anyway. "Let's just say that I found myself in a bit of a situation."

Jack raised an eyebrow. "You? Surely not."

I grinned. "They knocked me out and tied me up. My hands were bound too tightly to..." I raised a hand and made a trail of gold sparks in the air to illustrate my point. I smiled as Jack immediately shifted uncomfortably, his thighs pressed together. It really was incredibly entertaining to have Jack react that way every single time I used my magic. I bit off a chunk of dried meat before continuing. "Anyway, luckily for me, who should happen to come across our little tableau of captor and captive, but Achalos." I smiled in fond remembrance. "There were pixies flying everywhere." I bit off another chunk of meat. "And then we went to a tavern and got drunk to celebrate ridding ourselves of pixies."

Jack rolled his eyes. "And I bet you immediately showed him how grateful you were."

"If that's a polite way of saying that we had sex, then yes."

Jack stared into the flames for a moment. "And then what happened?"

I thought hard, trying to remember. "I went on my way, and Achalos... followed."

Jack let out a little huff. "Like I did at the ship."

I held his gaze. "It was nothing like what happened with you. I'd already asked you to accompany me. Achalos... he, well... he just tagged along. There was no invitation. It would never have occurred to me to offer one. But he was good company. And he had rescued me, so I didn't say anything." I pulled a face. "Well, until I did."

Jack leaned forward, interest written all over his face. "What did you say?"

"That it was probably time for us to go our separate ways, that I'm sure he had far more important wizardly stuff that he should be doing."

Jack smiled, but it was tinged with bitterness. "Poor guy. There he was hanging on your every word. And all you wanted to do was get rid of him. No wonder he's still sore about it."

"It wasn't like that." I frowned. "At least, I don't think it was. If it was, it wasn't intentional."

Jack went quiet as he finally lifted the piece of dried meat to his mouth. A brief tussle between meat and teeth ensued before he finally managed to break off a piece. He chewed for a moment, the look on his face one of displeasure. "This tastes like feet."

I laughed. "How would you know? Have you licked a lot of feet, farm boy?"

"Not as many as you."

Grinning, I shuffled closer to Jack. "Feet aren't really my thing."

Jack lowered his eyelashes, his gaze turning suddenly seductive. "What is your thing?"

That was an easy question to answer. "Green-eyed farm boys, ones with a great deal of spirit that like to make my life difficult in the best possible way." My bout of honesty reminded me of my earlier intention to have a serious talk with Jack, to make sure he had everything straight in his head. I cupped his cheek. "Listen, I wanted to make sure that you knew..."

A loud throat clearing came from the other side of the fire. I lifted my head to find Earl standing there. I let my hand drop from Jack's face as Earl lifted a hand in greeting. "Excuse me for interrupting, but I thought you might like an update on the day's events."

Jack sat up straighter. "You're not just invisible, are you? You can travel between places." He clicked his fingers. "Like that, I mean."

Earl bowed his head in recognition of Jack's point. "Places, no. But I can travel to people I know, yes. It's a strange side effect of the curse. I thought you might be interested in knowing what happened with the mage."

"Did Achalos go there? Jack asked. "She made all that stuff about him up. She was the one who sealed him in the cave before he could reveal what she'd been up to. Did he free the soldiers? He said he'd try."

Knowing Achalos better than Jack did, I had my doubts about whether he would have gone to that much trouble. Therefore, it came as a surprise when Earl broke into a broad smile. "He did. All the soldiers are free, and on their way back to Chastershire none too worse for wear despite their incarceration. There's going to be a lot of relieved people once they have returned. Thanks to you."

"And the mage?" I asked.

Earl frowned. "She seems to have disappeared into thin air. It's quite the mystery."

I smiled. I had an inkling that the mage had found herself sealed in an all too familiar cave. It was no less than she deserved, and I suspected that Achalos would have seen it as preferable to killing her. Achalos was many things, but he wasn't a murderer. Earl held up his hand and grimaced, the dim light not enough to hide that it had become somewhat transparent. "I don't have much longer. You have the luck spell, I presume?"

Jack nodded. "We do. But unfortunately, it only works for a short time. If we can't track down the artifact tomorrow, then chances are we won't be able to."

Earl looked to me, and I gave a nod of agreement. Much as it stuck in my craw that we might have come all this way and end up with nothing to show for it, Jack was right. The person who'd taken the artifact might be happy to wander around the mountains for weeks on end, but I wasn't, and neither was Jack. There were far better things we could be doing with our time than freezing our asses off.

Jack's gaze dropped to the bracelet on his wrist, his brow furrowing. "Hey, Earl, if you've been around since we left Chastershire, maybe you could help us out with something. There was a night where we stayed in an orc settlement. Events that night are a little bit... hazy. Can you shed any light on what happened?" He held up his wrist so that Earl could see what he wore on it. "Sebastian claims"—he accompanied my name with a roll of his eyes—"that we got married. I think it's far more likely that he stole these and put one on me once I'd passed out. It would be good to know what actually happened."

I opened my mouth to inform Earl that that wasn't necessary, that I was sure he had far more important things to worry about than the actions of two people who may have been slightly under the influence of drugs, but before I could, he'd blinked out of existence.

"Damn it!" Jack's curse was loud enough to have carried all the way back to Icehaven.

I gave him a reproachful look. "Why are you bothering Earl with stuff like that? Don't you think he's got enough to contend with, without being bothered by questions about things that don't really matter?"

I swallowed another bite of dried meat as Jack turned stormy eyes my way and I waited for the inevitable explosion. I didn't have to wait long. "Doesn't matter! Of course, it matters. You keep calling me your husband, and it's like you actually believe it. And I have this thing on my wrist as a constant reminder—"

"That you still haven't taken off."

"I will take it off."

I gave him a look of challenge. "Go on, then."

"I will."

I met his gaze in silence, one eyebrow slightly raised.

"Don't think I won't."

When all I did was smile, Jack rose to his feet in a huff. "I'm going to bed. We need to get going as soon as it's light. We can't afford to sleep through a luck spell."

Despite his words, he made no move toward the tent, Jack having had the good sense to have erected it far enough from the fire that should the wind change, we wouldn't wake up to find ourselves on fire. I tipped my head back to look at him, wondering why he was just standing there. "What?"

"Aren't you coming?"

I leaned back on one arm, unable to keep the smile off my lips. "Oh, I'm invited, am I?" I climbed to my feet and followed Jack as he headed toward the tent. It turned out to be a difficult procedure for two grown men to maneuver enough to shed coats and boots within its cramped confines; we didn't dare shed any more clothing. Finally, though, we were huddled under a pile of furs, my arms wrapped around Jack's shivering body, his teeth chattering loudly. "It's so damn cold up here."

I tamped down on the urge to point out that snow tended to be cold, tightening my arms around him and stroking my hands along the length of his back in an effort to quell the shivering. "You'll warm up."

Jack tucked his face into the curve of my shoulder. "I hope so, or I'm not going to be able to sleep. We should have gone somewhere warm."

I smiled. "When we catch up with the person who took the artifact tomorrow, we can chastise them for not taking it somewhere warm."

Jack gave a little chuckle. His shivers had subsided somewhat, the heat of my body leaching into his. There was a moment of quiet before he spoke again. "It's weird that Earl disappeared before he could answer my question. I thought I was supposed to be lucky."

It was safe to smile in the pitch black without Jack being able to tell. It was tempting to point out that I was also lucky, but if that hadn't occurred to him, then

I wasn't going to be the one to enlighten him. He'd work it out eventually. Mention of Earl did remind me, though, that the hulking man had interrupted my attempt to set Jack right on a few things. "Jack, I wanted to say some things." Jack was unusually silent. "Jack?"

A gentle snore told me why he wasn't responding. I let out a frustrated sigh and closed my eyes. Tomorrow, then. Once we'd either apprehended the artifact thief or given up altogether.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

JACK

For one heart-stopping moment as I took in the figure standing at the top of the mountainous ridge, with her long red hair flowing out behind her in the icy wind, I thought it was my missing sister, my breath catching in my throat, and my heartrate rocketing. "It's not her."

I didn't realize I'd said the words out loud until Sebastian turned my way with a puzzled expression. "Not who?" Realization dawned quickly. So quickly he answered his own question. "Not Annabelle." He paused for a moment before he flashed a grin my way. "Good. Because if it was your sister who'd stolen the artifact, that would leave us in a very difficult position."

"Do you think that's the person who stole the artifact?"

"I don't see why else they would be out here."

Neither did I, but it was worth debating the possibility. "Who are they?"

"I have an inkling."

"Yeah?" I couldn't keep the surprise out of my voice. "Who?" At that moment, as if sensing they had an audience, the woman started to turn. Sebastian and I both dropped to the ground behind a large rock, our knees sinking into the deep snow. Although, the luck spell had brought us close enough to see the mysterious stranger, we still had a lot of ground to cover before we caught up with them, a task that would be far more difficult if they became aware that we were in pursuit. We only had a few hours left as well. Despite being far enough away that I doubted my voice would carry, I lowered it to a whisper anyway, repeating my earlier question. "Who?"

Sebastian turned his gaze my way. "Who did we meet in Chastershire with red hair?"

I thought about it. We hadn't met enough people for it to take me long to recall. "Father Riley."

Sebastian nodded. "I'd lay odds that they're related in some way."

"Really? Just because they both have red hair. I don't have red hair, but Annabelle's definitely my sister." A slight smile appeared on Sebastian's lips. "What?"

He lifted his chin in the direction of my head. "Your hair glints red in the sun sometimes. There's more red in it than you might think."

"Yeah?" I lifted my hand to my head, running my fingers through the hair I'd always just thought of as being dark. It was a pointless gesture. It wasn't like you could feel red. "Huh! No one's ever told me that before."

Sebastian rose slowly to peer over the top of the rock. "That's probably because I watch you more than most."

"Yeah?"

He nodded. "She's gone. We need to catch up with her."

Sebastian scrambled to his feet, and I had no choice but to do the same. It was a shame. It would have been nice to spend more time discussing what other observations Sebastian had made while watching me so closely. I might even have been able to squeeze a couple of compliments out of him. Instead, the next few hours were going to be spent trying to creep up on the woman while staying out of sight. It was a game of cat and mouse that probably wouldn't prove to be a lot of fun. Especially while pulling the sled. The noise it made wasn't exactly conducive to approaching anyone silently. "Maybe we should leave the sled here."

Sebastian peered up at the sky, shaking his head. "It might look clear now, but there's no telling when a snowstorm might hit. If it does, we're not going to want to be stuck in it without the tent."

It was an unusual amount of caution for Sebastian to demonstrate, and there was one definite argument against it. "We're lucky, remember. There shouldn't be any chance of getting caught in a snowstorm."

"Only for a few more hours."

He had a point. Therefore, there was no point grumbling about it. We were stuck with the sled, never-ending supply of dried meat and all.

Over the next couple of hours, we caught more glimpses of the mysterious girl, Sebastian and I careful to hide whenever there was a danger of being seen. She seemed to be traveling in circles, a fact that meant we were growing ever closer to her. We hadn't discussed what we were going to do when we caught up to her, but then, when did Sebastian ever have a plan for anything? I guessed that when it came down to it, we just needed to get the artifact back. But then what? Were we meant to capture her? Escort her back to Chastershire to be apprehended for her crimes? If so, how? It wasn't like either of us were carrying chains, and the only rope we had was the one we used to pull the sled.

Perhaps some discussion would have been wise. Then again, we hadn't even known who we were chasing until a few hours ago. It was hard to make plans when you didn't know what you were up against. At least one woman gave us better odds than those we'd faced against a whole horde of dragon-shifting knights when we'd rescued Prince Montgomery. Had either of us suspected that the culprit was a woman? I couldn't speak for Sebastian, but it wouldn't have been my first guess.

It was another hour before we finally found ourselves on the same ridge, the girl tantalizingly close. Sebastian and I both exchanged a look of "now what?" In the end, it was Sebastian who rallied first, his voice ringing out clear as a bell across the divide. "Stop! Don't go any farther."

There was no hiding the shock on the girl's face as she spun around. "Who are you?"

I stepped forward with my hands in the air. There was far too big a drop on either side for her to think we were a danger to her. We didn't want her doing anything stupid. Therefore, it was in our best interest to come across as harmless. And we were harmless. All she needed to do was surrender the artifact. I tried for a smile, nerves probably rendering it closer to a grimace. "I'm Jack. And this is Sebastian. What's your name?"

A slight furrow appeared on her brow. "My name is none of your business."

So, it was going to be like that, was it? The last person—or should I say troll—who had refused to give us their name had had a giant invincible knight to play as their trump card. I just hoped this girl didn't have anything similar up her sleeve.

Sebastian stepped forward, his shoulder a reassuring pressure against my own. "You're Father Riley's sister, aren't you?" He waved a hand at his head. "What, with the hair, and..." He lowered his hand to draw a circle in the air in front of his face. "You have the same nose as well." She didn't need to answer; the expression on her face said it all. Sebastian lowered his voice to a purr. "What's your name?"

She blinked at us, her blue eyes huge in her face. "Mirabelle."

I winced at the similarity of the name. Red hair and a similar name too. It produced an uncomfortable feeling in my gut, like I was somehow responsible for her. She might not be my sister, but she was clearly out of her depth. Had Annabelle found herself in any tricky situations like this? Had she regretted leaving home? And if so, had someone helped her?

Sebastian took a step toward Mirabelle. "So, what was the plan? Did you hatch it with your brother? Steal the artifact. Find the treasure with the luck it gave you, and then what?"

Mirabelle lifted her chin, her shoulders rigid. "My brother deserves better than to toil away in Chastershire. He's dedicated his life to that palace, and what do they give him in return?" The corners

of her mouth turned down. "Do you know that he doesn't earn any more coin than he did on the very first day that he worked there?"

I frowned. "He's a priest. I thought his role was about faith, not about how much money he can make from it."

My comment was met with a sneer, Sebastian taking the opportunity to edge a bit closer while Mirabelle's attention was locked on me. The snow was coming down faster now, the flakes leaving muted patches on Mirabelle's fiery hair, the air too cold for them to melt. "Faith doesn't keep you warm at night. Faith doesn't put meals on the table. He works for the king and queen... He's been one of their most loyal subjects for years, yet we live in a shack. I mean, he could live in the palace if he wanted to, but I can't, so he won't leave me. How is that fair? Why should they have everything while we have nothing?"

"Whose idea was it to take the artifact?" I asked.

The look in Mirabelle's eyes was nothing short of mutinous. "Mine."

Sebastian shuffled forward another step. "Did your brother know what you were intending to do? Did he help you?"

Sebastian wanted to know whether the priest had looked us straight in the eye and lied, whether all that sanctimonious bullshit he'd spouted about the artifact had been nothing but an act. If it had, it had been convincing enough that neither of us had suspected a thing. That might not have been a surprise when it came to Sebastian, when he preferred to look for the good in people, but I was normally far more circumspect. I hated to think he could have pulled the wool over my eyes quite that easily.

Mirabelle sniffed. "Of course he did."

I almost wished she'd lied. Didn't she realize that by admitting they were in on it together, that she'd just signed her brother's death warrant as well as her own?

"What about the mage?" I asked.

"The mage?" Mirabelle's brow furrowed. "What mage? Chastershire doesn't have a mage."

"The mage in Icehaven, the one who apparently likes to collect statues made out of real people and doesn't bother to ask for their consent first."

Mirabelle gave a slow shake of her head. So the mage's interference had just been incidental, the soldiers' unfortunate fate nothing more than her seizing the opportunity to add to her gruesome art display.

Sebastian's careful approach had worked to bring him to within a couple of meters of Mirabelle. He held his hand out, his fingers slightly curled. "Hand the artifact over. If you do that, we'll let you

go. We'll say you escaped."

She tossed her head back and laughed. "Now why would I want to do a thing like that? I need it. I'm not going to be able to find the treasure without it. Once we have the treasure, Peter and I can start again." Peter? I assumed that was Father Riley's first name. Neither Sebastian nor I had thought to ask. "He can have the life he should have had, one that doesn't involve him having to spend every single hour of every day bowing and scraping to two people who just happened to be born in the right place. He never wanted to be a priest, but after our parents died, we were too young to be left with a lot of choices. The previous priest was a friend of my father's. He took Peter under his wing, and the rest is history. The palace made out like they were doing us some great favor, like we should have been grateful." She treated us both to a disdainful look. "You wouldn't understand."

I almost laughed. I understood only too well, but I doubted she was prepared to listen to my thoughts on the subject. She'd decided that she and her brother had been dealt a bad hand in life, and there would be no changing her mind. Maybe there was one thing I might be able to get through to her about, though. "How long have you been searching for this treasure?"

She aimed a glare my way. "None of your business."

"Weeks, though, right? And you haven't found it. Even though you've been carrying around something..." It felt stupid to say something, but as we were still none the wiser about what this damn artifact was, I didn't have any other option. "Something that gives you an awful lot of luck. We had to get a wizard to cast a luck spell on us just to have a chance of tracking you down. That should tell you something, surely?" Sebastian was edging closer again. He would be within touching distance soon.

"It tells me that I should find it soon."

I laughed. "Really? It should tell you that it doesn't exist, that you're chasing a story, a legend. Something that somebody probably made up one night in the tavern when they'd had far too much ale. You would have been better off taking up gambling. You could have earned a small fortune by now. You and your brother could have been miles away, and it wouldn't have involved sleeping rough in the mountains."

She shook her head. "You're wrong." She reached into her fur cloak and pulled out a very unremarkable-looking wooden cup. She held it up, her eyes gleaming. "This is the key to changing my life. Mine and Peter's, and I'm not going to let anyone take it from me."

A wooden cup! All this fuss, all this drama, had been over a wooden cup, someone somewhere once having decided that it was worthy of a powerful luck spell. It was all I could do not to laugh at the sheer stupidity of the situation. It made me wonder who'd originally been responsible for placing

it in a chest. Perhaps they'd realized that on its own, it wasn't convincing as an object of great importance. They'd hidden it from sight, the action necessary to create the legend.

"That's it?" Sebastian's voice was full of amusement. "A cup."

At least we agreed on something.

Mirabelle turned angry eyes his way. "Let me guess, you judge everything on what it looks like. If it's not pretty, it's not worthwhile." She looked down her nose at him. "You'd be at home in Chastershire with the king and queen. They look at things in a very similar way. I thought it was just royalty that did that, but I guess I was wrong."

An irritated flush developed on Sebastian's cheeks. I was surprised that he was letting her get to him. It wasn't like Sebastian. I was the one prone to moments of seeing red, not him. But seeing red, he certainly was, his nostrils flaring and his fingers curling into his palms. Fueled by annoyance, he reached out, the movement fast and sure. One moment, Mirabelle was holding the wooden cup, and the next it was in Sebastian's possession, his fingers closing tightly around it. Relief settled like a blanket over me. We'd come all this way to get the artifact, and we had it. We'd take it back to Chastershire. We'd collect the reward, and then we'd return to Riverbrook, where I planned on not letting Sebastian leave my bed for at least a week. Maybe two.

Mirabelle rounded on Sebastian, her voice almost a screech. "Give it back. It's not yours."

He took a step back, keeping well away from her grasping hands. "It's not yours either. It belongs in Chastershire, and we're going to return it there."

"Give it back. Give it back." They seemed to be the only words Mirabelle could say, desperation pushing more and more to the fore every time she said it. When that didn't work, her tone changed to pleading. "Please. Give it back and then forget that you've seen me. That's all I ask. All I did was borrow something for a while. I'll return it once I've found the treasure, and Peter and I are somewhere where no one can find us. I'll hire someone to take it back. You have my word."

Sebastian was already shaking his head before Mirabelle was even halfway through her impassioned speech. She made a wild grab for the cup, Sebastian much faster than she was and easily able to evade her. He glanced behind him before he took another step back, realizing at the same time as I did how close he was getting to the place where the mountain suddenly cut away to leave nothing but a sheer drop. "Sebastian, be careful," I shouted.

Mirabelle made another wild grab, her fingers skimming the cup this time, Sebastian having nowhere to go. Sebastian looked up, his gaze finding mine over Mirabelle's shoulder. "Are you ready, Jack?"

Ready for what? I didn't have long to ponder the question, Sebastian's muscles already bunching as he brought his shoulder back to launch the cup into the air. It arced over Mirabelle's head, his intent becoming clear. I was meant to catch it, which might have been fine if we'd ever had a conversation where I'd claimed to be skilled in that department, but no such conversation had ever taken place. Therefore, he was putting an awful lot of faith in me. Which was sweet, but seriously misguided.

The cup had barely left Sebastian's hand when Mirabelle dived at him. Perhaps she'd sensed what he was about to do, and had been intent on stopping him, her reactions just that few seconds too slow. Whatever the reason, I was keenly aware of two things happening at the same time, the full force of Mirabelle's body weight meeting Sebastian's with a crunch, and the trajectory of the cup as it threatened to sail over my head. I stepped backward, almost falling over the sled in my haste to position myself under where I thought the cup was going to drop, all too aware that there was another sheer drop close to me.

Time seemed to slow, my gaze fixed on the cup and my hands outstretched.

Were we still operating under the influence of Achalos's luck spell, or had the time expired? I wasn't sure. I hoped we were, but if not, I needed to catch it, and avoid falling to my death, all without a luck spell. I couldn't wait to chastise Sebastian later for having so much faith in me. I'd said it before, and I'd keep saying it. The man was insane.

Pure relief washed through me as my fingers closed around the cup and I dropped to the snow, my heart hammering in my chest.

"Jaaaaack!"

The anguished cry had me jerking my head up just in time to see both Sebastian and Mirabelle teetering on the edge of the mountain, Mirabelle's momentum having driven them right to the edge. For one moment, I was convinced it was going to be okay, and then they both lost their battle, windmilling arms and motion changing to nothing in the blink of an eye. Only an empty space remaining where they'd been moments before.

Noooooo!" There was no holding back my shout. I scrambled through the snow to the point where Sebastian had been only seconds before, dropping to my stomach to peer over the edge, fear a ravenous beast in my stomach.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

JACK

The luck spell! Sebastian had to still be under the influence of it. He had to be, because the alternative didn't bear thinking about. At first, I couldn't see anything, but then I spotted it, a ledge about a hundred meters below. There was someone lying on the ledge, the distance too great to be able to tell whether it was a man or a woman. There was definitely only one person, though. Were they big enough to be Sebastian? I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted Sebastian's name. Whoever it was didn't stir. They were perfectly still, almost like they were...

I refused to let myself finish the thought. Sebastian couldn't be dead. I wouldn't let him be. I'd threatened him enough times with what would happen if he went and died on me. He wouldn't dare go against that, would he? One thing was for sure, I wouldn't find out more until I got down there. The truth could only be found by reaching the ledge. I stood, taking a moment to collect myself and trying to slow the thrashing of my heart in my chest by taking deep breaths. I'd never felt more alone than I felt at that moment. It would have been a really good time to have had some help. "Earl? Are you there? Can you hear me?"

No response. No big, bald man appearing at my side. Either he wasn't here, or if he was, he couldn't make himself visible. Either way, the result was the same. There was no one except for me. Still dragging the sled behind me, mainly because I didn't want to waste time untying it, I changed direction and made my way to the winding path that would take me down the mountain, hoping the cup still clutched in my hands would be enough to stop me from slipping to my doom.

Even moving as fast as I dared, it took a while, but eventually, I rounded a bend to find the ledge in front of me. A whole host of information assailed me at the same time. It was Sebastian, his blond hair trailing out behind him. There was no time for relief, though, my gaze also taking in the drops of bright-red blood staining the snow where he lay. Far too much of it. My fingers scrabbled at the rope

around my waist, the task seeming to take far too long before I could leave the sled behind and run to Sebastian.

He was deathly still, his face so pale that there was very little difference between his complexion and the snow as I dropped to my knees next to him, pulling his head onto my lap so I could cradle it. The source of the blood became all too apparent, his beautiful blond hair matted with it, a long gash on his forehead responsible for it. "Sebastian?" My voice was barely more than a whisper, the icy wind carrying so much of the sound away that it was barely audible even to my own ears. Which was the only reason Sebastian hadn't opened his eyes. It was just my imagination that he wasn't breathing. Any moment now he would open his eyes.

Except, he didn't. Even when I managed to force his name out louder, there was no response. He just lay there. Pale and bleeding, and with none of the life that Sebastian was always full of. I began to rock, tears streaming down my face. "No, no, no, no, no, no! You can't be dead. I won't allow it." I shoved at his shoulder, Sebastian's body so limp that it made me cry all the harder. I buried my face in his chest, trying not to notice how cold he was. "There was so much I never said to you, so many things we didn't get a chance to do together. I never even showed you around the farm. Not that you would have found it very interesting. You would have said something crass about goats, and I would have rolled my eyes at you. And you would have asked stupid questions because you know nothing about farming. And when I answered your questions, you wouldn't have bothered to listen because farming's not for you and it never will be. But the farm's mine. It's the only thing I own in the world, and deep down, you would have understood that. And now none of that is going to happen because you went and died on me, you stupid, stupid idiot."

I paused to take a deep breath, fighting against the urge to lose control completely. "I'm the bigger idiot, though, because I never even told you how I felt about you. I kept those words to myself. I pretended like we were no big thing, which clearly wasn't true. Who leaves their home behind to tag along with the most reckless man in the world, unless they...?"

The words stuck in my throat, but I was determined to force them out. I hadn't given them to him while he was alive, so the least I could do was say them to him in death. "You might have been the most annoying man in the world... vain... prone to stealing things... far too blasé about everything. You might have left a string of lovers behind you as long as my arm... but... I loved you. I really loved you, Sebastian Beau. With all of my heart. I would have done anything for you. I might have given you shit about it, depending on what it was, but I would have done it."

"How about not lying on top of me? You're quite heavy."

I froze. Had my sanity gone? Did it happen that quickly? One minute, you were fine, and the next, dead men started talking to you.

"Seriously, Jack. You're lying on my chest. It's difficult to breathe."

I jerked myself up to stare at Sebastian's face. His eyes were open, as beautifully blue as ever. "You're not dead."

"Apparently not." He lifted a hand to his head, grimacing when his fingers came away stained with red. He turned his head to the side, his gaze focusing on the jagged edge of a loose rock. "I remember banging my head on that. And then it went dark. I must have lost consciousness. And then the next thing I remember is you trying to suffocate me."

"I thought you were dead." A hysterical laugh bubbled out of me. "You're alive, you absolute bastard. You're alive!" There was no holding back the huge smile on my face. "You fell off the top of the mountain. How did you survive that?"

Sebastian swallowed, his voice thick when he started talking. "We were falling. Far too fast. I summoned a bird. The plan was for it to carry us both off, but there wasn't enough time. I landed on it instead. I guess it broke my fall, apart from my head hitting that rock." He turned his head in the opposite direction to where the ledge fell away, a drop of at least another two hundred meters lying that way. "I couldn't hold on to her, Jack. I tried. Honestly, I did." He attempted to lift his head, pain etched across his face. "She might have stolen the artifact, but I didn't want her dead. The artifact! Did you...?"

I pointed to where I'd left the cup propped up in the snow in my haste to get to Sebastian. Sebastian relaxed once he saw it. "Oh, thank god! You did catch it. You use a bow. You should have excellent hand-eye coordination, but I saw the look on your face when I threw it. You looked like you'd been tasked with doing something incredibly difficult."

"I wasn't expecting you to throw it. Next time, how about you give me a bit of warning. You're lucky I didn't fall off the other side of the mountain while trying to catch it." I moved to look over the ledge, Sebastian's gaze following my movement.

"Can you see her?"

I shook my head. "Maybe she didn't die. Maybe..." I trailed off. I couldn't think of any possible scenario which would enable a human being to survive that sort of fall. "It might have been for the best. They would have executed her if they caught her." I didn't share the fact that there was a certain amount of relief on my part that we didn't have to work out what to do with her. It might have been callous of me, but at the moment the only thing I was concerned about was Sebastian. He might have

survived the fall, but that didn't mean he didn't have other potentially life-threatening injuries. It was concerning that he'd made no effort to sit up. "Is anything broken?"

"I don't know."

I began to run my hands over his body, searching for any lumps or bumps that shouldn't have been there. I started with his arms. Once I was satisfied that all the bones were where they should be, I moved on to his legs, treating each limb to the same thorough perusal.

"That's definitely not broken."

"Shut up." Despite my reprimand, I was relieved. How bad could Sebastian's physical condition be if he was still able to joke about what had been no more than the slight brush of my fingers against his groin. "I don't think anything is broken." I subjected his head to the same scrutiny. It wasn't just the gash. There was a huge swelling there as well, the skin already starting to bruise quite spectacularly. "You hit your head pretty hard." Even more alarming than that was the fact that Sebastian was starting to shiver. I'd never seen Sebastian cold. But then, he didn't usually lie in the snow for what had to be approaching an hour. That's all it was. Nothing more.

"C... c... cold." Sebastian struggled to get the word out, his teeth chattering. "And my... h... head... it... h...hurts."

"I know. I'm going to..." What was I going to do? While searching for inspiration, my gaze fell on the sled. I said a silent prayer for my haste meaning that I'd dragged it all the way down with me. Without that, it would have meant a return journey up the mountain while Sebastian lay there shivering, hypothermia possibly turning my worst thoughts into reality. "I'm going to put the tent up, and then you can rest, and we'll get you warm." I stripped my coat off, laying it over the top of Sebastian and hoping that was enough to stop him from freezing to death in the next ten minutes. "You just lie there. I'll do all the work."

Sebastian managed a weak smile. "So... e...everything... as... n...n..normal, then." "Exactly."

I got halfway to the sled before Sebastian called my name. I turned back to find his head turned my way. "D...does... this... c...c...count... as b...being... r...r...reckless?"

I thought about it while I busied myself locating everything I needed. Luckily, there was a flat space a few meters away that would provide enough room for the tent. There was no room for a fire, but then I couldn't see much in the way of firewood in this area, and I wasn't leaving Sebastian to search farther afield. "I don't think so. She pushed you off."

"She w...w...wasn't thinking... s...straight."

"When she took the artifact, or when she was so desperate to hang on to it that she decided she'd rather kill herself than lose it?"

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"B...b...both."
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I kept talking to Sebastian, injecting an artificially cheery note in my voice that had Sebastian been more himself, he wouldn't have hesitated to mock. "Won't take me long to get this sorted. The more you do it, the quicker you get at it. Of course, you wouldn't know that because I'm always the one who does it. You rival Earl with your disappearing act when there's any hard work to be done."

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"Y...you're b...b...better at things... l...like that... th...than I... am." "True."
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"Y... you're g...g...good with y...your h...h...hands."
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I aimed a grin Sebastian's way. "You big flirt. Why don't you save it until you haven't got blood in your hair?"

Sebastian looked suddenly stricken, his hand lifting to his head. "H...have... I?"

"Afraid so. No one told the rock that messing with your appearance wasn't allowed." Tent erected and furs piled inside, I pondered how I was supposed to get Sebastian from where he still lay to the tent a few meters away. I returned to him, his shivering not having abated in the slightest. "Can you stand?"

"Of course."

I hid my grin at his optimism. Even nursing a head injury and shivering up a storm, Sebastian seemed to think he was invincible. Despite that, it took a great deal of effort to maneuver him to his feet and into the tent, most of his body weight on me, to the point that even without my coat, I was sweating by the time I finally had him lying down with a pile of furs heaped on top of him. The extra body heat would prove useful, and I didn't think Sebastian was up to complaining if I was a little ripe. I didn't join him immediately, instead lifting the tent flap to crawl back out. "W...w... where are you going?"

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"To get the cup, and my coat. Are you hungry?"
"No."
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I wasn't sure whether I should be concerned about that. Was that normal? I wasn't a healer, most of my knowledge about ailments confined to animals, not people. I was back in less than a minute. I removed Sebastian's boots and then my own, fitting myself around him and wrapping my arms around his body, his head resting on my shoulder, the furs pulled up as high as I could get them. It took a

[&]quot;Probably."

while before his shivers eased, but ease they did. I raised my head, searching his face in the rapidly dimming light, the thick fabric of the tent blocking out a lot of what was left. Even so, I imagined that he had a little more color in his cheeks. "Are you feeling better?"

"I'm not as cold, but my head still hurts."

I stroked my fingers through his hair. "It will. It'll ease, though." Or at least I hoped it would. "It's strange, you being cold. You're never cold. You usually have to warm me up, not the other way around." There was a long pause, long enough for me to pick up on the tension in Sebastian's body. "What?"

"I think I did something to my magic."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"When I landed on the eagle, it... I don't know, it did something. Like when I damaged the bird, I damaged myself. And I don't just mean banging my head on the rock, I mean something inside. I can't feel the magic like I usually do. It's like when I've overused it and I feel cold inside. Except, I haven't. I've barely used it at all in the last few days."

"It's probably just the head injury."

"Probably."

I wasn't sure either of us really believed that, though. I'd once wondered what effect it might have if one of Sebastian's animals died. Was this the answer? Did it damage the magic irreparably? I hoped not, for his sake. His magic was part of him. A Sebastian without magic wouldn't be the same.

Sebastian's arms tightened around me. "At least something good came from me tumbling off a mountain."

"What?" I couldn't think what he might be referring to. As far as I could see, there was nothing good about us being stuck on a mountain, miles from civilization, with Sebastian not only nursing a head injury but also concerned that his magic had been rendered useless. We had the artifact, but that was about the only positive I could think of.

"Yeah!" I felt his smile against my neck. "You finally said it."

"Said what?" Was this another symptom of the head injury?

"That you loved me."

I went still, simultaneously hot and cold at the same time. "Erm..." I could barely remember what words were, never mind use them.

"Don't deny it. I heard you. It was sweet. All the things you were saying were. Well, apart from the name-calling but I'm used to that. I don't think I was conscious from the start, which is a shame, but I

definitely heard you say you loved me, and that you regretted not having told me."

I finally remembered how to string a sentence together. "I thought you were dead. Emotion got the better of me."

"So you didn't mean it?"

I closed my eyes and, painful as it was, I dredged up how I'd felt at the time. It had been like someone taking a knife to my chest and carving out my heart. All that sadness at never having had a chance to say it came flooding back. Well, I'd been given that second chance, hadn't I? So to deny it would be nothing less than stupid. "I meant it."

I braced myself for Sebastian to crow over it, to say something about how he'd known it for ages, and that of course, I loved him, that he hadn't expected anything less. None of that happened. All he did was let out a soft sigh. "I love you too."

My chest was filled with butterflies. Bright beautiful ones that made me feel like I might float up to the top of the tent and stay there. "Why didn't you ever tell me? I was waiting for you to say it first."

Sebastian let out a little chuckle. "And I was waiting for you to say it first. You're a very difficult man to predict, farm boy. I wasn't sure what reaction I would get if I said it. You may well have thrown it back in my face."

"I wouldn't have done that." There was a lack of conviction in my voice, though. Depending on Sebastian's timing and how he'd said it, it was entirely possible I might have done that, believing he wasn't serious. "Does that mean I'm stuck with you?" Despite the deliberate lightness of my tone, there was still a serious question behind it, that nagging feeling in the back of my head never quite having gone away.

"Yes." No hesitation at all from Sebastian, the butterflies in my chest all fluttering their wings. "I'm not going anywhere. Wherever you are, Jack Shaw, I will be too."

"Good. Don't die on me then."

"That's impossible."

"How do you work that one out?"

Sebastian unearthed his arm from the pile of furs to point to the wooden cup, which looked no more spectacular than it had when I'd first laid eyes on it. "We have the artifact. We're lucky. All I need is a bit of sleep, and I'll be fine. And then we can get off this mountain and go home. Via Chastershire, of course."

He raised a good point. I closed my eyes again, listening to the sound of Sebastian breathing. "Jack?"

"What?"

"Do you love me enough to help me work out how I can get blood out of my hair tomorrow?" I grinned into the darkness. "Yes."

Sebastian let out a contented little sigh, and I let the lure of sleep pull me under.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

SEBASTIAN

Jack shifted uncomfortably in front of me on the horse as Chastershire came into view. They were the same horses we'd left behind in Blackwharf, the gap between our visits not having been long enough for them to suspect we'd met a sticky end and have sent them back to Chastershire. Either that or Earl had paid the stable hands a visit. He'd appeared the day after my vertical trip down a mountain, my prediction that I'd be fine after a good night's sleep proving to be correct.

Aside from a sizable bump on my head, I'd been as good as new, Jack keeping his promise to help me wash the blood out of my hair, using snow as a water source rendering the task difficult but not impossible. Jack had brought all his stubbornness to the fore to insist that I spent another day recuperating in the mountains. I hadn't argued. Getting to spend the day alone with Jack could never be a chore, especially coming in the wake of him finally confessing his love, even if he had only done it believing that I was dead and couldn't hear him. Jack really should learn to check whether someone was breathing before pronouncing them dead. I was lucky he hadn't dug me a grave while I was unconscious.

On learning that the artifact was in our possession, Earl had almost cracked a smile. Almost. He'd been less pleased when we'd relayed the story of how it had come to be in Mirabelle's possession, his expression turning decidedly stormy when he'd learned of her connection to the palace priest. He'd appeared at regular intervals since then. I suspected he was concerned we might somehow manage to lose the cup. There was little chance of that. Not when it had caused us so much trouble to retrieve. I even slept with it under my pillow. Bringing my hand to my chest, I traced the outline of it through my shirt, reassuring myself that it was still there.

As for the journey back, we'd been nauseatingly cautious. No trolls—we'd gone the long way around, the knight's arm left in a deep pit high in the mountains. No fights. No orcs. Nothing of note. It had been tempting to drop into Bleakpoint to see how Grat was doing, and to watch Gluronk make

eyes at Jack again which would never not be amusing, but the issue with my magic had persisted, proving it hadn't just been the head injury affecting it. Therefore, conjuring the unicorn that we'd insisted would reunite with us once we left the orc settlement had become a risky proposition, the unicorn likely to disappear before their eyes. For that reason, we'd spent the night in the tent, Jack grumbling as he'd once more been the one to erect it while I watched. He was good at it. Why would I intervene?

I pulled on the reins to bring the horse to a stop, Jack frowning. "Why are we stopping?"

I inclined my head in the direction of Chastershire, the palace lying less than an hour's canter away. "How long do you want to stay?"

"At Chastershire?"

I nodded.

"I don't want to go at all."

I smiled, Jack's answer coming as no surprise. "Well, we can't exactly just throw the cup over the wall."

"Shame."

"Plus, we have six hundred gold coins to collect."

Jack immediately cheered at the mention of the reward. "Don't forget that three hundred of those are mine."

"How could I? You remind me of that fact all the time. You even reminded me when it looked unlikely we'd be able to find the artifact at all."

"I've earned those gold coins!" Jack sounded so indignant that it made me smile even more."

"How?"

"How!" He twisted around, the horse shifting beneath us at the unexpectedness of the move. I tightened my hands on the reins, steadying the horse as Jack let rip. "I narrowly escaped with my life from a griffin. I had to spend an entire evening with an orc fawning over me." He lifted his arm, giving the bracelet he still wore a shake. "I ended up with this damn thing, with you insisting over and over again that it makes us married." I opened my mouth to speak, Jack getting in there first. "Which we are *not*, before you say anything."

"I admit that we may have done things the wrong way round."

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"It's more traditional to declare your love, and then get married, whereas we did it in reverse." I waved a hand at him. "Anyway, was that it? I think that earns you about one hundred and fifty gold

coins."

"No, that's not it. I had to watch you fight a troll just to prove your manhood." I opened my mouth to argue, Jack again beating me to it. "I know, it wasn't the troll that you fought, but your argument was with him. The knight was an extension of him, so unless you're in the habit of being really pedantic." His stare said that's exactly what I was in the habit of being. "Then, you were fighting the troll."

I gave a shrug, perfectly willing to acquiesce when it came to this.

"I had to watch you take a swan dive off a mountain. I had to drag your heavy carcass into a tent and keep you warm, so you didn't drop dead. I had to wash your damn hair because you couldn't bear to have blood in it. Anyone would have thought you expected to bump into someone in the mountains."

I grinned as Jack ran out of ammunition. "None of which answers the question that I asked."

"What was the question?"

"How long do you want to stay in Chastershire?"

Jack turned back to face forward, his gaze fixing on the palace in the distance. "Oh, as short a time as we can." He let out a sigh of longing. "I just want to get back to Riverbrook."

"Me too." I rested my chin on Jack's shoulder. "I have a house to renovate. It needs a lot of work." Jack let out a little chuckle. "That's a joke, right?"

"Not at all. It will be winter in Cerensai soon, which I admit after spending time in Askophai will probably feel extremely mild, but that doesn't mean I'm going to want a big hole in my roof. I might have griffin flashbacks. No one wants to wake up in the middle of the night believing that they're about to be devoured by a griffin."

Jack shook his head. "You know full well you're going to be staying with me in my farmhouse." I didn't need to see Jack's face to hear the eye roll in his words.

"Do I? A man would be wise not to assume such a thing without an invitation. Do I have an invitation?"

"Sebastian..." Jack's utterance of my name was said in a sickly-sweet tone. "Would you please do me the great honor of moving into my house and taking up far more room than you should in my bed, and leaving blond hairs all over the floor, which you won't even notice, and I'll have to clean up?"

"Yes!" I leaned forward, my intention to kiss Jack's cheek. Except, Jack turned his head, our lips meeting in a lingering kiss instead. "Love you, Jack Shaw."

The only response I got was a grunt. Jack still hadn't gotten that good at declarations of love when I was fully conscious, but I was working on it.

"How's your magic today?"

I pulled a face at the change of subject. In a rare show of optimism from my contrary lover, he still liked to believe it would return to normal given time. Well, it had been a week, and so far, that hadn't happened. I lifted my hand, the horse stirring between my thighs as if it sensed something in the air. It took longer to draw up my magic, as if my magical reserves weren't dwelling inside of me but were instead somewhere much farther away. I had to concentrate harder as well.

The gold sparks when I finally manifested them were more muted, colder. In short, just... not right, as if some crucial ingredient was missing. I did manage a grin, though, at Jack's hiss of outrage when the monkey appeared in front of the horse. It looked up at Jack, making a chittering noise of delight at seeing him again. He always claimed I was making it up when I said the monkey liked him, but it really did.

It made short work of clambering onto the horse's back, and from there up onto Jack's shoulder. He batted at it ineffectually, the monkey easily evading his flailing hands and treating it like it was some sort of game. It grabbed onto Jack's hair, hopping from one shoulder to the other whenever his fingers drew too close. "Get the damn thing off me!"

One second, the monkey was there, and the next it wasn't. Jack let out a sigh and relaxed back against me. "Thank you. I hate that damn thing."

The only problem with his thanks was that I hadn't done anything. The magic had simply ceased to be. What was the point in having magic if I couldn't rely on it? And therein lay the problem. My magic might not be gone, but in its current state, it was less than useless. It definitely wasn't something I could count on in times of peril.



The reception that awaited us in Chastershire was nothing like on our first visit. Back then, we'd been subjected to curious stares, and more attention had been given to the unicorn than to the men sitting on its back. This time, as soon as the gates were opened, we were met by almost triple the amount of people that had lined the streets previously. I doubted there was a person left in their house unless they were so elderly, they couldn't stand. The cheering was deafening, and only grew louder. Jack seemed to shrink in on himself while I was happy to soak up all the adoration thrown our way. Why shouldn't we make the most of it? I had almost died to retrieve the wooden cup nestled in my shirt.

"Sebastian, make them stop." Jack's request was delivered with all the angry frustration I expected from him.

I leaned closer to him, needing to shout to be heard over the rising fever-pitch that, just when I

thought couldn't get any louder, somehow managed to. "I'm flattered that you think I have that sort of power, but I'm afraid silencing thousands of people is beyond even me."

Like Jack, the horse didn't like the noise one little bit, the tight grip I had on the reins the only thing keeping it from breaking into a crazed gallop in an effort to outrun it. Although, I'm sure Jack would have been on board with that idea. Instead, Jack—and the horse—were forced to endure the cacophony until we finally left the crowd of people behind for the final approach to the palace.

We didn't get as far as the stables, a beaming Frederick intercepting us before we could make the turn. He was accompanied by a small congregation of uniformed palace staff, one of them grabbing the horses as soon as we'd dismounted and leading them away. It was an unusually jovial Frederick, the man even going so far as to clap us both on the backs like we were long-standing drinking buddies of his before breaking into an impassioned speech. "I knew as soon as I set eyes on the both of you, that you were the only people who could retrieve Chastershire's great artifact. The people of Osagezia will sing your praises for years to come, and quite rightly too."

That was an interesting reinvention of the facts, given that both Jack and I had been naked save for artfully draped furs when Frederick had come calling with his request to locate the missing artifact, but if he wanted to change history, who was I to argue? As for the people of Osagezia singing our praises, I doubted Jack would ever set foot in the kingdom again. And as I only went where he did, then I wouldn't either.

Frederick turned in the direction of the palace, Jack throwing an evil glare and cringing away from a rather over-zealous palace employee who had made an ill-advised attempt to try and tidy his hair. I tugged him away before he got any ideas about using his fists to demonstrate his displeasure at being touched without permission.

Frederick cleared his throat. "Come! Come! The king and queen await. They have been besides themselves with excitement all day waiting to welcome you back." It was on the tip of my tongue to suggest that perhaps the excitement was more for the wooden lump residing in my shirt than either Jack or myself, but I bit my tongue and stayed silent. Acerbic comments were more Jack's style. Instead, I nudged Jack as we approached the door of the palace. "Look! We've made it to the main entrance. No more servant's entrance for us."

Despite his obvious discomfort, Jack managed a grin. "And all we had to do was go on a long and arduous mountain trek."

Frederick kept up a punishing pace as he led us through corridor after corridor, the rather portly man able to move surprisingly fast when he wanted to. We seemed to have lost most of the palace

employees, only a couple still following. Perhaps the rest hadn't been able to keep up. "Do the king and queen have another engagement after our meeting?"

Frederick looked back over his shoulder, a furrow on his brow. "What do you mean?"

Jack laughed. "I think Sebastian's wondering why we're almost running."

Frederick slowed slightly, inclining his head in recognition of Jack's point. "My apologies, but as I already communicated to you, the king and queen are most eager to see you. I'm sure you do not wish to keep them waiting any longer than is necessary."

When Jack looked like he might argue that point, I shot him a warning glance. There was no point in rocking the boat, not when I shared his desire to keep our stay in Chastershire as short as possible. To that end, it would suit us to have the reception with the king and queen over and done with as soon as possible.

Jack managed to keep his appreciation of the throne room ceiling to nothing more than a brief glance this time, his gaze already fixed on the king and queen by the time we were brought to a stop in front of them. *And* he remembered to bow, both of us doing it in almost perfect synchronization. Having delivered us in record time, Frederick too bowed before taking his leave. The king and queen weren't alone in the throne room this time, a tall man I'd never seen before stood a respectful distance away from the thrones.

The king immediately sat forward, his gaze scouring both of us and lingering on our empty hands. "Well... do you have it? I was told that it was in your possession."

I couldn't help myself. "Have what?"

The king looked suddenly panic-stricken. "The artifact. Please do not say you have lost it."

"Oh, the artifact!" I slid my hand into my shirt, my fingers wrapping around the smooth wooden base of the cup. Whether it was fatigue, the luck Jack and I had been operating under now having been distributed back to the kingdom, or sheer clumsiness, I couldn't have said, but my grip wasn't as sure as it should have been as I eased the cup out of its fabric prison. It slipped from my grasp, hitting the floor with a clatter, and proceeded to roll across the floor until it came to a stop just short of the queen's foot.

We all stared at it. The king and queen looked mortified. Jack let out a cough that sounded more like an attempt to disguise a laugh. Meanwhile, the palace employee averted his gaze from the cup so sharply that I was concerned he might have injured his neck. I cleared my throat. "Whoops. It..." I waggled my fingers at them as if that explained everything.

The queen was the first to find words, her gaze still fixed on the cup. "Are you sure there hasn't been some sort of mistake? I thought it would be more..." She trailed off, seemingly unable to find the right words.

The king—also still staring at the cup—managed a faint "quite" in accord with his wife.

It was Jack who stepped forward and picked it up, breaking the spell of inactivity that had stolen over everyone. "It's sacred though, right? Sacred things shouldn't be fancy. They should be... functional." He balanced the cup on his palm and lifted it higher, the king and queen's eyes following the movement. "And what's more functional than something made out of wood?"

The king blinked a couple of times and then scratched at his beard thoughtfully. "You are right, of course." He waved the palace employee over. "Reginald, would you...?"

Reginald immediately leapt to attention, only pausing to pick up an ornate chest from the floor next to him. He almost fell over himself in his haste to reach Jack. Once there, he wasted no time in opening the chest and holding it out to Jack, Jack taking his cue to place the wooden cup reverently inside it with a care I'd never seen him employ with anything before, not even my cock. Cup safely ensconced inside the chest, Reginald closed the lid. He placed the chest on the floor and then pulled a large key out of his pocket to lock it. Apparently satisfied with his work, he retreated to his original position, the chest still held in his arms. Perhaps that was Chastershire's new plan to ensure that such a thing couldn't happen again—attach it to Reginald. He certainly didn't look like a man who would ever crave the excitement of searching for treasure.

The king beckoned Jack and me forward, his voice dropping to a completely unnecessary whisper given that we were the only people in the room. He tapped the side of his nose. "I trust that you will keep the finer details of the artifact to yourself."

"I can barely remember what it looks like already," Jack said.

The king rewarded him with a smile for his outright lie. "Good. Good." His gaze slid sideways to me, a slight frown marring his forehead. "I still can't place why you look familiar."

The queen let out a sigh. "George, don't start that again. He probably looks nothing like the man you're thinking of." She sat up straighter. "You will stay for the night, of course." She accompanied her words with a slow once-over that seemed to say that should I stay, I would find myself with a late-night visitor while some reason was found for Jack to be elsewhere.

Jack seemed to think the same if the speed of the words out of his mouth was any indication, not to mention the slight edge in his voice. "We truly appreciate the offer, but I... we... would like to start

the journey home as soon as possible. Therefore, gracious as it is, we must turn down your"—his gaze flicked to the queen—"kind offer."

The queen looked decidedly disgruntled while the king just looked puzzled. "I see. Understandable of course, but if you ever travel this way again, know that you will always be welcome in the palace of Chastershire."

The queen's eyes strayed to my crotch. "Always."

"Is there anything else we can do for you?" the king asked.

"Well..." I strung out the word, trying to find a more polite way of saying it. When I failed to come up with anything, I channeled Jack and just said it anyway. "There's the small matter of the reward, of course."

The king slapped his palm against his forehead, his crown narrowly avoiding being pitched to the floor. "The reward!" He laughed. "In all the excitement, we almost forgot."

He waved Reginald over again, the man clearly confused by what he was meant to do with the chest. Eventually, he lowered it to the floor before rushing over to reclaim the same spot he'd held earlier. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a bulging money pouch. When he held it out, I reached out to take it, but Jack was quicker. "Six hundred?" he queried.

The king nodded. "Yes, and worth every single coin. And you must take the horses that you rode here today as well. That way you can get home quicker. I will ensure that the stables are made aware that they are now yours. Will that be all?"

I was already forming my lips into the necessary shape to say it was when Jack interjected. "Can we see Father Riley?"

I looked to him in surprise. Apart from mentioning him to Earl as a co-conspirator, his name hadn't come up in conversation since.

The king looked somewhat perplexed by Jack's request. We had that in common. "Father Riley is being detained in the dungeon while we decide what to do with him."

Jack gave a nod. "I'd still like to talk to him before we leave, if that's possible? Not for long. Just for a few minutes."

The king and queen exchanged a look, the king eventually shrugging. "I don't see why not." He smiled. "As long as you aren't hatching some sort of escape plan. I have a feeling you two could possibly carry it off."

Jack laughed. "Definitely not. I just need closure on a couple of things."



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

JACK

The dungeon was an awful place, which I guess was to be expected. They weren't built to be nice, but never having been in one before unless you counted Mad Dog Keaton's cell, I hadn't anticipated it being quite as dank and dirty—or as smelly—as it was. And yes, I might have jumped, much to Sebastian's amusement, when a rat the size of my head ran right across my path. If it hadn't been for the lack of gold sparks, I might have suspected him of being responsible.

We were escorted by two guards, the men seeming at home within the dungeon's dark confines. Neither guard was someone you'd want to mess with. Aside from their lack of green skin and protruding teeth, they would have made good orcs, both in looks and in temperament.

Most of the cells were empty as we passed, which made me feel slightly better. I didn't have any wish to see people suffering. I might not be the most soft-hearted of people, but even I had my limits.

Sebastian leaned in, his hair brushing my cheek. "Would you care to tell me what we're doing here?"

"We owe him that."

He frowned. "We don't owe him anything. He lied to us, remember. In fact, he tried to throw us off the scent with some sanctimonious bullshit."

"Maybe." The guards coming to a stop in front of a cell brought the conversation to a premature end. One of the guards waved a hand at the man sitting on the floor with his back to the wall, his head bowed, strands of lank red hair hanging down over his face. "There he is. Exactly where we left him." He hawked up a gob of phlegm and spat it unceremoniously on the floor. As a means of demonstrating his feelings toward the prisoner, it worked a treat. "You got yourself five minutes, and not a minute more. Then we're coming back to get you. Got that?"

Both Sebastian and I nodded. I waited until the guards had stepped back out of sight before I went over to the bars, Sebastian not seeming quite as keen to get close. "Father Riley? Peter?"

The man's head jerked up, and I was struck again by how young he was. He rose slowly to his feet, suspicion written all over his face as he came to stand in front of me, his gaze flicking between both of us. "What do you want? Have you come to gloat?"

I shook my head. Perhaps Sebastian was right, and this had been a mistake. "Did they...?" There was no easy way of saying it, so I just came straight out with it. "Did they tell you about your sister? I thought you should know. I have a sister who's been missing for months. I guess I needed to make sure that you're not in the same position I am, of not knowing what happened to her, because I know how painful that is, how your mind likes to play tricks on you." I smiled wanly. "I even thought when I saw her that Mirabelle might be her." I brushed a hand over my head. "Same red hair."

Father Riley grabbed hold of the bars and brought his face closer. "They told me I'd never see her again. I asked if they could bring her here, but they said I was in no position to be trying to make deals with them. I don't know where else they're going to keep her, but she should be here, with me. We've always been together. She looks after me, and I look after her. Once she found the treasure, I was going to meet up with her. We were going to travel to another kingdom where no one would know us, start again, live the lives we should always have lived. Now" —He waved a hand at the tiny cell —"this is all I've got."

I bit down on the urge to tell him that perhaps he shouldn't have been so greedy, that he'd had far more going for him than lots of other people I could name. I guess it warped your viewpoint when you were employed in a palace, and you spent your whole day immersed in riches you yourself didn't possess. Maybe I would have been the same in his position, resentment growing day by day until I did something stupid. Lucky for me then that my farm had kept my feet firmly on the ground. "Your sister..."

Father Riley's fingers tightened around the bars until his knuckles turned white. "What about her?" Would it be kinder to leave him in ignorance? All I had to do was walk away. Chastershire must have had their reasons for not telling him. I looked to Sebastian, his blank expression making it clear that this decision was all on me. "There was a scuffle at the top of the mountain. Your sister was trying to get the artifact back, but Sebastian had already thrown it to me. She was desperate. They were too close to the edge. They both went over."

A muscle twitched in Father Riley's cheek. "Over the edge?"

I nodded.

His gaze flicked between Sebastian and me, a desperation in his eyes that was painful to witness. "But she's alright?" He fastened his gaze on Sebastian, his eyes lingering for a few moments on the

bruise on his forehead. "You are, so she must be."

He looked back to me, and I shook my head, words sticking in my throat.

"I'm sorry. There was nothing I could do." Sebastian's words were thick, and it occurred to me that most of his reluctance to have this conversation was about guilt. He blamed himself for Mirabelle's death, whether it was rational to or not.

Father Riley let out a howl of pain. He returned to his place on the floor, burying his head in his hands, his shoulders shaking with silent sobs.

"I'm sorry." My words sounded completely insufficient, given the man falling apart in front of me. "We both are. It wasn't meant to end like that. I just thought you should know. I'd want to know if it was my sister." Would I? Would I really want someone to stamp out that little spark of optimism? He lifted his head, his eyes red and his cheeks wet. "Just go."

I opened my mouth with the intention of saying something else, but before I could, Sebastian's fingers closed around my shoulder, and he tugged me away. "Don't. Leave him to his grief. Nothing you say will make it better."

I nodded. I had no idea what I'd been going to say anyway. The guards escorted us out of the dungeon, neither commenting on the information we'd just given Father Riley. Either they hadn't been listening, or they didn't much care. Once out of the dungeon, they were quick to pass us back to the footman who had been assigned as our palace escort. He was a tall, skinny man with that same upright posture that all the palace employees seemed to possess. It hadn't taken long to learn that our new status in the palace came with the added bonus of being able to give instructions. While it hardly came naturally to me, I exercised that right, my need for clean air greater than my embarrassment at ordering someone around. "Outside, please. Wherever is closest."

He led us down a long corridor, the door at the far end opening out into a small, enclosed garden that had walls but no ceiling, allowing bright sunlight to stream in. It was a very picturesque garden, full of statues and colorful flowers, butterflies and bees busy going about their business. I dragged in a deep lungful of air as I headed over to a wooden bench, Sebastian seating himself next to me, closing his eyes and tipping his head back to enjoy the sun.

I studied him for a moment. Although the swelling on his head had gone down since it had happened, there was still a lot of bruising, the yellow coloration more obvious in the bright light. "Was that a mistake?"

Opening his eyes, he turned his head my way. "He was never going to take the news well." He thought about it for a moment. "But he did deserve to know. I wonder why they hadn't told him."

I shrugged. "I don't know. Do you think they're going to execute him? Wouldn't they have done it already if they were going to?"

"Not necessarily."

I sighed. "I hope they don't. I'd like to think that years of loyalty to the palace count for something, even if he did throw it all away in one stupid act."

"Would that really be better?"

I frowned. "Would what be better?"

"That they're not going to execute him? He's what... late twenties at most. Not much older than us. Would you want to spend your entire life in a dungeon?"

I grimaced. Death or decades in a dungeon? What a choice. "He should have thought about that before he had his sister steal the artifact."

Sebastian grinned. "There he is! Welcome back. I was beginning to think you'd gone soft on me, farm boy. I thought I might have to poke you until you started snarling again."

I rolled my eyes at him. Any retort I might have made was forestalled by someone calling my name. I shaded my eyes against the sun, smiling as I made out Princess Surander coming toward us. She was flanked by the same two guards who'd been with her on the day I'd stumbled into her drawing room.

"Oh, she gets a smile."

I ignored Sebastian, offering up a wave as well as a smile. She lifted her hand, the two guards following the silent instruction and coming to a halt while she continued walking in our direction. I immediately made to stand with the intention of giving her my seat, but she waved me back down. "No, please. I came out here to stretch my legs. I've done far too much sitting today as it is." She gave another beaming smile. "I was hoping I'd get a chance to see you, Jack, before you left. I'm so happy you came back in one piece, and with the artifact as well. Osagezia is incredibly grateful to you, and always will be. I will make sure that your name is never forgotten in this kingdom."

I smiled. "Spoken like a true future queen."

She gave a little laugh, her skirts rustling. "Indeed. And don't worry, news of the help you received from Achalos Bane is already being spread around the kingdom. We'll undo the damage that was done to his reputation in no time at all."

Her gaze slid over to Sebastian, curiosity sparking in her eyes. "Ah, the inimitable Sebastian Beau, who I've heard so much about but never had the pleasure of meeting in person."

Smooth bastard that he was, he immediately took hold of her hand and delivered a delicate kiss to the back of it. My lip curled of its own accord.

Gaze still fixed on Sebastian, Princess Surander laughed. "Jack doesn't like you doing that."

Sebastian grinned at her like they were sharing some sort of joke. "He's very possessive."

"I am not..." I gave up when they both started laughing. "Fine. Keep laughing. You can think whatever you want. I know the truth."

"Still lying to yourself, I see," Princess Surander said with a mischievous grin. "Although, I detect"—she paused to scrutinize both of us for a moment—"that you have made some progress when it comes to being honest about your emotions. There has been a declaration or two, has there not?"

Forgetting she was royalty for a moment, I narrowed my eyes at her. "What is your magic exactly?"

"My magic..." She let out a tinkling laugh. "Did I not say? I can sense emotions. They're like..." She stared off into the distance for a moment. It reminded me of the time Sebastian had struggled to describe his magic. "They taste different. Jealousy and envy are bitter. Anger is salty. Whereas love..." She raised an eyebrow, one corner of her lips tilting upward. "Love tastes like sugar, and you two are very sweet indeed."

I shook my head. "So all that stuff about body language was...?"

She shrugged. "It was true, but I may have a little help that other people don't have."

"What do lies taste like?" I asked, intrigued enough to ask.

Princess Surander smoothed her hands across the front of her skirt. "Ah, well, that is an interesting one. It greatly depends on the purpose of the lie. A lie intended to hurt someone tastes... almost burnt. Whereas a lie when a person is in denial"—she gave me a coquettish look from beneath her lashes —"is... well, it has a delicate flavor like a herb. Almost like the jasmine tea we shared."

"Ah, well that explains it, then, it must have been the jasmine you could taste."

She held my gaze. "Must have been." She cast a quick glance toward the silent figures of her guards, both men not bothering to hide that they were watching. I guess they had to, just in case either Sebastian or I decided to do something crazy.

Sensing our time was almost up, I got one last question in. "Does the return of the artifact mean you can go ahead and get married?"

She gave a nod. "Word will be sent today that the artifact is back in Chastershire's possession. My fiancé will set sail within the next couple of days, and we shall be married within the month. It is a pity you cannot stay for the wedding. It will be quite something to behold."

Sebastian aimed a sly smile my way. "Jack isn't big on pomp and ceremony. You wouldn't want him glowering away in the background."

I gave him a dirty look. "I'm not that bad."

Sebastian's only response was to raise an eyebrow.

"Your highness?"

Princess Surander grimaced at the bid for her attention. "I must go. I'm afraid I have a prior engagement. One that shall no doubt be a lot less fun than talking to you two." Her gaze dropped to our wrists. "I didn't even get an opportunity to ask how you came to be wearing orc marriage bands."

Sebastian leaned forward, his body language conspiratorial. "We got married."

Princess Surander smiled so widely that her dimples appeared. "Of course you did."

"Your highness?" The guard's tone was more insistent this time.

She sighed. "Promise me that if you are ever in Theoporia, you will come and see me."

Sebastian and I both nodded as she turned away, her steps hurried as the small procession made their way back in the palace.



It came as no surprise to find Earl leaning against the wall outside the stables as we reached it, his brawny arms crossed over his chest. We'd grown used to him popping up whenever and wherever he pleased. He jerked his chin in the direction of the gate. "Are you leaving?"

I nodded. "We are. We'd rather spend the night in the tavern than here." Some might have considered my answer rude, but Earl had never given me the impression that he stood on ceremony, or that he was someone liable to spread tittle-tattle to others. Besides, we were the heroes of Chastershire. We could probably make as many social faux pas as we wanted, and we would be forgiven.

Earl nodded. "And what will you do now?"

"Go home." The word home had never sounded so good in my mouth. "If we're lucky"—I laughed at the use of the word that had grown to have a very different meaning over the last week or so—"it will only take us a few days, especially now that we're not on foot." I just had to make sure that Sebastian didn't 'lose' the horses on the way. "By the way, your curse... perhaps there's something we can do about it." I'd given a lot of thought to it recently. "Maybe Achalos could help. I'm not sure where he's gone, but if we track him down." I frowned, Earl already shaking his head before I'd finished, Sebastian looking just as confused as I was as he took the reins of the horse brought out to him.

"No." There wasn't a hint of hesitation in Earl's answer. He gave a lopsided smile. "It may have been intended as a curse, but I've grown to appreciate many of the foibles it allows me. I can travel to

places within the blink of an eye. I can gather useful information. I can slip in and out of places without anybody seeing me. While I'll confess that I miss painting—"

"You paint?" I couldn't help the glance I threw at Earl's thick fingers as I said it. They did not look like the fingers of any painters I knew.

Earl smiled. "I do, or at least I did. You may have seen some of my work."

I thought hard. "I don't think so. Not unless you have a hobby painting rudimentary unicorns for orcs." That reminded me. "Speaking of Bleakpoint, I tried to ask you this before, but you disappeared before I could get an answer." I held up my wrist, the circlet of leaves and hair starting to look a little worse for wear. "Were you there the night we got these?"

Sebastian came to stand next to me. "You shouldn't bother Earl with things that don't matter."

I shot him a death glare. "It matters to me." I turned my attention back to Earl. "Were you?"

Earl looked at me and then at Sebastian, his brow furrowing. There was a long silence before Earl eventually spoke. "I can't help. Sorry."

I let out a sigh of frustration. It had been worth a try, but I guessed that night would always remain a mystery, which unfortunately meant I'd never hear the end of Sebastian claiming that we were married. If he dared to tell my mother any such thing, there'd be hell to pay, though. "What did you paint?"

Earl's gaze strayed in the direction of the palace. "The ceiling of the throne room."

I gawped at him. "You painted that? But it's so beautiful." I felt terrible for suggesting he'd painted the unicorn. The two things couldn't have been any further apart. I may as well have accused him of lying about not being able to paint.

Sebastian chuckled. "Jack is a huge fan of your work."

"I am." I sobered quickly, remembering Earl had said he couldn't paint anymore. "But you know invisibility, and being able to travel from place to place, is an impressive feat as well."

Earl gave a nod of understanding, a somewhat awkward silence following. Eventually, Earl threw a glance to the sky, the sun already low. "You better be on your way if you want to make the tavern before nightfall. Remember that luck is no longer on your side."

Sebastian mounted the horse and held out a hand, the second horse already safely tethered to the first. "Come on, husband. Time to start the journey home."

I made no move to take his hand. "Don't call me that. If you keep calling me that, you're going to slip up in front of my mum, and I don't want to have to explain to her how I got high on Moombat, and

that I can't actually remember what happened. She brought me up better than that, and you don't want her thinking you're a bad influence, do you?"

Sebastian waggled his fingers, and I eventually gave in, taking up my usual position in front of him, a slight smile on Earl's lips when I looked back at him.

"I'll be seeing you."

"Will you?"

Earl nodded. "Of course. I can be wherever you and Sebastian are. I'm looking forward to the places you might take me to in the future."

I wasn't sure how I felt about that. "Just..." I screwed my face up, unable to say what I wanted to.

Sebastian leaned forward. "I think what Jack is trying to say is that there are certain places that are out of bounds to you, like the bedroom."

Heat flared in my cheeks, Earl's turning a charming shade of red that I suspected matched my own. "I don't... I would never... I won't..."

He was still trying to find the right words to protest as we rode away.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

JACK

Three months later

I paused for a moment to enjoy the sight of Sebastian's heavy-lidded gaze and flushed cheeks as I tightened my fingers around his hips before delivering another deep thrust, his lips parting to release a grunt of pleasure. This was round two, the flame of passion having been tamped down to a more manageable level by a previous bout of energetic sex less than an hour ago.

Hips still moving languorously, I lowered my head to seal our lips together, Sebastian only too happy to arch up and meet me halfway. We shared a long, lingering kiss before I broke the connection and sat back on my haunches, Sebastian spread out before me like the world's most enticing feast. I felt filled by that same sense of peace that had been such a factor of my life since our return to Riverbrook.

The first few days had been hectic, people clamoring for details of our adventure in Askophai. Everyone seemed to have questions. And of course, my family had had more than anyone else. It had been devastating to have to report that I'd gotten no further with my investigation into Annabelle's disappearance. But then, the possibility of her having traveled that way had always been a long shot. The thirteen kingdoms were vast, stretching for thousands of miles, and Annabelle's last known location had been at sea.

It had struck me for the first time that I might never know what had become of my sister. I just prayed that wherever she was, she'd found what she was searching for, and that she was happy. As happy as I was with my infuriating and contrary lover who never gave me so much as a moment's peace.

He'd wasted no time in taking me up on my invitation to move into my farmhouse. It wasn't like he had many possessions, just some clothes and a secret stash of gold coins. My home had never been

quiet—or tidy—since. And I loved it, even if I constantly claimed the opposite. Sebastian helped on the farm—sort of. He was a regular in the tavern, the inhabitants of Riverbrook only too happy to sit and listen to tales of Sebastian's many adventures for hours on end, even if they'd heard them all before. None of them seemed to notice that the story varied slightly, details added or taken away depending on Sebastian's mood. I was sure that at the heart of it there was some truth, but you'd probably have to dig quite deep to find it. It was certainly noticeable that he didn't tell any stories from our time together while I was present. Yet, I'd heard talk of "basilisks the size of a house" and "a very tall troll" at other times, the gossip just making me smile and shake my head fondly.

And as for my family, Sebastian had them wrapped around his little finger. My mother doted on him. My father slapped him on the back so frequently it was a wonder Sebastian didn't have bruises. My brothers and sisters hung on his every word. Sometimes, it felt like my family would have been quite happy to swap me for him. In short, Sebastian had slotted into Riverbrook like he'd always been there.

I'd spent the first few weeks fully prepared for Sebastian to get itchy feet, assuming that when it did hit, we would be off somewhere. But it hadn't happened yet. I had an inkling that some of that was down to Sebastian's magic, or should I say the lack of it. After his tumble down the mountain, it had been inconsistent. That had only worsened after the return of the cup to Chastershire. Without it providing a constant source of good luck, Sebastian's magic was almost non-existent. Sure, there were better days where Sebastian could conjure something that stuck around for at least a few minutes, but there were others where he couldn't summon anything at all. And there were far more of those days.

The absence of his magic wasn't a problem in Riverbrook, where the most dangerous thing we had to face on a daily basis was my mother's ire if we were late for dinner. But I was keenly aware that outside Riverbrook, it would be a factor should Sebastian find himself in any sort of peril. And it was Sebastian, when was he ever not in peril? Of course, he claimed that living without magic was a relief, that he'd always wanted to be "normal." Except no matter how many times he said it, I didn't believe him, something in his eyes saying the opposite.

Sebastian was close. I could tell from the way his teeth had sunk into his bottom lip, and the slight flush that had spread to the golden skin of his chest. I sped up, eager to see him come apart beneath my hands. His hands trailed down my back, smoothing, caressing, nails digging in every now and again, the tiny spark of pain only accentuating the rush of pleasure building in my balls. "Say it, Jack."

I smiled as I buried myself deep once more, Sebastian's body rising to meet me. "Say what?"

"Jaaack!" He dragged my name out in a warning.

I kissed him again, and it was hot and sweet, our tongues doing a perfect impersonation of our lower bodies. I didn't want to come yet. It was too perfect. I wanted to ride that edge of delicious anticipation for as long as I could. And it didn't matter that we could do it all again within the hour, and probably would, since my brother was looking after the farm today.

Except, I was already losing the battle, my orgasm pushing to the surface, the first tendrils of it spreading out from my groin to send heat and pleasure to my lower back and thighs. I ripped my mouth from Sebastian's to pant out my pleasure, giving him the opportunity to talk once more. "Say it, farm boy."

I thrust deep and came, my body shaking, the orgasm all the more intense for it being my second in a short period of time. My forehead came to rest against Sebastian's, my breathing ragged. "I love you."

He chuckled, his orgasm having happened at some point while I'd been too busy with my own. Fingers stroked through my hair, and he pressed a kiss to my forehead. "Love you too, farm boy."

I eased myself off him, and Sebastian rolled onto his back, lacing his fingers behind his head. I took the opportunity to use his biceps as a pillow, a smile on my face as I stared up at the ceiling. I had to admit that over time declaring my love had grown easier, but it was still fun to play dumb when Sebastian got greedy and demanded it on cue. I turned my head his way. He was wearing his usual post-sex smile of satisfaction. "I keep waiting for that to get boring."

His gaze found mine, his smile growing bigger. "Us? No way. We'll never get boring."

I propped myself up on one elbow, my fingers bridging the space between us to stroke across his abdomen. "Why not?"

""Why not?" Sebastian's eyes were shining with amusement. "Because we're not boring people." He lifted a hand to drag a thumb over my lower lip, laughing and snatching it back when I snapped my teeth together as if to bite him. "See! You're vicious, and I'm never going to be able to tame you completely. And I like that."

I held his gaze, my fingers stilling on his skin. "You'd say, though, wouldn't you... if life in Riverbrook ever grew too dull for you?"

Sebastian shook his head. "It won't. Not while you're here. I'm enjoying the rest. No basilisks. No trolls. No sleeping rough. No orcs out for vengeance. It's refreshing." He leaned forward for a kiss. "Don't bite me."

I laughed, and I was still laughing when our lips met, the kiss that followed, slow and sweet. It was a kiss of two lovers who had nothing better to do with their afternoon than bask in their happiness.

Sebastian had just rolled on top of me, one hand making its inevitable way toward my cock in a prelude to heat building between us once more when the hammering came at the door. We both froze, our gazes meeting in a mutual frown. Sebastian's hair hung down, tickling my chest as he turned his head toward the noise. "Who do you think that is?"

I shook my head. "It won't be any of my family. They know better than to drop in without an invitation on a day when we have nowhere else to be." I didn't need to add that they'd learned that the hard way, my brother, Dillon, getting quite the eyeful a few weeks ago. I was sure Sebastian remembered that incident only too well. At least, for that reason, we knew the door was locked.

"In that case"—Sebastian's head lowered once more—"it can't be anyone important. We'll just pretend we're not here."

I nodded, only too happy to resume kissing again. There were a few moments of blessed silence, and then the hammering came again. Louder this time. I dug my fingers into Sebastian's scalp and tried to concentrate on what was important. Him. Anything else could wait.

More hammering. And then... "Bass! Open up. I know you're in there. I need to talk to you before they get here."

Sebastian froze, the hand that cupped my cheek going rigid. I stared up at him. "What? Who is it? And what do they want?" He leapt off the bed without answering me, already halfway into his trousers before I'd sat up. "Sebastian?"

He threw a glance my way, the look on his face setting off alarm bells. "Stay here. I'll get rid of them."

"Get rid of who?" My question was asked to the back of Sebastian's head, my lover already on his way out of the room. I sighed as I heaved myself out of the bed and reached for my own trousers. Did Sebastian really think I was just going to stay here? He probably did. Well, he was wrong. Hushed voices met my exit from the room. It wasn't until I drew close that I could make out what they were saying.

"You have told him?"

Who was him? Me? The voice sounded familiar, but I couldn't place it.

"Keep your voice down. He'll hear you." That was Sebastian, his voice a low hiss.

There was a bitter laugh. "I think that's the least of your problems."

I rounded the corner, the identity of the mystery man immediately making itself known. Leofric. I had no idea what he was doing here in Riverbrook, but given their conversation, it seemed he was trying to warn Sebastian about something. Something that I apparently didn't know. "Told me what?"

Both men spun around, Leofric offering a tight smile while Sebastian swore. "I told you to stay in bed."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "And how naïve of you to think that I might actually do that." I focused my attention on Leofric. "It's nice to see you again, Leofric." I made a sweeping gesture with my arm. Welcome to my humble abode." When he didn't respond, I crossed my arms over my chest and pinned him with a look of challenge, repeating my question. "Told me what?"

A dull flush appeared on his cheekbones. "I... er..." He looked to Sebastian for help, but the floor had apparently grown so fascinating that Sebastian couldn't take his eyes off it.

"One of you needs to tell me. I'm not stupid."

At that moment, the door burst open, my brother Dillon looking far more ruffled than I'd ever seen him before, his eyes glittering with a manic intensity. "Jack, come quick. There's a royal carriage, and they're coming here."

Frowning, I followed him outside. Someone from Chastershire? If they'd lost their wooden cup again, they were on their own. Once was unfortunate, but twice would be ridiculous. They could get someone else to risk their lives for it.

I arrived outside to find that when Dylan had said "here," he hadn't meant here as in Riverbrook, he'd meant here as in my farm, the elaborate carriage already drawing to a halt outside, and it wasn't from Chastershire, their royal coat of arms having become only too familiar during my time in the palace. Leofric and Sebastian joined us outside as I turned to Dillon. "Which royal house is that?"

He was almost bouncing on his heels, my younger brother demonstrating a sudden excitement about royalty. "That's Silverwood, the royal household from Padora."

"Padora!" My gaze slid across to Sebastian as I echoed the word.

He grabbed hold of my hand, the look in his eyes beseeching. "Just remember, Jack, that this doesn't change anything. I'm still me, and I had good reasons for not saying anything. We can talk later, and I'll explain."

"Explain what?"

Dillon nudged me in the ribs, his voice as high-pitched as I'd ever heard it. "Look! Is that the queen? It must be. This is amazing. A queen here. Who would ever have thought it? Do you think she'll want to see the cows?"

More confused than I'd ever been before, I answered automatically. "I doubt it. Queens aren't usually into cows." I didn't look Dillon's way, my eyes trained on the tall lady with blond hair dressed in silken finery being helped from the carriage. It struck me as I prepared to face royalty yet again that neither Sebastian nor I had stopped to put a shirt on. We weren't wearing boots either, my bare toes quite incongruous against the dirt. Could you be executed for meeting royalty while inappropriately dressed? But then, this was my house. I hadn't invited her. She'd just turned up. Despite my state of undress, I made an effort to stand tall, and to pretend that the amount of bare skin I had on display wouldn't be a problem.

Safely on the ground without incident, the queen took a look around, her gaze skimming over me and my brother to pause on Sebastian. To my surprise, her lips curved up into an immediate smile. "Sebastian Beauchamp-Hedges, you have been a very difficult man to track down. The least you can do is come and give your mother a hug."

Mother! As Sebastian rushed forward and threw his arms around the woman who was almost as tall as he was, the word rebounded in my head. It couldn't be true because if she was the queen, and he was her son, that would make him a...

I looked to Leofric, Sebastian's friend having the good sense to look pained. "He's a prince." My voice sounded weak, like it belonged to someone else. "And you knew?"

Leofric's grimace grew more pronounced. "I thought he would have told you by now. I'm really sorry. You shouldn't have had to find out like this, Jack."

Damn right, I shouldn't have. Sebastian not only hadn't told me, but he'd made up a story about growing up in a small village. He'd looked me in the eye, and he'd lied. He'd made a complete mockery of everything we were to each other.

And I didn't know where that left us.

Continue Jack and Sebastian's story in The Wandering Prince. You can pre-order <u>here.</u>

THANKS

Thanks for reading this book. If you can take the time to leave a review, I would really appreciate it.

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The Beauty Within

A Temporary Situation

ATEMPORARY SITUATION

(Temporary; Tristan and Dom #1)

Personal assistant Dominic is a consummate professional. Funny then, that he harbors such unprofessional feelings toward Tristan Maxwell, the CEO of the company. No, not in that way. The man may be the walking epitome of gorgeousness dressed up in a designer suit. But, Dominic's immune. Unlike most of the workforce, he can see through the pretty facade to the arrogant, self-entitled asshole below. It's lucky then, that the man's easy enough to avoid.

Disaster strikes when Dominic finds himself having to work in close proximity as Tristan's P.A. The man is infuriatingly unflappable, infuriatingly good-humored, and infuriatingly unorthodox. In short, just infuriating. A late-night rescue leading to a drunken pass only complicates matters further, especially with the discovery that Tristan is both straight and engaged.

Hatred turns to tolerance, tolerance to friendship, and friendship to mutual passion. One thing's for sure, if Tristan sets his sights on Dominic, there's no way Dominic has the necessary armor or willpower to keep a force of nature like Tristan at bay for long, no matter how unprofessional a relationship with the boss might be. He may just have to revise everything he previously thought and believed in for a chance at love.

Buy now from Amazon

NOT SO SILENT NIGHT

One grumpy patient. One unconventional nurse. Twenty-two reindeer later.

Things aren't great for Xander Cole. It's Christmas, he's fractured his pelvis on a skiing trip he never wanted to go on, and his on/off boyfriend is most definitely off. No wonder he's not exactly full of festive cheer.

Ferris Night isn't having much luck either. His plan to take a break from work before starting a new job has been wrecked by a flooded flat. With nowhere to stay, he grabs the opportunity for a job as a live-in nurse with both hands. After all, how hard can it be?

Xander doesn't need a nurse. Especially one who's far too flirty, far too attractive, far too into Christmas, and far too good at getting his own way. But Ferris has never faced a challenge that couldn't be overcome with a bit of charm and perseverance. It doesn't matter how attractive Xander might be. He's immune. Maybe.

- As banter and sparring between the two men turn into more, a nurse might not be needed, but both men could be in for a fresh start to the new year.
- A low angst 63k romantic comedy, which features snarky banter, a slow burn relationship, two men who can give as good as they get, an annoying ex, and a Star Wars nativity scene.
 - *Please note that this story was originally released as a single POV short story as part of the Winter

Wonderland Prolific Works giveaway. The story has been revised and is now dual POV with over 40k of added content*

Buy from Amazon

TEMPORARY INSANITY

(Temporary; Paul and Indy #1)

Sleeping with the enemy never felt so good.

When Paul Davenport comes face to face with the man he caught in bed with his boyfriend years before, it's hate at first sight. Well, second sight. Indy should be apologizing, not flirting. Except the gorgeous barman is completely oblivious to their paths ever having crossed before.

Despite his feelings, Paul's powerless to resist the full-on charm offensive that follows. It's fine though. It's just sex. No emotions. No getting to know each other. Just a bout of temporary insanity that's sure to run its course once the simmering passion starts to wear off.

Only what if it's not? Indy's nothing like the man Paul expected him to be from his past actions. What if they're perfect for each other and Paul's just too stubborn to see it? Forging a relationship with him would require an emotional U-turn Paul might not be capable of making.

There's a thin line between love and hate, and Paul's about to discover just how thin it really is. He can't possibly be falling for the man that ruined his life. Can he?

Warning: This book contains hate sex—sort of, lots of banter, and a pink elephant. No, really it does. Actually, two elephants.

Please note: Although this book is in the Temporary series, it occurs during the same timeline as A Temporary Situation. Therefore, both books can be read as standalones and in any order.

Buy from Amazon

TAKING LOVE'S LEAD

Sometimes you've got to stalk a man to win his heart

A whirlwind encounter has web designer Zachary Cole reassessing his life and what he wants from it.

Knocked for six by a less than orthodox meeting with the sexy Edgar, he resolves to see him again.

Even if it does involve hatching a plan using his heavily pregnant sister, her dalmatian, and a rather large dose of subterfuge.

Sick of being dumped, dog-walker Edgar's sworn off relationships. Zack might just happen to pop up wherever he goes, but that's not going to change anything. It's not like Zack would ever want anything more than a walk on the wild side with him anyway. They're just too different. He'll stick to his four-legged friends instead. They might get up to a lot of mischief but they never let him down.

Zack wants love. Edgar only wants friendship. Can the two men find common ground amid the chaos of Edgar's life? Or is Zack going to find that no matter what he does, he'll end up having to walk away?

A romantic comedy full of mad mishaps with dogs, ducks, and lakes. Oh, and two stubborn men as well who find it almost impossible to both be on the same page.

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