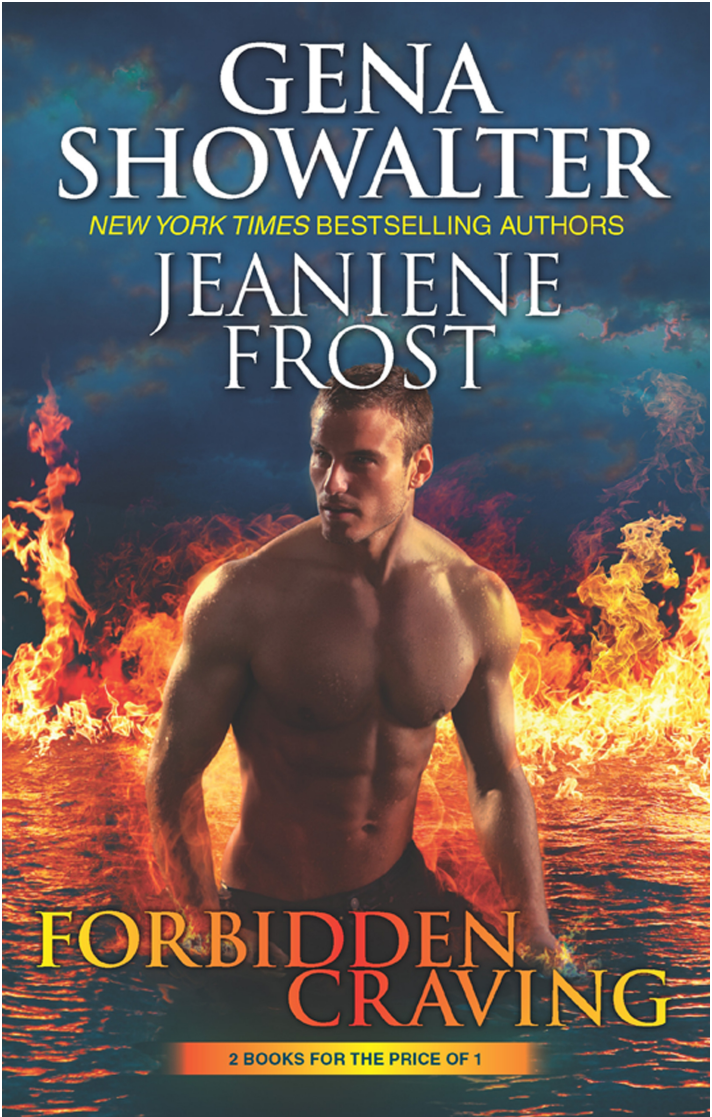
GENA SHOWALTER
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHORS
JEANIENE FROST
FORBIDDEN CRAVING
2 BOOKS FOR THE PRICE OF 1

Gena Showalter
Jeaniene Frost

Forbidden Craving: The Nymph King / The Beautiful Ashes

Аннотация

Two unforgettable fan-favorite novels from the biggest stars of paranormal romance.The Nymph KingGena ShowalterFemales young and old, beautiful and plain crave Valerian's touch. None can resist his blatant sensuality and potent allure—until he steals Shaye Holling from a Florida beach and holds her prisoner in his underwater kingdom. Now Valerian must fight for the privilege of claiming her as his own. Because there's one thing Shaye doesn't know…when a nymph discovers his true mate, she's his for life.The Beautiful AshesJeaniene FrostWith her sister missing, Ivy discovers a startling truth—the disturbing, otherworldly hallucinations she's always had are real, and her sister is trapped in a demon realm. The one person who can help her is the dangerously attractive rebel who's bound by an ancient legacy to betray her.

Two unforgettable fan-favorite novels from the biggest stars of paranormal romance

The Nymph King Gena Showalter

Includes all-new scenes!

Females young and old, beautiful and plain crave Valerian's touch. None can resist his blatant sensuality and potent allure—until he steals Shaye Holling from a Florida beach and holds her prisoner in his underwater kingdom. Now Valerian must fight for the privilege of claiming her as his own. Because there's one thing Shaye doesn't know...when a nymph discovers his true mate, she's his for life.

The Beautiful Ashes Jeaniene Frost

With her sister missing, Ivy discovers a startling truth—the disturbing, otherworldly hallucinations she's always had are real, and her sister is trapped in a demon realm. The one person who can help her is the dangerously attractive rebel who's bound by an ancient legacy to betray her. Adrian and Ivy must battle their desires if they're to save her sister, but Adrian knows the truth about Ivy's destiny, and sooner or later, it will be Ivy on one side, Adrian on the other and nothing but ashes in between...

Praise for New York Times bestselling author Gena Showalter

"A world of myth, mayhem and love under the sea!"

—#1 New York Times bestselling author J.R. Ward

"The Showalter name on a book means guaranteed entertainment."

—RT Book Reviews

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—#1 New York Times bestselling author Kresley Cole

Praise for New York Times bestselling author Jeaniene Frost

“Jeaniene Frost brings her signature wit, sizzle, and extraordinary imagination to this epic new series. I was addicted from page one.”

—#1 New York Times bestselling author Jennifer L. Armentrout

“Frost’s fast-paced paranormal romantic thriller is a pure stunner...”

—Publishers Weekly (starred review)

“Jeaniene Frost is blessed with a creative soul.”

—#1 New York Times bestselling author Sherrilyn Kenyon

Forbidden Craving

Gena Showalter & Jeaniene Frost

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THE NYMPH KING

Gena Showalter

To Jeaniene Frost—what an honor and dream come true to be in a duology with you!

CHAPTER ONE

Atlantis

VALERIAN, KING OF THE NYMPHS, lover extraordinaire and greatest leader of the greatest army in the history of Atlantis, untangled from the naked, slumbering woman beside him...only to discover his legs were entwined with two other naked, slumbering women.

He truly thought to leave this paradise?

With a sleep-rough chuckle, he abandoned all efforts to escape and relaxed against the softness of the bed. Satisfaction hummed inside him.

The females curled closer to him, soft tendrils of hair—a delightful mix of black, brown and red—cascading across the muscle and sinew he worked hard to maintain.

Did life get any better than this?

Had he known what awaited him in this massive palace, he would have fought the dragon shape-shifter army for rights to it years ago rather than mere weeks.

Nymphs, once touted eternal wanderers, had desired a permanent home almost as desperately as they desired sex.

Sex was like air to nymphs. Without it, they suffered, and they died.

They'd won the palace with only minor losses, expecting

to charm and seduce the female dragon shape-shifters still in residence. Within minutes of victory, however, the entire enclosure had emptied, leaving no one to wine, dine and recline.

Until yesterday.

Beneath the palace were catacombs. There, Valerian discovered a strange, upright pool—or rather, a portal leading into another world. The human world. Earth, it was called.

All his life he'd heard rumors about the portal and the topside world. Everyone inside Atlantis had heard, considering there were humans scattered among them. But Valerian had never dreamed he would become the gatekeeper.

He'd watched, dumbfounded, as the trio of femininity currently occupying his bed stumbled through the pool. A sleek black beauty, a plump redhead and brown-skinned goddess.

At first, they'd looked at him and panicked.

"Where are we? Who are you?"

"What happened?"

"I can't... I want to go..."

"Oh, wow. You're hot. Take off your clothes."

The pheromone Valerian exuded every day...hour...minute was the most powerful in the world and considered a potent aphrodisiac. Pair that aphrodisiac with his angelic face, and who could resist him?

In the back of his mind, he heard other immortals calling him conceited, narcissistic and boastful. He considered himself honest.

Besides, he'd never really cared about the reasons why women preferred him over other men. He'd simply enjoyed the end results. Again and again.

The trio of beauties had basically attacked him, kissing every inch of him while ripping at his clothes. He'd barely gotten the females into his bedroom with his nonexistent virtue in tact.

Between rounds one and five, he'd finally managed to question his lovers. One moment they'd been swimming in the ocean, the next they'd been sucked through a swirling black hole...the next they were inside the catacombs of the fortress.

Welcome to Atlantis. Home to creatures you've only ever considered myth.

Vampires, Minotaurs, griffins, Amazons, trolls, centaurs, winged horses, mermaids and more. The Greek gods had trapped the different immortal races in a dome under the sea. Less competition for human adoration, Valerian supposed.

Peering up at the ceiling, he braced his nape with one hand. The dome had been created with naturally grown crystals and had always protected the fortress from the elements. Now, light uncoiled from the sparkling minerals to caress the chamber he'd claimed as his own.

The master's suite. An enormous space with luxuries beyond imagining. A unicorn pelt had been turned into a rug and draped in front of a marble hearth.

Valerian would rather the unicorn still lived, wild and free.

Never-ending fires crackled from bejeweled torches that hung

along golden brick walls. A dresser forged from a massive diamond pressed against a vanity that had been cut from one of the last trees to grow in the Forest of Wisdom Eternal.

The bed occupied the center of an island cutout, with three separate bridges leading to and from the rest of the room. In the spaces between each bridge, a dark abyss loomed. One wrong step...

The perfect precaution against attack.

"Valerian." The bronzed goddess stretched her arms above her head and arched her back, her expression soft from slumber. "You weren't just a dream."

"No. I'm very real." He caught her hand and lifted her knuckles to his lips, licked. "And I'm very appreciative of your sweet sweetness."

Warm breath fanned his pectorals as she chuckled. "I've never slept with a man after a two-second introduction, but I find I can't regret my actions."

"Regrets never do anyone any good," he told her.

She giggled. "While multiple orgasms do a whole lot of good."

She had no idea.

Need arose, and he considered going for round six. Problem was, good sex required half an hour, at the very least, and his men awaited him in the training arena. He could spare another five minutes, perhaps, but no more.

The surviving dragon shape-shifters would return and attack; they would be willing to do anything to regain ownership of the

fortress.

He sighed. “I must go.”

Moans of disappointed erupted.

“Are you sure?” The black beauty wrapped her fingers around the base of his erection. “Because your body says I want to stay.”

Three sets of hands and breasts were suddenly all over him. Hot, greedy mouths sucked at him. Wet, needy female cores rubbed against him. The scent of desire enveloped him, and he gnashed his teeth, wanting, needing, to please.

The blessing and curse of a nymph.

“Ladies—” he began.

“Just being near you makes me desperate to come.” The plump redhead with her deliciously ample curves purred at him.

“I can’t get enough of you.”

“I’m addicted to you and pretty sure I’ll die without you.”

He ignored the fiery heat that ignited in his blood. At times, when the need overwhelmed him, he was reduced to an animalistic state, taking his lovers with a savage intensity better suited for the battlefield.

Valerian leaped from the bed and swept up his leathers. The women pouted as he dressed and strapped on his weapons.

“There are other warriors here,” he said. “Men just like me. You’re welcome to seduce anyone who catches your eye.”

He’d never had a problem sharing, and doubted he ever would.

“Dibs!” one said.

“On whom?” another asked.

The brown-skinned goddess fluffed her hair. “All of them.”

The black beauty punched the pillow. “Greed will be the death of you—because I’ll kill you dead!”

The nymph pheromone usually erased inhibitions to reveal true desire, but these humans struck him as particularly susceptible. Willing to kill for pleasure?

The perfect females.

“There are hundreds of warriors here,” he said. “More than enough to sate each of you for months. Years.”

If they heard him, they gave no notice. They continued arguing among themselves...until the heat of anger morphed into the heat of desire. Lips kissed and hands wandered.

Well. I’d say my job here is done.

* * *

CLANG. WHOOSH. CLANG.

Sweat trickled down Valerian’s bare chest and back as he swung his sword. The heavy metal slammed into his opponent’s upraised weapon.

Broderick toppled, crash-landing, dirt flinging in every direction. Some of the grains sprinkled over Valerian’s freshly polished boots.

He waited for his friend to stand, but Broderick remained prone. “Get up, man.”

“Can’t,” was the panted reply. “Also, I don’t want to.”

Valerian frowned. Four times he’d put the fierce Broderick on the ground. In only one hour.

And Broderick wasn't even the worst case!

If his men grew any weaker, the fortress would be lost the first time they were challenged. They needed sex. Today.

The humans would probably love a go at his nymphs, but they would have to choose one warrior, only one. The more nymphs they bedded, the more addicted to the pheromone they would become, until they lived and breathed for their next nymph lover. And yet, the second the females made their selection, fights would break out among his army.

"I hate this," Broderick muttered, his voice strained. He sat up, head bent and anchored in place by his upraised hands, his golden hair shielding his eyes. "Weakness is for women, babies and the elderly."

Nods throughout the room.

Valerian slashed his sword's tip into the sand. A tip that had been shaped and honed into the image of a skull—a tip that inflicted irreparable damage to his opponents.

His gaze traveled the ranks of his army. Some of the men were sitting on a bench, sharpening their blades, while others leaned against a stone wall, their expressions lost, faraway. Only Theophilus appeared ready for anything more than a nap.

Well, that wasn't quite true. Though Joachim was hunched over, his elbows resting on his knees, his head was tilted to the side as he gazed up at Valerian with undeniable sparks of fury.

What was his cousin angry about now?

"Line up," Valerian commanded the entire group. "Now." The

sharpness of his voice finally snagged everyone's attention.

The men stumbled into a clumsy zigzag formation. What he saw? Skin stretched tight with strain, shaky grips and unsteady legs. At this rate, Valerian would be the only one to offer any sort of resistance if the dragons attacked. And the dragons would attack. Darius the Heartless, their exalted king, wasn't known for his forgiving nature.

"I need you ready for action." His hands fisted at his sides. Defeat wasn't something he allowed. Ever.

A warrior won. Always. Without exception.

Broderick sighed and scrubbed a hand down his grim features. "We need sex, Valerian, and we need it now."

"I know." He considered his options. There were few.

Possibility number one: he could send a handful of soldiers into the Outer City a few miles away. Sirens—women who seduced with their voices—lived there, and they could be convinced to move into the fortress.

First problem: sirens sided with dragons, and they could strike the nymphs while they were weak.

Second problem: sirens usually killed those they bedded, an impulse as fierce as a nymph's need for sex.

Third problem: since the march to the fortress, the females of Atlantis had avoided nymphs as if they came with a side of plague.

Word had spread. Give yourself to a nymph, and you lose yourself to his dark, sexual hunger.

Possibility number two: rethink possibility number one.

"You've been with humans," Dorian said. "I can smell them on you, and it's destroying my ability to concentrate." With his obsidian hair, godlike features and mischievous sense of humor, women of every race usually flocked to him. There was nothing mischievous about him right now; he radiated jealousy and resentment. "I almost—almost—want to have my wicked way with you."

Guilt consumed Valerian. He'd taken care of his needs while neglecting those of his men. He had to make this right.

There was a third possibility: entering uncharted territory. Why the previous owner of the palace hadn't thought of it, Valerian wasn't sure and didn't care.

No risk, no reward.

He studied his men. They were a range of heights and colors, from the palest ivory to the darkest onyx. Some were cut with muscle while others were stacked.

"I found the portal into the human world," he said, bracing his hands behind his back. "A small group of us can venture there and convince whatever females we find to return to Atlantis with us."

A chorus of "Yes" immediately erupted. Smiles abounded.

"Thank you, great king." A beaming Shivawn patted the shoulder of the man beside him.

"We can't stay long." Not with dragons foaming-at-the-mouth eager to reclaim the fortress.

"Perhaps I'll find my mate," someone called.

Everyone cheered.

Valerian nodded in agreement. When a nymph mated, he mated for life, no matter his age or circumstances. His body would never crave another; his heart would beat only for one. The one.

The very idea should have been terrifying to him. But just like the other warriors, Valerian wanted his mate more than he wanted...anything.

His twin brother had died years ago, leaving a hollow ache in his chest. An ache he prayed his mate would fill. He'd searched for her. For centuries. No stone in Atlantis had been left unturned. Eventually he'd begun to despair. What if I don't have a mate?

I do. I must.

He wouldn't give up hope.

His father had told him a nymph would know his "one" the moment he scented her, and she would, in turn, recognize him, choosing him above all others.

"I'll lead five of you to the surface." Valerian wondered what kind of world waited on the other side of the portal. Dangerous, no doubt. "We'll go in, find as many women as possible as fast as possible and return with those who wish to follow us."

Joachim's dark brows knit. "Why don't we simply take the women we want? Why must we give them a choice?"

"We aren't dragons." In other words, they weren't barbarians.

"Well. My ravishment of you can be postponed, it seems." The dryness of Dorian's tone failed to mask his excitement.

Broderick frowned. "What if human females want nothing to do with us?"

Laughter erupted.

Grinning, Valerian patted him on the shoulder. "Good one."

Broderick's frown melted, revealing a smile. He snickered. "I thought so."

"How will we decide who beds whom?" Shivawn asked.

"My elite will go first, from the highest ranked to the lowest." The elite had fought in more wars, were stronger, faster and needed sex more than an average solider. "I have no need to choose, of course."

Broderick rubbed his hands together. "How soon can we leave?"

There was no reason to wait and every reason to hurry. "We leave now."

CHAPTER TWO

A BAREFOOT BAY destination wedding. Complete with a wide expanse of glistening beach, crashing cerulean waves, a magical pink-gold sunset and a warm, sultry breeze. White rose petals formed a line along the fine-grained sand; as the wind blew, a few of those petals danced and twirled away. The couple even now pledging their undying love stared deeply into each other's eyes, their hands clutched tightly, their lips parted in expectation of the coming kiss.

They presented a beautiful sight—but Shaye Holling only wanted to gag.

However, she maintained her smile, brittle though it was, and fought the urge to adjust her ill-fitting seashell bikini top. The grass skirt itched her calves.

The more horrid-looking the bridesmaids, the more exquisite the bride, eh?

Thanks, Mom.

Yep. Her mother was the bride.

Shaye shifted uncomfortably, her shoulders burning. She'd been standing in the sunlight for only half an hour, but her ultrapale skin had already turned a lovely shade of lobster red.

In fact, the richly dressed crowd of onlookers no longer eyed the bride and groom. Instead, they stared at Shaye.

And why not? Red skin. White hair. Brown eyes. Blue seashells. Green skirt. I'm a freaking rainbow.

She shifted again and dang it, her seashells dipped, forcing her to adjust.

Silver lining: a new idea for her business, Anti-Cards, popped into her mind.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart. Because of you, I found religion. I finally believe in hell.

She sighed. Her mother's long silvery-white hair—so like Shaye's own—waved down her back, a perfect mimic of the creamy satin slip dress billowing at her ankles. Nowhere was there a woman more gorgeous than Tamara soon-to-be Waddell.

No one more surgically enhanced. No one else who went through men like sexual Kleenex.

Okay. There was probably someone else who went through men like sexual Kleenex. But come on! This was her mom's sixth marriage.

Tamara looked over at her and frowned. Back straight, Shaye, she mouthed. Smile.

A straight back displays your breasts to their best advantage, Shaye.

A smile is honey and men are flies, Shaye.

Do you want to die alone, Shaye?

Shaye straightened her shoulders to make her mother happy and pretended to focus on the minister.

"'To love, honor and cherish...'" His smooth baritone created a perfect harmony with the gentle lap of waves.

Mostly, she heard love, blah, blah, blah.

Love. How she despised the word. People used love as an excuse to do ridiculous things.

He cheated on me, but I'm going to stay with him because I love him.

He hit me, but I'm going to stay with him because I love him.

He stole every penny from my savings, but I'm not going to press charges because I love him.

Her mother had said each of those things at one time or another.

And how many times had Tamara's boyfriends groped Shaye

herself, claiming they'd fallen in love with her?

Her, a mere child.

Shaye's father was another prime example of the "love is all that matters" idiocy.

I can't live with you and your mom, Shaye. I don't love her anymore. I love Glenda.

His secretary. Of course, after Glenda had lost her sparkle, he'd fallen for Charlene, then Kasey, then Morgan.

When Morgan divorced him to be with another man, Shaye sent him an I'm so sorry card. What she'd really wanted to send was a Finally getting what you deserve sucks big-time, doesn't it? card, but none had been available—the very reason she'd started making her own.

Over the years, her Anti-Card business had only grown. There were a lot of people out there who wanted to tell someone to screw off—in a fun way.

She worked close to eighty hours a week, but she loved every second. A love that would never come back to bite her.

Thanks to popular cards like I'm so miserable without you, it's almost like you're here and You can do more with a kind word and a gun than with just a kind word, she provided jobs for twenty-three like-minded men and women and made more money than she'd ever dreamed possible.

Life, for the weird-looking little girl who'd only ever disappointed her parents, was finally...not good, not really, but good enough.

She sighed.

"You may now kiss the bride," the minister said.

Amid joyous applause, the brow-lifted, cheek-implanted groom laid a wet one on Tamara, who returned the kiss with vigor.

How long would this marriage last?

Not my problem. Soon Shaye would be on a plane, returning to Cincinnati and her quiet little apartment. No family. Few friends. Absolutely zero romance.

Life would be worth living again.

The glowing couple turned and strolled down the aisle, hand in hand. The lyrical thrums of a harp echoed behind them.

Daughter duty done at last. As everyone else filed toward the reception tent, Shaye inched closer to the sandy shore, moving away from the masses, escape within her grasp.

"Where are you going, silly?" A bridesmaid latched on to her arm with a surprisingly intense grip. "Remember, we're supposed to take pictures and serve the guests."

She swallowed a groan. Basically, the torture had only just begun.

* * *

AFTER AN HOUR of posing for a photographer who finally gave up trying to make the antisocial daughter of the bride smile, Shaye served cake to a line of champagne-guzzling guests. As expected. Most of those guests ignored her, merely grabbing a plate and ambling away. A few tried to talk to her, but quickly

retreated when she snapped a cranky reply.

When the line stopped progressing, she glanced up, her eyes narrowed. A man—one of the groomsmen—had claimed his dessert but hadn't stepped out of the way. Instead, he grinned at her.

"No, thank you," she said, being preemptive in case that grin meant Let's get our flirt on.

He balanced the cake in one hand and swirled his champagne flute with the other. His green eyes twinkled with merriment. "I'll take a little slice of you if you're serving it."

Wow. Talk about inappropriate.

Should she throat punch him now or later?

Being nice is a choice, her therapist once told her. You don't have to be cruel to others, physically or emotionally, to get your point across. All you need to do is communicate your desires in a firm but polite manner.

"I'm not serving myself to anyone." Choose your attitude. Communicate your desires. "I'm not interesting in flirting, either." Good? Good.

Groomsman's grin only broadened. "How about a dance? I'll do all the flirting, and you can simply enjoy the fruits of my labors."

"No, thank you," she repeated. She turned to the man standing behind him and handed over a plate. "Sorry for your wait, sir."

Groomsman's grin slipped a little. He drained his glass and set the empty on the table, exactly where it didn't belong. "I get the

feeling your mother...exaggerated about the best way to approach you. I should probably—"

"Shaye, darling," her mother called airily. The scent of her expensive perfume wafted as she floated to Shaye's side, blending with the aroma of sugar and spice. "Wonderful. You've already met your new stepbrother, Preston."

Stepbrother? Well, that showed exactly how much contact Shaye had had with her mom these past few years. She hadn't known groom number six had children. Actually, she hadn't even met her newest daddy until an hour before the wedding.

Shaye glanced at Preston. "Nice to meet you."

"A true pleasure," he said, a little unsure.

He was a very handsome man, but he wasn't even close to her type: absent.

She gathered two plates to pass to the couple behind him. Communicate desire. "If you'll excuse me, I really must finish serving the guests before there's a revolt." A few ladies at the back of the line looked ready to claw out her eyes just to eat the jelly inside.

Tamara uttered a strained laugh. "There's no reason to be rude, Shaye. You can do your duties while getting to know your new brother."

"No, thank you." He wouldn't be her brother for long. No reason to forge a relationship already doomed to fail.

Her mother hissed, "I hate when you speak those three little words."

"Why? They're polite."

"You," her mother said, pointing to one of the other horrendously clad bridesmaids. "Take over the cake. Shaye, you will come with me."

Strong fingers curled around Shaye's wrist. A second later she was being dragged out of the reception tent to the edge of the beach.

Sand squished between her sandaled toes as a warm, salty breeze wrapped itself around her, swishing her grass skirt over her knees. Sunlight had faded completely. Now slivers of ethereal moonlight illuminated their path. Waves sang a gentle, soothing song.

Her mom's velvety-brown eyes—eyes exactly like her own—narrowed slightly. She dropped Shaye's hand as if contact could cause premature wrinkles. "Do you want to kill my hopes and dreams? Because that's what you're doing."

Shaye wrapped her arms around her middle. "Your hopes and dreams...for me?"

"Of course for you! At the rate you're going, you're going to die alone, not just unloved but despised. I'll never have a grandbaby."

"There's nothing wrong with dying alone. I imagine it's quite peaceful."

"Would it kill you to be nice?" Tamara smoothed a wisp of hair from her face. "To pretend you have a heart for just a few hours?"

That stung. Badly. “I’ll worry about me, and you worry about you, okay? This kind of upset could cause you to shrivel up like a raisin.”

Horrified, Tamara patted the skin around her eyes. “I just had Botox. I shouldn’t have a single line or wrinkle. Do you see a wrinkle? Tell me!”

A new card flashed through her mind.

There’s only one person worthy of dating you—YOU!

“Mother, you inspire me,” Shaye replied honestly.

Somehow mollified, Tamara brushed her fingertips over the side of her face. “Yes, well. I try.”

“So...are we done here?”

“No! Not even close.” Her mom stomped a high-heeled foot. “Tell me why you spurn everyone. Tell me why you never date.”

She used to date. She’d quickly discovered men never called when they said they would. Most hadn’t been interested in getting to know her as a person; they’d wanted to get her out of her clothing. Some guys had admired other women while they were out with her.

Some had lied straight up. One had used her for her money. Another had cheated on her.

Relationships were too much trouble for too little reward.

Shaye twirled a strand of the grass skirt around her finger. Instead of explaining her reasons to her mother, she said, “I love you, and I’ll call you when you return from your honeymoon. Now I’m going home.”

"You're not going anywhere, young lady. Not until you've apologized to Preston." Tamara shoved a finger in her face. "You treated him shabbily, and I won't have it."

Had she treated him shabbily?

Shaye valued and prized honesty, and that's what she'd given him. Shouldn't he thank her?

Would she ever understand the complexity of human interactions?

"Mother. Nannies raised me." A gentle reminder. "Your orders hold no sway with me."

The color drained from Tamara's cheeks. "But... I'm your mother."

"And I'm the Ice Princess of Bitterslovakia, the Grand Duchess of Rancorstonia and the Queen of Hostileland." The many names Tamera had called her over the years.

Waves splashed in the distance as her mother snapped, "All I've ever wanted was a nice, normal daughter. Instead I'm stuck with you." Tears welled in her eyes. "You won't be happy until you've ruined my wedding."

Fighting the newest sting, Shaye allowed a familiar icy numbness to encompass her. The same numbness she'd relied on during her childhood. A sweet relief against depression and desolation.

Tamara stared past her. "Conner tried to tell me. You're jealous of me. Admit it! I should have disowned you long ago. Conner says negativity must be purged to allow positivity to

flourish."

Wow. Of all the things her mother had said over the years, that little gem might have cut the deepest.

She thinks I'm the problem.

Wow. Just...wow!

As a little girl, Shaye had craved her mother's attention, approval and adoration more than breath. But nothing she'd tried had worked. Not gifts or fits or pretending to be the woman's shadow. Once, Shaye had even run away.

The police had found her, and the nanny had come to pick her up.

"Why don't you do us both a favor and take responsibility for your own life," Shaye said, her voice as cold as her internal armor.

The tears began to pour down Tamara's cheeks. "Conner and I wanted so badly for this day to be perf—" Her eyes widened and glazed with lust. "Perfect," she finished on a dreamy sigh. "Hmm. So perfect."

Her voice had dropped to a husky purr.

"Mother?"

"Man." Tamara stretched out her arms. "My man."

"I don't understand." Shaye dragged her gaze to the ocean—her mouth fell open in shock.

There, rising from the water like primitive sea gods, were six gloriously tall, muscled barbarians. The moon glowed behind them reverently, providing each male with a golden halo.

The warriors were shirtless, revealing washboard abs and skin so tanned it made her think liquid gold had been poured over steel. They looked like supermodels. Only better. Yes, so much better.

Unbelievable...surreal...magnificent.

As the six warriors focused on Shaye, molten air snagged in her lungs, melting her precious ice armor.

The urge to strip and splay herself atop a table to offer her body as the dinner buffet bombarded her. She would be an all-you-can-eat buffet. No charge.

She moistened her lips. Her mouth watered, her skin tingling, and her stomach clenched.

I'm...turned on? By strangers?

What's wrong with me?

The men continued to prowl toward her. They were so close she could see the silvery water droplets sliding down their chests and gathering in their navels.

Other droplets slid lower...

Her gaze snagged on the man in the middle, and she forgot how to blink.

Dangerous, her most feminine instincts whispered. Lethal.

He was taller than the rest of the group, his dark blond hair hanging in a wet tangle around features that had been chiseled by a master. His eyes... Oh, glory hallelujah, his eyes. They were blue-green, neither color blending with the other but standing alone, so wickedly mesmerizing she felt the pull of them all the

way to her bones.

Her nipples hardened, and an ache suddenly throbbed between her legs.

There was something wild about him. Something untamed and savage. His confident swagger, perhaps. The deceptively calm glint in his expression that said he did what he pleased, when he pleased.

As she stared at him, he stared at her. He studied her face, searing arousal flickering in those magnificent eyes, the blue-green deepening and mixing at last, becoming smoldering turquoise.

Raw, masculine perfection.

"Mine," her mom said on a wispy catch of breath. "All mine."

A previously missed detail hit her awareness. The warriors carried swords.

They're armed for war.

She gulped. The one in the middle cocked his finger, beckoning her to join him.

Shivering, drowning in the flood of his maleness, she struggled to shake her head no.

Go to him, her stupid whoremones beseeched.

She shook her head, violently this time.

He frowned at her. "Come here." His husky voice drifted across the small distance, almost as intoxicating and heady as a caress.

In seconds, a sensual fog wove through her mind. Her knees

quaked, and another shiver traipsed the length of her spine.

What would happen if he actually touched her?

What would happen if he trailed those luscious pink lips along her every curve and hollow?

Images flashed through her mind. The man's mouth on her breasts, his fingers slipping deep inside her, her legs parting to give him better access...

He's seducing me without even trying.

Either that, or she was seducing herself!

"Come here," he repeated.

"Yes," Tamara said, already stepping toward him. The dreamy glaze in her eyes had darkened with eagerness. "I need to touch you, or I'll die. Please let me touch you."

The part of Shaye that recognized how dangerous these men were also realized there was something wrong with the entire situation—she still couldn't bring herself to care.

Must fight this!

Scowling, she reached out to latch on to her mom's arm and jerk Tamara to a halt. "Don't go near them."

"Let me go." She struggled against Shaye's hold. "I've never been so in love. I need to be with my man."

"We're going back to the tent." Dragging her flailing mother behind her, Shaye raced toward the outside reception area, where laughing voices, soft music and unsuspecting guests greeted her.

She dared a glance behind her. The warriors hadn't slowed or changed direction. They'd followed her, lust in their eyes.

"Help us," she shouted, flinging sand with every step. She swept the curtain aside and entered the tent. "Someone call 911!"

No one paid her any heed. They were too busy dancing and drinking themselves into oblivion, thanks to the open bar.

"Let me go," her mom continued to shout. When that failed to gain her release, she sank her teeth into Shaye's arm.

"Ow!" Not knowing what else to do, Shaye hooked her foot behind her mom's ankle and pushed, inadvertently sending the bride hurling into the dessert table. Platters of food crashed to the ground.

Several people glanced at Shaye before concentrating on the fallen bride with confusion and horror.

"There are men—" Shaye pointed "—out there. Dangerous men with swords. Does anyone have a gun? Did someone call 911?"

Tamara jolted to her feet, unconcerned by the red-and-white frosting now streaking her ten-thousand-dollar dress. She elbowed her way past the guests. "Where he is? My love! My heart!"

"Tamara?" Conner, her new husband, rushed to his bride to lock her in his arms, his expression both concerned and incredulous as she struggled to break free. "What's wrong with you, kitten?"

"I need...him." The last word was uttered on a relieved, happy sigh.

The six sea gods had just stepped into the tent; they consumed

every inch of breathable space and blocked the only viable exit.

The music suddenly stopped. The male guests cowered, as if death had just arrived, and the females gasped in bliss, already moving toward the warriors, reaching out, eager to touch the exquisite display of masculinity.

This couldn't be happening.

The one in the middle scanned the crowd, as if drinking in every detail...but also searching...searching...and finally locking on Shaye. Satisfaction glowed in his eyes.

She trembled as dizzying warmth speared her. More images rushed through her mind. This man naked and sweaty, pressed against her, licking her...

No, no, no. She forced her mind to blank.

Who were these men?

And how did the tall one make her forget who and what she was, and simply enjoy the pleasures she somehow knew he alone could give her?

He alone? What madness!

She grabbed the cake knife from the floor, icing coating her fingers, holding the weapon in front of her. Her heart thumped erratically in her chest.

After multiple physical altercations with different stepsiblings —and sometimes having to fend off a new stepfather—Shaye had considered self-defense classes prudent. The problem? She'd never had to put the lessons into action.

Wait. There was an even bigger problem. None of her

instructors had ever prepared her for a sword-wielding giant.

The warrior in the middle—what was his name?—narrowed his eyes and motioned her over. His kissable, lickable lips lifted in a slow, wicked smile. In the candlelight, he exuded a far more potent sensuality...

A silver hoop winked at his nipple.

Her mouth watered all over again.

"Come," he said, the single word weighted, as if it had more than one meaning.

She shivered, everything inside her screaming to obey him, to come...to suck that hoop into her mouth while she ground herself against his erection—

Crap! She hadn't meant to look between his legs, but now she couldn't pull her gaze away.

Black leather pants molded to his thighs, displaying every muscle...every inch of hardness...every bit of perfection.

Talk about instant inspiration! A new card took shape—a ridiculous card.

A good wine will make you feel sexy, brave and ready for anything. Oh, wait. I meant a sea god.

He took a step toward her. She took a step back, even though she wanted to rush forward.

A laugh burst from her, zero humor, all hysteria. I'm seriously screwed, aren't I?

CHAPTER THREE

MY MATE, VALERIAN THOUGHT, filled with joy, pride

and even anger. After centuries of searching, he'd finally found his mate.

The moment he'd spotted her, the world around him had faded, ceasing to exist. Then he'd caught scent of her. Ice and wildflowers.

As legend claimed, he'd known who she was to him in an instant. Known beyond any doubt. His every cell had awakened for her.

I am hers, and she is mine.

There was no woman more beautiful, in this human world or in Atlantis. Her face...utterly angelic, with a luscious little chin, radiant cheeks and a daintily sloped nose. Her eyes were big and brown, a rich brown, almost gold, filled with dark secrets and undeniable determination, offset stunningly by pale, gloriously long lashes.

He'd never seen skin more fair or luminous. Not even on a vampire. Like the very moon he'd spied shining in the heavens, she was soft, dazzling and ethereal.

Moon. Yes. That's what she was.

His hands itched to reach out, to caress her, to linger and savor, to learn her, to anchor her against him, ensuring she wouldn't disappear when the sun rose, as unattainable as a dream.

His moonbeam was his wildest dream made flesh.

She was tall, her slenderness making her appear almost fragile. Definitely vulnerable. And yet, she also had delicious curves. Her breasts were more than a handful, and her hips flared. Her

legs...oh, those legs. Deliciously lithe, leading straight to the new center of his world.

Possessive hunger consumed him. Already his blood boiled with a seemingly unquenchable fire, his skin tightening over muscle and bone.

Never again would he be able to enjoy another woman.

Enjoy? he thought and nearly laughed. Had he ever truly enjoyed a woman until now?

In seconds, the little moonbeam had become essential to his well-being. But for the first time in his existence—and that's what he'd been doing until just this moment, existing without really living—he suspected a woman would reject him.

This one had disobeyed him, run from him and now pointed a weapon in his direction. She radiated an icy veneer his warrior instincts longed to melt.

A moan of pleasure sounded a few feet away. He didn't have to look to know a female had just offered herself to a warrior, and that warrior had eagerly accepted.

"Sheathe the beast." There were too many unknowns around them. Dropping their guard—or their pants—would be foolish. "Gather the unmated females." He spoke in his native tongue, never taking his gaze from the object of his fascination. "Only those who wish to accompany us."

His moonbeam would have to be convinced.

She retreated a step. When she realized what she'd done, she stilled. She straightened her shoulders and raised the blade

higher.

My woman has courage. I couldn't be more proud of her.

His shoulders straightened.

"Why are you here?" she demanded. "What do you want with us?"

Her pink-as-roses lips moved sensuously, entrancing him.

Going to taste those lips every day for the rest of my life...

"Hello, handsome." An unfamiliar female voice sounded beside him.

He tore his gaze from the moonbeam at last—surely one of the most difficult things he'd ever done—and glanced down. Three females now surrounded him, purring as they caressed him and rubbed against him.

"Only the unmated ones?" Broderick asked, his eyes closing in surrender as a pretty brunette licked his collarbone. "You're sure? This one really wants to come with us."

"Only the unmated ones," he confirmed. He'd never—wittingly—taken a married woman from another man, and he wouldn't start now.

If the little moonbeam is mated?

He stiffened. She's mine! Only mine!

Needing no other encouragement, his men leaped into action, beckoning unmated females to wait outside the tent. Broderick had to pull the trio off Valerian. They protested, only to glom on to the other warrior.

Smiles abounded from his army and the chosen alike.

Mated females cried in distress before attempting to shove their way out of the tent.

One of the human males decided to object. He pointed a small, black handheld device in Valerian's direction. A gun, he thought the weapon was called.

Before a shot could be fired, Dorian sneaked up behind him. A sword hilt slammed into his temple, and he collapsed.

Excellent. Valerian returned his attention to the moonbeam. She remained in place. Slowly he approached her, her dark eyes widening.

The closer he got, the more her delectable fragrance drew him like an invisible chain. Except...

One of his warriors reached her first, his strong arms wrapping around her from behind. Shivawn disarmed her and swooped her up into his embrace. She screamed and kicked, fighting like an enraged vampire out for blood.

A feral growl rose in Valerian's throat, and he bit back a wave of fury. Fury over his woman's torment; fury over his intense surge of possessiveness. Mine! She belongs to me! He'd never experienced a moment's jealousy in his life, and yet the sight of another man holding his little moonbeam pushed him into madness.

"Mine," he barked. Even though he wanted to rip the warrior's arms away from her, he remained still. "She's mine."

Shivawn paused, the beads in his hair clanging together. The moonbeam continued to fight, pounding her fists into his face,

making him grimace and bleed.

"She isn't willing to go with you," Valerian said, doing his best to remain calm. She only wants my touch.

Frowning, Shivawn released her to clasp another woman against him. A dark-haired beauty who also looked less than pleased by the happenings around her.

Hmm. Very odd. Another unhappy one. What was wrong with these surface females?

His moonbeam quieted and stilled at last.

"Do you know who I am?" Valerian asked, using her language, his tone gentle. Recognize me. He sheathed his sword.

"What do you want with us?" she demanded a second time, ignoring his question.

"I want nothing to do with the others," he replied honestly. "My soldiers have issued invitations to the single females to come and live with us. Invitations that are being accepted, as you can see."

She gaped at him. "Only because you've somehow drugged them."

"The only thing we've done...is breathe."

"And what do you mean, live with you?" she continued. "Live with you where?"

"Under the sea."

"The sea," she echoed. She licked her bottom lip, the sight of her tongue nearly unmanning him. "You're lying."

"I will never lie to you."

Now confusion knitted her brows. “You sound so sure, so determined.”

“I am.”

“You don’t even know me, and I certainly don’t want to know you. After I pick you out of a police lineup, I hope to never see you again.”

She had no desire to accompany him. The realization dumbfounded him.

My mate would rather live her life without me.

No. No! His sudden appearance had shocked her. She just needed time. With him. With his pheromone.

Time she would one day thank him for giving her.

“You’re not going to like what happens next,” Valerian told her. “I apologize for that.” He gently lifted her in his arms. The side of her body pressed against his chest, and everywhere their skin touched, he burned.

Unable to resist, he burrowed his nose in the hollow of her neck, breathing in her delectable fragrance while relishing the softness of her pale skin.

“Are you sniffing me?” she demanded.

“Yes. Would you like to sniff me in turn?”

“No!”

His shoulders slumped with disappointment.

“If you don’t put me down,” she said, each word sounding as if it were being forced from her throat, “I’m going to claw out your eyes and eat them in front of you.”

He chuckled, his disappointment forgotten. She had a sweet face and a bloodthirsty disposition. What a delicious contradiction.

"Why are you laughing? I'm not teasing, and I'm most certainly not accepting your invitation and going with you."

He did stop laughing. "You alone have no choice. You are coming with me no matter what."

A muscle ticked in her jaw.

When their gazes met, blue against golden brown, he inhaled sharply. Awareness sizzled inside him, stronger than before. Such beauty. His nostrils flared, and he knew his pupils dilated. His body hardened painfully.

She gulped, her already pale skin becoming pallid.

"You're going to kidnap me?"

"Have you changed your mind about coming with me?"

"No!"

"Then yes. Yes, I am going to kidnap you."

CHAPTER FOUR

"YES, I AM going to kidnap you."

To Shaye, the quiet determination in the warrior's voice proved more frightening than a bellow because he wasn't overcome by emotion, and he knew his mind wouldn't be swayed.

She should be screaming for help. Instead, she only wanted to snuggle against her captor. Her freaking captor!

A delicious heat had woven through her blood. A heat that begged her to stop resisting and enjoy every stolen touch, every

caress of the man's warm, clean breath on her skin.

"This is wrong," she grated. "This is not okay. This mantitlement will not stand!"

"Mantitlement?" He chuckled. "I vow to you here and now, I'll never harm you. I will protect you with my life. I will cherish and pamper you. You'll see."

"Said every captor to every victim." Her stomach roiled. "Why do you want us to live with you?" Maid service? Sex slaves?

Her stomach roiled harder.

Never mind that other women were petting the warriors as if they were innocent house cats.

He ignored Shaye's question...kind of. "My name is Valerian, and I'm king of the nymphs. I intend to make you my queen."

Wait, wait, wait. His queen? Was he talking marriage? After a two second introduction?

Can't process...

In an effort to remain calm, she concentrated on the more trivial details. "Valerian, like the flower? And do you mean you're king of the nymphos?"

The women were definitely meant to be sex slaves.

"No. We're nymphs. The word rhymes with lymph." A pause. "You humans have a flower named Valerian?"

Humans? "Yes, we humans do, and its root is lauded for helping people fall sleep."

He laughed. "So this strong, mighty root gets women into bed? How appropriate. Your flower must have been named after me."

Part of her wanted to laugh with him. The other part just wanted to whimper. Had there ever been a more sexual sound?

Her ovaries might have just exploded.

Give in to his desires. They match your own...

What? No! Panicked by her weakening will, Shaye launched into action, slamming her palm into Valerian's nose.

His head whipped backward, and blood trickled onto his lip.

A shocked pause ensued.

Then, "Why did you do that?" he demanded.

"You're as dumb as a box of rocks if you can't figure out the answer on your own." As she spoke, she bowed her back and kicked her legs. "Let me go!"

His grip on her loosened...as if he feared hurting her? She managed to squirm free and—

Thud. She crash-landed, only to jump to her feet and race away. Go! Go!

No, not without her mom. She switched direction, dragging her gaze over the masses. Her breath emerged in shallow, ragged pants.

Preston lay unconscious on the floor. When he'd aimed a gun at Valerian, another warrior had knocked him out. There was Conner, her new stepdad, frantically crawling away from a redheaded warrior. But there was no sign of Tamara.

Where was she? They might have a rocky relationship, but Shaye couldn't—wouldn't—abandon her to...this.

Arms seized her from behind, the grip gentle but firm.

Valerian! He'd only touched her once, but she would have recognized the feel of him anytime, anywhere. A white-hot brand.

Her blood ran from blistering to frigid as different emotions flooded her. Relief, lust, anger, confusion and fear.

Choose your attitude. She focused on the anger, turned and kneed Valerian in the balls.

He released a strained wheeze as he hunched over. He might have said, "My precious!"

"Not so eager for me now, are you?"

"That...hurt," he rasped.

"Of course it did, and there's more where that came from if you grab me again." Once again she darted away, still searching...searching...

There!

Conner hadn't been trying to leave, she realized. He'd been on the lookout for his bride. He now had Tamara trapped in his arms as she struggled to accost a warrior.

Shaye jumped over fallen chairs and skirted around overturned tables, slipping and sliding along a river of red punch. Someone else snaked an arm around her waist and hauled her against a stone wall of a chest.

His scent wasn't quite as exotic as Valerian's. Even his skin felt different, cooler, smoother. While his arms had a thick veil of dark hair, Valerian's possessed only a dusting of honey-blond.

She slammed the back of her head into his chin, her entire

body vibrating with the force of the blow.

He growled a word she'd never heard, no doubt a curse. His arms fell away from her; she whirled on him, ready to fight to the death. His!

She never should have come here. Nothing good ever happened at her mom's weddings.

The he-man regarded her through narrowed blue eyes. "I only meant to kiss you," he said, in English this time, his voice so heavily accented she had trouble deciphering the words.

When her frantic mind deduced his meaning, she slapped him.

"Ow!" He rubbed his cheek.

"Kissing a woman without permission is not okay," she shouted.

He...pouted?

Shaye leaped around him and closed in on her mom. "Let's go! We have to get out of here." Before Valerian noticed.

Tamara continued fighting her husband. "If you don't release me, I'll stab you while you're sleeping!"

Lines of strain bracketed the groom's too-thin lips while concern and fear gleamed in his eyes. "What should I do?" he asked, looking to Shaye.

Urgency beat her with brass knuckles. "Just throw her over your shoulder fireman-style and run. I'll—"

"Be staying with me," she heard behind her.

The familiar, husky voice made her shiver. Made her muscles clench, desperate for sublime satisfaction.

He slid a hand around her bare stomach; his fingers were long and thick, tanned and hard against her pale softness. Goose bumps broke out all over her body. His other hand glided across her collarbone to stop beneath her seashell-covered breast. He tugged her backward, locking her against a muscled chest.

She melted into him. No, no. She forced herself to stiffen. He smelled like dark magic. Sultry. Heady. Powerful.

She should protest. At the very least, she should scold him for such daring.

The words refused to leave her mouth.

Whatever madness had overcome the other women, well, it had obviously affected her, too.

Valerian's warm breath stroked the hollow of her ear, shooting dangerous sparks of pleasure across her nerve endings. "My nose still hurts. As does my co—manhood. Kiss me and make me better?"

A strange weakness invaded her limbs. "No, thank you?"

A question? Really?

She'd always thought herself immune to lust. None of the men she'd dated had ever made it past first base. Kisses goodbye had been more of an obligation than a desire.

Cold fish, one man had even lobbed at her.

She'd had to agree with him. Cold equaled safe.

But she wasn't cold right now. She burned.

She burned because of a stranger intent on kidnapping her!

He rubbed his cheek against hers. "I was born to please you,

moonbeam. You are my paradise, and I will be yours. Imagine it. You're naked. I'm naked. We grind together, reaching heights we never before thought possible."

A moan bubbled up, but she swallowed it back. He'd launched a full assault on her senses. Touch, sound, scent, sight...each giving her a taste of the delights she could find in his arms.

His soft lips brushed the shell of her ear; his tongue darted inside, only to retreat and leave her shaking, hungry for more. "Let me take you to my home. Let me give you untold pleasure."

Fight this! Fight him! "I—no, thank you." A statement this time.

"Shall we bargain, then? My kingdom for your heart."

He expected her to hand over rights to her heart after meeting him only five minutes ago? No way. Just no way. Fight!

"You don't want me or my black heart. Trust me. But I will give you trouble, and a lot of it. I'm mean and cranky, and most people can't stand to be around me."

"I want everything you have to give. In return, I'll give you everything right back."

Tamara ripped free of Conner's clasp to curl around Valerian's ankles and kiss his feet. "Take my heart! It's yours!"

Valerian didn't seem to notice he had a woman slobbering on his boots.

"Get up, Mom," Shaye demanded. Seeing her newly wed mother humble herself in such a way snapped her out of whatever spell Valerian had cast. "Run. Escape!"

"She is your mother? Fear not. No harm will come to her and her husband, I swear it." Without releasing Shaye, Valerian gently lifted Tamara to her feet and urged her toward Conner.

"Only if I cooperate with you, right?" Shaye asked with bite.

"No. No harm will come to the pair regardless of your actions."

A lie, surely.

"What's your name?" he asked her, having to speak over Tamara's pleas.

Mutinous, Shaye pressed her lips in a thin line. Defy him at every turn. Ignore the heady, seductive tingle in my veins. Maybe then he would tire of her.

"You surprise me," he said, his honeyed timbre rich with confusion. "I expected my mate—"

A string of foreign words suddenly cut him off.

His mate?

Stiffening, Valerian faced the speaker. Shaye did the same. The man had black hair and eyes as blue as a cloudless sky. Like the others, he wore only pants and boots, his bronzed chest on display. He said something else.

Valerian responded in the same, clipped language.

What were they saying to each other?

The dark-haired man motioned to Shaye with a tilt of his chin.

Whatever Valerian's reply, it wasn't nice. His tone hardened, becoming unbending and dripping with command.

The warrior paused only a moment, shrugged and strode away.

"What was that about?" Trying not to panic again, she angled her head to stare up at her captor.

Mistake! Their gazes locked, and a wave of sexual energy sparked between them, stronger than before, undeniable and irresistible.

Need coiled between her legs, hot and wet, before spiraling through her stomach, her nipples.

Look away. Look away!

"What was that about?" she repeated.

"I'm breaking my own rules." He bent to nuzzle her cheek with his own, an action seemingly as natural to him as breathing. "The fact isn't...appreciated. What Joachim failed to understand is that you are not a rule, you are an exception."

"I don't understand."

"I'll explain. Later." Without another word, he spun her and hefted her onto his shoulder as if she weighed nothing more than a bag of feathers.

"Put me down!" She fought and kicked with all her might, and her knee slammed into his stomach. "Valerian!"

"I love the sound of my name on your rose-petal lips," he said, striding out of the tent, past the line of waiting—eager—women. "Would you like to hear your name on mine?"

"Never!"

He sighed, heading for the ocean he'd risen from. At least her mom wouldn't be forced to endure...whatever these men were going to make her and the others endure.

The warriors fell into place behind him, and the young, single women happily, blithely followed suit. Those singles were a mix of every race, size and age, though no one looked to be under twenty or over fifty; the prettiest of the bunch even had a prosthetic leg. To the warriors' credit, they peered at each woman as if she were the ultimate prize, despite the flaws modern-day trolls would have most likely issued.

Wait. Was she praising douche bags just because they found everyone equally attractive?

I need more therapy. Shaye didn't need praise from someone—anyone—else. She liked herself just the way she was.

Feminine sobs echoed from within the tent.

"Take me with you," someone called. "Please. I'm begging."

At the shoreline, Valerian stopped to whisper, "Beautiful. So very beautiful. A sky without a dome." He spoke in English—for her benefit?

"The heavens seem to go on forever," another said, clearly awed. He, too, spoke in English.

"I'd dreamed of this land, but never imagined such majesty."

"Are you sure we can't stay here?" one of the warriors asked. "We could bring the rest of the army through the portal and—"

Valerian shook his head, silky tendrils of his hair brushing her bare back.

Portal?

"I'm sure," he said. "Layel was very clear. To remain on the surface is to die on the surface. Let us tarry no longer." He walked

into the water.

He was going for a nighttime swim? Or did he plan something more nefarious? Like a mass drowning?

Fear sprouted. "Valerian." She slapped his butt with all her might. "This is illegal. You're going to get caught. Criminals always get caught. At your trial I'll request the death penalty." If I'm still alive.

"As long as you're in my arms, I can die a happy man."

She beat her fists into his back, watching water splash at his feet. The echo of churning waves filled her ears. "Don't do this. Please, don't do this."

"I told you I would never hurt you. This is the only way to my home. Once there, I'll beg for your forgiveness for any hardships you endure. I'll gift you with more jewels and gold than you can imagine. I'll—"

"I don't want jewels and gold, you brute! I want my freedom."

Waves lapped at his knees...his thighs...his midsection. Cool, salty droplets sprayed over her face and burned her eyes. Though he slowed his pace, he continued on, sinking deeper and deeper into the water.

She swallowed a mouthful of the stuff—and choked. He stopped, patting her butt in a vain effort to help her catch her breath. Then he resumed his slow, torturous journey. The other women still followed merrily, each wearing a giddy smile, as if frolicking to their deaths was perfectly acceptable. Even fun.

Wait. No, not every woman followed merrily. The one with

dark curls, a petite beauty, looked ready to vomit.

Shaye's heart pounded in her chest, an erratic drumbeat. A war beat. "Don't do this. You're going to kill us all, you—umph."

Butt smack. "Hold your breath, moonbeam."

The next thing she knew, she was completely submerged. The salt stung her eyes. Her throat constricted. Hair floated around her face like strands of ivory ribbon.

The idiot man kept his strong arms locked around her, one at the bend of her knees, one at the small of her back. His palms were hot, so hot, a startling contrast against the chilly liquid.

Colorful fish swam past her. She wanted to scream, but every time she opened her mouth, she swallowed more water.

He tilted forward and began using his powerful legs to swim even deeper....deeper still. Her lungs shrieked for air. She desperately needed to breathe. Now. Now!

Can't...

Terror devoured her.

I'm going to die, she realized. My life will be over before I ever truly lived.

A thousand regrets surfaced, along with all the lies she'd told herself. She didn't like herself. She wasn't happy. She should have forgiven those who'd wronged her. Clinging to hurt instead of embracing love seemed so silly now. Like wasted time. Every moment counted, and hurt only ever, well, hurt. Love healed, always. She should have written a book instead of simply talking about it. Her characters could have had the happy ending she'd

secretly craved for herself.

She should have gotten a second tattoo. A rose in full bloom, or a cross, or a butterfly. Basically the opposite of the skull and crossbones she had on her lower back—an image she'd gotten to make her parents notice her.

Her mom had definitely noticed and still mailed her articles about new methods of tattoo-removal every few weeks.

Her mind suddenly blanked, becoming as dark as the water, wiping her thoughts clean.

Have to breathe, she mentally shouted.

Between one heartbeat and the next, the murky water cleared, so glassy she could see as perfectly as if she were on land. Even the salt dissipated, soothing her irritated eyes.

Valerian tugged her forward so that they were eye to eye. She tried to push away from him—her tormentor—but he held tight.

Breathe, she mouthed. Please.

With a hand on her nape, he drew her close and pressed his mouth to hers; he used his tongue to open her lips...and then he exhaled, gifting her with the last breath he'd taken.

The burn inside her cooled, the vise-grip easing from her throat and lungs.

Lifting his head, he motioned with a tilt of his chin, and she squelched her panic long enough to turn and look. Her eyes widened when she spotted the swirling, gelatinous whirlpool that loomed ahead.

What was that? And why was Valerian swimming straight for

it?

She fought to paddle in the opposition direction, but an undeniable suction pulled her closer...until she shot through the whirlpool and into dark nothingness.

She began to spin, faster and faster, left and right, tumbling toward the unknown. Nausea churned in her stomach, and needles jabbed at her pores, the pain nearly too much to bear.

She didn't understand what was happening; she only knew the water had disappeared, leaving the spiraling black abyss that seemed to stretch for eternity.

Zipping lights whizzed past her, firefly flickers extinguished all too soon. A bevy of screams assaulted her ears, and a sharp ache began to hammer at her temples. Her blood flash-froze in her veins even as sweat beaded over her skin.

As a little girl, her favorite fairy tale had been Alice in Wonderland. Alice had fallen down a rabbit hole, and Shaye had envied her. A whole new world! Adventure!

Suddenly she pitied Alice.

Brighter streams of light appeared. Gusts of wind erupted, blustering around her.

Where was Valerian? She shouted his name.

Dizziness invaded her mind as she continued to twirl, twirl, twirl, alone, frightened...finally crash-landing inside a new world, just like Alice.

CHAPTER FIVE

"I'VE GOT YOU, MOON."

Strong arms lifted Shaye, and she gratefully buried her face in the hollow of Valerian's neck. In that moment, she no longer cared what the warrior was doing to her; she was just happy he was with her. She even wound her legs around his hips to prevent any kind of separation.

I'm safe?

"Don't you dare let me go," she cried.

His hold tightened. "I will never let you go."

The vehement tone should have frightened her, but oddly enough she felt comforted instead.

Maybe because he clung to her as if she were a treasure. As if she were someone special. As if he'd waited his whole life to meet her and now couldn't imagine living without her.

A deception, she knew. But that was okay. For now, that was okay.

"Take a moment to breathe." He petted his fingers down her spine. "Breathe for me. I don't feel your chest moving."

Right. In, out. Air filled and exited her lungs. In, out. Surprisingly, she did calm. The scent of salt and Valerian's particular brand of black magic teased her nostrils. His heart beat against hers. His hard strength welcomed her soft femininity.

Valerian set her on her feet and framed her jaw with his big, callused hands. "You are pale," he said, a hint of concern in his voice.

"I'm always pale," she muttered.

She forced her gaze to abandon the stunning beauty of his

chiseled features in favor of studying her new surroundings.

They'd somehow entered a cave. The walls were rough and rocky, silver stones painted with streaks of crimson. Blood?

She swallowed the barbed lump growing in her throat. A metallic tang layered the cold, cold air, and that cold, cold air continued to stroke her nearly bare body, chasing away Valerian's delicious warmth, making her shiver.

A shuffle of footsteps sounded behind her.

Gasping, she looked over her shoulder. Tendrils of mist curled toward a domed ceiling as, one by one, warriors walked from a clear, jellylike whirlpool identical to the one she'd seen under water. The women still followed, but they were no longer smiling.

"Where are we?" she asked Valerian.

A pause. "Look at me, Moon. Please."

The nickname made no sense to her, and yet it somehow delighted her—the only reason she obeyed him.

The rest of the world vanished as her gaze traveled from his booted feet to his muscled legs, skipping over the ridge between his legs to stop on his chest—where rope after rope of bronzed masculinity awaited. Droplets of water trickled over perfect male nipples—even through the silver piercing—and pooled in his navel.

How could one person be so...delicious?

He had perfect sandy brows, perfect crystalline eyes framed with spiky black lashes and a perfect nose. His lips were plump and pink—and perfect.

Confidence clung to him like a second skin, making him the most sensually erotic creature she'd ever seen. Even better—or worse!—he radiated primal ferocity.

"We are home." Gently, so gently, he traced his fingertips over her face to wipe away the water.

She stood completely still, not encouraging him but not rebuking him, either. His touch reverberated through her like a live wire, hot and scorching.

"This isn't my home," she said. "I live in Cincinnati."

"You used to live in Cincinnati. Now you live with me in Atlantis, the capital of the gods' finest creations. Home to nymphs, vampires, Amazons and many other races."

Wait. Wait, wait, wait. She blinked rapidly as her mind attempted to make sense of his words. Atlantis...the city buried under the ocean? Like the ocean she'd just exited? Her mouth went dry. No way. Just no way.

"Home of nymphos and vampires? You're lying," she grated. "Why are you lying?"

He frowned at her. "I told you. I'll never lie to you. And I'm a nymph. Nymph."

"Well, guess what? You're my abductor, so I'll never believe you."

His frown deepened. "Do you have another explanation for entering the sea and appearing here?"

"Yes. I drowned," she told him. "You killed me. But someone—a human—found my body and restarted my heart. Only, I'm

in a coma and my brain is short-circuiting."

The corners of his beautiful mouth twitched. "If that's true, I'm nothing but a dream. A midnight fantasy. You can enjoy me without fear of the consequences."

Dang him. He had an excellent point. "You're right. I can murder you and avoid jail time."

His smile bloomed full force, causing a precious gasp of breath to snag in her lungs. "You and you alone have cart blanche with my body. If you'll receive pleasure from my pain, then you may hurt me any way you'd like. You can always kiss me better..."

Did nothing faze him?

Choose your attitude. "No, thank you," she muttered. "To everything."

"Men," he called, his penetrating stare never veering from her face. "Escort the women to the dining hall. The ceremony will soon begin."

"Ceremony?" she asked.

With an air of eager anticipation, the warriors leaped into action. One of them tried to grab her arm, but Valerian stopped him with a feral, "I'll escort this one," even as she slapped at the offender's hand.

"As you wish, my king."

King? King!

Footsteps echoed through the cavern.

Once again, the women were all smiles, happily trailing their captors.

"Who do you desire?" one warrior asked another.

"The redhead. Her breasts are..."

Their chatter faded.

A single man remained behind. Or perhaps he'd been waiting in the cave. He wasn't drenched like everyone else, his white shirt and tight black pants completely dry.

Valerian released her from his stare to face the remaining warrior. "How are the prisoners?" he asked.

Prisoners? Her eyes widened, and she clutched at her throat, the barbed lump back in place.

The man gave a brusque answer in that odd language Valerian had used earlier, but he—the freaking king—shook his head. "Speak in the human tongue."

"Alive," the man responded with a frown.

Human tongue.

That wasn't the first time he'd referred to her as a human, implying he himself was something else entirely. Like the creature of myth he claimed to be...

"Have they given you any trouble?" Valerian asked.

"None at all, my king."

"Very good. Continue to see to their needs." He waved in dismissal, scowled, then called the man back. "Has there been any word about our females?"

"None."

"Very well." He rubbed the back of his neck. "On with you."

The man nodded and clomped off, leaving her alone with her

abductor.

"What prisoners?" Shaye asked on a trembling breath. Would she end up in a prison cell?

"Dragon shape-shifters. Killers."

Dragon shape-shifters. Valerian is insane, plain and simple.

He traced his knuckles along her cheekbone, and she shivered. The water in his hair had dried somewhat, lightening the locks to a rich, honey gold. Several strands fell over his forehead. Part of her longed to reach up and smooth those strands away.

Part of her was clearly insane.

"Do not fear," he added, "for the dragons won't be allowed near you. Some are to be gifts for my friend Layel, and some are to be used as bargaining chips."

His delusions were more than her fragile mind could deal with right now. "The ceremony," she repeated. "Tell me."

In an instant, he radiated possessive intensity without a hint of amusement.

"The men," he said, "will chose their lovers."

She'd been right. Sex slaves. "And if the women protest?" she croaked.

"They won't."

Too cocky! "But if they do?"

His frown returned. "They'll never be forced."

Truth or lie? "What if they're too scared to protest?"

He thought for a moment. "If you'd like to speak with every woman before she joins her warrior, to ascertain her desires for

yourself, you may."

The offer surprised her.

He flattened his hands on the boulder behind her, caging her in. Electric shocks skittered through her.

Icy rock at her back, pure heat in front.

"What are you doing?" She hated the breathless quality in her voice.

"Right this moment? Wishing you were kissing me. In a few seconds from now, showing you our world."

He twisted his wrists, and the huge rock wall slid backward. She would have stumbled, but Valerian caught her by the waist and turned her, his chest pressing against her spine.

The contact delighted her body while irritating her mind.

She watched, flabbergasted, as the wall descended, a smooth, glassy crystal suddenly exposed. Her jaw dropped as water flowed behind the enclosure, and sand swirled at the sea's bottom. Pink coral and multicolored fish danced a lazy waltz around emerald plants.

"Breathtaking, isn't it?" Warmth fanned the back of her neck.

As she peered out, trying to come to grips with the bounty before her, a gorgeous woman swam up to the crystal. No, not a woman. Shaye gasped. A mermaid. A bare-chested, tail-wagging mermaid.

Her knees shook. The creature frowned...until her gaze latched on to Valerian. She smiled and waved, pleasure gleaming in her eyes.

"You know her?" Shaye managed to say.

He nodded but didn't elaborate.

The woman—mermaid—had the face of an angel, innocent, lovelier than a long-awaited sunrise. Long black hair curled around delicate shoulders and lush breasts. Her tail glimmered like spun glass, different shades of violet, yellow, green and pink creating a kaleidoscope of color on every scale.

"Do you believe me now?" Valerian asked.

How could she not?

"I...do." The admission left her on a ragged breath.

She had been transported to a mythical world. The man behind her wasn't human but a nympho—oops, a nymph.

"What's the difference between a nymph and a nympho?" The words trembled as they left her.

"Nymphs are—everything! Everything is different."

Basically, they were the same. A sexual being, both seductive and irresistible. Obsessed with sex. Or rather, addicted to sex. Probably willing to sleep with anything that moved. Perhaps able to give pleasure to others with only a glance...or a whispered word. Definitely beauty personified.

Valerian fit the description completely, and that frightened her so much more than if he'd said he was a soul-sucking demon from the deepest depths of hell.

Welcome to Wonderland, Alice.

Another mermaid joined the brunette, this one a symphony of curves. She pressed herself against the crystal and offered a

wanton smile to Valerian, passion glazing her amethyst eyes.

Bet the lovelies were thinking Score! Three-way.

"Take me home, Valerian." Please. Tremors rocked her. Where had her numbness gone? "I don't belong here."

"You do." The rocky wall returned to its place, gradually hiding the mermaids, who were banging on the crystal. "We belong together."

"No." Shaye angled her head to give him the dreaded side-eye. "We don't even know each other."

"A fact I look forward to changing." His husky tone beguiled, promising endless nights of passion and days of wild abandon.

Resist. Flee. She squared her shoulders and raised her chin. "No, thank you."

"Give me a chance. One chance. Please."

Had a man ever begged for her attention before?

Stay strong. "I did," she said. "I gave you the chance to leave me behind and respect my wishes. Had you, I might have agreed to a date. But you didn't. Now I want nothing to do with you."

He rested his forehead against her shoulder.

A position of defeat? A pang cut through her chest. Why? Why should his pain affect her?

Act! Act now!

Shaye wrenched from his embrace and sprinted toward the whirlpool. Her sandals dug into rocks and twigs. Breath caught in her throat, burning. Almost there...just one more step...

Valerian grabbed her by the arm, stopping her.

"No!" She kicked his shin.

"If you enter the portal without me, you'll die." The words held an unmistakable edge of fury, his grip tightening on her. "You'll never be able to swim to the surface alone. Do you understand? You'll die out there, your body nothing more than fish food."

She stilled, panting, the blood in her veins chilling. The water...how could she have forgotten the water?

"Is death preferable to my pursuit?" he asked.

"If I'm to be a captive, yes!" She'd fought hard for her independence and would relinquish it to no one.

A heavy pause stretched between them. Valerian radiated both sadness and anger.

Sadness? The pang returned to her chest, and she sputtered with indignation.

"I can't live aboveground," he said, "and I don't want to live without you."

"That's ridiculous. You're ridiculous. I... I..." Had no idea how to respond. "How many human girls have heard those words from your lips?"

Don't know how to respond, so you go with jealousy? You are ridiculous!

"One. Only one. And I haven't yet learned her name."

"Up yours," she said. He couldn't mean the things he was saying to her. He just couldn't. "That's what you can call me."

He sighed. He secured her against him, his body an impenetrable force. "Come then, Up Yours, and I'll show you the

palace."

As he ushered her up a crudely built staircase, she offered no more protests. She needed time to consider her options.

Try to find another way home?

Was there another way?

Make nice with Valerian and enjoy his pampering while it lasted?

Save the dark-haired girl who'd looked as upset by the circumstances as Shaye?

Ding, ding, ding. We have a winner!

Shaye studied the markings on the wall to help her find her way back—just in case. The higher up she traveled, the less jagged the rocks became...until the walls appeared to be dusted with glitter. She brushed her fingertip over the smooth surface, leaving a mark behind. Her own personal bread crumb.

Valerian stopped abruptly, causing her to bump into his back. Fiery, full-body contact. She gasped as he backed her into the wall, his frown fierce, his crystalline eyes gleaming with purpose.

"You wouldn't happen to be planning your escape, would you?"

She arched a brow. "What do you think?"

"I think your determination matches mine."

"Is that a compliment or an insult?"

"What do you think?" he asked, mocking her. He brushed the tip of his nose against hers.

An innocent action and yet her bones liquefied.

Dang it! Where's my armor?

"What if I promise not to try to escape?" she asked. She didn't plan to try; she planned to succeed.

Another brush of his nose against hers. "I would want to believe you, but still I would doubt you. Trust between us will take time, but it will come. I know this."

Even as deluded as he was, considering he thought a happily-ever-after—or happily ever until-the-new-wears off—was possible between a captor and his captive, he still understood trust had to be earned.

Ugh. Was she hoping to give herself permission to like him?

Probably. Because, with every second that passed, some of her animosity faded.

I'm a fool!

All right. It was clearly time to do what her therapist had told her never to do: use a snotty attitude to create distance with the people around her.

Cruel to be kind...to myself.

She lifted her chin. "What happens if I want to hook up with one of your men?"

His brow furrowed. "Hook up?"

"You know, get my groove on. Offer myself up on a silver platter. Do the dirty bump and grind."

Rage exploded inside his eyes. "You will not hook up with one of my men. Ever."

"Wrong! My body. My choice."

His nostrils flared as he fought for control and oh, wow, the sight actually...turned her on. He wanted to keep her all to himself.

"You're mine," he grated.

"Actually, I'm mine."

"Fine. I'm willing to share you with you and only you."

She almost—almost—laughed. "How kind of you," she muttered.

"Yes. I'm very kind." He stepped back and offered his hand. "Shall we?"

The distance...displeased her, the most feminine parts of her body actually pouting.

She peered at his blunt-tipped fingers...at the calluses and scars slashed across his palm, a contrast to his otherwise flawless beauty. As strong as he was, he could have killed her at any moment. He could have crushed her and yet he'd been nothing but gentle with her.

Oh, yes. I'm a fool.

She willingly twined her fingers with his—and gasped. A blast of heat slammed into her. Tingles raced over her.

She tried to tug away from him, to sever the connection, but he held tight. He even lifted her knuckles to his lips and kissed.

The heat—a thousand degrees worse.

The tingles—a thousand times stronger.

"You are precious to me," he said. "The one I've been searching for all the days of my life."

She bit the inside of her cheek, battling the pleasure his declaration had wrought. “Are you saying you...love me?”

“No. Not yet. But I have no doubt love for you will come.”

“How?” No one had ever loved her. “How can you believe that?”

“Every nymph has a fated mate, and you are mine.”

“I don’t understand,” she rasped. “I don’t understand at all.”

“You will. In time.”

The words—a warning? a promise?—rang in her head as he led her up the rest of the stairs. At the top, two gleaming crystal doors slid open.

They traveled down a series of long, winding hallways. Luxurious hallways. Gold brick walls had been draped with strands of emeralds that wound this way and that to resemble ivy. Alabaster columns were decorated with fist-size diamonds that had been carved to look like roses in full bloom. From the ceiling hung multiple chandeliers, each in the shape of a dragon’s head, crimson-colored crystals dripping from fangs that might have been fashioned from pearls.

The magnificence overwhelmed her.

“Do you like your...the palace?” he asked. “We’ll be replacing the chandeliers with a less hideous design.”

“It’s beautiful. It’s all beautiful.”

They turned a corner, vivid wall murals coming into view. Each scene showcased a man, doing something kind for a woman. Feeding her grapes. Undressing her. Bathing her.

"I had to paint over dragon portraits," he said, noticing where her attention was fixed.

"You painted these?"

"Yes."

"Your talent is..." Compliment her captor? No! "Decent."

He squeezed her hand. "Perhaps you'll pose for me one day."

Her heart rate increased. Had nothing to do with Valerian, of course. She'd obviously developed an early-onset heart arrhythmia.

"Why did you take the palace from the dragons?" she asked, desperately returning to the previous topic of conversation. The safer topic.

"Nymphs have always been natural wanderers. For centuries, we flittered from one location to the other in search of our next sexual conquest, but I grew weary of such an existence. I wanted more for myself and more for my people."

"Why? What changed?" According to her therapist, transformation required a catalyst.

"A sense of restlessness plagued me for months. I knew if I wanted a better life, I had to do something different. This is my different."

Basically, he'd changed his mind. Just as he would change his mind about Shaye.

"Usually nymphs attack only when provoked," he added, "keeping our bestial natures under strict control, but dragons are an enemy to the vampires, our only ally."

"Do the other races not like the nymphos?" Bet I can guess all the reasons why.

"They don't like our power over women. Layel, the vampire king, finds it amusing."

She shuddered, praying she never came face-to-face with a blood drinker. "Do you regret the decision to steal?"

"Not in the slightest," Valerian replied easily. "Once I entered the palace, my restlessness was replaced by rightness. Now, having met you, I understand why."

She scowled at him. "Stop saying things like that."

"Why?"

"Because—just because!"

They turned another corner. Valerian stiffened.

So did she. They'd entered what was clearly the dining hall...where the ceremony was set to begin.

CHAPTER SIX

FOR YEARS, VALERIAN had imagined his perfect future. He would lead the strongest army in Atlantis. His queen would rule at his side, happy to belong to him. She would adore him. Of course she would adore him. He would treasure her. Their days would be hot, but their nights would be hotter.

Finally he'd found her—only to lose her?

What if another warrior selected her during the ceremony?

Someone would. Surely. What man could resist the fire burning beneath her cool facade, begging for release?

Rage detonated inside him. He'd said he wouldn't choose a

woman, but he regretted the vow with every fiber of his being.

He couldn't go back on his word, but he couldn't allow his Moon to end up with anyone else, either.

What was he going to do? Not all of his men loved him. A few would choose her simply to strike at him.

His cousin might even attempt to trade her for his crown.

He'd also vowed he would never relinquish his reign. But what good was his crown without his queen?

He wanted—nay, he needed—her. To kiss her. To know the taste of her tongue and her skin. He'd come close to kissing her in the cave. Would she have fought him...or melted for him?

Like you really have to wonder.

She would have fought him. For some reason, she wanted to get to know him before she allowed herself to enjoy him. A novel concept. One he actually...appreciated?

He'd never before cared about the reasons a woman desired him. The pheromone. His pretty face. His strength. His exalted position. Whatever! But for the first time, he wanted someone to desire him for...dare he think it?...his personality—the man he'd become.

Doubts surfaced. You kidnapped her, putting your needs above her wants. Your personality is lacking.

Pain tore through the center of his chest. Could he win her affections despite his crime?

Perhaps. But he would have to win her the same way he'd won the dragon palace. With cunning, precision and an absolute lack

of mercy.

Slowly his lips lifted in a grin. Oh, yes. She would soon find herself on the receiving end of a full-scale attack.

"Take me back to the beach," she said, tugging against his hold. Her heartbeat drummed erratically against his back, and he could feel the shallow exhalations of her breath against his skin. "Right now. I'm through playing nice. Do you hear me?"

"Everyone hears you, Moon." He wrapped his arms around her, hugging her body to his. "The answer is no."

Their bare stomachs pressed together, and she sucked in a breath. His muscles jumped in excited reaction.

She might deny it, but she was aware of him in a very sexual way. A wonderful start!

"You are frightened," he said, "and I'm sorry for it."

"Frightened? Ha! I'm so angry I could spit."

"Spitting is a sign of your anger? Noted."

For some reason, his response caused her to screech.

At her outburst, several of his men flinched. A few regarded her with weary reluctance.

Hope bloomed. Had he just found the answer to his dilemma?

"Whatever you do," he said, "do not attack my men as they make their selection."

Her head lifted, and her eyes glared amber fire at him. "You can't stop me."

Do not smile, he thought. Get this over with.

Anticipation thickened the air. A contingent of warriors lined

one side of the room while a sweet-smelling cluster of females lined the other.

"I'm not placing myself on the menu of this—this smorgasbord." She slammed her elbow into his stomach, almost knocking the air from his lungs.

His men watched them with varying expressions of horror. For their benefit, he said, "Be still, woman."

"Sure. If you'll do me a favor and die."

The horror intensified, just as he'd hoped. If he, the most desired of nymphs, failed to entice this woman, his men were destined to fail with her, too. No one wanted to risk failure. Or even a lengthy wooing. Not while sex could be easily had with another.

Valerian forced a frown, feigning disappointment, and tapped her on the backside. Once again, she reacted as he'd hoped.

"Did you just spank me?" she bellowed. Her eyes were dark velvet, rich and warm, absolutely riveting in her pale face. "Tell me you didn't just spank me, Valerian."

Ah, he loved hearing his name spill from her soft, pink lips. The rest of the world faded away, as it always seemed to do when he looked at her.

"I told you I would never lie to you," he said.

"You also told me you wouldn't hurt me."

"Did my love tap hurt you?"

Her perfect white teeth flashed in a scowl. "Pain isn't always physical."

True. “Did I hurt you mentally? Emotionally?” The idea hurt him, physically, mentally and emotionally.

How many others had hurt her throughout her young life?

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I plead the fifth.”

“Fifth. Five. Is that the number of ways you hope I’ll take you?” he asked softly.

Another bellow. “Stop acting as if you adore me,” she grated. “It’s creepy.”

“But I do adore you.”

“You can’t! How many times do I have to tell you? You. Don’t. Know. Me.”

“I know you have a temper.”

“And so do millions of other people.”

“I know you like to be touched, whether you admit it or not.” Many times she’d leaned into him before coming to her senses and stiffening. “I know you like when I compliment you.” Her gaze always softened.

She huffed and puffed. “You’re wrong.”

“Would you rather I say mean things to you?”

“Yes!”

He also knew she meant that and blinked with confusion. “Why?”

“Why don’t you tell me?” she challenged.

Only one reason made any sense, and he thrilled. “When I’m kind, your defenses threaten to crumble.”

She gave an adamant shake of her head.

He only thrilled harder!

"My king," Broderick prompted. "We're ready. We have instructed the women to remain in place until they've been chosen."

Valerian blanked his expression. He picked up his woman and carried her to the end of the line. A quick count revealed more men than women.

Many warriors would be going to bed alone tonight. What if someone decided having a chance to woo Moon would be better than having no chance at all?

"Stay quiet," he told her, suspecting she would do the opposite. "Everyone will want a good look at you without any distractions."

She lifted her chin. "This T and A pageant sucks balls. I won't passively stand here—and neither should you," she shouted at the other women. "We are human beings, and we have rights. Men do not choose us, we choose our men. We say no to these nymphos and their demeaning ceremony. We demand to be returned home. Who's with me?"

Silence.

"Who's with me?" Broderick asked.

One female jumped up, her arm extended in the air. "Pick me! Pick me!"

"No. Me!"

Shaye's shoulders brushed his chest as they rolled in, and several strands of silken hair snagged in his nipple ring.

"If I help you remain unchosen," he whispered, "will you tell

me your name?"

"I—maybe." Her eyelids slitted, the length of her lashes casting spiky shadows over her cheeks. "Why would you help me?"

Why indeed. The answer should have been obvious to her. "I intend to keep you for myself." He stated the words as baldly as possible. He needed an extreme reaction from her—something to appall his men further.

"I'm not a piece of meat, and this isn't a buffet. You should be ashamed of yourself." Her gaze blazed over his men. "All of you should be ashamed."

Valerian heaved a mighty sigh. "If you won't remain in line," he called loudly, "I'll be obligated to hold you in place."

"Keep your hands to yourself! I don't want to be touched. I'll never want to be touched."

Nymphs recoiled in horror.

A wave of triumph swept through him. "Broderick," he called.

"Yes, my king." The warrior stepped forward, excitement radiating from him.

"As second in command and leader of the elite, you are granted first choice." Valerian loosened his hold on his captive so that her movements were more obvious.

She squirmed, her murmured curses and grunts filling the air.

Broderick grinned and approached the females, starting at the far end. Feminine twitters and purrs echoed throughout the spacious enclosure.

A new chorus erupted. “Pick me, pick me!”

“What have you done to them?” Shaye demanded.

Full disclosure. “We produce a potent pheromone all...well, most women find pleasing.”

She stiffened. “By pheromone, do you mean drug?”

“The word drug implies wrongdoing on our part. Just as humans have no control over the way they perspire, we have no control over the way we pheromone. And it doesn’t drug. It frees hidden desires.”

Broderick slowly edged his way down the line, stopping here and there to study a woman more closely—even to touch. But he didn’t ask questions, getting to know the women better, and it clearly irritated Shaye, who mumbled under her breath.

By the time he reached her, the warrior had yet to make his selection.

He reached out to touch her.

Valerian had to swallow a harsh rebuke.

She reared back, calling, “Shaye Octavia Holling. That’s my name.”

Shaye. Valerian rolled the name over his tongue, savoring its delicacy. “I like your name.”

“Thank you,” she snapped. “I got it for my birthday.”

Funny girl. “Kick him.” He breathed the command straight into her ear. “As hard as you can.”

Without hesitation, she slammed her knee between Broderick’s legs. The stunned warrior hunched over, gasping for

breath; the rest of the army burst into gales of laughter.

"I'm not your chattel," Shaye grated. "You disgust me. I hope your testicles have to be surgical removed from you intestines."

Valerian bit back a grin. His second in command quickly selected the curviest woman in line. The pair rushed from the dining hall without a backward glance.

One down...

"Dorian." Valerian nodded to the man often referred to as the sexiest male in Atlantis. "You're next."

To Shaye—would he ever get enough of her name?—he whispered, "When he approaches you, ignore him. Don't even look at him."

"You're sure?" she whispered back.

Valerian had expected the process of elimination to infuriate him. Instead, he and Shaye were working together, and he loved it.

"I'm sure."

* * *

SHAYE COULDN'T BELIEVE she stood in a line of singles, being ogled by nymphos while relying on Valerian to ensure her safety. He'd gotten her into this mess in the first place! But she could think of no other alternative. Letting one of these barbarians "claim" her and drag her away to do who knew what to her held zero appeal.

"Won't ignoring him bring out all his caveman instincts?" she asked softly.

"Anyone else? Yes. Not him." Valerian sounded amused. "His pride will demand immediate soothing—from someone else."

Well. Consider him ignored.

The one named Dorian had onyx hair and irises so pure and blue they rivaled the ocean. His mouthwatering beauty was something out of a fairy tale, his features somehow even more perfect than Valerian's....but he didn't make her ache.

He didn't fill her mind with X-rated images of naked, straining bodies.

As Dorian followed Broderick's example and considered every woman in line, Shaye's hands curled into fists.

How would these men like it if the tables were turned? If they were the ones being looked over and judged?

Who was she kidding? They would love every second of it.

There had to be a way to override the nympho pheromone and convince these women they did not sexually desire their captors.

When Dorian reached Shaye, he made sure to remain out of striking distance. He studied her, his intense gaze lingering on her every curve.

Just as before, Valerian stiffened.

She peered down at her cuticles as if she hadn't a care.

"You intrigue me, female," Dorian told her.

She faked a yawn. His intrigue? Probably nothing more than the pride Valerian had mentioned. Winning the one others had failed to win would come with a side of bragging rights.

"Female?"

Another yawn.

The warrior expelled a frustrated breath.

Maybe she had a cruel streak, because she liked upsetting him.

"Look at me," Dorian commanded, reminding her of a petulant child.

She brushed an invisible piece of lint from her arm.

He tangled a hand through his hair and eyed his boss. "Valerian. A little help, if you please."

Valerian lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "I can't force her eyes on you unless I remove them."

"But—"

"Is she the one you want or not?" The words lashed from him, abrupt and harsh. Filled with impatience. "Others await their turn."

A scowl darkened Dorian's features before he spun from Shaye and stalked to an Asian sweetie with a lily in her hair. "I choose you."

Lily actually cheered.

"If you guys are going to select women based on their appearance," Shaye muttered, "you should first make sure you're Chris or Liam Hemsworth."

A growl rose from him. "Who are these men to you?"

"Only my lovers." In her dreams.

Just because a real man had never really tempted her, and just because she'd encased her heart in icy armor, well, that didn't mean her mind had never fantasized and her body had never

ached. She'd ached. Oh, she'd ached.

"No longer," Valerian grated. "You're mine."

A new card took shape. I love watching you sleep...through the crack in your bedroom curtains.

"Are you familiar with the term stalker?" she asked.

"Stalk. Noun. The stem of a herbaceous plant. To stalk. Verb. To pursue or approach stealthily. Therefore stalker must be...one who pursues stealthily."

Smart man. "One who pursues someone who doesn't want to be pursued."

A sharp inhalation. "I'm not stalking you."

"Whatever you have to tell yourself, buddy."

The ceremony continued for another half hour. Only one other woman appeared upset by the proceedings—the same one who'd been unwilling to blithely walk into the water.

She was a tiny thing and very pretty, with dark, curly hair, wide, dark eyes and a button nose. Of Spanish heritage, maybe. Despite her innocent, schoolgirl features, she radiated a wild sensuality that had intrigued many of the nymphos. They'd passed her over, however, because she'd trembled with fear rather than eagerness.

But pickings were becoming slim, and a tall warrior with beads in his sandy-colored hair eventually selected her. One of the men still waiting for his turn slammed his fist into the wall, the force of the blow reverberating through the entire room.

"Choose another. I want that one," he bellowed.

"Too bad for you, Joachim," was the smug reply. "She's mine now." Beaded Hair clasped the girl's hand and tugged her from the line.

Her tremors worsened, and she dragged her heels, but she never uttered a word in protest.

Obviously puzzled by her lack of enthusiasm, her would-be lover glanced over his shoulder and frowned. "Do not be afraid, little one. I won't hurt you."

She chewed on her bottom lip, tears in her eyes.

"Valerian," Shaye said, "you told me no one would be harmed. Well, she's being harmed. Stop him."

"Shivawn isn't striking her, and he won't. He'll feed and care for her. He'll—"

"Listen to me. She doesn't want food, and she certainly doesn't want to be alone with him." Unwilling to wait for Valerian's response, Shaye shouted, "Let her go! Now! You might have picked her, but she doesn't pick you."

Shivawn's frown deepened. "But... I'll be good to you."

Her frightened, watery gaze landed on Shaye, and she chewed on her bottom lip. Still she didn't speak a word.

"Valerian." Shaye latched on to his wrist and squeezed. "You have to do something about this. Please."

Seconds passed in absolute silence, everyone in the room waiting for the king's decree.

Shaye wrenched away from him to rush to the girl—who she then freed from Shivawn's grip. She stepped between the pair,

her gaze searching for...she wasn't sure.

"I know you want to go home," she said. "I'll find a way, I swear it." Will never give up. "But until then, how do you want to handle this situation?"

Silence. The Spanish girl even looked away from her, as if she couldn't bear to be the object of anyone's scrutiny.

"Obviously she doesn't want anything to do with you, either." Shivawn clasped Shaye's wrist, clearly intending to move her out of the way.

Her self-defense training kicked in, and she pivoted, grabbing hold of his wrist and dropping to the floor, her weight and momentum dragging him down with her. Upon impact, she thrust out her legs, nailing him in the chest and causing him to flip over her head.

He remained on his back, staring up at the crystal ceiling. Held immobile by shock?

Other warriors gaped.

Valerian raced to her side to pull her to her feet. He focused on the other woman. "Do you wish to be chosen by another warrior? Do you wish to be given a room of your own? I'll ensure you are undisturbed."

Her eyes roved over the remaining, eager men. She shrank back, gulped, then slowly shook her head.

No to Shivawn? Or no to the room? Or both?

"You may take her to your chamber, Shivawn, but you are not to touch her tonight. If one of the humans I...met...yesterday is

interested in...meeting you, you may...meet her in a guest room."

Why the hesitation? Did met, meeting and meet actually mean screwed, screwing and screw?

"Why don't you take her home instead?" Shaye asked as Shivawn stood.

"Do you wish to go home?" Valerian asked the other woman.

Again, the girl shrank back and shook her head no.

Shaye didn't understand. "Do you want to go with Shivawn?"

A nearly imperceptible nod, but a nod all the same.

She glared at Valerian. "Can Shivawn be trusted to obey your command?"

"All my men can be trusted to obey me. More than that, they aren't rapists." There was a good amount of affront in his tone. "Go," he told the couple.

Shivawn and the girl hurried out of the room.

The man who'd hit the wall punched the guy next to him.

"Happy?" Valerian asked as he escorted Shaye back to the line.

"No!"

Of course, the "selection" continued.

This time, none of the soldiers approached her. Perhaps because she'd proved too much trouble for zero reward.

The line dwindled significantly.

"It's almost over," Valerian whispered. His breath fanned her ear, and he trailed a fingertip along the bumps of her spine. A caress to arouse...or a gesture of comfort?

Did it matter? Either way, she almost slumped into a boneless heap. So good! Only the sudden, unexpected feeling of being watched strengthened her resolve to appear unaffected. Her eyes darted across the remaining men—and collided with hate.

Every fiber of her being recoiled.

"Lean on me if your feet hurt," Valerian said, mistaking her reaction.

"No, thank you." Leaning on another—relying on another—would never appeal to her. Even though the idea of being enveloped by his heat and strength actually did appeal to her.

In her experience, the moment she softened and allowed someone in, that someone would leave her, disappoint her or betray her.

"Joachim," Valerian called. "Your turn has arrived."

"That one." Joachim, as it turned out, was the man with hate in his eyes. "The pale one in your arms."

Valerian cursed, and Shaye gasped. She'd been so sure she'd scared everyone away. Now ice chilled every inch of her.

"What did you say?" Valerian wrapped his arms around her waist, holding her tightly, his fingers digging into her skin, probably bruising.

The shocking thing? She didn't want him to let go.

Joachim braced his legs apart, his expression stern and smug. He wasn't a man besotted or even consumed by lust. No, he looked ready for a fight. "Give her to me. She is mine."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"VALERIAN," SHAYE SAID, her voice shaky. As shaky as her limbs. "I'm unwilling. I don't want him. If he tries to lead me away—"

"He won't. I'll take care of him. Worry not." All at once, Valerian was infuriated that someone would dare try to take Shaye from him, overjoyed that she felt safest with him and frightened that he might actually lose her.

And to his cousin, no less. The man would break her beautiful spirit.

He and Joachim had never enjoyed an easy camaraderie. Through no fault of his own. Over the years, Joachim's thirst for power had transformed him into a rebellious fool. He'd become far too wild to control.

How Valerian would change his mind, he didn't yet know.

The only question that mattered, he supposed, was how far was he willing to go.

Easy. To the death.

"There are two other females in line. They want you. This one doesn't."

Joachim never once glanced at the others. "Don't care. I've already chosen the pale one."

"Well, I haven't chosen you." Shaye pressed her soft body more firmly against Valerian. Her frosty scent enveloped him, fueling his determination.

"Challenge me." Valerian pinned his cousin with a hard stare. "I'll accept."

"And turn me into a prize?" she gasped. "No. Absolutely not."

Valerian ignored her. He had to. He knew the way of the nymphs; she didn't.

Joachim had issued challenges in the past. He longed to prove his strength. Valerian had always turned him down. Not because he'd feared losing. On the contrary. He'd known beyond any doubt that he would win, and his cousin would die.

Despite their acrimony, he had no desire to kill the male.

For a moment, an all-too-short flash of time, Joachim considered the offer. He even began to nod. Then he stopped himself. "Unacceptable. You had sex yesterday. You're strong. I've been neglected for weeks. We aren't on equal ground."

A muscle jumped in Valerian's jaw. Did his cousin hope for a night with Shaye, then a fight with the king? "I'll bargain with you as I bargained with Shivawn. If one of the humans in my chamber desires you, you may spend the night with her and rebuild your strength. On the morrow, we will fight for Shaye."

Shaye...who uttered another round of protests.

Joachim's black brows arched, and something—an unreadable emotion—brightened his blue eyes. "You said you wouldn't claim another surface woman, yet there you stand, attempting to do just that."

"Do you accept my offer or not?"

Lips curling in a cold smile, Joachim pointed to Shaye. "I do not. I want that one. As is my right."

"You have zero right to me." Shaye shook a fist in his

direction. “Cart me away. Go ahead. I dare you. While you sleep, I’ll cut off your balls and use them for earrings.”

Inventive. At least she’d only wanted to cut out Valerian’s eyes.

“Females are precious to us, necessary for our survival,” he told his cousin. “We do them no harm. Ever. You would have to hurt her to have her.”

Joachim swallowed. “I’ll woo her.”

So confident—for no reason!

Am I this foolish, thinking I can win the moonbeam?

“Joachim—” he began.

“No!” the male shouted. “I’ll take what’s owed to me.”

“So you’ll accept your ball-less life, then?” Shaye asked, her tone casual. “Because that is all you’re owed from me.”

Valerian admired her spirit even as frustration and fury flooded him. His cousin wouldn’t relent, and Valerian wouldn’t go back on his word.

Would he? For Shaye...

He’d taken over the army as a young lad, after his father had died in battle. Over and over again, he’d had to prove himself worthy of the honor.

Esteem your men, and they’ll esteem you. His father’s dying words.

If Valerian took Shaye, no one would naysay him—but no one would respect him, either.

And how could he expect her to fall in love with such a dishonorable man?

"I said I wouldn't claim the female, and I won't." The announcement pained him. "Yet."

Shaye closed her hands over his arms—arms still wrapped around her—and dug her fingernails into his skin to hold him in place or punish him, he wasn't sure.

He switched to his native tongue and added, "Not without reaching amicable terms. Allow me to buy her from you."

Once more, Joachim shook his head. "No."

"What can I do, cousin? The woman—" he stopped, pressed his lips together "—she is my mate."

Joachim's grin returned, colder than before. "She doesn't agree. She clearly hasn't accepted you as such."

"She will." Believing otherwise would destroy him. "If you take her, she'll hate you." They both knew the ways of nymphs and their mates. The bond was inescapable. "You might seduce her, but you'll never win her. She'll wish she were with me. Can your pride withstand such a horror?"

His cousin clenched and unclenched his fists.

"What did you say to him?" Shaye looked between them. "Tell me."

Joachim's gaze remained narrowed on Valerian. "I must think on what you've said. Let us both stay away from her this night and discuss her ownership in the morning."

Since he'd spoken in the surface language, Shaye understood. "Ownership?" she said between gritted teeth.

Stay away from her for an entire night? Valerian's body

recoiled in horror. Need her in my arms, now and always!

No other way. “I’m in...agreement.”

“Well, I’m not in agreement.” Shaye stomped her foot, determined to be acknowledged. “Let me save you both a lot of trouble. I don’t want either of you. Now, I’m a reasonable—”

Valerian snorted.

“—woman,” she finished, glaring at him over her shoulder. “And I’m willing to forget this entire episode of The Male Whores of Atlantis ever happened. All you have to do is take me home.”

Ignoring her, Joachim crossed his arms over his chest. “Where will she stay tonight?”

Where she will stay every night. “My chamber,” he answered in their language. “We’ll both guard the door.”

His cousin paused for a moment, running the idea through his mind. Finally he nodded. “Very well.”

Valerian released Shaye from his embrace and instantly mourned the loss of her softness and heat. She must have felt the same sense of loss, whether she would admit it or not, because she laced her arms over her middle and shivered.

“I love being disregarded, I really do.” She drummed her fingers against her sides. “So who’s taking me home?”

“I am,” Valerian answered before Joachim could respond. “When the ceremony concludes, I’m taking you home.”

With a startled gasp, she faced him. “Really? Seriously? Today’s ceremony, not some ceremony a few years from now?”

He drank her in, struck anew by the beauty of her. How could one woman make him ache so intensely? Make him forget everyone who'd come before her until only she existed?

"Yes." Reaching out, he offered her a callused hand.

Suspicion suddenly darkened her features, but not even that detracted from her beauty. "Is this a trick?"

He knew she'd misunderstood his intentions; this was her new home. But he said nothing. Not yet.

"What makes you think I have a sense of humor?" he asked.

A smile bloomed, stealing the breath from his lungs.

Want to see that smile everyday—every hour!

"Thank you." Tentative, she placed her palm against his.

Joachim offered his hand to her.

Seconds ticked by, every muscle in Valerian's body knotting. If she took Joachim's hand, simply to punish Valerian, she would encourage his cousin's attentions and disprove the validity of Valerian's declaration.

One heartbeat passed. Then another.

She kept her free hand at her side.

Triumph flared deep in his chest.

Valerian called to one of the remaining men. "You're next."

That man selected his prize quickly, leaving a single female in line.

Valerian called another name. The nymph cheered, taking the hand of the remaining female, while the other nymphs hissed with disappointment.

"Aeson," Valerian said to one of the disappointed. "Prepare my chamber for Shaye." Hopefully the loyal man would know what he truly desired—the removal of all traces of the human women he'd pleasured last eve.

The warrior nodded and rushed to obey.

"The rest of you are dismissed for the night," he said. "Sneak into town, if you wish, but stay aware. Trust no one at your back."

Off they went.

"This way." He led Shaye out of the dining hall.

A few of the warriors, he noticed, hadn't made it to their rooms. Couples were having sex right there in the hallways, leaning against the walls.

Moans, purrs and groans of delight echoed.

"My eyes," Shaye gasped out. "My poor eyes."

In a nymph household, such a sight was common. But he kept that fact to himself.

With her close on his heels, and Joachim close on hers, he ushered her past the kitchens, the training arena and the warriors' barracks—where more moans and purrs abounded.

"Do they ever stop?" She'd probably hoped to sound exasperated. Instead she'd sounded breathless.

Primal excitement brewed within him. If she were his, he would have explored the reasons for her reaction. Namely—did she want Valerian to take her against a wall?

Soon, he vowed. Very soon.

His personal suite occupied the opposite end of the palace.

An area he'd chosen for the large bathing pool and panoramic wall of windows that offered a breathtaking view of the Outer City below.

What would Shaye think of the luxuries?

Did she like antiques or modern furnishings? Bright colors or pastels? Did she prefer warmth to cold?

She was right; he didn't know her well. But he wanted so badly to learn.

"Thank you for agreeing to take me back," Shaye said. "I know you don't want to, and I'm truly grateful."

He'd never heard such a gentle, tender tone from her. She even wore an expression of gratitude, the sweetness of it softening her features and gifting her with bright radiance.

He couldn't allow her to entertain the false assumption any longer. "I'm not taking you back to your world, Moon. I'm taking you to your new home."

She jolted, her nails digging into his flesh. "You knew what I thought but didn't correct me."

"I did correct you. Now."

"Yes, you're practically a Boy Scout. If this is how you think to win my affections, well, good luck," she spit at him. "You and Joachim should consider dating. You're perfect for each other."

"Does she always speak this way?" Joachim asked, expressing his first doubt about his selection.

"Always," Valerian and Shaye snapped in unison.

"By the way. I'm not staying anywhere near your room," she

informed Valerian. “I’d rather return to the sea and drown.”

“That isn’t an option for you.” He had to drag her—gently, of course—the rest of the way.

Joachim watched the interaction with an unreadable countenance.

Finally they reached the outskirts of Valerian’s suite.

Aeson exited the main doorway, his face flushed with pleasure.

Having caught his scent, the three humans chased after him. Soon, they trapped him in a circle.

“Be with me.”

“No, me.”

“I neeeed you.”

Then, “Valerian! You came back for me.”

All three swung around to beckon him over.

Mated nymphs didn’t usually attract females with the same potency and fervor as unmated ones. Still. He pulled Shaye in front of him, using her as a shield.

“Take one and go, Aeson.”

“You’re taking me.” The black beauty stepped forward and clasped Aeson’s hand.

He gazed at her with adoration as he led her from the room.

The other two females pouted.

Shaye humphed. “So. You’re a pimp as well as king.”

He ignored her and waved in his cousin’s direction. “Joachim is in need of a lover. Any interest?”

Both women sashayed to him without question.

"You're so big," the darker skin woman cooed.

"And strong," added the delightfully plump redhead.

Joachim backed away, determined to resist. "I've already made my choice?" he said, the words a question rather than a statement. "The...the pale one is to be mine, and I must guard her door this night. For that reason, you...cannot...touch...me. Touch me." The last was an unrestrained moan of helpless capitulation.

They'd reached him, their hands already stroking him.

Valerian almost grinned. "Shaye won't mind if you forgo standing guard at her door this night. A man has needs, and she understands." Or rather, he prayed she understood.

"Needs," the lost-in-a-passion-haze warrior repeated.

"I need your naked skin sliding against mine," the redhead said, breathless.

"I need you, hot in my mouth."

Joachim audibly swallowed. "Valerian," he began, a tremor in his tone.

Shouldn't smile. "Go. I'll see you in the morning."

"The pale one—"

"Will remain untouched." Tonight. Only tonight. "I've given you my word, and I'll keep it." Even if Shaye begged him for more.

The thought caused him to harden painfully. He wanted her to beg.

The redhead shoved her friend and jumped into Joachim's

arms. “I’ll make you forget her.”

“I trust you, cousin.” Joachim strode away then, and the woman clung to him.

“Wait,” Valerian called. “Take the other to Shivawn. If you’d like a man of your own?” he asked her.

She brightened. “Yes, please.”

Joachim held out his hand, and the other woman eagerly rushed over to claim it.

The trio disappeared beyond the corner.

Valerian allowed his grin to peek through. He had Shaye to himself, Joachim otherwise occupied.

“Unbelievable,” Shaye muttered.

He gripped her shoulders to twist her around. “Just what do you find so unbelievable?”

“The amount of communal sex to be had, of course. Haven’t you people heard of STDs?” Her pique painted her cheeks a soft shade of rose. As if the moon would soon vanish in place of the sun.

Lust boiled in his blood. He’d touched the softness of her skin today, but he had yet to taste her. He’d held her, but he had yet to make love to her. He wanted to strip her. To sink deep inside her. To pound, hard and fast, pleasuring her with long, demanding strokes.

She looked at him, as if she herself had just realized they were finally alone, and her nostrils flared. With desire?

He fisted his hands at his sides to keep himself from reaching

out again.

"Listen to me very closely." The words were nothing more than a growl of barely restrained need. "I want you, but I can't have you. If you don't lock yourself inside the suite right now, I'm going to forget my vow to leave you untouched and use every weapon in my sensual arsenal to tempt you."

Her eyes widened, the rich velvet-brown flicking with sparks of arousal. Her breath caught, and she inched away from him.

"If you exit the suite," he added, "I'll view it as an invitation to begin your seduction."

She spun on her heel and sprinted past the door. Click.

For a long while, Valerian stood in place, desperate to follow her, willing the door to open.

When his blood cooled, he scrubbed his face with a shaky hand. Having a mate was going to be murder on his body, it seemed, for he foresaw a long, painful night ahead—with no real end in sight.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SHAYE'S HEART THUNDERED in her chest, pounding so hard she feared her ribs would crack; her ears rang loudly, and she covered them with her hands to block out the awful sound. She sank onto the edge of a decadent made-for-sex bed with red silk sheets and a velvet comforter.

Not daring to breathe, she stared at the door.

She remained in that exact position for over an hour, anticipatory. Part of her wanted Valerian to storm inside the

room to begin seducing her.

Begin. As if he hadn't already.

Before she'd left him, his gaze had scorched her. If she'd remained with him, that heat would have burned her alive.

A new card idea had taken root. We should probably have sex before we rush into dating.

She gulped. If any man could tempt her...

No! She wouldn't be a fool for lust or love or whatever the heck he wanted to call...whatever the heck was going on between them, accepting whatever crap he happened to dish.

She rested her head against the bedpost, which was intricately carved with—what else?—naked females.

So far Valerian had proved to be a man of his word—which meant he would remain guard just outside the door all freaking night.

He would always tell her the truth, huh?

"This is your personal love shack, right? And those three women, you bagged and tagged them?" she called.

A pause. She expected the silence to continue.

Then he said, "Yes."

Well, well. The truth, even when it hurt. A rarity. A trait she admired greatly and had always hoped to find in someone else.

Maybe I should stay with him? Just for a little while.

Okay, wow. Part of her had to be looking for any reason to stay. Which was the very reason she had to escape tonight. No way she should stick around until morning, when he and the other

warrior, Joachim, would fight for ownership of her, as if she were property.

"I'm not a trophy," she muttered. "I'm not a prize for Valerian and his sex squad to battle to the death over."

"Yes, Moon, you are."

The huskiness of his voice gave her a jolt of pure pleasure, making her heart skip a beat and heat coast over her skin.

Trembling now, she jumped to her feet and traversed one of the bridges, careful to avoid the pits. She paced. A large, sunken tub had been filled with bubbling water. Or the water never drained. Tendrils of steam curled to the vaulted crystal ceiling, which showcased the now turbulent ocean above. Waves churned and swirled, leaving wisps of foam behind, no horny mermaids in sight.

Maybe...maybe a night with Valerian could go on her bucket list?

What! What are you doing? Stop! Escape!

Right. She traced a fingertip over the vanity. The rings in the wood actually warmed to her touch, a slight vibration rising up her arm.

An eerie voice suddenly whispered through her mind. Love heals; it doesn't hurt. Love is the answer, not the problem...

With a gasp, she yanked her arm away, severing contact. What. The. Heck?

"You mentioned...lovers." Valerian spoke up again, his tone dripping with irritation. "Are they the reason you want to return

home?"

Ugh. She'd yelled at him for misleading her, but she'd done the same to him. "I have a business. I have dreams."

"What's your business?"

Genuine interest? "I sell anti-cards." Did Atlanteans celebrate holidays?

"Or, more accurately, I sell sarcasm to people who have stopped romanticizing life."

A pause, as if he needed a moment to store every bit of info about her. "Give me an example of an anti-card."

She thought for a moment. "Congratulations on your new job. Before you go, would you mind taking the knife out of my back? You'll probably need it again."

He chuckled, surprising her, delighting her—arousing her. Which was so freaking frustrating!

"Now tell me about your dreams," he said.

A safe topic. One she embraced. "Well, while I was busy drowning, I admitted I'd like to write a book."

A soft growl. "You were never in danger of drowning. And you can write a book here."

"I have a feeling just do it here will be your answer to everything," she told him dryly.

"Yes, I'm very wise."

She had to cut off a laugh.

Twice, she realized. Twice he'd amused her—the moody, broody cold fish—in a way no one else ever had.

"I notice you mention nothing of your family," he said, his tone now careful. "Not your mother and her new husband. Not your father."

"We've never been close," she admitted.

Love heals; it doesn't hurt.

Argh! Those words!

"Their loss," he said.

Love is the answer, not the problem.

"I...thank you?"

Another pause stretched between them. "I'll be your family," he said, and she could picture him banging his chest with his fists. "It will be my honor and my privilege."

She rolled her eyes. "See! Told you just do it here would be your answer to everything."

Let's say she agreed to date Valerian. Would she ever be able to trust him? Was he capable of being faithful?

Shaye despised sharing. She'd shared her parents with their ever-changing lovers. She'd shared her childhood and her toys with stepsisters and stepbrothers.

If ever she gave herself to someone, it would be to a man who wanted her and only her. A man willing to give up his life just to make her happy. And she, in turn, would do the same for him.

Was she asking and offering too much? Maybe. But it was what she wanted, and she wouldn't settle for less—even though she knew it was an impossibility. Perhaps that was why she wanted it in the first place. If she couldn't really have it, she never

had to worry about heartbreak.

Valerian talked a good talk, and granted, he could probably walk a delectable, mind-shattering walk all over her body, but how long would his affections last?

"As my queen," he said, "you'll be wealthy beyond imagining."

"So. You think you can buy me?"

"I wish I could buy you," he grumbled.

She wanted to laugh again. What is wrong with me?

She valued her independence and being with a nymph—the nymph, actually—would strip that independence away layer by precious layer. How many times had she seen her father's girlfriends change their personality to fit him? Countless! Shaye refused, absolutely refused, to allow the same fate to befall her.

And yet, she told Valerian, "As long as I'm a prisoner, you won't be a viable date for me." As if there could ever be hope for more.

"No. I refuse to believe that. One day you'll forgive me. And our children will love the story of our meeting."

She nearly choked on her tongue. Children?

"Tell me a secret," he said. To distract her?

Her shock must have loosened her tongue, because she admitted, "I like the color pink. Which is borderline humiliating! Pink equals girlie. A frilly princess."

"And you don't want to be a girlie princess because..."

"I'm tough, as hard as nails?" A question? Really? She hurried to remove the focus from her. "What about you? Tell me a

secret."

"One moment, Shaye," he said, then muttered something she couldn't discern.

Her brow furrowed with confusion until a male replied, "Yes, Majesty." Footsteps rang out.

"All right. We're alone again," he told her.

Her first thought? Good! He's mine, all mine.

I need help.

"As a boy," he said, "I liked to nap in fields of lavender."

"Because being so beautiful was exhausting?"

"You think I'm beautiful?" How happy he sounded.

"You know you are."

"More beautiful than Joachim?"

Not going to travel that road. "Good night, Valerian."

He sighed. "Sleep well, Shaye. I'll protect you."

In that, she believed him. An odd but undeniable fact.

She searched the rest of the room but found no other doorway. Disheartened—yes, that had to be it—she dug through the closet. A few feminine garments were mixed in with the array of masculine shirts and leathers. From past lovers?

Probably. Not that she cared.

Really!

Almost defiantly, Shaye selected a black T-shirt and a pair of pants she had to roll at the ankles. More comfortable, she moved to the window and parted the violet curtains.

Her eyes widened. Oh, wow. Thick, dew-kissed trees—some

as bright as emeralds, others as white as snow—circled the landscape. Clear waterfalls spilled into pristine rivers while rainbow-colored birds soared overhead.

Absolutely magnificent.

In the heart of it all was a crowded city pulsing with life. Buildings of stone and wood created a maze of winding streets. Fading streaks of light emanated from the dome above, twilight giving way to night.

The crystal dome also acted as the sun, she realized.

She would have loved to visit the city, to stand in the midst of such spectacular beauty and bask.

"This has to be close to heaven," she breathed.

"We call it the Outer City," Valerian replied.

"A boring name for a specular paradise." Her gaze swept over the cliffs; she spotted bull-faced men with horns sprouting from their heads, beautiful women with horse bodies—centaurs?—and lions with wings.

"There was no need to travel to my world, Valerian," she said. "Your perfect mate was here all along."

"Only you would do, Moon."

Her stomach tightened. "Annnd that's the end of our conversation." Shaky legs returned her to the bed, where she eased onto the mattress.

"I'd like to bargain with you," Valerian said. "Let's negotiate."

Her brand-new heart arrhythmia acted up again. "What are you offering, exactly?"

"I'll be silent for the rest of the night...if you give me a compliment. A real one."

Dangerous territory. She would have to consider all the wonderful things about him and most assuredly, she'd begin to melt. Diabolical man.

If she were home, she would be alone right now. And lonely, her mind piped up.

Lonely was safe. Lonely was familiar.

A hot ache squeezed at her chest.

"Why are you doing this to me, Valerian? You could have any of the other women. Someone who would eagerly come to you...who would do anything you asked of them."

"They aren't you."

A simple sentence, yes, but it rocked her to the core. "What's so special about me? I defy you to name one thing."

Silence stretched between them, and it both elated and defeated her.

How stupid could I be? She'd actually craved praise from him. "You seriously need this much time to think about it?"

"You asked for one thing. I'm having trouble deciding which one to mention."

Her anger deflated. This man...oh, this man.

"How about I tell you three things?" he asked.

"Sure," she managed to croak.

"Your scent is so incredibly sweet, I could pick you out of a crowd of thousands, even if I were blindfolded. You remind me

of a rose—there are thorns, but beneath them, your soul is as soft as silk. You fascinate me. You are brave, but vulnerable. Kind but selective. Jaded yet hopeful."

She reeled. No one—not her mother, father, stepbrothers or stepsisters, or an endless string of nannies—had ever made her feel so important, so necessary, with only a few softly spoken words.

She barely knew Valerian. In their short time together, she'd railed at him, desired him, cursed him and attacked him. Now she wanted to storm out of the bedroom and throw herself into his arms. To be the brave girl he considered her to be, to destroy every wall she'd ever built and melt every piece of ice surrounding her heart.

This. This was the danger of the nymph, she realized. Not the beauty or the physical strength. Not even the pheromone Valerian had mentioned.

This. The belief that you were special. That you would be different from every other woman seduced and discarded. That a happily-ever-after wasn't just possible but imminent.

How was she supposed to resist him?

CHAPTER NINE

VALERIAN SPENT THE entire night posted in front of Shaye's door, hyperaware of every move and sound she made. Only a few minutes ago, she'd drifted to sleep with a heavy sigh. A quick peek inside the room had confirmed his suspicions, her lithe form sprawled across the bed, her hair spilling around her

like a snowy curtain sprinkled with starlight.

She was a winter goddess. A snow nymph. His greatest satisfaction and most decadent pleasure.

Ripe for the taking...

Her eyelashes were light, only a shade darker than her hair. Her lips, those soft, lush, all-your-dreams-come-true lips were parted, begging to be kissed.

He wanted so badly to touch her.

"I'll have you yet," he told her. "Say nothing if you agree with me."

Silence greeted him, and he grinned.

"Dream of me, Moon. I'll dream of you, I have no doubt." If he slept at all.

The pink tip of her tongue swept over her lips. A wave of desire swept through him as he imagined meeting her tongue with his own. The two twining, dueling, tasting.

Devouring.

His stomach clenched, and every muscle in his body turned to stone. He needed to leave...at the very least, to look away from her. Already he clung precariously to a sense of honor he wasn't sure he possessed anymore. The longer he stood there, the worse it would be for him.

How he longed for the night she would breathe her sighs in his ears, or across his chest—or lower still. And how dare Joachim attempt to lay claim to her!

Valerian scowled. Shaye was meant for him, and only him,

and those who thought otherwise deserved a painful death.

He'd never wanted anything as much as he wanted her, and not being able to have her immediately was...hard. Very, very hard.

I have to win her. I cannot let another have her.

Perhaps his cousin would become so enamored of his current lover he would forgot all about Shaye. If not...well, Valerian would just have to think of something Joachim would find irresistible. Something he would place above the importance of a bedmate.

Joachim was a good man—at times—and a strong warrior with a—slightly—loyal heart. What were the man's weaknesses? Women? Beyond a doubt. Women were the weakness of all nymphs. Power? Definitely. Weapons? Most surely. Joachim collected them, taking them from every warrior he'd ever killed or bested and hanging them on his bedchamber wall.

Valerian considered his own blade, resting against his back. The Skull. Large, sharp and lethal. One of the finest swords ever made. No, the finest ever made. Crafted by Hephaesteus himself, the blacksmith of the Greeks. The weapon had slayed many of his enemies, rending them with injuries that could not be mended. The sword was the only one of its kind, with a twisted frame and elongated skull tip that were envied by every soldier who spied it.

He would hate to give it up, but his mate held so much more importance to him. Even a mate who wanted nothing to do with him.

Would Joachim accept the Skull?

Valerian released a sigh of his own, the answer remaining a mystery—as much a mystery as the best way to win Shaye's well-guarded heart.

She'd scoffed at money and jewels. She'd shown no interest in his crown.

Did she have enemies in need of slaying? If so, he would gladly gift her with their severed heads.

He pushed a hand through his hair. Uncertainty was foreign to him. And horrible and challenging but also exciting.

Winning her—appeasing Joachim and overcoming Shaye's own resistance—had awakened his deepest warrior instincts.

"You will be mine," he told her. "Somehow."

"Majesty?"

He closed the door with a quiet snick and focused on the warrior who'd returned at last, bearing the supplies Valerian had requested. A canvas, an easel and three colors of paint. Black, white and red.

He dismissed the warrior and carefully placed the canvas on the easel. He spent hours painting, losing himself in the joy of creating. The subject of his art had never appealed to him more. Had never mattered to him more.

When he finished, he stood back to study the image and ensure he'd gotten every detail right. His chest swelled with pride. He had. Oh, he had.

Let Shaye try to resist him now...

* * *

THREADS OF LIGHT flowed from the crystal dome above, gradually brightening the bedroom. Different-colored shards shot in every direction, a lovely rainbow spray of blue, pink, purple and green.

Shaye eased up, surprisingly relaxed. She yawned and rubbed the sleep from her eyes before scanning the room, hoping an exit would reveal itself in the bright light of day. The bathing pool still steamed and bubbled with hot water. Violet cloth still draped the windows. Columns still rose to the ceiling, majestic and—

She gasped. A painting had been hung on the wall, beside the vanity. A painting that hadn't been there last night.

It was a painting of her. A close-up of her face. In black and white, with only spots of color. Twin pink circles highlighted her cheeks while her lips were dark red.

Her eyes somehow sparkled with mischief, her eyelids at half-mast, heavy and slumberous; she looked ready and eager for a man. But not just any man...

Her lips were slightly kiss-swollen, a smile threatening to break free.

Valerian must have spent the entire night working on it.

Is this how he sees me?

Her mind rebelled. She wasn't mischievous, and she rarely smiled. He must have painted his desires—the way he wanted her to be.

Disappointment delivered a one-two punch to her midsection.

Can't you be nice for once, Shaye?

Why can't you be more like your stepsister, Shaye?

What will it take to get rid of your perma-scowl, Shaye?

Mumbling under her breath, she lumbered from the bed and crossed the bridge, avoiding the surrounding pits. Why did Valerian have those death traps in here, anyway?

Wait. The palace—fortress, whatever—used to belong to the dragons, he'd said. They must have used those pits to fly in and out of the room.

And how scary that she had begun to think like an Atlantean, considering the different races as part of everyday life.

Anyway. Maybe she could climb down? Or scale down with a sheet, since she didn't have a ladder.

Yeah, and she could also fall to her death.

So. No scaling.

Shaye used the surprisingly modern bathroom to brush her teeth and wash up, hoping the water would also wash away her darker emotions. A pipe dream.

She wanted to go home, and she wanted to go home now. Nothing and no one confused her there. Nothing and no one made her wish for more, for better.

Her employees were probably missing her. Or had they not yet noticed her absence? She was always the first one there and the last to leave, her time spent locked inside her office.

Whatever. If she wanted to leave, she'd have to walk out the front door. And what better time? Valerian could be sleeping.

Unbidden, his image rose front and center in her mind. He

was so strong, so proud. So danged sexual. A hedonist to the extreme, with skin that looked like dark, lickable cream, hair as radiant as spun gold, and eyes...oh, his eyes. Those turquoise irises beckoned. They teased. They promised. His long, dark lashes acted as the perfect frame, the perfect contrast.

Stalling?

As quietly as possible, she tiptoed toward the door. The closer she was, the stronger Valerian's masculine scent became, a heady mixture of aroused man and determined warrior. Her skin prickled with heat. She tried to hold her nose, to fight the scent's allure and the weakening effect it had on her.

Her heart drummed a staccato rhythm—da-dum da-dum dadada-dum—as she clasped the knob and twisted. Would Valerian be out there, awake and waiting?

"Good morning, Shaye."

His husky voice jolted her, and as she flattened a hand over her throat, she belted out, "Crap!"

He stood just in front of her, his muscled arms crossed over his massive chest, his legs braced apart. Their gazes clashed, her treacherous heart losing track of its rhythm and skipping a beat.

He looked even more unbelievably mouthwatering than before.

Golden hair tumbled onto his forehead and shoulders. He was still shirtless, his body roped with the tightest abs she'd ever seen. A leather band wrapped around him, holding a sword against his back.

Trembling now, she licked her lips. “What are you doing here?”

His gaze raked over her, and she suspected he had just peeled away her clothing. “Waiting for you, of course. You are gorgeous.”

She shifted from one foot to the other. His voice had dipped as he’d uttered the compliment. A take-no-prisoners timbre. Pure temptation and utter decadence.

He’s a lecherous abductor. Dangerous in every way.

Right. She mentally reinforced the icy walls around her heart.

“Did you like your painting?” he asked.

A shiver tripped along her spine. “Yes. No.”

He arched a sandy brow. “No?”

“Honestly? I both love and hate it. You painted an almost-smile on my face.”

“A look you tried to hide from me but couldn’t.”

He had amused her on several occasions. But...

He was that aware of her?

Dang him. He was seducing her again, and he wasn’t even trying!

It wasn’t fair. He had experience. She didn’t. But just as he was learning about her, she was learning about him. He wasn’t needlessly cruel or even merciless. He clearly loved and respected his men and wanted the very best for them.

“Be honest,” she said. “If we got married and had a daughter —” ovaries threatening to exploded again “—what would you do

if some man came along and kidnapped her?"

Tension radiated from him. He raised his chin. "I would kill the bastard."

A pang of envy—all for a make-believe daughter! Her own father would be too afraid of someone like Valerian to act against him.

"You would kill someone for doing exactly as you've done," she said softly.

A muscle ticked beneath his eye. "I will die without you, Shaye. You would sentence me to death?"

He didn't mean he would literally die. No way, no how. "You're describing love at first sight. Which I don't believe is possible."

"No, I'm describing mate at first sight."

"What's the difference?"

"Everything and nothing," he replied cryptically. He waved a hand through the air, a regal command to move on to the next topic. "Did you dream of me?"

She allowed the subject change because she'd made her point and given him something to consider.

"Yes," she admitted grudgingly. She had. She'd dreamed of his hands on her body, caressing her...of his mouth doing delicious things.

His lush lips inched into a surprised but pleased smile. "Tell me. Every detail."

"You were naked," she told him.

His grin spread, and his eyes gleamed with satisfaction.

"And you were tied up..."

He appeared intrigued. "I had no idea bondage would excite you."

"Oh, I adore the idea of tying you up." She paused dramatically, and just like the Shaye in the painting, she fought a grin of her own. Maybe he knew her better than she'd given him credit for, after all. "You were secured to an anthill, being eaten alive."

He barked out a charming laugh. "Such a cruel woman, my Shaye."

His Shaye. Tremors nearly toppled her, her good humor vanishing in an instant...replaced by stunning desire.

He propped his shoulder against the side wall, a pose of carnal relaxation. Fall into my arms, his posture proclaimed. I'll catch you.

"I dreamed of you, too," he said.

Shivers cascaded through her. "Do tell."

"You were naked, as well."

Suddenly light-headed, she backed up a step. "Is it too much to hope I was tied to an anthill?"

"Yes." He stepped toward her, intent and intense. "You were splayed on my dinner table, ready to quench my hunger." His eyes were heavy-lidded, deliciously wicked. "I devoured you."

Breathe; she had to breathe. The oxygen she did manage to draw in burned her throat, singed her lungs. As he'd spoken, his

words had painted a picture in her mind. A terribly beautiful picture as vivid as the one he'd painted on the canvas.

His tongue...on her...in her...

"Come," he said, extending his hand. "I'll feed your hunger."

Yes, oh, yes. I want him.

No! She batted at his wrist. "I'd rather starve than feast on your body."

"I wasn't planning to feed you from my body...yet."

Oh. Disappointment—

Did not bloom. Nope. Not even a tiny spark.

"What about the warrior?" she asked. "Joachim?"

The muscle began to jump under his eye again. "I'll deal with him when he awakens. Until then, you need sustenance if you're to keep up your strength."

Well. Maybe if she starved herself, he'd take her home? "No, thank you. I'm good."

His eyes narrowed. "We could bargain," he cajoled.

What was with the man and his bargaining? "I eat and you'll...what?"

"Kiss you anywhere you'd like."

Save me.

She had to force her mind to blank. "Um, you really need to work on your bargaining skills. They suck." Had her voice shaken?

"I understand." His eyes twinkled down at her. "You would rather I offer you an orgasm."

"What!" Her cheeks fused with heat, and a tremor stole over her. "No!"

"You're sure?"

"Yes?" Her cheeks burned hotter. "Yes. Very."

"Too bad." Valerian took another step toward her, his masculine scent wafting to her, filling her nostrils. Strong and spicy—so arousing her tee abraded her nipples and an ache throbbed between her legs.

She'd never been a sexual creature, and these new sensations rocked her to the core. How long could she fight them? How long could she resist this man?

"What thoughts are rolling through your head, hmm?" he asked, his voice huskier than before.

Did he know she was aroused? No, no. He couldn't. Please!

"I was—" What? She wouldn't admit the truth, but she wouldn't lie, either. "You're right. I'm hungry."

For several seconds he remained quiet. She used the time to cool her molten desires, reciting math equations in her mind.

Men = Heartbreak × Wasted Time.

Of course: Heartbreak = Wasted Time.

So: Men = Heartbreak × (Heartbreak) = Relationship.

Therefore: Relationship = Pain + Suffering.

Conclusion? Men = Pain + Suffering.

"Come, Moon." Once again, he extended his hand. "I will feed you."

"Food?" she asked, just to be certain.

"Food."

Very well. She placed her hand in his. Such heat! Such strength! His calluses delighted her.

Contact had been a mistake. A big—really big—mistake. But she didn't pull away. He brought her knuckles to his mouth to kiss...to lick and taste, and she shivered.

"Valerian."

"Shaye." He smiled at her, a slice of heaven in a life that had been hell.

To distract herself, she drafted a new card. Roses are red, Valerian is sex. This poem makes no sense. Trouble.

CHAPTER TEN

JOACHIM LAY IN HIS BED, his arms propped under his head. He stared up at the glistening ceiling, wishing he could take comfort in something, anything. Or someone. Would he even recognize comfort nowadays?

Night had long since passed, and morning had arrived. He shifted and eyed the wall of weapons he'd acquired over the years. A weapon for every man, woman or creature he'd slain. Their numbers were so vast, he'd stopped keeping count.

He wasn't ashamed of his violent past. Far from it. He reveled in his victories. The bloodier the better.

He was a man without honor, compassion, or mercy. A mistake, his mother had once said. The true nymph king, his father had then retorted.

So. Joachim's behavior with the redhead had shredded his

pride.

After leaving his cousin and the pale-haired female, Joachim had brought the lushly rounded redhead to his chamber. He'd been poised to enter her—ready to burst. She'd been writhing in passion, opening herself wider, pleading for more.

So of course he'd stopped. Just stopped! Like a trembling lad about to claim his first female, afraid of blowing his load before he was able to sheathe himself completely.

As he had peered down at her, the sense of all-consuming need had abandoned him, there one moment, gone the next. An image of the dark-headed witch he'd wanted so badly at the selection ceremony had flashed through his mind.

He yearned to tangle his fingers in her curls, to put his mouth on her ripe little body—to roll her body under his. Hers, and only hers.

Craving a specific female was new to him.

Next he'd pictured the little witch in Shivawn's arms, moaning, mindless with pleasure, and a terrible rage had blackened his mood.

Your mood is always black.

True. But never to such a terrible degree.

Joachim's bed partner had tried her best to reignite his passions, but she'd failed miserably. He should have given her an orgasm anyway. He might have strengthened, at least a little bit.

Instead, he'd sent her away to find another lover.

Fool! He was as weak as before. But at least Valerian, too, was

weakened this day, having gone without a woman's touch—his mate's touch. If his claims were to be believed.

Mate. How Joachim longed to find his own mate; that one woman who would love him above all others.

He sighed. He didn't want to take the pale woman from Valerian. She didn't excite him. Not like the dark-headed witch, with her lush curves.

What was her name? She hadn't said. Hadn't spoken at all. He wondered what her voice would be like. Low and husky? Sweet and soft?

If he'd had the opportunity to choose her, the night would have ended differently. Now Shivawn would pay for taking her, forcing Joachim to push Valerian into issuing a challenge before the appointed time.

Do nothing until you're ready, his father had told him. Until you're absolutely certain you'll win.

Joachim liked and admired his cousin, but he liked and admired power more.

He'd never enjoyed being told what to do. He preferred to give the orders, forcing others to do his bidding. Even his women. He was master. He was commander.

Never bend, never break.

His cousin ruled with an iron fist, expecting total and complete obedience, even from family.

Perhaps the appointed time had arrived. Joachim had an opportunity to take the crown at long last.

Valerian had offered to fight him, true, but Joachim wouldn't become king if—when—he won. And he would win. His cousin's honor would prevent him from doing the dirty deeds, the things that needed to be done. Like kicking a man while he was down.

My specialty.

No, Valerian had to willingly agree to surrender his throne. Would he?

His cousin had spent an entire night considering his limited options. Surely he'd realized there was only one way to keep the pale woman.

"I will be king," Joachim snarled.

Some men were meant for greatness. Some were not. Valerian had made many foolish mistakes lately.

The first: he'd left the nymph females behind to lay siege to this palace, citing their safety mattered more than the strength of the army.

Nothing mattered more than the strength of an army!

The women were now lost, probably captured, with no trace of them in either the Inner or Outer City.

Yes, Valerian had a contingent of men searching. But that wasn't enough. The women wouldn't need finding if the king had brought them along.

The second mistake: Valerian had slept with the three humans who'd exited the portal, thinking of his own needs rather than the needs of his men.

I would have thought of the men.

A lie.

A lie he embraced, using it to fuel his ire.

Everything fueled his ire this day.

The pale woman was a means to an end. He'd seen the way Valerian hovered over her, protecting her, silently willing the other warriors away from her. The only reason Joachim had chosen her—he'd hoped his cousin would do anything to keep her.

He would find out if his hope had paid off.

And perhaps, when he became sovereign, he would simply take the dark-haired witch from Shivawn.

He grinned at the thought.

Oh, yes, he was going to like being king.

* * *

VALERIAN'S CONFIDENCE SOARED. Shaye had willingly placed her hand in his. The contact had set his every nerve ending on fire.

Would she always affect him this way?

As he led her down the hall, he smiled at her over his shoulder. His breath caught. The dome cast rainbow flecks over her rosy cheeks. Those roses...the only source of color in her skin. She could have been a dream, a ghost or a phantom come to torment him.

Like a siren, she lured and tempted him.

Her pale hair tumbled down her back. Some of the ends curled

while some fell straight. What he would give to sift his fingers through the thick mass. His home? His crown? His life?

Yes, each of those things.

He would willingly go to his death for this woman.

She scowled at him, her rich, brown eyes crackling with a fire of their own. "Why are you smiling?"

"I'm with you." However long it took, he would chip at her resistance, and he wouldn't stop until she'd caved. I'll have you begging for me, Moon. "Why wouldn't I smile?"

"Um, I don't know. Maybe because I'm being a cranky witch? And FYI, I shouldn't have to explain something so simple to you."

"FYI?"

"An acronym. Usually it means 'For Your Information.' In your case it means 'Fact, You're Idiotic.'"

He chuckled, his confidence only intensifying. He knew the ins and outs of warfare better than most and knew this woman was brandishing her crankiness like a weapon.

The only viable conclusion: she was at war with her own desires.

He couldn't have been happier.

No, not true. He would've been a lot happier if they were both naked and in bed.

"Why don't I kiss you out of your crankiness, hmm?" he asked, practically purring the words.

She sucked in a breath. "Tell me. Will one kiss lead to one

touch?"

"Only if I'm lucky."

"You're not."

"Believe me, I know. Otherwise I'd be the main course at breakfast." As he spoke, he pressed his fingers against the pulse in her lower palm. It raced.

Oh, yes. She'll be mine. And soon...

While her mind hadn't yet accepted him as her mate, her body already recognized him as such.

What she would learn: when the body desired someone, the mind would create excuses to seize the opportunity to take. Anything to assuage the ache.

Her awareness of him would ultimately become her downfall.

"Do you ever wear a shirt?" she grumbled.

"Once upon a time, yes. Then I noticed the way your gaze caressed my chest, and I decided it was in my best interest to forgo shirts for the rest of my days."

"Caressed?" she sputtered. "My gaze did no such thing."

He tsk-tsked. "You lie to me, and you lie to yourself. I expected better of you."

"Well, too bad." She attempted to yank her hand from his, but he tightened his grip. "Get used to disappointment, because that's all your supposed mate will ever offer you."

"Another lie." He tugged her in front of him before pressing her against the wall. "Let's bargain. From now on, if you lie to me—or to yourself—I get to spank you."

Her eyes narrowed on him. An action that expressed anger. And yet, she couldn't quite catch her breath. An action that expressed arousal. "And if you lie to me?"

"You get to spank me."

Her pulse raced faster. "Why would I ever agree to such a bargain?"

"Because you're desperate for any excuse to put your hands on me without admitting you want me."

Her lips pursed. "Fine," she said.

What! She'd just accepted? If so, he would lie to her right here, right now—which would mean he would have also lied to her about never lying to her, so he would actually need two spankings.

"You're gorgeous," she added, and his excitement plummeted. "Your muscles are exceptional, and I could stare at them all day. But I also like to look at lions, tigers and bears, oh my. Touching them would be detrimental to my health. They'd eat me!"

"So would I." Unwilling to give up, he rubbed the tip of his nose against hers. "Slowly. Thoroughly."

She shivered and softened against his. "No?"

Do not smile. "You can tell yourself it won't mean anything. A momentary pleasure, nothing more."

"Right," she said, her voice low and husky with want. "Because that's all it would be."

He nuzzled his cheek against hers. "Of course, I would then have to spank you for saying so. For lying to us both."

Another shiver. Her hands settled on his shoulders, her nails digging into his skin. “How could I know whether I had lied or not...until you’d actually pleasured me?”

A spark of triumph, every fiber of his being demanding he push her for more. Here. Now. She craved his mouth on hers, and he had to strike while she was receptive.

Honor be damned.

But he straightened. Only in the midst of a struggle did a man reveal his true character. Valerian would prove to Shaye she could trust him at all times, even when he had to forgo what he wanted most.

Wide brown eyes regarded him warily. She’d expected him to pounce.

How would she have reacted? Accepting at first, angry afterward?

So vulnerable, his little Moon. What kind of life had she led? Had someone hurt her? Had a man betrayed her trust?

Proving his worth wasn’t just important, he realized. Proving his worth was imperative.

“Valerian?” His name drifted from her lips, a husky entreaty...a confused plea.

“Breakfast awaits.” His harsh tone would have sent anyone else running for cover; his need for this woman was so great he wasn’t sure how he’d managed to keep his hands to himself. “Come.”

Her eyes narrowed, and he realized he’d used the wrong word, considering their conversation. If “wrong” now meant “right.”

She bristled. “Are you secretly a tease?”

At any other time, he might have laughed at the intended insult. “No, Moon. I’m a warrior determined to win the war rather than a single battle, and that is hot, hard truth.”

“You mean cold hard truth.”

“No, it’s definitely hot.”

Her mouth opened and closed and, in her delightfully stunned state, she offered no protest as he linked their fingers to lead her through the commons, the central meeting point for the barracks.

Several couples had decided to camp there and now lay intertwined out in the open. Unlike the frantic moans that had rung out last night, silence reigned.

“You nymphos need a sexual etiquette coach.”

He stopped only long enough to pierce her with a hard stare. “Nymphs. Nymphs.”

Eyes full of innocence, she said, “Nymph... Ohs.”

Frustrating female.

“So, what are we going to do about Joachim?” she asked. “Don’t tell me we’ll deal with him when he wakes up. Give me an answer this time. I hate not knowing our plan.”

We and our, she’d said. Not I. Not your. But we and our.

He liked that she considered him a partner in this. “Worry not. We will do whatever is necessary to remain together.”

“Whatever is necessary.... Are you talking about—” she gulped “—committing cold-blooded murder?”

“Yes.” He kicked a pile of clothing out of the way and turned

a corner. “But I would swing the blade, and you would merely watch.”

“Yeah, because that’s the problem I had with the plan.” She sighed. “Is cold-blooded murder not a crime here?”

“The strong govern the weak. If the weak refuse to obey, they must be pruned from the vine. In what way would it be crime?”

“And you wonder why I want to go home,” she muttered.

He wished he could wipe her memory of the surface world! “You will never be harmed here.”

“Because you plan to protect me. Yeah, yeah. But I’m sure I’m considered a weakling to the rest of your world. At least physically. So what’s to stop the strong from attempting to govern me when you aren’t around?”

“You are my queen. You govern others. They do not govern you.”

A fresh, warm scent wafted to him just before the dining hall came into view, the table piled with food. The male centaurs and Minotaurs he’d hired from the Outer City had prepared a feast to welcome the new additions to the household.

Shaye’s stomach growled, and he experienced a flicker of guilt. He hadn’t fed her dinner.

He would have to take better care of her in the future. His woman should never go hungry.

“Usually at this time of day, my warriors surround the table,” he said. Now he and Shaye were alone. Even the servants were gone. “You’ll have to wait to test your power.”

"One, I'm not your queen yet. Two, I don't want to order anyone around."

His pulse leaped. She'd said yet! "You order me around all the time."

"Supposed queen, remember?" she said and fluffed her hair. "If you don't like my rule, you can cut me loose."

He snorted.

She eased into the chair at the head of the table and eyed him. Expecting him to balk, he was sure. When he didn't, she shrugged and filled a plate with food.

As she swallowed a bite of coconut cream, her eyes closed in sweet surrender. "Oh, wow. Who prepared this? Surely not your army. They may look like beefcake, but I seriously doubt they know how to cook it."

"As if I would allow my men to cook," he said, filling a plate of his own before taking the chair beside hers. "They would inadvertently poison us."

She popped a grape into her mouth. "So...you're a chauvinist. Your men belong on the battlefield but never in the kitchen."

"Not even close. Food can mean the difference between life and death." He leaned back and bit into a strawberry. How he would have loved to trace the fruit over her lips and lick the juice away. "The kitchen is a battlefield in its own right. My men simply have no real talent for it."

"Perhaps they're too much like you. Arrogant, bossy, pigheaded, stubborn, half-witted, spoiled, demanding, self-

absorbed and morally corrupt."

When she paused for breath, he grumbled, "Is that all?"

"No. Horny. Overbearing. Mean." She paused, tapped a finger against her lips before nodding. "That's all."

"'Mean'?" He frowned. "I've been the epitome of nice, catering to your every whim."

"Did you not steal me from my home? Have you not refused over and over again to return me?"

He tossed his arms up. "This again."

"This always."

"Perhaps I can give you something better to think about." He leaned forward and placed his hand on her thigh; she sucked in a breath.

What she didn't do? Rebuke him.

Slowly, languidly, he slid his fingers higher. He stopped only a few inches away from the center of both their worlds.

"Shall we bargain, sweet Shaye?"

The pink tip of her tongue swiped over her lips and almost proved his undoing. "I'm listening."

"Give me time." Would she find ten years objectionable? Five? Probably. He sighed. "A year. A mere blip in a lifetime. If I fail to win your affections, I'll return you to the surface."

"You're kidding, right?" She bit into a strawberry of her own. "By the end of that year, I would be considered dead. My business would fail. My home would be sold. My bank accounts would be emptied."

He tensed with incomparable need, once again overcome by the desire to lick juice off her lips and chin...to dribble the sweet but tart droplets into her navel...between her legs. She would writhe as his tongue followed every path taken by the liquid. She would tunnel her hands through his hair while her knees squeezed his temples.

"Valerian?" She snapped her fingers in front of his face.

He blinked. Their gazes met...heated.

She had to suspect the direction his mind had gone—and she had to like it. Her pupils were blown, those velvety-brown irises utterly consumed.

"How long do you propose?" he asked, his voice more of a growl than anything.

She shifted in her seat, uncomfortable. "A week."

Risk losing her forever for a mere seven days of her company? No! "Six months."

"You ask for far too much."

"I ask for far too little when I long to demand an eternity."

A moment passed in heavy silence. Then she grated, "If I'm going to consider this bargain thing, I need to know a few things first."

"Anything."

She arched a brow. "Be honest. Do you want to wear my skin?"

"Pardon?"

"Yes or no? I have to know how deep this stalker slash creeper thing goes."

"No?"

"Do you want to hump my eyeballs?"

"Interesting, but no."

She drew in a deep breath, held it and released it. "A month," she said. "I'll stay a month."

A month. A mere four weeks. Or thirty days. Or 720 hours. Or 43,200 minutes. Or 2,592,000 seconds.

Not. Long. Enough.

Could he win her in the allotted time frame? With anyone else, he would have said yes. With Shaye...

"Well?" she prompted.

Two of his warriors strode into the room, saving him from having to reply.

Both men sported wide, toothy smiles. Unlike the day before, each sported a relaxed posture. Strength radiated from them, so strong it was nearly tangible.

"Shaye, meet Broderick and Dorian."

Broderick had an arm slung around Dorian's shoulders. They smiled at Shaye.

They wore gilded breastplates, black pants and jewel-studded armbands, ready to train.

"Good morning, great king." Broderick patted him on the back. "This promises to be a pleasurable day."

"Highly pleasurable," Dorian agreed.

The males whistled as they circled the table and heaped their plates with food. They must have worked up hearty appetites.

Valerian glared at them, actually...envious? Yes. Yes, he was. A first for him. Another blow to his pride.

Shivawn entered the room. He wasn't smiling or relaxed but stiff; he glowered at everyone. He slammed himself onto the bench beside Valerian, the beads in his hair rattling, and silently filled his plate.

"Problems?" Valerian asked him.

"Maybe one or two. My woman vomited when we reached my room," Shivawn muttered.

"Did you touch her?" Shaye asked, inserting herself into the conversation. "Fair warning. Your next words dictate my next actions."

"No," Shivawn snapped. "I obeyed orders."

"Well, you just saved yourself a painful forking." She set the fork in question beside her plate. "Let's discuss the fact that you've decided to act like a child and pout." She shook her fists in front of her face. "Boo hoo. Poor you. Now you'll actually have to work at a relationship before having sex. Oh, the travesty!"

"Women love me," the warrior grated.

"Wrong. They love your pheromone." Her gaze slid to the others. "There's a big difference, guys. Huge. Without that magic drug—and it's a drug, I don't care what your king says—I wonder if anyone would ever want any of you. You've got A-plus looks, sure, but after last night's ceremony? You've got solid F-minus personalities."

Having been on the receiving end of her sharp tongue more

than once, Valerian sat back and enjoyed the show—enjoyed her.

She was born to be a queen.

And really, her words made him think. He'd never before taken the time to discuss his life—past, present or future—with any of his bedmates. He hadn't cared to discuss his secrets, and they hadn't cared to ask.

He wanted Shaye to know him. All of him. The good, the bad and the ugly. He wanted to tell her about himself and gauge her reaction, hear her thoughts.

He wanted to know her. All of her. No detail was too small. He wanted to know what had given her joy, what had pained her. He wanted to know about the men she'd dated.

Had she favored scholars? Warriors? How had the men treated her?

Had she ever been in love?

Valerian's hands clenched on the arms of the chair, nearly snapping the wood. A need to maim, destroy and kill any man who'd once held this woman's affections consumed him, hotter than a dragon's fire. Her passion—his. Her affections—his.

Her heart—his!

He yearned to brand his very essence into her. She would know no scent but his. Would feel no touch but his. Would crave him, only him, as he craved her, only her.

He wanted her to feel the same way about any woman who'd come before her. He wanted her to brand him.

"My personality is as delightful as the rest of me," Dorian said,

cutting into his thoughts.

Broderick nodded. “As is mine. I’ve never gotten a single complaint.”

“What do you think I’ve been doing?” she asked. “Complaining.”

Both males looked to Valerian. He hiked his shoulders in a shrug, all what can I do?

“Get to know the women,” Shaye said. “You might be surprised by what you learn. Like, maybe they’re right for you but maybe they aren’t. And give them a chance to get to know you, to like you without any kind of chemical interference. Hey, here’s a thought. Maybe even go a step further and gift them with something special—prove they are special to you. And I’m not talking about the supposed gift between your legs.”

Mumbling under his breath, Shivawn swiped up his plate and stalked from the room.

Everyone watched him leave, each with a different reaction. Broderick laughed. Dorian frowned, confused, and Shaye heaved a sigh.

“When you are queen,” Valerian said, hoping to tempt her, “you can make as many decrees as your heart desires. You can command the men to do whatever you wish.”

“What!” Broderick shouted.

Dorian banged his head against the tabletop.

Shaye crossed her arms over her chest, causing the neckline of her shirt to gape, revealing a deep plunge of cleavage. His need

for her intensified—not because of her cleavage, though he loved the sight, but because the corners of her mouth twitched, as if she were fighting a grin.

Gorgeous girl.

"Well. I see my chosen has quenched one hunger," a male voice suddenly said from the doorway. "Why don't I quench another?"

Valerian stiffened. Because of the implication, and the reaction the words elicited in Shaye. The mischievous glint faded from her eyes, and the color drained from her cheeks. The corners of her mouth no longer twitched.

Gnashing his teeth, Valerian twisted in his seat to meet his cousin's narrowed gaze.

Joachim stood in the doorway. He appeared no more relaxed than yesterday. In fact, he appeared ready for war, weapons strapped over armor.

Joachim wanted to war, so they would war.

It was past time he showed his power-hungry cousin the error of his ways—beginning now.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

TENSION AND TESTOSTERONE heated the air, burning Shaye's lungs every time she inhaled. Fury sizzled and snapped between Valerian and Joachim, making everything worse; a raging inferno, barely banked, threatened to destroy, well, everyone.

As a child, she'd lived with emotional people. How many

tirades and fits of jealous rage had her mother thrown over the years? Countless. If a husband ever came home late, china was thrown at his head—right along with accusations of infidelity. If a birthday or anniversary was forgotten, tires were slashed.

How many times had her different stepmothers raged?

How often had her father and stepdads experienced mansteria for some silly reason or another?

Shaye had usually hidden in her bedroom.

But none of those people had ever looked as scary as Valerian. The need to kill had darkened his expression. His lips were thinned and pulled back from his teeth—an animalistic scowl.

Until this point, he'd shown her desire, amusement and patience.

"I have a bargain for you, Joachim." His voice lashed like a barbed whip.

Joachim gave no outward reaction. Although his eyes did bear the same trace of dissatisfaction as Valerian and Shivawn.

"I'm listening."

"I'll give you my sword," Valerian said. "You may have it with my blessing, but you must renounce all claim to the girl."

Traded for a sword? Be still my heart.

"Unacceptable." Black brows winged into Joachim's hairline in a display of arrogance. "If you want the girl, you'll have to renounce your role as king."

Dorian and Broderick snarled like animals.

Okay. Enough. Valerian had faults—a lot of faults—but

judging by the things she'd seen so far, he was a good king. Most certainly, this black-haired man would be a merciless dictator.

"No," she said. "As acting queen, I refuse on Valerian's behalf."

"You don't have a voice in this," Joachim snapped at her.

"And you won't speak to her in such a manner," Valerian snapped right back at him.

Shaye blew Mr. Dictator a kiss using her middle finger.

Valerian rubbed the back of his neck. "I cannot simply make you king. You know that. My men would never follow someone who hadn't proved himself worthy."

"That's true," Joachim agreed. "Which is why I'm willing to prove myself worthy."

Valerian hands flexed, as if he imagined holding a sword. "And just how do you plan to do that?"

"Yeah," Shaye said. "How do you?"

"Yesterday you were willing to fight me." Joachim lifted his chin. "Are you still?"

A nod without hesitation. "Yes."

"Are you willing to relinquish your crown when I best you, thereby proving myself worthy?"

A predatory stillness came over Valerian. He muttered, "I knew it."

She'd never seen him fight. She'd never seen either of them fight. Joachim possessed the same confidence as Valerian, and yet he also struck her as bloodthirsty.

Could Valerian win?

And what if he were injured?

The thought...displeased her. Because she needed him to remain in charge so that he could escort her home. Not for any other reason. Really.

"What about a game of chess?" she suggested. "Hey. Not that it matters, but are either of you good at chess?"

Valerian's eyes narrowed on her—and churned with more fury.

"What did I do?" As many insults as she'd tossed at him, he'd only ever smiled at her. But a mention of chess pushed him over the edge?

"You doubt my skill with a sword," he barked. Then he looked away from her, as if he couldn't stand her, and that was somehow far worse.

"Such a thing has never been done," he said to Joachim, his tone careful, even guarded.

Joachim wrapped his fingers around his sword hilt. "Yet such a thing has often needed to be done."

Well. Shaye had thought tensions were already high. Wrong! The room pulsed with danger.

If she didn't do something, and quick, the two males would come to blows right here, right now. But what could she do?

Flash her breasts? No, thanks.

Dance a jig, hoping everyone would laugh at her? Bad idea. She had a feeling any dance would be considered a mating dance.

No, thanks.

Food fight?

Not great, but not terrible, either. A girl had to make do.

Shaye scooped a handful of the coconut-cream pudding and tossed it at Joachim. Success! The pudding splattered over his cheeks.

As he blinked in surprise—and before she could talk herself out of it—she launched a handful at Valerian.

His gaze returned to her, hot so very hot. And so much better than the fury.

No, no. So much worse!

He gathered as much cream as he could on his finger and licked it away. Her insides quivered.

The reactions this man roused in her...

A grinning Broderick and Dorian leaned toward her...hoping to get nailed, as well?

She might never understand these nymphos. But. Mission accomplished, tensions reduced.

"Why did you do that?" As Joachim straightened, his armor clinked ominously. "Never mind. The answer doesn't matter. What say you, Valerian? Shall we fight, the winner awarded the woman and crowned king with all the rights the title entails?"

She had to swallow a shout of denial.

At first, Valerian offered him no response. He took her hand and brought her fingers to his mouth. Out came his tongue, licking the pudding on her skin.

Oh, my stars, what have I done?

Delicious heat flowed from the top of her head to the soles of her feet, melting her bones.

Earlier she'd thought she could handle a month with this man. Obviously she couldn't handle five minutes!

"He declines," she said with a tremor in her voice. "The woman will choose her own man."

Valerian leaned into her. "If you think I would risk losing you, you don't know me at all."

Was he serious? "Um, like I've tried to tell you a thousand times, I don't know you. We literally just met."

Frustration and disappointment flashed in his beautiful eyes, and she kind of wished she could take back her words. Even though they were true!

"Valerian?" Joachim prompted.

Without looking away from her, Valerian stood and said, "No."

His cousin hissed with surprise.

"We'll fight for the crown, only the crown, and not the girl," Valerian finished. "She's mine, no matter what."

Shaye gaped at him. She meant more than his kingdom?

"Agreed," Joachim replied.

Valerian splayed his arms, encompassing the room and everyone inside. "What is your weapon of choice?"

"Swords, of course. The weapon of a true warrior."

"To the death, then."

"No," she said, horrified.

"I don't want to kill you," Joachim said. "I don't hate you and never have. We were friends once, as children, but I should have been crowned after my father."

"And yet Poseidon chose my father."

"I was too young. Now I'm older. And how long since Poseidon has deigned to visit us? Decades."

For a long while the two males engaged in a staring contest. Finally Joachim cursed and blinked.

Valerian lifted his chin. "Go to the arena, cousin. I'll be there shortly."

"That's the last command you'll ever give me." Scowling, Joachim pivoted on his heel and strode away.

Shaye had to put a stop to this.

"Dorian," Valerian said, not giving her a chance to speak. "Gather the rest of the men. They'll bear witness to the battle—they'll see what happens to those who think to usurp my rule. Broderick, go and prepare my gear."

Chairs skidded backward. Footsteps pounded.

I can't believe this is happening, Shaye thought.

She'd been kidnapped from her mother's wedding—shrug. She'd been dragged underwater, through a portal and into a lost city—yawn. She'd been chosen as the king's mistress—could someone pass a nail file?

This battle...it was a nightmare.

"I'm asking you not to do this," she said to Valerian. They were

alone now, no one else in sight. “He’ll make a terrible king.”

Valerian sat down and once again regarded her through narrowed eyes. “He will never be king.”

Ugh. She’d insulted his skill again, which hadn’t been her intention.

“So you’ll win,” she said. “What will happen afterward?”

He popped a grape into his mouth. “You’ll admire my strength.”

Probably. Not that she’d admit such a horror aloud.

With a sigh, she plopped into her chair.

They finished their breakfast as if they’d never been interrupted. As if her stomach wasn’t churning with nervousness.

When they finished, he pushed to his feet and held out his hand, palm up. A silent command.

“They are awaiting us in the arena.”

She studied his palm, knowing the moment she intertwined her fingers with his, warmth would rush up her arm. Such a drugging warmth. She would tingle and ache.

Her throat constricted.

She stood, keeping her arms at her sides. “Go ahead. Lead the way.”

He frowned and beckoned her with a single wave of his fingers.

Stubborn, she crossed her arms over her chest.

Their gazes locked in challenge. The long length of his black lashes cast shadows over his cheeks. How did a man with honey-

blond hair have such dark eyelashes?

"I need your touch, Shaye." The words dripped with determination, but drifting beneath them was a very clear challenge: every resistance will be met and conquered until you've soared over the sweet edge of surrender. "My victory depends upon it."

"No way."

"Nymphs are strengthened through sex," he said.

What! "I am not having sex with you."

Not even to save him?

Well...

No. What? Can't believe you're even considering this. Death was an exaggeration on his part, surely. A way to get her into bed.

"Contact—any contact—helps."

"Fine." She clasped his hand.

The warmth she'd feared speared her, spreading up and out and soon overtaking her entire body.

He closed his eyes, as if savoring her.

Once again, her insides quivered. Such an innocent touch, and yet he affected her so...wantonly.

"One day..." he said.

A promise...or a warning?

He stalked out of the dining hall, dragging her with him.

"Slow down," she said, struggling to keep up. "Please."

He could have ignored her, but he obeyed. As if her words carried weight with him.

A girl could get used to that.

Her gaze snagged on the wall, where white marble was inlaid with silver stone, crumbling in spots. There were also scratch marks, she realized, as if someone had taken a tool to every inch.

"What happened here?" she asked.

"I was told humans invaded."

Her gaze pierced his back, where hard muscle and sinew strained under his beautiful bronzed flesh. "Humans willingly visit Atlantis?"

"Some do, yes."

Wow. People actually knew about this place, yet they'd managed to keep it a secret. If they'd returned home, that was.

"How long have you lived here?"

"My army claimed the palace from the dragons only a few weeks ago."

Claimed. Aka "stolen," she was sure. "In stories, dragons spew fire and eat humans as tasty snacks."

"Stories are correct." He sounded amused.

"Won't the dragons want their palace back?"

"Oh, yes."

Her eyes widened at his nonchalance. "And that doesn't bother you? The thought of battling such fierce creatures?"

"No. Why should it?" He stopped to glare at her, his chest seeming to expand right before her eyes. The heat of his skin caressed her, and the heady scent of him filled her nose, fogging her head.

Sconces blazed from the walls, their glow flickering over the contours of his face. Shadows and light fought for dominance, playing over his cheeks, making him appear menacing.

"I'm fiercer," he said. "I'm stronger."

Hello, male arrogance. "Well, I'm sorry I don't share your confidence," she said dryly.

He frowned. "If the thought of dragons scares you—"

"Terrifies me," she interjected. In this land, you were either predator or prey. Since she wasn't a predator...

"How will you react when I introduce you to the vampires?"

A strangled gasp wheezed from her throat. "I'm not meeting vampires."

"They are our friends."

He talks as if we're already a couple.

"Look. I know you told me those creatures existed, but I never actually thought you'd make me interact with them. Vampires drink blood, Valerian."

"They won't drink yours, Shaye."

She sighed. There was simply no arguing with him. He had a response for everything.

"Let's bargain," she said. "You won't introduce me to vampires, and I'll..." What?

In the distance, swords clanged together. Grunts sounded, and male laughter abounded.

"I like where you are headed with this conversation," he said. "We'll revisit what you're willing to do after the fight."

"No. We finish it now." She jumped in front of him to stop him and flatten her hands on his chest—oh, how he burned. "Forget the vampires. Win the fight, and I'll kiss you."

Desire flared in his eyes. The same consuming desire she'd encountered when she'd first watched him stride from the ocean.

"Give me a preview of this kiss," he said.

Desire consumed her. "Or what? You'll lose? I don't think so, babe." Babe? Her cheeks heated. What an embarrassing slip of the tongue. "You'll do anything to keep your crown."

"Obviously I won't. I'm fighting my cousin, risking my crown, to keep you."

"I thought there was no real risk for you."

His eyes gleamed with calculation. "Kiss me now, and I'll end the fight as quickly as possible. I won't drag it out."

Well...

Her gaze lowered, lingering on his lips, and her breath caught in her throat. If her touch strengthened him, how much more so would her kiss? And he needed his strength, right? The future of his kingdom was at stake!

"Fine," she whispered, already rising on her tiptoes.

He needed no other prompting. He tangled his fingers in her hair and slammed his mouth onto hers. His hot tongue pushed inside, past her teeth, past any thought of resistance.

In seconds she felt burned alive. The woman who'd once eschewed dating became wild. Someone who existed only for pleasure, sex and debauchery. For this man.

Valerian consumed her. Dark need consumed her—and she discovered that she liked every second of it.

His taste was pure sexual heat, raw masculinity, exotic and addictive; his tongue worked hers with expert precision, her every nerve endings leaping to blissful life. Her nipples hardened, the apex of her thighs ached, and her stomach quivered.

She wound her arms around his neck, accepting him fully, demanding more; a feral growl of satisfaction escaped him.

"I want you," he whispered fiercely and as always, the sound of his wine-rich voice excited her.

He was made for her, only her—his every action, every breath, they happened simply to please her.

The thought intoxicated her. Like the man himself.

"I want you," he repeated. "Give me everything."

"Never," she forced herself to say. Then, of course, she contradicted herself by running his bottom lip between her teeth.

His callused hands slid down the ridges of her spine to settle softly on the curve of her hips.

"I need your breasts in my hands. Please, Shaye."

Yes! Oh, yes. Her nipples hardened more, and they hurt. They actually hurt, desperate for contact.

He tunneled his hands under her shirt, his fingers tickling her skin. She gasped in wonder when his thumbs grazed each aching crest.

"I wish I could stand you in front of a mirror and slowly remove your top, baring your flesh inch by precious inch," he

said. “I would cup your breasts in my hands, framing your nipples with my fingers as they pearled for me.”

Her knees trembled. “I should hate the thought,” she told him, breathless. She brought her hands to his chest, brushing her thumbs over his nipples. They were hard little points she wanted to lick and suck. And, as her fingertip curled in the steel loop anchored in the right one, she wanted to lick and suck that, too. “Should absolutely, positively hate it.”

He groaned. “If this is the way you hate...”

“The pheromone. Only the pheromone.”

“No.” He grated the negation.

Angry with her now?

She licked the seam of his lips, and his anger returned to passion. Their breaths had mingled. Now their gazes locked, a sultry clash of turquoise against brown, passion against passion.

“Hate me some more,” he told her.

She rose on her tiptoes—her body seemed to have a mind of its own—placing her lips just in front of his.

He kissed her harder than before, his hands returning to her waist and tightening, his grip needy, firm and commanding.

His message was clear: she could not escape.

Why would she want to escape?

He pulled her closer, until she nestled against the long, rigid length of his erection. A hot, raspy gasp left her, spears of pleasure arcing through her, spawning other bursts of sensation.

“I want to hate you, too,” he told her in that same soft tone.

“I want to hate you hard and fast the first time, slow and tender the second.”

Behind them, someone cleared his throat. “My king?”

Shaye heard the voice distantly and despised the interruption. More kisses. She wanted more of Valerian’s kisses. And he very clearly wanted to give them to her. Wicked intent gleamed in his eyes.

“I’m so sorry, my king,” the voice said. “The fight...”

Valerian’s fingers clenched on her hips. “I don’t want to stop hating you,” he said softly, the words nothing but a growl.

Saying “You must” almost killed her.

He brushed his nose against hers. “Must hate you?”

“Must stop.” Never stop!

He ran his tongue over his teeth. Then his nostrils flared, as if her taste lingered there. “For now,” he stated. “I will.”

She gulped. She’d never been kissed with such passion or fervor. As if the man claiming her lips truly savored her and would be utterly destroyed without her.

He’s dangerous, her mind whispered. He made her hope, even though there was only one way the relationship would end. Painfully.

All relationships ended. Period.

But going from the beginning to the end will be worth the heartbreak later on, her body responded.

She tugged from his embrace, suddenly cold and empty. Hollow, as she’d been through her entire childhood.

His eyelids compressed to tiny slits, his thick lashes nearly intertwining top with bottom. “You melted for me. That isn’t reason to withdraw from me, Moon. That’s reason to rejoice.”

“Valerian,” yet another man called. Joachim, this time. She recognized the deep baritone, now filled with impatience. “Have you decided against fighting me? Do you concede the victory to me?”

Shaye drew her arms over her middle, tamping down a tremor of dread. “No,” she said. “He doesn’t.”

Valerian cupped her cheeks. His gaze searched hers. He had to wonder why she’d protested the fight before but supported it now.

The answer—whatever he’d decided it was—didn’t please him. He scowled.

Did he think she wanted him to lose now that they’d kissed? Now that fear held her in an obvious choke hold?

“I will never concede,” Valerian said, the words more lethal than the sword strapped to his back. His eyes never left her face. “Never.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

VALERIAN REELED, HARD, as he peered at the exquisite Shaye. Her eyes were wide and haunting—haunted—her lips puffed and red, and a pulse hammering at the base of her neck as she struggled to catch her breath. If he hadn’t already known she belonged to him, he would have known the moment, the very second, he tasted her sweetness. Nothing and no one had ever

affected him more profoundly.

I'm owned. She owns me.

Joachim—the man who had interrupted Valerian's first kiss with his one and only mate—awaited him.

Wrong phrasing. What he and Shaye had done had been more than a kiss. Joachim had interrupted Valerian's first consuming with his one and only mate.

Yes. Better. They'd consumed each other.

He wanted to consume her again.

My cousin's death warrant has been signed, sealed and soon, delivered.

Looking away from a female had never been difficult, but fury seethed and bubbled in his veins, a rushing river of acid, giving him the strength he needed to glare at Joachim.

"You will pay for this," he snapped.

"Only if you beat me," Joachim replied, smug expectation coloring his face.

The man truly thought to win and become king.

"I've changed my mind about the fight," Shaye muttered. "He deserves a royal spanking pronto."

Valerian reached back, palm extended, waiting for her to willingly place her hand in his. To his delight, she laced her fingers with his without a moment's hesitation. Her hand was soft and delicate, the bones fine, the skin smooth. Her perfectly rounded nails were painted the color of coral shells.

One day, he would suck them into his mouth.

She tightened her grip, and his delight only magnified. Was she offering him...comfort?

Was she coming to care for him?

Perhaps, perhaps not, but he had made progress with her. Never had a woman reacted so passionately to him, erupting from ice-cold to white-hot in seconds.

I'll have that—her—again, he vowed. Soon.

"I'm waiting," Joachim said, tapping a booted foot.

"So ready to die," Valerian snapped.

His cousin ignored the threat. "Unless you've decided to challenge me to a staring contest?"

Valerian lifted his chin. "Come," he said to Shaye. As he ushered her down the rest of the hallway, determination fueled his steps.

He barreled past Joachim, shouldering the foolish man out of the way. Such disrespect would only ever be met with pain—more than the warrior had ever before experienced.

By the time their private war ended, any other male who'd ever harbored thoughts of taking the crown would apologize.

A thought occurred to him. Should he have Shaye escorted to his chamber rather than take her with him, allowing her to watch the fight? If she bore witness to his most vicious side, the animal inside him...an animal that maimed and conquered...

She might grow to fear him.

The thought of her cowering from him...

It was more than he could bear.

But already she doubted his ability to win. Let her see the true depths of his strengths and know beyond any doubt he could take care of her at all times, in all ways.

"Um, I feel silly saying this, but it's got to be pointed out," Shaye said. "He's wearing armor. You're still shirtless."

"I know. He is such a fool," Valerian replied.

"He's protecting vulnerable organs, and he's the fool?"

"Have you ever been in a sword fight?"

"Metal, plastic or lightsaber?"

There were other kinds of swords in the surface world? Might be worth another trip topside to gather supplies. The lightsaber, especially, piqued his interest.

"Metal," he finally said.

"Then no. No, I haven't been in a sword fight."

"I'm unencumbered. He's weighted down."

"Quick reflexes over blocking. Got it."

Wait. He stopped to gape down at her. "Are you taking notes, actually planning to engage in a sword fight of your own?"

She lifted her chin in a mimic of him. "Perhaps I'm planning to challenge you."

He couldn't stop his smile. "I look forward to the day you do."

A blush stained her cheeks.

Joachim stalked past him, his boots flinging sand in every direction, and a chorus of "boo" rang out.

Valerian resumed his journey and the chorus turned to cheers. The arena overflowed with men and women brimming with

anticipation and eagerness.

The females were draped in traditional nymph robes—scarves that had been woven together with golden thread. Fine, metal links cinched the material at the waist, showcasing the shapely curves of some and the lean delicacy of others.

He would love to see Shaye draped in one of those robes.

Valerian stopped in front of Broderick. "Is all ready?"

"I've taken care of every detail." Broderick grinned and wound his arm around the curvy beauty at his side. "Women and war in one day. Would only be better if I could watch the battle while having sex and eating grapes fed to me by a bevy of beauties."

"Our definition of better differs," Shaye muttered. "Hey! New card idea. Barbarian Mentality 101 for women stuck with a Neanderthal. It could say something simple like, 'Got Razors' or even 'Ugh'?"

Valerian sometimes had no idea how to decipher her words, but this he understood. He grinned. "Broderick, my friend, you're going to watch this little morsel for me." He gently thrust Shaye in the warrior's path.

She humphed.

"Guard her well and allow no one to touch her." He paused, considered Broderick's past liaisons and current desires, and added, "Not even yourself."

Broderick lost all traces of amusement. "What do I do if she tries to run away?"

"She won't." He turned his gaze on Shaye and met her

rebellious stare. “Will you?”

She buffed her fingernails. “We never agreed on a time frame.”

He expelled a hot breath. “Promise me you’ll stay here while I fight. If I’m worried about you, I won’t be able to concentrate on the sword being swung at me.”

She paled, a lovely ice queen. “So. The only thing I get out of this newest bargain is the life of my captor?”

“Contain your excitement. This isn’t a dream,” he said dryly. “Just...promise me.”

Her expression softened ever so slightly. “Fine. I promise. But after the fight...”

Satisfied, he looked to Broderick. “When I return, I want her in the same condition I’ve left her.”

“What about him?” Shaye hiked her thumb in Broderick’s direction. “Do you want him in the same condition?”

Valerian fought a grin. “Yes. Please.”

The woman at the warrior’s side pointed an accusing finger at Shaye. “You’re standing too close to my Broderick.”

Shaye rolled her eyes. “Sue me.”

Broderick puffed up his chest. “Martina is possessive of me, what can I say?”

Valerian crossed his arms over his chest. “Just make sure your Martina keeps her hands off Shaye, as well.”

“You mean I won’t get to catfight over a man I have no interest in?” Shaye twisted her fists under her eyes. “Tears. Sadness.”

"Fine," he said in a mimic of her. "You can catfight her if you desire, but if you break her, I'll owe Broderick another woman."

Broderick nodded. "He would."

Martina hissed at the warrior. "You would let someone hurt me? You wouldn't protect me with your life?"

"Yes?" he said, looking to Valerian for help.

Shaye held up her hands, palms out. "All right. I can admit when I'm wrong, and I was wrong about the pheromone. It can't overcome a bad personality."

Valerian wanted to laugh. He wanted to kiss his woman again. Wanted to luxuriate in her heat and wetness as he tasted her sweetness.

She licked her lips, as if she read his thoughts. "Stop looking at me like that."

"I can't." More important, he didn't want to.

"You must. Get your head out of my pants and into the game."

"Valerian!" A female squeal echoed behind his mate. "You're here!"

His muscles turned to stone. Heading straight toward him? The redhead Joachim had slept with last night. On a mission, she shoved her way through the crowd.

"I came to wish you well." She even shouldered Shaye out of the way, her focus solely on Valerian. "I just heard about the fight and wanted to cheer for you."

He scowled at her, ready to issue a stinging rebuke. Without asking permission, she caressed his bare chest and cupped his

backside. He reared back.

She chuckled. “You’re even sexier than I remembered. How about a quickie?”

He shook his head. “Our association is now and forever at an end.” He used a gentle tone, determined not to inflict unnecessary hurt. “I have a mate now.”

Her pink lips dipped into a pout. “So? I want you.”

“And I want a pony,” Shaye snapped. “We don’t always get what we want, do we?”

His first thought: What kind of pony? He would buy her an entire stable full.

She loved pink, and he remembered seeing a pink pony on his last trip through the Outer City.

His second thought: Was she jealous? He wanted her to be jealous. To long to keep him all to herself the way he longed to keep her.

“Valerian?” the redhead said. “I’m fine with you having a mate. She can join us.”

First things first. “I’ll never be willing to share my mate. With anyone.”

“Supposed mate,” Shaye interjected, her expression softening.

He frowned at her before continuing. “She’s all I want, all I need.”

Color flooded her cheeks, and she looked away from him.

The redhead’s shoulders drooped, and guilt pricked at him. He should have explained his intensions before he’d bedded the

human. Should have made sure they wanted the same thing: momentary pleasure.

"Valerian." Joachim's voice rang out. "I've waited long enough."

Everyone in the arena stopped speaking.

"Then by all means," Valerian replied. Time to push Shaye from his thoughts. "Let's hurry your execution along."

He faced his opponent. Joachim stood in the center of the sandy arena, swinging a spear overhead to loosen his muscles. The metal whistled and zinged, like a war cry. In his other hand, he held a silver shield, two wings embossed on each side. A sword was sheathed in the center.

Joachim slid his helmet in place, his armor glinting in the light.

Valerian held his hand out, and Broderick slapped a spear into his grip. He felt its familiar weight and nodded.

Next Broderick handed him a shield of his own.

In the center rested the Skull. With it, Joachim would die, guaranteed. What Valerian had thought he wanted only seconds ago. Faced with such an inevitable outcome, his fury wrestled with uncertainty.

He returned the shield. "Replace the Skull with one of my training blades."

"My lord." Broderick gaped at him. "You've never—"

"Do it." Joachim could be killed any day. But if he died today, Valerian could never bring him back.

As his cousin had pronounced earlier, they had been friends

as children. The best of friends. Only when Poseidon had given Valerian's father the crown had Joachim's resentment sprouted.

Under normal circumstances, Joachim would have been the chosen, continuing the line. Eldest son to eldest son. As young as he'd been—as sickly as he'd once been—Valerian's father had been the better choice.

Joachim believed Valerian had stolen his legacy, and he wasn't wrong. But now, looking back, Valerian wondered if the sea god had known what he hadn't. Joachim would have destroyed the nymphs.

If Poseidon had even visited once since the coronation, perhaps this could have been avoided. But the male had forgotten them.

"Any sword will do," he added.

A pause before the shield was taken out of his hand. Footsteps rang out. A few seconds later, the cool press of the shield's handle weighed in his grip. A sharp-tipped blade now rested in the center. He nodded in approval.

"Your helmet, my king," Broderick said.

"No." He kept his gaze on Joachim. "Not this time."

Broderick frowned. "What of your other armor?"

"No."

Valerian hefted his spear in one hand, his shield in the other, and stepped into the arena.

"Shall we begin?"

"We shall."

Determined, he circled Joachim. “You will forever be an example of what happens to those who challenge my rule.”

“Is this the part where I taunt you back?” Joachim continued to swing his spear.

“I’d hoped it would be the part where you listened to reason. You are too war-happy to be king.”

Eyes narrowing, his cousin said, “Such a quality should be lauded.”

“Lauded? When the hunger will never be appeased? In the end, you might conquer all of Atlantis, but you will also destroy the entire city.”

“Better to rule a decimated land than no land at all.”

“That. That is why you are unfit. You don’t see the foolishness of your words.”

“I’m no fool!” With a roar, Joachim leaped at him. Valerian met him halfway. He’d told Shaye he would handle this quickly, and he would.

Their spears clashed together midair. Immediately Valerian countered, ducking low, pivoting and slashing. He missed as Joachim sliced to the side. Clang. Their spears met again. In the next instant, Joachim raised his lance and Valerian rammed it high. He spun, aiming for his cousin’s neck.

Joachim darted out of the way with a grin. “Getting slow, Valerian.” He removed his helmet and tossed it aside.

Valerian stabbed forward, his spike and shield swinging simultaneously. Joachim quickly lost his smile as he was forced

to duck. He stumbled backward. Valerian's spear nearly sank into his stomach, but Joachim blocked, swung. Thrust.

That low thrust grazed Valerian's thigh, slicing cloth rather than skin. Valerian dropped to one knee, absorbing the next blow with his shield. When he regained his footing, he lunged forward. The tip of his weapon whizzed past Joachim's side, taking a hunk of armor with it.

"Still think I'm slow?" Valerian asked.

Their fiery gazes met, blue against bluer, and Joachim scowled. He swung to the left, missed, then swung to the right. As the lance dipped toward the ground, Valerian leaped over its middle, trapping it between his legs and jamming his elbow into Joachim's nose. Blood squirted and Joachim howled as he tripped, falling away from striking distance and flinging dirt in every direction.

"Get up," Valerian commanded.

"You'll pay for that." His cousin jumped to his feet and ran straight at him, continuously stabbing forward.

Valerian circled on swift feet, his shield blocking. His muscles began to burn, and sweat began to run down his face and chest in rivulets. Already his breath emerged in shallow pants. At this rate, his strength would be rapidly depleted. Lack of sex did that to a nymph.

Looking tired himself, Joachim arched high, intending to puncture his shoulder on the downward swing, but Valerian hit Joachim's wrist and his cousin dropped the spear. At a

disadvantage, Joachim dived, rolled and reached for it. His fingers closed around the middle. Maintaining a fluid pace, he spun back to his feet. But Valerian was already there, stomping on the lance and snapping it in two.

Growling low in his throat, Joachim kicked up. His foot slammed into Valerian's wrist and Valerian, too, lost his spear. Both men sprang apart, unsheathing the swords centered in their shields.

As blood continued to drip down his face, Joachim launched forward, wildly swinging. Air whistled, zinged, just like it had before the battle began. Movements slower than normal, Valerian didn't duck in time. The blade sliced his forearm. He felt the sting of it, the burn of torn flesh.

He didn't give a reaction, didn't allow it to slow him further.

He stabbed low, then up, twisting before Joachim could counter. The tip of his sword whizzed by his cousin's face, and the man paled. He raised his shield and slammed it into Valerian's other arm, the sharp wings cutting skin. Valerian used the momentum to spin and slice into Joachim's thigh.

His cousin shouted, and his knees buckled into the sand.

"Get up," Valerian snarled. "We finish this."

Gritting his teeth, Joachim lumbered to his feet. He still clutched his weapon and shield. His eyes were dark with rage, his irises bright with his thirst for power; he dropped his shield and slid a second dagger from his side.

Valerian hurled his shield aside, as well. He held out his free

hand, and Broderick tossed him a second dagger. He easily caught the hilt. Two blades against two blades.

Instantly he and Joachim leaped for each other. One blade clashed, then the other, a lethal dance of dodge and slash. Valerian spun as he worked his blades, lunged and stabbed.

"I should have killed your father. I should have been king," Joachim panted as he ducked.

"But you didn't. You aren't." Stab. Turn. Stab.

"I was created to rule."

"How can you rule an army when you cannot rule your own emotions?" The first blade finally slammed home, sinking into Joachim's side.

His cousin screamed and dropped to his knees. Valerian's momentum kept him from drawing back his other weapon. He wasn't sure he would have, though, even if he could. But he did angle his arm, his second blade embedding in Joachim's shoulder, close to his heart without damaging the organ. The silver glided smoothly through the links of armor. Joachim gasped for air as a trickle of blood ran from his mouth.

Total silence filled the arena.

Valerian straightened, panting.

Blood gurgled from Joachim's mouth. "Should have...killed...me."

"You will live, and you will regret," Valerian said, unemotional and loud enough that everyone could hear. "If you ever again challenge my leadership, I will kill you. Without a thought,

hesitation, or mercy. No matter that we are family. No matter that we were once friends."

Joachim's chin fell to his chest as his eyes closed. Dark shadows spread over his blood-coated face just before he tumbled into the dirt, unconscious. Grains of sand sprayed onto Valerian's boots.

He slammed the tip of his dagger beside his cousin's body and eyed the crowd of warriors who watched him in openmouthed shock. Perhaps they had expected him to kill his cousin. Perhaps they had expected him to deflect the final blow completely.

His gaze connected with Shaye's. Mine, his mind shouted. Mine now. No one could say otherwise.

Like his men, her face projected her shock. And horror? He knew he must look a sight, blood and sand covering him from head to toe, strands of sweat-soaked hair clinging to his temples.

He couldn't regret what had been done. She belonged to him, would live here with him now and always, so it was best for her to learn his way of life.

Tearing his gaze from her, he looked at each of his men. "Is there anyone else who wishes to challenge my authority?"

The echo of his voice settled. Silence reigned.

He paced through the arena. "Now is the time to issue such a challenge. You won't be given another chance."

No one came forward.

He stilled, hands clenched at his sides. "Then I hereby claim Shaye Octavia Holling as my mate. Your queen. Any protests

will be met by my sword."

"Now hold on just a moment," Shaye called. "We haven't agreed—"

"Except hers," he interjected. Her protests would never be met by his sword.

"Valerian," she said.

He ignored her and moved in front of Broderick.

Broderick kneeled, bowed his head. "What should we do about Joachim, my king? Say our goodbyes?"

Valerian still didn't want Joachim to die, and banishment would get him killed in a hurry.

He searched for the females among the crowd. "Is there a healer among you?"

After a pause, Shivawn's silent, black-haired wench stepped forward. Tears glistened in her eyes as she raised a tentative hand.

Excellent. "Take Joachim and the healer to the sick room," he told Broderick. "She's to bandage him up and nothing more. Make sure she doesn't touch him sexually." If she did, Joachim would heal speedily, his injuries forgotten far too soon.

Broderick nodded and stood.

Now. Time to see to his woman.

Without another word, Valerian clasped her hand and tugged her from the arena.

They were meant to be together—and now he would prove it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

POSEIDON WAS BORED.

He was god of the sea, ruler of fish, merpeople and ocean waves, and nothing excited him anymore. Not even the storms and destruction he'd recently caused. People had screamed, people had died, yada yada yada.

Perched on a boulder beneath a cliff, he traced his fingers through the dappled liquid surrounding him. There had to be something to combat this constant sense of ennui.

Create another hurricane or tsunami? No. The last few had been yawners.

Start a war? No. Too much effort for too little reward.

Abandon the water and enter Olympus? No again. The other gods were selfish and greedy, and he had no desire to deal with them, his temper too sharp.

What could he do, what could he do? Once he would have visited Atlantis—

Atlantis, he thought, straightening. Oh, oh, oh. Was that...yes, yes, it was. For the first time in an eternity, he experienced a flash of excitement.

He hadn't considered Atlantis and its people—his subjects—in years. Many had called for him, but he'd ignored their pleas for help. The last time he'd offered aid, he'd received no thanks, only complaints.

Perhaps the people—or rather, the abominations, as his brothers often called them—had learned to be appreciative.

There was only one way to find out.

Poseidon grinned.

* * *

SHAYE'S ATTENTION REMAINED on Valerian's back as he led her through the palace, following the same path they'd taken earlier. She offered no protests. Muscles strained and bunched in his bare shoulders. Blood blended with sand, both splattered all over him, forming lines and circles on his skin.

He'd very nearly killed a man without hesitation or remorse. His own cousin, no less. But the biggest surprise? She'd watched him do it, and she hadn't flinched.

She'd been too relieved. He'd won, as promised. He would live and keep his crown.

The fight had unfolded like something out of a movie. Valerian had moved with grace and fluidity, each intricate step as beautiful as it was dangerous. Her heart had drummed erratically in her chest, only to stop altogether when Valerian received his first injury. She'd been unprepared for the blast of anger she'd felt toward Joachim.

More than that, she'd been unprepared for the fright she'd felt on Valerian's behalf.

She could have run—should have run. What better time to escape? Like a girl besotted, she'd stayed. Not because she'd promised Valerian—a promise made under duress wasn't really a promise, to her way of thinking—but because she'd had to know the outcome of the battle.

In the end, he'd shocked her. He'd purposely missed his cousin's heart, allowing the man to live to fight another day.

He cared about his people. Even those who defied him. How many other kings could say the same?

And then, what he'd said...

I hereby claim Shaye Octavia Holling as my mate. Your queen.

Again and again the words had whispered through her mind, making her shiver.

I should be...outraged?

Yes, of course. Most definitely.

After all, this thing with Valerian, it wasn't a game. It was her life. Unlike him, she wasn't immortal.

Wait. Were nymphos immortal? How old was Valerian?

Anyway. She didn't get a second chance.

"You did good out there," she said grudgingly.

"Some women abhor violence," he said. "Some are titillated by it. Which are you?"

"Neither," she said. "But I'm certain there are other ways to be, like ambivalent or confused."

"So...you don't fear me?" Fear now saturated his voice.

"No." Truth. He could have harmed her a million times over by now, but he'd only ever treated her gently. He'd even placed himself in harm's way in order to protect her.

"But you do desire me?" Hope had replaced the fear.

Rather than answer his question—the truth would get her into trouble—she said, "By the way. I'm not your woman."

He cast her a pitying look. "Cease your protests, Moon. They'll only embarrass you when you at last admit your love for

me."

So. No more talk of lust. He'd moved on to love. She snorted.

"Are surface dwellers allowed to combat each other with swords?" he asked.

"When countries are at war, yes. When the men are caught up in a personal vendetta, no. Not without consequences."

"What of protecting yourself or those you love?"

"It's allowed, but sometimes there are still consequences."

"You are clearly far better off here."

Another snort. "I should have known you'd go there."

They turned a corner and Valerian stumbled—over nothing. His injuries must have weakened him.

Her concern for him doubled. "You need a healer, too," she said.

"I have you. I need no one else."

She had a sinking suspicion he meant those words in more ways than one. Despite everything that had happened—or maybe because of everything that had happened—she couldn't deny this man saw only the best in her.

While she administered aid, would he "accidentally" touch her? Would he purr his warm breath into her ears, over her skin, and let his white-hot gaze devour her?

Better question: Would she be able to resist him?

Already her resolve teetered on precarious ground. Perhaps playing doctor wasn't a smart move.

"Valerian, O mighty king of the nymphos. Please listen to me.

I know absolutely nothing about wound care."

"I don't care. I trust you."

"Trust doesn't matter. Not in this. I could do more harm than good."

"And you want me well?" Satisfaction dripped from his tone.

"Uh, don't read too much into it, big guy. I'd want my worst enemy to get well. Because I'm nice."

"Nice?"

"All right. That's fair. I'm sometimes nice."

He pushed out a breath. "I meant I trust only you to be with me while I'm in such a weakened state."

How did he always manage to say the exact right thing to melt the ice around her heart? "But why? You don't know—"

"Not this again, little Moon. I know you. But, if it will make you feel better, you can tell me all about your life while you patch me."

"I can, can I?" she asked dryly. "How generous of you."

"If you're nice, you'll agree. You'll distract me from my pain."

Her concern instantly resurged. "You're in pain?" Stupid question. He'd been slashed by a sword. Of course he was in pain.

He winked at her over his shoulder, his eyes gleaming with amusement. "So. Much. Pain."

Well. She pursed her lips. "If you're talking about blue balls —"

"Blue balls?" His shoulders shook, and she heard the rumbling purr of his beautiful laughter. "Oh, but I like your wicked mouth,

Moon."

Unbidden, her lips inched into a half smile. "Well, I've somehow managed to resist you for twenty-four hours. That's got to be a record, right? Your groin must be seriously neglected."

"I'm glad you understand. Kiss it and make it better?"

She snorted. "In your dreams."

"Yes, please. You've seen my life, yes? My dreams always come true." His tone was husky and rich but also honey warm, as if the thought of her ravishment was an exquisite bliss. As if, in his mind, she was already naked and he was already inside her.

She would have to remain on full alert with this man. Being with him, she suspected, would be like shooting herself full of heroin. Addictive, wild, a high beyond imagining, but also lethal and stupid. So, if she could resist taking that first, experimental taste—well, a second taste—she wouldn't have to deal with withdrawal.

Her new mantra: Resist! "I think I'm more of a nightmare waiting to happen."

He brought her knuckles to his lips and stroked them with his tongue. "If you have sex with me, I'll be healed by the time you're screaming my name. Win-win for both of us."

Shivers down her spine, fire in her blood. He said nothing else, letting her mind and body battle for supremacy.

Stay strong. Be cold.

If he touched her... Wait. He was touching her, his hand clutching hers, and it felt good.

"I'm going on record right now," she said.

Once again he looked over his shoulder. This time he silenced her. He licked his lips, as if he knew exactly what reaction he'd caused in her and planned to exploit it by whatever means necessary.

A foreign part of her—a part happy to reveal itself only around him—urged her to reach up and run her fingers through his hair...across his beautiful face. His decadent flavor was still in her mouth, the press of his lips imprinted on her memory.

The very reason she had to resist him.

"Sex isn't happening." There. Stated now, so that he had no excuse later. Because, if a nymph's pheromone could drug, what could a nymph's penis do? "If you push me, I'll resent you."

"Will you resent me the same way you hate me?"

He'd just had to remind her about that, hadn't he? Her free hand fisted, and her belly quivered. "No," she said.

He sighed. "If you insist on abstaining—"

"I do."

"Then I'll spend the rest of the day—" he grimaced "—talking with you."

Probably shouldn't laugh.

Really, he could have claimed she owed him.

Once a date had felt entitled to sex after paying for dinner. If not for her self-defense classes he might have succeeded in his endeavor to exact payment. But Valerian acted as if only her delight would spark his own.

No self-defense class in the world could protect her from his appeal.

"How altruistic of you," she finally said, forcing a dry tone.

"Tell me. Have you had a bad experience with sex?" he asked gently. "Because I would be happy to return to the surface and punish anyone who ever hurt you."

The urge to lean against him, simply enjoy being with him, bombarded her. "No." Try zero experiences, buddy. How would Valerian react to that?

And she wanted to lean against him? Fear raised its ugly head to screech, Fool!

Why begin something destined to end?

"What if Joachim challenges you again?" she asked, changing the focus of the conversation. "Or what if he just stabs you in the back without bothering to engage in a fair fight?"

"He won't."

"How can you be sure?"

"Joachim lost. Everyone knows his skill is inferior to mine. Whether he kills me in the future or not, he'll never be accepted as leader."

They turned another corner, torches lighting the hallway, revealing familiar nicked-and-scuffed walls.

At the entrance to the master suite, he opened the door with his free hand.

She released him to soar inside—and gasped.

The large bed had been made, with a new comforter. A pink

comforter.

Jewelry had been scattered over the vanity. Every piece boasted pink diamonds or pink crystals. A full-size mirror hung on the wall, the frame made from pink-veined marble.

Steam curled from the bathing pool, twining around the pink flower petals that floated on the surface.

"I can't...how did you...?" Use your words.

An impossibility at the moment.

"I sent a man to the Outer City bright and early this morning to buy things I thought you'd like. I want you comfortable in this room. Want it to be ours, not mine."

She swallowed the lump growing in her throat.

"Thank you," she managed to say. "This might be the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me."

"This, Shaye, is only the beginning."

* * *

STANDING THERE, VALERIAN drank in the sight of his mate. Then he drank in the sight of the bed. He wanted Shaye there, splayed and open for his view. His touch.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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