The Flame and the Arrow

by

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Dedicated to those who still believe.
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about the author
Chapter 1
an ill-timed proposal

Fidgeting with her keys in one hand and balancing an over-stuffed laundry basket in the other, a very short and very glum redhead walked up the stone steps to a very large and very dilapidated three-story house.

“Annika, is that you? Oh my god, you’re late!” a shrill voice nagged from the kitchen. “I thought you guys were just having a quick dinner before you came over. What the hell took you so long?”

Annika rounded the corner to see an impeccably dressed man in his late twenties getting up from the table as he shut down his laptop.

“I’m not going out tonight, James,” she sighed, dropping the laundry basket by the staircase that led to her old room.

“The hell you’re not,” he said in a tone that found her excuse unacceptable. “We’ve been planning this for like, three weeks.”

“Yeah, well…Danny and I broke up.”

James’ whole body jumped, like he’d been electrocuted.

“What?” he gasped. “But, you just moved in with him! I thought he was hinting at buying you a ring!”

Annika nodded and lifted up her left hand, which was snatched right away by her friend. There on display was an enormous diamond ring that probably cost as much as a small island.

“It wasn’t a hint.”

James let go of her hand and massaged the bridge of his nose underneath his trendy glasses. It was something he did when he was stressed, which happened to be quite often.

“So where’s the part where you broke up?” he asked, still dumbstruck.

“Oh, it was right after the part where he asked me to marry him in front of the entire restaurant! And when I said I wasn’t sure, he basically told me that the band is never going to go anywhere and that I was wasting my time with my music.” Annika stopped speaking just long enough to keep her lower lip from trembling. “He said I needed to grow up.”

“He actually told you that?” James asked, deeply offended. “Like, to your face?”

“Yeah, although I can’t remember if it was before or after he called me an alcoholic party animal.” True, Annika liked to have a good time, but not every night. And if having wine with dinner made her an alcoholic, then Danny was just being ridiculous.

“You’ve got to be shitting me!” James’s brown eyes seemed about ready to pop out of his skull. “What the hell is his problem? You guys got together at a friggin’ bar!”

“I know,” Annika agreed, shaking her head. “To be fair, I said a few asinine things to him too, but they’re not worth repeating.” She wiped away a rebellious tear from her cheek. “I just know I can’t marry him.”

“So, um, then why are you still wearing the ring, sweetie?” James couldn’t stop eyeballing the huge rock that glittered every time Annika’s hand moved.

“He told me I could keep it,” she sighed heavily and then sat on the bottom step of the staircase. “I think he’s counting on me coming to my senses. That’s how he put it, anyway.”
“Then he really doesn’t know you at all, does he?” James pointed out, and sat down beside her. “You know, the harder he tried to pin you down, the more you’ve been talking about seeing other people. I’m kind of surprised you guys lasted so long. I had my doubts when you said you were moving in together, but I suppose deep down you weren’t really sure about it. Otherwise you wouldn’t have left so much of your shit in your room upstairs.” Annika glanced at her friend, and an old memory came to mind of when she was a young girl catching fire flies in a glass jar. She would watch them crawl around and light up her bedroom on those summer nights, only to set them free the next morning. It was always her favorite part, to let them go. Now that she was older, she wondered if the insects had felt as trapped in that jar as she had felt in the restaurant when the small, distinctive blue box from Tiffany’s had been given to her.

She studied her left hand as if it had changed into a freakish, yet fascinating shape. She turned her wrist slowly from side to side, letting the light from above catch the cuts of the stone. It was beautiful, but it wasn’t anything she would have chosen for herself since the band was too wide for her to comfortably play guitar.

“It is kinda pretty, I guess,” she confessed with a little smile. “And it’ll keep the boys from hitting on me.”

“If you believe that, then I’ve got a bridge in London I’d like to sell you,” James mused.

An hour later Annika was doing her best to drink her troubles away amidst the blaring music of James’ favorite club. The thumping bass was too loud to hear the condolences that their friends offered, yet it wasn’t nearly loud enough to drown out the thoughts in her head.

She cared about Danny a lot. True, they didn’t have much in common, but there were plenty of happy couples out there like that, right? At some point during the past two and a half years, all of Annika’s friends had suggested one way or another why Danny was so wrong for her, but she hadn’t seemed to hear them. He wasn’t very daring, or adventurous, or spontaneous. He thought her obsession with music was just a kink in her personality that needed to be worked out. Annika on the other hand, was the type of person who was determined enough to follow a strict band practice schedule, and impulsive enough to drive outside the Portland city limits at three in the morning just to watch a passing meteor shower. She was always out and about, whether it was seeing live shows with her older brother Charlie or going shoe shopping with James. Danny was the opposite. He was a homebody. On the rare occasion that they did go out on the town, it was always the same formula; dinner and a movie. Or a movie and dinner. Or sometimes, it was dinner with his co-workers, where they talked about the hospital they worked at and Annika would try desperately to follow along with their sophisticated jargon.

She used to think that her and Danny were a good balance because she was so free-spirited and he was so…grounded. He drove a nice car, had a nice house, made great money, and she knew she could have been content spending her life with him, but only to a certain extent. There was no passion, no spark, and she began to realize that she would never be fulfilled with him right around the time Danny had begun to look at engagement rings. It was only a matter of time before Annika would have to get her head out of the clouds and deal with the reality of her situation.

By the end of the night her situation consisted of having had too much to drink,
thanks to her well-meaning friends. The last thing she remembered was being shoved into
the backseat of James’s car, and then being helped to her old room at the top of the stairs.

Annika woke up face down on the floor, rolled halfway under her bed, still in her
dress and heels. Her cell phone was ringing in her purse close to her ear.

“Hello?” she mumbled into the receiver.

“‘Allo, Annika, is that you?” A far-away voice crackled in the receiver. She was still
a little drunk and extremely confused by the outrageous, thick French accent.

“Charlie?” she croaked. Her mouth was desert-dry from the previous night’s
drinking binge.

“No, no, Annika, it’s your favorite uncle.” Annika was silent as her brain reminded
her that she only had one uncle.

“Uncle Vince? Why is the connection so bad?” she asked. Usually she could hear
him perfectly, but now he sounded like he was talking to her through a tin can and some
old string.

“I am in Bulgaria. Did your mother not tell you? I’ve discovered a new praying
mantis during my research.”

“That sounds…cool,” Annika stammered as she rubbed her dark blue eyes. “How are
you doing other than that?”

“Très bien, merci beauçoup,” Vince chirped happily. “Unfortunately, it sounds as if I
am doing better than you. I just read your e-mail and I think it would be of benefit for you
to pay me a visit. Why don’t you take a holiday and come keep me company, eh? Just for
a month or two, and clear your mind of this tragedy de l’amour?”

What e-mail is he talking about? she wondered, racking her frazzled brain. When she
 glanced up at her nightstand, her heart sank. There was her laptop, with her email account
displayed on the screen.

“What would I do there, Vince? Catch grasshoppers?” she asked, wincing as she
stood up and sat on the edge of her bed. A serious hangover was just beginning to bloom.

“You can help me if you want. I don’t really give a shit.” She smiled at his accent,
and could almost see him waving his be-cigaretted hand in dismissal of the idea of her
trying to earn her keep. “You just feed us men a proper meal, eh? You are still a
reasonably good chef, oui? Everything I make burns to shit. Isn’t your passport still
valid?”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Oui, as serious as a…qu’est ce que c’est…a heart attack, no? Isn’t that how the
phrase goes?”

“Yeah, serious as a heart attack,” she confirmed. The thought of quitting her
waitressing job was less of a concern as the idea of running away grew more and more
alluring. “When should I come out there? It’ll take me a while to find a cheap ticket.”

“Come straight away! I will buy you a plane ticket right now, if you just say the
word. We are starving over here!”

“You’ve got to be shitting me.”

“I am not shitting with you, Annika,” her uncle said firmly, though she couldn’t help
but laugh at his English. “I have my finger on the button.”

“You do not,” she dared.

“Oui, I do!” he dared right back.
“Yeah, if you buy me a ticket, I’ll be on a plane tomorrow,” she joked, still not believing him.

“Consider it done, then. You had better pack your things.” With that final decry Vince promptly hung up. Annika had her doubts, but when she checked her e-mail there was an airline confirmation message for a one-way trip to Sofia, Bulgaria. Out of curiosity she opened the ‘sent mail’ folder and her jaw dropped. In the drunken stupor of last night, she’d poured her heart out to her uncle, sounding miserable and perplexed as to how and why she’d gotten so wrapped up with Danny in the first place. In between the numerous spelling errors she’d begged Vince for advice, saying she doubted that she was really in love, but unsure if she should leave Danny because maybe that was as good as it gets, and she had what most people wanted in a relationship; stability, financial security, someone who spoiled her rotten from time to time. She was slightly embarrassed to have mentioned all this to her uncle, but what was done was done. All she wanted now was time to sort out her thoughts. And Advil. A big bottle of Advil.

Within a matter of hours she was on a plane headed for Sofia, unsure of what her entomologist uncle would have her do. She assumed she’d help translate his academic papers since English wasn’t his first language. As children, her uncle and her mother were born in Macedonia, then later emigrated to France, where Annika’s mother became a hairdresser. There she met Annika’s father, who was in the military at the time. After a light sneeze botched his haircut and he still insisted on paying her, Annika’s mother took him out for coffee. The date clearly went well, because he brought her home to America. Vince had stayed in France, visiting his sister’s family during his university breaks. He was a proper uncle too, teaching Annika and Charlie how to spit, how to swear in French, and how to roll a joint the way he’d learned in Amsterdam.

Vince had always been lean, but when Annika arrived at the airport, she was concerned by his appearance. Apparently his cooking really was shit, because there were dark circles under his eyes and hollows in his gaunt cheeks. He seemed in good spirits, however, and helped her gather her luggage and wait in line through customs, all the while talking with a ready-to-be-lit cigarette dangling in his mouth.

He’d rented a small house less than fifteen miles north of Sofia, and Annika was grateful that he’d chosen to live outside of the city where the air was clean and the Balkan Mountains were practically in her backyard. It was a welcome change of scenery from Vince’s cracker box of an apartment in Paris, with cars whooshing by at all hours of the night in a city so large that it filled the horizon in every direction. When she went to bed at night, all she saw were the stars outside her window that numbered in the billions without the hindrance of light pollution. When she woke up in the morning, all she heard was the musical chirping of birds as summer drew to a reluctant end.

For the first couple of days she focused on translating papers and cooking big meals for Vince and his colleagues from the university in Sofia. They marveled at her skill in the kitchen, devouring the succulent *banitza* she made on a regular basis; a traditional dish her mother had taught her to make with eggs, yogurt and cheese layered between flaky sheets of filo dough. She basked in pride when they tilted their chairs back and loosened their belts. When Danny had expected her to act more traditional, she wasn’t interested. But when it was her choice she jumped at the chance to impress Vince and his buddies with lemon-herb chicken, or a shepherd’s pie, or chopska salad with garlic.
mashed potatoes and crème caramel for dessert. Within two weeks she swore Vince had gained twenty pounds. He looked less emaciated and jollier than ever. When she wasn’t grocery shopping with him or cooking for him or tidying up his little cottage, she spent the rest of her time hiking around the mountains and writing music. Even though she still wore her engagement ring, she thought about Danny less and less. She hadn’t responded to his e-mails where he tried to explain his point of view. They all said the same thing; that he expected her to trade in her guitar for a minivan, that he hoped she’d give up her childish dreams and become something she wasn’t at all interested in being; ordinary.

Sometimes she wrote a few lines of lyrics or music in her journal. Sometimes she scribbled random streams of conscious thought, and sometimes she lay in bed until late in the morning, just relishing her freedom. Nothing made her happier than walking in the sunshine with only fresh air, trees, and the occasional stream entering her view. But even though she was on an extended vacation, she began to grow restless without having regular band practice. She had a few pages of new material, but she hadn’t thought to bring any recording equipment.

“Why don’t you go into the city by yourself tomorrow? There must be someplace you can find what you need,” her uncle suggested one evening as they reviewed field notes together.

“But Vince, I don’t speak Bulgarian,” she reminded him. He took off his reading glasses and looked at her skeptically.

“Oui, but you speak Macedonian just fine. The languages are very similar.”

Annika knew he was right. She’d been to Sofia with him often enough to feel comfortable taking a bus into the city by herself, and the next afternoon was spent shopping and drinking coffee in an outdoor café, soaking up the sun.

Having waitressed for a while, Annika had become quite a people watcher. She could always tell who was on their first date, who was going to leave a crummy tip, and who were the ladies who lunched. Reading people quickly had become second nature to her, so when she noticed a strange looking couple in their mid-twenties come down the sidewalk, she noticed. It wasn’t that they were her own age that got her attention. They just looked different…they even moved differently from everyone else on the street. The petite, slender girl with long, pale blonde hair walked alongside an incredibly tall, handsome young man with a red baseball cap over his shaggy black hair and long sideburns. The girl wore a pair of dark sunglasses that were way too large for her heart-shaped face, and there was at least a foot and a half difference in their height. Annika followed them with her eyes, careful not to stare, but there was something captivating about them. They walked leisurely arm in arm like they had known each other forever. Although the man was very tall, he moved with feline grace as he weaved between the people on the sidewalk. As they passed Annika, he turned her way just long enough for her to catch his glance. Her stomach jumped into her throat before he turned away with a smile. Even if he had a girlfriend, it didn’t hurt to look at the local eye candy. She watched them disappear into a nearby used bookstore and felt a sudden urge to follow them. After leaving a few bills under her coffee cup she headed down the sidewalk, unsure as to the reason why.

The place was exactly what an old eastern European bookstore might be expected to look like. The walls were paneled in dark wood, and there were only two windows to let in the minimum amount of light required for browsing. It was warm, stuffy, and in dire
need of a good dusting. Annika stood on the opposite side of the shelf from the strange couple. She picked up a thick book without looking at the title and pretended to read, noticing the girl’s exotic feather earrings instead, observing from between the rows of books. The blonde had a sheer white peasant-style blouse on, belted with a long, narrow green sash. The sleeves were pushed up past her forearms, and held in place with a long leather cord looped and tied around her biceps. She wore a few beaded bracelets on her wrists, a fringed skirt that buckled over her hips, and brown boots that laced up to her knees. It seemed to Annika that her clothing must have been hand-made. She’d never seen anyone dressed in such a way before. The blonde had her nose crammed in one of the books, trying to read through her huge dark sunglasses. The young man reached over and gently tilted her chin upwards, removing them carefully with an air of affection.

“Why didn’t I think of that?” his girlfriend asked him with a goofy grin.

Because you’re a stupid blonde airhead, was Annika’s catty but silent response. The man didn’t reply, but instead tucked the glasses into the torn pocket of a dark brown velvet dinner jacket that had been stitched, and had clearly seen better days. His pants were made of black suede, but they were so broken in that they seemed less fashionable and more functional. His calf-length black leather boots were fastened with tarnished silver buckles running up the outsides, and appeared just as worn as his pants. He had taken his cap off and was running his fingers through his black mane. It stuck out in every direction with a mind of its own and looked every bit as ornery as he did.

The blonde hissed at him, looking annoyed, and tried to snatch the ball cap away from him. He made a game of it, holding it high above her head as she was just as short as Annika. He hissed back to the blonde in a language she didn’t recognize, but it seemed that his girlfriend was annoyed that he’d taken off the hat, and he was annoyed that he should bother wearing it. The girl grabbed another nearby book and the young man stuffed his hat into her purse and sauntered away.

The door to the shop opened again, and another short young woman with long, light brown hair walked in. Dressed almost identically as the blonde, her hair looked like she’d spent the past hour riding on the back of a motorcycle. Annika swore she saw a few twigs stuck in the honey-brown snarls. The blonde motioned for her friend to come over, and they spoke in hushed voices in the strange language.

Annika’s curiosity wandered to their male companion, who had disappeared. She walked to the end of the aisle and peeked around the corner, but he wasn’t there. As she whirled around, Annika ran right smack into one of the customers, dropping her book with a loud clunk to the floor. The man behind the counter gave them a stern look, and went back to reading his novel.

“I’m so sorry!” Annika sputtered, feeling thoroughly embarrassed as she realized she was staring at two black boots fastened with dusty silver buckles. She forced herself to look up and into the face of the guy she’d been stalking, and was pleasantly surprised to find him even better looking from scarcely a foot away. She felt her insides constrict as he studied her with a curious expression. There were subtle changes in his eyes as if he were hearing her thoughts and speaking to her without words. She caught a whiff of late summer air laced with honeysuckle as he leaned down to retrieve the book for her, but the windows weren’t open.

“What have you here?” he asked her, flipping through the pages of the book. She recognized an English accent. His brow raised and he gave her an odd look as the corner
of his mouth curled upward. “Interesting.” He thumbed quickly from cover to cover. His mouth was pressed shut in a peculiar way, like he was trying hard not to laugh. “Very interesting. I cannot picture a girl like you finding this subject very fascinating, but I’ll let you get back to your reading,” he told her as he held out the book. Annika looked closer at the cover, which wobbled slightly from the silent laughter that shook him. It was a history of artificial bovine insemination. Her eyes grew wide in horror and she felt uncomfortably warm.

“I must have misread the title! I thought it was about…I didn’t…I thought…”

“I thought you would have noticed what you were reading by now,” he said in a soft, smooth voice while flashing a smug grin. “You’ve certainly been clutching that book long enough.”

Annika was mortified that he’d caught her spying on him. She wanted to drop the book and run, but her feet were like lead. She expected him to walk back over to his girlfriend, but he simply ran his fingers through his hair, watching her with a curious twinkle in his eyes. She’d never seen ones like his; they were outlined in deep green with bright blue surrounding those infinite irises. There was something else odd about him but she couldn’t pinpoint it; there were just too many odd things to count.

“Where are you from?” he asked. “Your accent is completely different than the locals.” At first Annika was surprised. He was asking her? He was the one with the English accent.

“I’ve lived all around the world, but mostly in the States.”

“The states of what, madness?”

“The United States of America.” Annika tried not to grin at his joke. His eyebrows rose slightly as he made the connection.

“Ah yes…I’ve heard rumors about American girls.” An amused grin played on his lips and he gave the tiniest nod of approval. “You’ll have to tell me if they’re true.” He tilted his head to one side, letting his eyes wander over her curves. “Although I have to say…I’d rather you show me.”

She wrinkled her forehead at this reply, uncertain if he was mocking her or not.

“Where are you from that you think it’s okay to talk to strangers that way? One of the caves up north? You don’t seem like you go out in public very often,” she retorted, eyeing his mended velvet jacket.

“You are quite a saucy girl, aren’t you,” he remarked with an amused grin. “I hoped you would be.”

She saw an image flash in front of her eyes, like a memory surfacing, but there was no way this fleeting sight had happened before. She could see herself crushed against his chest with his hand cradling the back of her neck, about to be kissed. She shook her head, wondering where this vision had come from. It certainly wasn’t one of hers.

“I’m from Derbedrossivic, not that far away. It’s those lovely creatures over there who live in a cave,” he said with a straight face as he pointed over his shoulder at the blonde and her friend. Usually Annika could play it so cool with men. Usually she could just laugh at whatever lines they told her or walk away from whatever smooth moves they made, so why was this one affecting her composure? She tried, but she couldn’t budge. It was as if he were holding her there with invisible rope. The young man stepped even closer to her in his catlike way of moving, emphasizing how much he towered over her. The scent of spices and honeysuckle returned, but that window was still shut tight.
“Here’s a volume I think you might fancy...” he noted as a different book caught his eye. He reached seductively up over her head, selecting another older book with a tattered green cover before passing it to her. She could see that it was a history not of bovine insemination, but of stringed instruments, particularly guitars. She eyed him suspiciously.

“Why did you choose this one?” Annika asked, completely unnerved. She’d never seen this person before in her life, yet he somehow knew that she had a passion for music. “What makes you think that I’m interested in this kind of thing?”

“It was just a guess,” he said and pressed it into her hands. “Am I correct?”

Annika couldn’t get over the way he was looking at her, like he’d just discovered a rare work of art or a map leading to treasure. She found herself nodding her head at his question, trying not to lose herself in his gaze.

“It wasn’t merely a guess. I noticed the callouses on your fingers and how short you keep your nails,” he said, looking very impressed with himself. “I play guitar as well. I have this very text at home.”

Before Annika could respond she heard the shopkeeper grumbling to a customer up at the cash register.

“Don’t you have any bills smaller than these?” the irritated man complained in broken English. “I cannot make change for you. You will have to buy something else or give me a smaller bill.”

“I’m sorry, this is all I have,” said the messy-haired girl as she dumped the contents of her leather bag onto the counter. Coins bounced to the floor and notes fluttered on top of the small stack of books. The bookseller had been irritated with her before, but now his expression changed to one of sheer frustration as she began laying out each bill like she barely knew how to use money.

“I can never figure this out. Let’s see...” She started counting out bills and added them up to the correct number. “Is that right?”

The man nodded, muttering something incomprehensible. Satisfied, the young woman stuffed the rest of the money in her bag while he put the books in a paper sack.

“Magda?” Annika heard from nearby. The voice came from the blonde who was now standing next to the handsome man in the odd outfit. “Is that you?” She squinted her dark brown eyes until they were two dark slits in her face.

“Sorry, but I’m afraid you’ve mistaken me for someone else,” said Annika. The girl looked obsessed with her, and Annika found herself glancing around for the nearest exit. Then to make things worse, her friend joined them, lugging the heavy bag.

“Look, Hilda! It’s Magda, I swear!” Hilda leaned her face so close to Annika that she backed up against the bookshelf.

“My name isn’t Magda. It’s Annika Brisby. I’m not from here and I don’t know anyone named Magda.” She was quickly losing her patience with these people who had no regard for personal space.

“Runa, love, it’s not her,” the young man said gently, putting a hand on the blonde’s shoulder.

“How would you know?” she snapped at him with a scowl before turning back to Annika. “Oh, it has to be you! Your hair is different, but you have her face and her eyes!” Annika tried to leave, but she was blocked by the three strangers. The blonde girl reached out her hands and grabbed Annika’s t-shirt, lifting it up to expose her waist. At this, Annika instinctively jumped back, and knocked over a small bookshelf. Then the smaller
bookshelf fell into a larger one and knocked it down. And the larger bookshelf knocked down another, and another, like dominoes. Annika scrambled to her feet, leapt over the mess, and out the door as the shopkeeper turned an unnatural shade of purple and bellowed at them in Bulgarian. Annika was pretty sure he was threatening to call the police, as she had done a remarkable job of vandalizing his store.

She ran as fast as she could down the block, looking over her shoulder to see if the furious bookstore owner was chasing her. To her surprise she saw the three people she’d just met running after her instead. Just then the dark blonde’s paper bag tore, spilling its contents all over the sidewalk. The girls stopped and turned around to gather the books, but the dark-haired young man kept running towards her.

_He won’t even stop and help his girlfriend? What a jerk!_ she thought as she began to grow winded. _Why is he chasing me? Should I stop?_ She wasn’t even thinking about where she was going, but the next thing she knew she was climbing onto a bus. She had no clue where it was headed when she paid the fare, but she walked to the rear and took a seat anyway, huffing as she tried to catch her breath. She looked down at her lap and realized she was still clutching the book about stringed instruments. She sunk low into her seat with just enough room to peek out the window. Enough time passed that it was clear the shopkeeper wasn’t going to involve the police over an old book on guitars, but there was one man who came into view; the one who had put the book in her hands.

The bus rumbled as the driver turned the ignition switch and put it into first gear, and Annika coaxed her window down to get a better look at him. Over the chaos and noise of the traffic in the street, he managed to spot her and dodged the cars and trucks to reach the bus. Grabbing ahold of the windowpane, he pulled himself up along the outside, and Annika knew he’d have crawled right through it if it were bigger. The bus was headed for a narrow street made even narrower by a large truck parked up ahead. If he didn’t let go soon he’d be crushed into it. She opened her mouth to warn him, but no words came out. He, however, flashed his brilliant smile at her with absolute confidence.

“Annika Brisby…” he said, savoring her name just before he let go. “I’ve been wondering when I would finally meet you.”
Chapter 2
a living legend

Annika had accidentally taken a route that didn’t get her home until well past dinnertime, but she didn’t mind. She stared out the window at the city streets and eventually the countryside, wondering why the pale blonde had mistaken her for someone else, and what the dark-haired daredevil had meant by his comment about finally meeting her.

She came home to Uncle Vince standing in front of the stove in his ancient flannel robe. A cigarette was stuck in his mouth that halfway consisted of a long stem of ash. His friend Tosho sat at the table, typing on his laptop, unconcerned by the acrid stench that greeted Annika’s nose the second she opened the door.

“Aww, sweetie, you made dinner.” She fanned away the opaque veil of smoke that had settled throughout the kitchen and cracked open a nearby window. Vince jerked his head upwards at her sarcasm, causing the ashy portion of his cigarette to fall into the pan. “Ah, fucking shit,” he muttered as he continued to smoke the rest of his cigarette.

“That is the second time I’ve done that today, and now I’m out of eggs.”

“How can you mess up eggs? They’re the easiest thing to cook.” Tosho nodded in agreement. Vince turned to his niece and gave her an exaggerated pout.

“I don’t think I can let you leave. I will starve.” Annika took the dirty pan from him and began scraping the ashy crust into the trash.

“Oh Vince, you have got to learn to make something besides eggs.” She laughed at his pathetic state of bachelorhood and rummaged through the refrigerator, looking for something more creative for dinner. She pulled out a few thick slices of beef and a handful of vegetables.

“You came home much later than I expected,” Vince remarked. “Where have you been?”

“I sort of met some weird people today,” she began, chopping up the onions and potatoes.

“They must have been weird if you are calling them weird,” Vince said, lighting a fresh cigarette. She described to him and Tosho how the people were dressed like they’d come off a movie set and were terrible with money. She told him about the boy with the hypnotic eyes that seemed capable of reading her mind when it came to books and guitars.

“But you liked this boy, didn’t you?” he taunted playfully. “I can tell by the look in your eyes.”

“He was actually a bit of a cad,” she said, turning away so that neither Vince nor Tosho could see her blush. “And then he had the nerve to call me saucy!”

“Then he sounds clever to me,” Vince hooted, but Tosho didn’t laugh. He seemed to be stuck on a detail from earlier in her tale.

“Did you say that the women wore green sashes?” he asked.

“Yep. And long white tunics.”

“That is so bizarre. They sound like samodivi.”

“Does a samodivi walk up to strangers and try to take off their clothes?”

“I’ve seen stranger things in Montmartre. They must be eccentric artists or
musicians, just like you,” Vince mumbled as he flopped into the chair beside Tosho. The cigarette bobbing in his mouth ashed all over his bare chest, but he merely brushed it away. Vince had a lot of good qualities, but cleanliness certainly wasn’t one of them.

“I don’t walk up to strangers and try to take off their clothes.”

“Maybe you’d sell more albums if you did?” Vince and Tosho shared a little laugh. Unamused, Annika ignored her uncle and threw the chopped vegetables into a pan along with a pot roast. She covered it with tinfoil and set it in the oven, turning to Tosho.

“So what’s a samodiva, and what’s up with the green sashes?”

“Samodivi is the plural form of a samodiva. They are wood nymphs,” he explained. “There is a Bulgarian legend that they take off their clothes every night before they bathe in the river. If a man is lucky enough to steal her sash, she is obligated to become his wife. I wish the legend were true.”

“You aren’t the only one,” Vince said with a grin. “If it were true, I would have brought a samodiva home for myself a long time ago.”

“Well, these girls totally looked like what you just described,” Annika confirmed. “But even if samodivi did exist, I can’t imagine why a wood nymph would come to a big city like Sofia. Wood nymphs belong in the forest.”

“Maybe they ran out of men in the woods?” suggested Vince. “If you visit with them again, you can invite them over any time.”

“Yeah, okay,” she joked. “If I bump into them again I’ll be sure to invite them all to dinner. The guy said he was from Derbedrossivic, if you know where that is.”

Tosho gave her an odd look.

“Derbedrossivic? There is no such place that I know of. The name sounds Armenian.”

“But Armenia’s on the other side of the Black Sea,” Annika pointed out. “And he said it wasn’t that far away.”

Tosho just looked at her skeptically.

“Maybe it is in Romania. It is not that far by train.” Both he and Annika were content enough to drop the issue, since everyone has a different idea of just how far away is ‘not that far’.

“You know,” Vince said, “your grandmother used to tell your mother and I all sorts of tales about the wood nymphs when we were growing up.”

“I remember Mom telling me about some of them too,” said Annika, “but I don’t remember her calling them samodivi.”

“Perhaps no,” said Vince, squinting his eyes slightly as he recalled old memories. “But your mère tried very hard not to forget our history. That is why she carries around that big treasure chest every time your family moves.”

“You mean that trunk of old lace and books?” Annika asked. She could indeed recall a mysterious trunk that she had never seen the bottom of. It was filled with sentimental objects that her mother didn’t display, like old photographs of family members and toys that threatened to break if they were ever played with again. She’d been curious as a young girl as to the contents, but the trunk was always kept locked up tight in her parents’ bedroom. She had always assumed the contents were probably of no interest to her, but she made it a point to ask her mother about it when she returned.

The smell of dinner had hovered over their noses for long enough, and the conversation became focused over the insect world yet again. Annika chewed on a bite of
tender meat and potatoes as she tuned out the latest development of her uncle’s project. She was secretly thinking about returning to the bookstore on her next visit to Sofia, but she was afraid that the owner might recognize her and kick her out. She had stolen a book after all. That night, and for many nights afterwards, she dreamt that she was always running. Running from Danny, running from the angry bookstore owner, running from the blonde who wanted to feel her up, and running from the guy that had already gotten under her skin. Somewhere inside she knew she wanted to stop. She just wasn’t sure why.
Chapter 3

a walk through the trees

Autumn had fallen upon the Balkans, splashing the mountains and valleys with orange, red, and yellow. While Annika had enjoyed her extended vacation, she had a long list of new songs she was anxious to share with James and Charlie. On a crisp, sunny day in mid-October she set out on what was to be one of her last hikes, as she was planning to buy a ticket home later that evening.

Walking everywhere had become the norm, so she decided to make a day of it. She packed a large bottle of water, some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, apples, and her journal, just in case she was inspired to write another song. For two hours Annika climbed over hilly mountains, delving deeper and deeper into the dense woods. The day started out so beautiful; the blue skies were dotted with fluffy white marshmallow clouds. She snapped photos with her camera and listened to music on her headphones as she climbed up and down the hilly terrain, too lost in daydreams of her band’s future success to pay attention to just how many miles she’d walked.

There was a meadow full of wildflowers that she lay down in and jotted down a few notes for lyrics that had come up amidst those daydreams. The sky began to grow dark, so she walked back the way she came, but the terrain beyond the hill looked strange and unfamiliar. She blamed it on the shadows caused by the setting sun, and assured herself that Vince’s house was just over the next hill…but every time she reached the top, it was only another hill. Her stomach turned as adrenaline began to trickle into her bloodstream. It was getting darker by the second, and the only lights to be seen were from the twinkling stars. Annika figured if she just found a place to sleep, things would look familiar again in the morning. She crouched underneath a protective pine tree and tried not to think about how many bears, cougars and wolves lived in the mountains. Besides her t-shirt and jeans with a patch on one knee, all she had to keep her warm was her black-hooded sweatshirt. She tried to remain calm and not panic, and eventually fell asleep, exhausted from walking almost nonstop that day.

Birds woke her well before dawn’s first light had airbrushed the sky with a deep cerulean hue. She shivered and dug into her bag for her breakfast; her very last peanut butter sandwich and a few precious drops of water to wash it down with. As the sky grew brighter she thought it might help to climb one of the higher hills and try to find Vince’s house from up there. Surely in the sunlight it would be easy to spot. For an hour and a half she forced her legs to climb, only stopping long enough to catch her breath.

She arrived at the top of the hill, dropped her backpack to the ground and pulled herself into one of the tall fir trees. Her hopeful eyes scanned the horizon in every direction, expecting to see a smattering of red rooftops that were so unique to the region. But everywhere she looked there was nothing but rolling hills, valleys of trees, and occasional meadows. Although it was breathtaking to see, she found little joy in the view. Annika liked to think of herself as a confident person, but for the first time in a long time she began to feel afraid. Not only because she was lost in the wilderness of a foreign country, but she was already running low on water and completely out of food, and what if a bear found her before a person did? It didn’t matter how long she’d studied martial arts, not if that bear weighed five times what she did.
She noticed a small stream running below her, so she climbed down the hill and decided to follow it. Wherever there was water, there was bound to be a town sooner or later. She tried to be optimistic. At least the warm sun was shining and she had plenty of music to keep her distracted.

The stream wasn’t a mighty river, but the water was crystal clear. She licked her dry lips in hesitation, then ultimately decided that the risk of giardia was worth quenching her thirst. The water was cool, and she swallowed it in greedy gulps before filling her empty bottle. She looked up and saw a blonde girl in a long white shirt and green sash sneaking down the other side of the river as though she didn’t want to be seen.

“Hey! Wait up! I’m lost!” Annika called out. The blonde turned around and sure enough, it was the same girl from the bookstore. Annika threw her bag over her shoulders and ran after her, but the girl didn’t stop. She chased her along the stream for at least half a mile where they came to a small waterfall. In front of it was a pool of turbulent water, surrounded by a fine mist. The black rocks surrounding it gave Annika the feeling that it was a very private, sacred place. The barefoot blonde hopped across the stones with ease, but when Annika tried to jump, the rubber sole of her sneaker slipped on the slimy algae, sending her into the deep pool. The shock of the cold water and a sudden sharp pain in her ankle disoriented her, and she accidentally gasped, inhaling what now felt like liquid ice. This caused another surge of pain in her lungs and nose and head. Her waterlogged jeans and sweatshirt were weighing her down, but she forced herself to kick towards the sunlight far above her. Just when she thought she might not make it, her head broke the surface of the water. She grabbed ahold of one of the black rocks and clung on for dear life.

“Runa, hurry,” a female voice called from behind the waterfall. “It’s going to close any second! Get in here!”

“I know you remember me from the bookstore!” Annika yelled after coughing up most of the water that stung her nasal passages. “I think I broke my ankle! Come on! You’ve got to help me!”

The girl’s face was fraught and utterly torn as she stared at Annika.

“If you come with me now, I don’t think you’ll ever return!”

“I don’t care! You can’t just leave me here!” Annika shouted, angry and scared.

“Runa, hurry! It’s starting to close already! You have to come NOW!” two voices screamed urgently from behind the waterfall. Just as frantic, Annika hollered at Runa again.

“I’m going to drown if you leave me! You have to help me! Please!”

Runa looked nothing short of terrified, but she dutifully crept out to the rocks where Annika was struggling to keep her nose above the water. She reached down and pulled Annika out with unexpected strength. With her good leg and Runa’s arms guiding her along, she was able to scramble across the other rocks and get to the ledge under the falling water. A messy head of honey colored hair poked out and the other girl from the bookstore appeared, wearing a look of shock. She reached out, grabbed both Annika and Runa, and yanked them violently through to the other side. Annika landed on a hard, wet, stone surface. Her hip took some of the impact, but the pain was nothing in comparison to the fire she felt in her right foot. It hurt so much that she wanted to scream and curse, but she chose to scowl at Runa instead.

“Why did you run away from me?” Annika demanded. She proceeded to wring the
water out of her long red hair but the blonde was silent. “Weren’t you the one chasing me down the street last month?”

“What in Badra’s name were you thinking, Runa?” the third woman’s voice scolded, sounding ready to boil over at any moment. Annika looked up to see a woman with long black hair and strong, toned muscles, who was dressed the same as Hilda and Runa. Although she was petite like the other two, she looked a bit older than them, and appeared somewhere on the brink of violence as she glared past her high cheekbones at them. The energy emanating from the woman made Annika bow her head slightly and turn away from her as well. She felt afraid to even look her in the eye.

Instead, she took stock of her surroundings now that her vision had adjusted to the darker light. They were in a narrow-mouthed cave that opened much wider in the middle. Through the dim light coming from a fire in the back and the light filtering in through the waterfall, Annika could see a cozy dwelling covered in thick rugs and pillows. This wasn’t any kind of hideout; this was definitely a home. It was actually pretty nice, for a cave.

“I cannot believe you, Runa,” the black-haired woman continued, speaking with such a severe tone that both Runa and Hilda hung their heads in shame. “You not only risked your life, but now you have risked ours as well! What are we supposed to do with her?” She turned away from the three wet girls like a disappointed parent. “And you’re not much better, Hilda. You should have let her fend for herself. You know you aren’t supposed to meddle in such things.” Annika felt her anger return, rising in the pit of her stomach. Before she could say anything, Runa beat her to it.

“Sariel, she’s the one I was telling you about! Just look at her,” Runa stammered. Sariel ignored the remark and walked towards the fire at the back of the cave, sitting sat down with her back towards the others.

“She’s your problem Runa, not mine,” she said callously from across the room. “And she’s yours as well, Hilda. You two can deal with her.” Annika moaned again in pain as a fiery hot bolt of pain shot through her ankle.

“I need to get to a doctor. Does anyone have a cell phone?” she asked. They just looked at her blankly.

“A cell phone?” Hilda repeated, like she’d never heard of one before.

“She means the little telephones without the string attached,” Runa explained before turning to Annika. “Those don’t work here.” Annika rolled her eyes. She was completely surrounded by morons.

“Will you drop the cosplay act already?” she growled through gritted teeth. “I need a doctor. My ankle’s killing me.”

“What you need,” Hilda said calmly, “is to take off your wet clothes before you catch a chill. I need to see your leg.” Annika threw off the soaked backpack and her hoodie easily enough, but peeling off her jeans was more of a challenge. Hilda helped her to a warm spot in front of the fire, where there was an abundance of soft pillows and woven blankets to lie about on. Runa gathered her soaked clothes and wrung them out before hanging them near the fire to dry.

“Are you a doctor?”

“I’m a healer. I can mend things like broken legs.” She stopped to give the ankle a soft squeeze, and Annika pressed her lips tight, masking her pain.

“Ah, not to worry. It’s not broken, but you aren’t going to be using it for a while.
You might as well get comfortable,” Hilda said, tossing her a sheer white blouse like her own. It was made out of a strange fabric unlike any other. When Annika took off her t-shirt and put it on, it felt like wearing a warm cloud against her naked skin, yet weighed next to nothing. Noticing the curious look on her face, Runa piped up from where she stood next to the fire,

“It’s milkweed fluff woven with angora rabbit hair. Isn’t it wonderful? It’s so much softer than your modern clothes.”

*Modern clothes?* thought Annika. *And they don’t even know what a cell phone is? Jeez, I hope these weirdos don’t make my ankle worse than it already is.*

Runa had come over to make Annika more comfortable, propping her leg up on a pillow and stuffing more cushions behind her back. She proceeded to dry and braid her own hair while Hilda set about gathering dried herbs. It didn’t even seem like a cave anymore. It was a cheerful and cozy little place if you didn’t count the spot that Sariel was sulking in. Annika could see there were a few pieces of furniture scattered about, with wooden bowls and grass baskets overflowing with fruits and vegetables. There were numerous weapons that hung on the walls; three long bows, one petite sized sword, and three small knives with handles made of ebony. There was a soft grinding sound as Hilda ground the herbs using a small mortar and pestle. The hearth around the fire was so large that one of them could almost fit in it standing up. In fact, the only thing that wasn’t cheerful about the place was Sariel, who was standing against one side of the hearth, still ignoring the girls.

“So, uh, how long do you think before we can get back to Sofia?” Annika wanted to know. “I don’t have a clue where we are. I’m so lost it’s not even funny.”

“You don’t understand,” Sariel huffed, as though Annika were an idiot. “You can’t go back there. That was the choice you made when you entered our home. You said you didn’t care, remember?” Sariel turned around to cast her guest an icy glare, but it vanished immediately as she gasped, seeing Annika’s face for the first time. Her clenched jaw line grew soft, as did her mouth, and she lost all of her hostile essence as she rushed towards Annika and almost sank to her knees.

“Dear gods,” she gasped, “you do look just like Magda.” Sariel reached out a hand to caress Annika’s face tenderly, like a mother would touch her child. “But your hair is different.” Sariel’s eyes looked glassy, but she blinked before they could form tears.

“There’s only one way to find out,” Hilda said. “Let us see your waist.”

“What? No.”

“Humor us,” Sariel instructed. Annika slowly lifted the soft and warm blouse she wore to reveal her midriff. Her small audience leaned in for a closer look at a particular area above her left hip, almost smacking their heads together.

“It’s just a birthmark,” Annika said, and let go of the fabric. “It’s nothing special.” But they all continued to stare at her in disbelief.

“What’s wrong?” She was starting to feel slightly creeped out. The three women each lifted their own gauzy garments. It took Annika a moment to realize what she was seeing, and when she understood what it was, her heart skipped a beat and her skin erupted in goose bumps. They all had a similar version of the same birthmark above their left hip.

“What does this mean? Do you think we’re related?” asked Annika. “Are you three sisters?” Runa and Hilda grinned to each other.
“They are,” Sariel said quietly. She had stopped frowning, but wasn’t ready to smile yet. Something still seemed to be bothering her. “Where have you been hiding all this time? How is it that I managed to not keep track of you?” She frowned as though she were inwardly scolding herself, and quite harshly at that.

“I’m not from here,” Annika tried to explain. “My mom is, but she doesn’t have any family left in the area. My dad’s parents are Norwegian. You know, Vikings.”

“Vikings?” Runa wondered out loud. “We haven’t seen them in a while.” Not in a while? Annika wondered silently. What were these women thinking? She tried her best to size them up. They could indeed be sisters. Hilda and Sariel looked the most alike, while Runa’s heart-shaped face made her look more like a doll. Sariel had a generous splash of freckles across her nose and arms, but it was her demeanor that set her apart from the others, even more than her jet black hair. There seemed to be a perpetual cloud of fierce negativity hanging over her.

“It’s a three day walk to the nearest village,” Sariel informed her. “We should leave first thing in the morning. If we get a ride then Annika’s injury shouldn’t slow us down too much.” Confusion clouded Annika’s thinking for a few moments.

“I know Sofia’s not that far,” she pointed out. “How can it be three days away if I’ve only walked for two? And why wouldn’t we just take a bus or a taxi?”

“There aren’t any autos here, and we haven’t any horses. We ride the deer of the forest,” Hilda said. Annika buried her face in her hands, shaking her head in frustration.

“I’m completely fucked, aren’t I?” she muttered. She was growing more and more concerned for her well-being given her present company. “Do you have any friends that I could talk to about getting home?”

“Yes. In the nearest village, which is three days away,” Runa said in the sweetest voice. “If we ride the deer it should only take two days.”

“Awesome,” she grumbled. Now that Annika knew she was depending on three strangers with a warped sense of reality, all she could do was play along.

“How is it that you don’t even recognize your own kind? Don’t you know us?” Runa replied, looking crestfallen. “You said your mother was from here. Doesn’t she have that same mark on her waist?”

“Yeah, actually, she does,” Annika admitted.

“I think perhaps you are a relative of our long lost Magda,” Hilda said. “She left us ages ago, and it’s somewhat bittersweet to see you. You look so much like her and we thought she came back. We used to dance and sing together right here on the same river rocks that you fell off of.”

Annika remembered what Tosho had told her about the wood nymphs who wore green sashes and had their clothes stolen by men seeking wives. She had her doubts regarding their sanity, but the business about that birthmark, well, that was perhaps too coincidental to be a coincidence.

“So you really are the samodivi that I’ve heard about?” she asked slowly, still pretending to believe them. Runa smiled and nodded her head enthusiastically.

“You are part of us, even if you don’t believe it.”

“Maybe,” Annika admitted slowly, tracing her fingers over the once boring, now much more interesting birthmark. She began to feel more comfortable with her acquaintances. “When I was growing up, I never understood why other kids never liked to climb trees or explore the woods, or why they didn’t seem to understand how…” she

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trailed off, lost in sentiment. “They just didn’t understand me.”

“Of course they didn’t,” Sariel agreed. Her expression had softened up considerably since Annika’s arrival. “You’re not from their tribe. I’ve followed our bloodlines for ages, although there has been a great deal of romantic intermingling between samodivi and humans. Sometimes the traits are so diluted that they become lost, although other times they’re so highly concentrated that you could pass for one of us. Even if your father was a Viking, your mother is still a samodiva.” She paused to look at Runa and Hilda. “Because of that, you belong to two different worlds—that’s why you have never belonged to just one.”

There was a chord struck in Annika’s heart, and although she wasn’t about to believe everything she was hearing, there was something about what Sariel said that explained years of teenage angst in an instant.

“That’s exactly how I’ve felt my whole life,” she admitted with hesitation. “Stuck between two worlds.” Sariel nodded sympathetically when she heard this.

“It’s the curse of our mortal children. Some of them, I suppose, are more affected than others.” There was a long silence as the women gave Annika time to let this thought digest properly.

“So there are others like me?” she asked, ignoring the pain in her ankle.

“There are actually more like you out there than you know, but it’s so difficult to keep track when you move halfway around your world and ours.”

“Yes, and it will be especially difficult to follow you now,” Hilda lamented. Annika was still in disbelief by all she was experiencing, unable to look past the insane notion that she might be talking to bona fide wood nymphs.

“Why especially now?”

“Because the path that brought you here is now gone,” Hilda replied. “That’s why you can’t simply walk back to your house in Sofia. I think your presence here is an omen.”

“I’m pretty sure that was just an accident. Are you saying I’m bad luck?”

“No, silly,” Runa said cheerfully. “She’s saying that you were meant to find your way home…back to your real home. Back to us. However,” she gave a great sigh. “You may be here a long time. Perhaps forever.”

“Forever?” Annika asked with a healthy dose of skepticism. “Why can’t we just go out the way we came?”

Hilda brought over the herbal paste she had been making, and when she applied it to Annika’s ankle she shuddered at how cool it felt. She was surprised to feel some of the pain slowly fade as Hilda wrapped it in thin strips of cloth.

“You can stick your head out through the water, but you won’t like what you see,” Sariel warned. “If you step through it, you’ll be lost indefinitely.” Annika wasn’t sure if she was speaking metaphorically or not, but she looked serious enough.

“Come on. That’s ridiculous.”

“Try it then,” Sariel dared. With her foot nicely bandaged up, Annika crawled over to the entrance of the cave, avoiding what bit of puddle still remained from her grand entrance. She stuck her head through the wall of water just enough to see a horrible sight. The sky was lit with blood-red sunlight from a blackened, coal-like sun. The searing hot sky burned her eyes, and on the ground was nothing but a desert of black sand. Instead of water, there was a river of fiery lava cutting through the landscape. She jumped back
quickly and retreated to her blankets, feeling the shock of cold water dripping down her back once again.

“Holy shit! What was that place?” she cried. She blinked and shook her head, but she still saw the eerie vision in her head. She began to seriously wonder if there was some type of hallucinogen in the water she’d drank earlier that day. There was no other explanation in her head for how she wound up in a cave with a bunch of Eastern European hillbilly hippies.

“We don’t know exactly what it is, but we know someone who might,” Hilda answered somberly.

“That’s why we should visit the Marinossians. Perhaps they know something about this situation and how to remedy it. Anthea will certainly be able to mend your ankle. Either way, they’ll have more information than we do. The elves are some of the oldest creatures we know.”

“I’m sorry, did you say elves?” Annika repeated.

“Ooh, I can’t wait for you to meet them!” Runa squealed with glee. “They’re such a fun family! Especially Talvi. I haven’t seen him in a long time.”

“I suppose an entire month is a long time to you,” Hilda said sarcastically. Then she and Runa grinned and giggled mischievously, looking at Annika again. Her eyes narrowed a little, wondering what the two weren’t telling her.

“What’s so funny?” she asked suspiciously.

“It’s silly…it’s nothing. But he’ll probably make you wish you had never laid eyes on him!” Runa sang in a playful voice.

“Who will?” asked Annika. “A little elf named Talvi?”

Hearing this, Runa burst out laughing, rolling on her back and shaking with rounds of giggles. Hilda turned around quickly so that Annika couldn’t see her trying not to laugh as she put away the mortar and pestle. Sariel just rolled her eyes and began packing a rucksack with vegetables.

“What could be so bad about him, and why’s it so funny?” Annika’s curiosity was peaked, as well as her suspected mental trip. She decided to stop fighting it and just let it play out. “Well? What kind of elf is he? Does he bake cookies and live in a tree? Or does he wear curly-toed shoes and make toys?” she pried, squeezing excess water from her hair. Her questions only seemed to make Runa laugh harder. “Are you going to tell me or not?”

Runa sat up and wiped the tears of laughter away from her big brown eyes. “You’ll find out soon enough,” she said, and rose to join her sister who was making a vegetable stew. “Now we really need a good meal and a good night’s rest for tomorrow. When Sariel said we were leaving first thing in the morning, she meant it.”

“I’ll go anywhere I need to,” Annika said, too exasperated to argue with them about the existence of elves and wood nymphs. “I just need to get home. I know my uncle is worried sick. He’s going to be so upset when I don’t come home a second night in a row.”

Upon the sight of food, Annika’s stomach growled. The samodivi served the hearty vegetable stew with bread and honey for their supper. It tasted better than anything Annika could think of, except maybe banitza. After dinner the ladies sang a few songs in their enchanting, siren-like voices that echoed against the walls around them. Many of the songs were in languages that she’d never heard before, and after their lullabies had
ceased, they retired to the soft blankets on the floor of the cave. Soon the only noise was
the occasional crackle of the fire. Annika was thoughtful for a few moments, thinking
about all she had learned in the past few hours. She was possibly related to these reality-
challenged women, there was a gateway to a hellish realm on the other side of the
waterfall where there should have been an open meadow, and she wasn’t calling a doctor
or going home anytime soon because they didn’t have outrageous things like phones.
Instead she was going to ride a deer through the forest to meet up with a little elf who
sounded like a huge pain in the ass. The whole thing sounded ridiculous, but Annika
knew she was exhausted. Plus, there had to have been something psychotropic floating
around in that water she’d gulped earlier that day. This particular high wasn’t like
anything else she’d ever experimented with in the past, but maybe they did things
different in the backwoods of Bulgaria.

What seemed like only moments later, Annika heard a strange, grinding metallic
noise. Shinnng, shinnng. She opened one eye. It was barely light enough to see anything,
but there was Sariel, sitting only inches away from the falling water. Shinnng, shinnng.
She was sharpening her sword with a stone, running it over each side of the blade and
then wetting it in the cascade. Runa was already up and about, packing things into small
bags. The weapons which had hung on the wall the previous day had been taken down,
and Hilda was taking a tea kettle off the fire. Annika sat up, trying to collect her thoughts.
Clearly she was still under the influence of something, but her mind was as crystal clear
as that water she’d tasted. She couldn’t imagine what Vince was thinking, wondering
what happened to his only niece. It upset her greatly to know she was unable to reach
him, and at least reassure him that she was safe.

“Did you get enough rest?” Sariel asked without looking up from her sword.
“Yeah, I think so. I had really weird dreams, though. Like, stranger than usual.”
Annika clutched her blanket tighter around her to keep out the chilly morning air, then
hobbled over to where Sariel was working. Maybe she was barking up the wrong tree, but
she felt determined to befriend her one way or another. At worst, Sariel would find her
annoying. At best, she might be more likely to help her.

“Where did you get your sword?” Out of the corner of her eye, Annika saw Runa and
Hilda’s heads jerk up at the question, but they said nothing. Sariel abruptly set the stone
down, tossed her dark mane, and held out her sword for observation. Annika knelt down
close to inspect the craftsmanship. The blade was etched with ancient writing and the hilt
was designed to curl around Sariel’s dainty hand. Anything but crude, it was a
magnificent work of art.

“The father of my children gave it to me,” she said in a voice that did not encourage
questions or elaboration, and quickly resumed her task of sharpening. Annika thought for
sure that by now, the blade could slice a gnat in half.

“Are you skilled with a weapon, Annika?” Runa piped up.
“I’ve used a bow and arrow before at summer camp. I guess I was pretty good at
hitting my target,” Annika said with a shrug. “But that was years ago. I’ve done
kickboxing on and off for the past two years, though.”

“What weapon do you use in that?” the blonde asked naively. Annika laughed
quietly.
“I guess my best weapon is my foot, which is useless now,” she replied. Runa looked
confused.

“I’ll show you what I mean when it gets better,” Annika said. “I don’t know how I’m going to walk anywhere on it, though.”

“Oh we’re not walking. We’re riding, remember?” Hilda laughed. “If you expect a ride from the Srebra Gora deer, there’s a song you’ll have to learn. Now hurry and dress.”

Annika wasn’t too sure about riding on a wild deer, let alone one that required a lullaby. She’d only been on a pony ride once as a girl, and the experience hadn’t ended on a good note. After a light breakfast of tea, bread, and honey, Hilda opened Annika’s bandages and reapplied more of the cooling paste. Her ankle was still swollen, but it had gone down enough for Annika to at least put her shoes on. The three gathered their cloaks and stood for a moment, looking at each other and then at Annika.

“You may as well use Magda’s cloak,” Sariel said dryly. “She would’ve wanted you to wear it.” She opened a large trunk and dug about for just a moment, retrieving a heap of dark fabric which she brought over to Annika.

“It’s so heavy!” Annika exclaimed as she took it in her arms. It was a magnificent hooded garment made of a soft woolen material and lined in fur. The back of it was embroidered in golden threads with ancient writing.

“What does this say?” she asked.

“They’re different stories about our ancestors,” replied Hilda. “These cloaks have been passed down along with the traditions behind them. They’re rich in our history.”

“How old are you anyway?” Annika asked, quite obviously mystified at the legacy before her eyes. A legacy that possibly included her.

“Younger than the forest, but older than the trees,” Runa and Hilda both chimed. Annika gave what felt like her millionth skeptical nod, content that she’d received a satisfactory enough answer for the time being.

“So is the legend really true that sometimes the samodivi will leave their life here and go become a man’s wife?”

“Yes,” Hilda breathed softly. “When we marry men and become part of the human world, we become mortal. We’ll have children, grow old, and die. We can come back, but that’s more easily said than done.”

“If that’s true, I don’t know why you’d ever get married,” Annika said.

“I never want to get married!” Runa laughed, then spun in a graceful circle. “I want to dance with every handsome fellow I can until the end of time.”

Annika smiled wide at this, finding it to be the most logical idea she’d heard since arriving in that cave.

“I can’t see anything! Am I going to fall?” Annika called out ten minutes later. A small, soft hand clasped hers. It was Runa.

“You’re alright. I apologize for assuming you’d know every stone and bend in the path. We’ve had a long time to navigate this cave. Just follow me close. We’re almost out.”

They walked for what seemed an eternity. The only thing to stimulate the senses was the occasional explicative from Annika’s mouth as she stubbed her foot into a rock or walked into a wall every now and then. But Runa never let go of her hand, and thus she was able to move almost as swiftly as the others. Annika could feel a breeze that brought sunshine and flowers with it, and knew that they’d nearly reached the other end of the
cave. It drove the mustiness away and filled her with the expectation of seeing green fields and waving trees. When she saw what lay on the other side, it was all worth it.

A myriad of roses grew around in a small circle. Inside the thicket of trees and blooming flowers was a small meadow. Annika turned around in a complete circle and saw pink yellow, white and red sprays of color everywhere but up in the blue sky. Sariel and Hilda joined them, and began the song that they’d taught Annika earlier. Runa nodded with her head for Annika to join them. At first she sang timidly, but the words were not so many that she grew comfortable singing them again. The translation, as Hilda had explained it, begged their deer brothers to come out and play with them, and that they were the sisters, as all the animals in the forest were siblings. It was a lonely melody; haunting, but mesmerizing. And then a strange thing happened.

A pale shadow zipped around the meadow. Twice it circled, and then came to a halt. It was a large silver stag nearly the size of a small horse. His eyes were black and twinkling, and the sun reflected off his antlers, sending shimmers of pale silver light to each of his points. He trotted over to the nymphs and stopped just out of Hilda’s reach. When she reached her arms to him he pranced backwards. Their dance had begun. She chased him in circles, in zig zags, but as soon as she had him he bolted one step ahead of her. Annika watched in amusement as two more silver stags just as handsome as the first stepped into the meadow. Runa let out a shriek and began chasing hers all around in figure eights. She ran back and forth, and it occurred to Annika how ridiculous this all seemed. The samodivi were all laughing and running in circles, and these deer just pranced in circles with them. They wanted to be caught, but they were making a game of it.

“Annika, you better start running!” Runa cried, as she had already caught her ride and hopped onto her stag’s back. It didn’t look too difficult. Annika looked around and saw a fourth deer standing at the edge of the thicket, waiting for her to notice him. He puffed out his chest proudly and licked his black nose. If ever a deer was capable of appearing conceited, this one certainly did. He tilted his head to one side and flicked his ears, as if he knew what a fine creature he was. He took a step forward in a casual manner, waiting to see what Annika was going to do about him. She hobbled straight for him, and he walked around her in a wide circle. He seemed to know she was injured, and so he came closer to her, giving her the smallest hope of catching him. They trotted in circles for a very long time, and she was getting out of breath and more irritated by the second. It was a frustrating dance they were doing, causing her sore ankle to hurt even more.

“You’re supposed to be having fun together! This is just a game! Don’t be angry that you haven’t won yet!” the nymphs shouted out to her. It was easy for them to say; they’d probably done this a million times. Annika was discouraged, though she couldn’t give up. Suddenly she had an idea. She remembered a trick she had once used to catch a neighbor’s dog when it had gotten loose. The dog had been part wolf, and too independent to come when called.

Annika smiled to herself, then fell down in a heap and didn’t move.

“Annika, are you hurt? Is it your leg?” the samodivi called out. Annika didn’t move a muscle, and sure enough, the deer eventually wandered over to see if his new admirer was injured. While he leaned his nose down to sniff her head, Annika slowly reached out her hand once again, and this time her fingers curled tight around the left antler. The
animal was caught off guard, but he was caught nonetheless. Then he did something completely unforeseen. Rather than fight or struggle, he lay down and motioned for her to climb onto his back instead.

“That was too easy! That wasn’t fair at all!” Runa pouted, but Hilda and Sariel just laughed.

“No,” Hilda said, “it was fair. And very clever. I can’t believe I’ve never tried that before. Now come on, let’s ride!”
The nimble feet of the deer stepped carefully between the trunks of the beech and oak trees. They moved with such grace that it wasn’t difficult for Annika to stay seated and enjoy the view. The forest grew less dense and the sunshine warmed the air a little more, leaving patches of light all over the forest floor. They passed numerous squirrels, a family of red fox, and even a lynx with a freshly caught gopher in his teeth. It was so captivating that Annika didn’t realize how dark it had gotten until Sariel signaled them to stop. It appeared to be a place the samodivi rested often, judging by the huge patches of soft green moss at their feet.

“This is where we’ll sleep tonight,” she said, sliding off of her stag’s back. The others did the same, and the stags slipped into the forest.

“Are we going to have to catch them again in the morning?” Annika complained, making Hilda laugh.

“No, they’ll stay with us until we’ve reached the Marinossians. They always eat well at their house. Besides,” she gave her bow a little pat before setting it down on her things. “They know they’re safe with us.”

“That’s a pretty nice arrangement,” Annika observed.

“Speaking of a nice arrangement, one of you can lay out my bedroll. I’m going to the hot spring for a bath,” Sariel announced as she walked down the faint path in the tall grass. Annika would’ve liked to have a good long soak as well, but didn’t feel nearly as comfortable around Sariel as she did with Hilda and Runa. She found a soft spot on the moss and curled up in her cloak. She looked up at the stars for a long time, perplexed that she couldn’t find any familiar constellations draped around the moon.

By the time Sariel returned, Hilda and Runa were fast asleep, yet Annika felt restless. Even the deer occasionally stirred from where they lay on the ground. Their legs were tucked under their bodies while their ears constantly moved, searching for sounds in the night. Annika gazed longingly towards the mossy path in the grass where Sariel had gone earlier, wanting nothing more than a hot bath. She glanced at her companions who were all asleep, and the deer, who were snoozing without a care in the world. If they weren’t concerned about what else lived in the woods, Annika decided she didn’t need to be, either. Limping in silence along the mossy moonlit path, she was delighted to hear the faint gurgle of water within a few short minutes. The spring was impossible to miss. Pale mist rose from the steamy pool, giving it a surreal glow from the reflection of the pale white moonlight. As she stepped closer, she saw light grey boulders that were worn by weather and promised to offer a soft place to sit. She wasted no time slipping out of her clothes and into the spring, and sighed in bliss. The contrast between the heat of the water and the sharpness of the air was hypnotizing, and while her body felt paralyzed by comfort, her imagination began playing tricks on her.

Annika remained quiet and still, but she couldn’t shake the idea that something in the woods was watching her. While she couldn’t explain the reason, she felt certain that whatever it was meant no harm; only good. She felt it in her heart, in her body, and guessed maybe it was one of the deer coming to check on her. In fact, she thought she saw her stag walking towards her, defined by the moonlight outlining his body. The
closer he came, the darker he appeared. The delicately built animal stepped out of the trees, dark as the shadows behind it, and studied Annika with glittering black eyes. She drew in her breath sharply when it tossed its head, revealing a silver mane and no antlers at all; just one long silver horn.

Rather than being snowy white like Annika expected it to be, the unicorn was so dark that it absorbed the light of the moon instead of reflecting it. Its muddy hooves were not those of a horse, but of a deer. Its tail was different too; it was long like a dog’s with a wispy tangle of long silver hair at the end. It looked down at this human in the water and stood there for quite some time, swishing its long tail in contemplation. While Annika had been more than skeptical of the samodivi back at the cave, she was quickly changing her mind now. The unicorn’s ears swiveled forward and it cocked its head to one side before blowing Annika’s mind by lying down along the edge of the water. The unicorn looked straight into her eyes, leaving Annika awestruck.

*This isn’t real. You can’t be real...can you?* she kept thinking in her mind, over and over. The creature blinked its inky eye as though it understood.

*I’m here before you, aren’t I?*

*Funny, I didn’t say that. Can you hear me?* she thought to herself. Ever so slightly, the unicorn nodded its head.

*Yes.*

*I didn’t think you existed.* The animal broke its gaze for a moment and turned to look at the forest behind it, then faced her again.

*We live in secret. Welcome home, little samodiva.*

Annika was floored.

*No one is ever going to believe this.*

*Don’t be so certain.* The unicorn stood up, still staring into Annika’s eyes. As it tossed its mane, a long, thick, silver hair fell onto the water’s surface. She instinctively reached out and scooped it into her steaming fingers, afraid to let it go.

*Cherish that gift wisely. Use it when the time is right.*

The mystical animal took a step back as if to leave, and Annika was overcome by a deep longing in her heart. “Please,” she gently begged. “Don’t go...Tell me something else. Tell me about why I’m here.”

*You are here because Fate invited you. You cannot go back the way you came. I suggest you go forward instead.* With that, the mystical being walked back into the woods as silently as it had emerged.

Annika stared into the black emptiness for as long as her eyes could bear, still in disbelief of what she’d just seen. She’d loved unicorns when she was a little girl, but to actually see one as an adult was incomprehensible. She wound the thick strand of hair around her engagement ring and shivered as she climbed out of the hot pool of water. She was shaking so much with excitement that she could barely dress, but she managed to do so and find her way back to the camp. She wished that she had brought along her digital camera, but it was sitting in her backpack, miraculously undamaged in its case. When she got back to the camp she wanted to wake everyone up and tell them what she’d seen, but a voice deep inside told her not to.

Annika woke up to the smell of wood burning. It was just past dawn and the birds were carrying on rather loudly. For a second she thought she might look up and see
Vince’s cottage. Glancing around, she was reminded of how far from home she really was. She peeked down at her left hand. There was a silver hair snarled around her engagement ring, looped around her finger at least three dozen times. Shivers coursed through her veins as she studied it. The experience had been real, all right.

“Are you feeling well?” Hilda asked. “If not, I’m sure we can split up your share of breakfast.”

Sariel and Runa both snickered.

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine. I was just dreaming…that’s all,” Annika lied. For some reason, she still wanted to keep her experience private and locked away for the time being.

“Well, you better get packed up. We’ll be leaving shortly,” Hilda said cheerfully.

They ate a small but filling meal of boiled potatoes, bread, and honey, then set off for another day of riding. It was very much like the previous day, but Sariel assured them that they were headed straight for the Marinossian’s home.

It wasn’t until the end of the second day that the trees began to change. Annika didn’t notice it at first, but then the forest took on a different shade. The trees were now primarily silver poplar, aspen, and birch, and all of them were unusually tall. They soared nearly two-hundred feet in the sky. The light reflected from them wasn’t golden and warm, but pale and cool, with silver light shimmering all about them.

“We’ve finally crossed into the Srebra Gora. That means the Silver Forest,” Runa turned to tell Annika with a hopeful look on her face. “It won’t be much farther now. We know a shortcut.”

“Yes, but recall how difficult that road to the river is,” Hilda reminded her. “That always takes a bit of time to navigate.” They began their descent down into a canyon where a river cut through jagged white and black stone that matched the bark of the trees. Their deer walked carefully along the edge of the rocks, unconcerned by the sheer drop down into the river below. Annika, on the other hand, was extremely concerned. Rapids were splashing white water over the boulders with no mercy, and she tried not to imagine how easy it would be for her deer to trip and fall down the cliff. She turned the other way and held on to her deer a little tighter, afraid she might throw up if she looked down again.

There was a narrow path that led away from the edge of the cliffs and towards a section of forest less densely filled with the same silvery-white trees. Twilight was descending upon them quickly, and Annika felt tired and irritable from riding along a treacherous cliff all day. She couldn’t imagine how her stag must have felt, but she gave him a grateful pat on the neck for his surefootedness. Since their day was almost at an end, they moved with less haste. The sky was quickly changing into breathtaking hues of purple, pink, and orange. The silver leaves high overhead reflected the light onto the white tree trunks, causing the entire forest to appear enchanted. Even the deer seemed to notice something was different. They moved less cautiously, carefree even. Finally the travelers stopped at Sariel’s signal.

Annika helped the samodivi collect firewood before she busied herself with laying down her soft cloak for another night’s rest. Runa knelt beside her and started the small fire as the other two walked off into the trees to refill the empty canteens.

“So what are the elves like?” Annika asked, imagining a bustling little village of tiny sprites with huge pointy ears. After seeing a unicorn and having a strand of hair to prove it, she was trying to keep an open mind. A very open mind. Runa twirled her pale blonde
hair around a finger and smiled.

“Well, there isn’t a sour one among them, though I suppose they have their moments like any of us. Anthea is the eldest child. She studies the healing arts, and she has the most adorable little ones! Her mother Althea makes more things than I can count, like beautiful yarns, and the best smelling soaps. Their father Ambrose studies books a lot, and settles disputes among the others in the village. Finn is extremely clever at books as well; almost more so than his father, but the twins Talvi and Yuri are the most fun to be around by far. Talvi and his sister are always up to something.”

Annika realized something wasn’t adding up quite right.

“I thought you said Talvi was the boy.”

“He is.”

“But isn’t Yuri a boy’s name?” Annika pointed out. Runa giggled her girlish laugh and lay down next to her.

“It’s a funny story, the reason they have those names. Before they were born, everyone knew they would be twins. It was prophesized that they were both male, and no one questioned it because elves are so skilled at sensing the spirit of a person.”

“They know that about babies even before they’re born?”

“Well, yes,” said Runa, as if this were common knowledge. “Anyway, they were both given male names. Althea was certain that they were both boys, because they were both so fierce and strong-willed, even while inside the womb. The day they came into the world, they were greeted with the names they had been growing into. Can you imagine how surprised everyone was when Yuri turned out to be a girl? We couldn’t believe it when they were born!”

“I guess you had to be there,” said Annika, not finding the story to half be as entertaining as Runa thought it was.

“I was there,” she said with a grin, making Annika grin as well, since Runa didn’t get her joke.

“So why didn’t they change her name when she was born?”

Runa giggled a little.

“That’s where the tradition ended up playing a funny trick on Yuri. It’s bad luck to change a baby’s name after you have been calling them that for a year,” she said.

“You don’t mean their mom was pregnant for a whole year, do you?” Annika wrinkled her nose at the thought. She couldn’t even stand the idea of driving a minivan, let alone the idea of being pregnant for an entire year.

“When you consider how long elves live, it’s not very long at all,” Runa said. “But they were born two months earlier than expected. It’s interesting that Yuri came first. She’s always on time and organized, while her brother is chronically late, always making a grand entrance or exit. Knowing her, she probably dragged Talvi out of the womb by the umbilical cord while he was in the middle of a nap!” Runa said, giggling to herself.

“The name suits her perfectly, however, because she is more like her brother than her sister Anthea.”

“You would think that mistake with the names happens a lot,” Annika snickered. But Runa shook her head.

“No, it’s very rare with the elves. They’re much better at seeing a soul than any of us, except unicorns. Those things see right into you and beyond. I suppose that’s why they prefer to be alone. It takes a lot of energy to read so many souls.”
Annika looked the other way and rubbed her finger against the coarse hair wrapped around her ring. Did any of the samodivi know she’d seen one so close, or that she carried a souvenir of her experience in the hot spring? Runa didn’t seem to notice, but if she did, she didn’t say anything. She just rubbed her legs against the furry inside of the cloak and yawned, trying to fight off sleep. The sky had grown dark just as quickly as the fire had grown to spread its warmth around them. There were only a few stars visible through the treetops and no light from the moon. A gust of wind blew through the trees and sent a shower of falling leaves to the ground. Annika looked up to see a raven swoop low overhead, circle, and fly off. The dark bird had looked right into her eyes before it left their tiny camp, giving her the eerie feeling that she’d been found by someone or something. It wasn’t peaceful the way it had been with the unicorn. Instead, she felt on edge. Her arms and legs broke out in goose bumps, as though the very air itself were electrically charged. She turned to Runa for an explanation only to find her deep in slumber, sounding off a very small and cute snore.
Chapter 5
electromagnetism

It was easier for Annika to ignore the goose bumps on her arms when she felt a familiar gurgle in her stomach. She found some stew vegetables and cut them up with Runa’s ebony-handled knife, but they were still out of water. She wished Hilda and Sariel would hurry back with the canteens. That raven staring at her had given her the creeps. Bite-sized chunks of potatoes, turnips, carrots and onions had nearly filled the cooking pot, and the stars were now springing up by the dozens, but there wasn’t a sign of Sariel nor Hilda.

Through the dim light, Annika saw shadows jumping all about, caused by the leaping flames of the campfire. She noticed that the deer suddenly all looked up in the same direction, and she followed their stare into the shadowy treetops. It was that raven again. It glided down to the lowest branch near her and cawed, looking at her with its beady eyes. She was trying to decide if she should wake up Runa or ignore her growing uneasiness. There were noises in the distance, but they weren’t coming from the direction that Sariel and Hilda had gone. She heard her heart pounding in her chest, growing louder and louder, then realized it wasn’t her heart at all, but the sound of hooves hitting the ground. At first they were a soft pitter-pat, pitter-pat, but as they neared they thundered louder. There was no way it could be a deer; it was something much heavier…and bigger. Annika saw a dark figure emerge from the woods and walk straight at her. She tightened her grip on the dagger and gave Runa a hard shove with the other hand.

“Runa! Runa, wake up!” she pleaded, and clumsily stood to her feet. Runa opened one eye, then the other and stretched, unconcerned. In the starlight Annika could tell it was a huge horse coming nearer, tossing its head and walking leisurely. The dark animal with one white foreleg stopped too far away from the fire for Annika to see its rider, but Runa ran to them with a gleeful squeal and a big smile on her face. The rider swung a long leg up and over the horse’s shoulders, landing on the dry leaves with a light crunch. He reached down and embraced Runa tightly.

“And how is my favorite little samodiva?” a velvety soft man’s voice asked her. Annika’s skin prickled yet again. She knew that voice. It was silky smooth, yet carried a bold confidence. He walked with his arm around Runa back to the fire where Annika stood, still leaning down to hear her chatter.

“I didn’t think we’d see you until tomorrow night,” Runa sighed happily. The man lifted his head as he stepped into the firelight, and his eyes grew wide when they met Annika’s, whose were just as large. For a split second she couldn’t breathe. It was the young man from the bookstore.

They regarded each other for what seemed an eternity while Runa’s sing song voice became mere background noise. Neither of them spoke. He seemed to be searching for words, but they wouldn’t come. She was lost as well, mesmerized by this gorgeous man which stood before her. She never imagined she’d see him again. He still wore the black leather pants with silver buckles running up his black knee-high boots, but he’d replaced the shabby dinner jacket with a matching suede one, cut to fit his sleek form perfectly.

“Badra’s beard—it’s you!” he looked as visibly shaken as Annika felt, but he was recovering a lot faster than her. His expression took on the appearance of a wolf catching
the scent of a nearby rabbit on the wind…a wolf that hadn’t eaten anything in a while.

“This is Annika, remember, from the bookstore in Sofia?” Runa informed him, as if he were as much of a ding-a-ling as she was. “She has the mark of a samodiva, but she says she comes from a place called Aberica.”

“It’s pronounced America, love,” he kindly corrected her. He smoothed her hair fondly, even though he was still looking at Annika. “How could I ever forget a saucy girl like you, Annika Brisby?”

She didn’t know whether to be flattered or offended, since his arm was still draped around Runa’s shoulders. He turned his head towards Runa to give the impression he was interested in her rambling story, but his eyes did not leave Annika’s.

“Annika somehow found our home and then the gate began to close on us when I pulled her in…” Runa gushed. “We almost didn’t make it! It was so scary, and now it doesn’t go back to the usual place. It leads to somewhere terrible, and Annika can’t go home. Sariel didn’t know what else to do, but she thought your father could help.”

“Am I to understand you’re coming home with me?” he asked her, then looked at Annika with a bemused grin. There seemed to be wheels of thought spinning madly behind his eyes. “Well then…where are my manners?” He let go of Runa and sauntered over to Annika gracefully, taking her free hand in his.

“Talvi Marinossian, at your service,” he introduced himself with a deviant smile. Annika was shocked, not only by this hint of double entendre, but also by his appearance. She was expecting Talvi to be a tiny elf with huge ears and goofy shoes, resembling a wrinkly old man; certainly not this beguiling, yet brazen creature that stood before her. She could clearly see his ears come to a soft, subtle point as he bent down low to kiss the back of her hand, which was probably why Runa had insisted he wear that ridiculous red hat in Sofia. Annika didn’t think his ears were all that noticeable. What was noticeable, however, was the sensation of the tip of his warm tongue darting between her fingers. It happened so quickly, so subtly that she wasn’t even sure if he had done it. But he definitely had. He let his chin graze her hand in a sensuous manner as he looked up at her.

“Enchante,” he murmured, looking quite smug. Annika’s eyes opened wide. She was appalled that he could act that way right in front of his girlfriend.

“I was expecting someone small,” she replied, flabbergasted. She could feel her heart begin to thump loudly again. Still holding her hand, Talvi stood up close to her, tilting his head to one side with interest. He squeezed her hand just enough to make her glance down to where he was holding it strategically below his belt. In a very low, seductive voice that only she could hear, he said, “I assure you, I am anything but that.”

Annika jerked her hand out of his, trying not to appear flustered, but it was too late. He threw a shameless smirk in her direction, and took a step backwards.

“Cazadora, come,” he called at the tree, and the raven landed on his shoulder. He nuzzled his cheek against her black wing. “Thank you so much for leading me to the girls,” he said to her. “I truly cannot thank you enough. Would you tell Finn that I’ve found the samodivi and one particular Annika Brisby?” The bird flew up into the starry night while Annika sat down and tossed the knife beside the pot of cold vegetables.

“I wish Sariel and Hilda would hurry up with the water,” Runa whined. “I’m hungry.”

“Yes, that doesn’t look like much of a stew to me,” Talvi snickered, glancing at the
sorry-looking pot of raw vegetables. “If Sariel went, you might be waiting a long time. I’d bet you my bow that she’s not coming back for a while. There’s a grove of trees out that way that make the best arrows.” Talvi walked over to retrieve a canteen from his saddle. He poured the entire contents in the pot and placed it over the fire, lifting it as if it weighed nothing.

“If you two want to go find them, I’ll wait here and keep an eye on your dinner,” he offered as he sat down beside Annika.

“Annika should rest. Her ankle is still pretty sore,” Runa said. “But I think I know where they are. I can go by myself. You should stay with her since she doesn’t know Srebra Gora at all.” She reached down to poke the vegetables with a wooden spoon. Was she hiding a smile?

“Well, that does make sense,” Talvi said, as his eyes flashed at Annika, making her squirm.

“Oh you don’t have to leave, Runa,” she said, trying to avoid looking at Talvi. “I’m sure they’ll be back soon.”

“You don’t know Sariel very well,” Runa replied. “She would gladly pass up dinner just to gather wood for arrows. Besides, Talvi will take care of you while I’m gone.”

*That’s what I’m afraid of,* thought Annika. Talvi gave a little snort, as though he had heard her thoughts out loud.

“Would you let me take Ghassan?” Runa asked. “I think the deer are tired.”

“Yes, but don’t let him run until the moons rise,” he said, shaking a finger sternly at Runa. He stood up and walked over to her, lifting her up into the saddle, but he was still smiling when he glanced at Annika and added, “You know it can be quite dangerous in the dark.”

“I promise I’ll be careful,” Runa assured him. She looked so tiny on the massive animal, compared to the slender deer they’d been riding. She was so petite that her feet didn’t even come near to fitting in the stirrups. Talvi waited until Runa and Ghassan had disappeared before he turned to Annika.

“I didn’t think I’d ever see you again. Why did you run away from me that day?” he asked, walking back to her.

“I… I don’t really know why,” she stammered as he sat closer to her than she would have preferred. “I guess I didn’t want to get in any more trouble.”

“Well, you can’t run away now. Does that mean you’re in trouble?” he said, running his fingers through his hair seductively.

“No, but you will be if you don’t back off!” she snapped. She was astounded by his suggestive manner, and wondered how soon Runa would come back. She frowned at him a little and looked away, wondering what self-defense moves she could use effectively with an injured ankle.

“What happened to your foot?” he asked. It was so odd how he seemed to know exactly what she was thinking.

“I fell off one of the river rocks outside Runa’s cave. Hilda put this bandage on it,” she said in a very business-like manner. “It’s getting better. Hilda doesn’t think it’s broken. I can even walk on it a little.”

“Oh, you poor little dove. Does it hurt?” he asked sympathetically.

“It’s not so bad,” she lied. She didn’t want to appear to be the wounded and helpless girl she actually was. “But I should probably see a doctor just to be sure. Do you have a
“Can I use your phone?”
“No.”
“What about back at your place?”
“I’m afraid not,” he said with a shrug. “We don’t have them here.”
“Of course you don’t,” Annika muttered, wincing as she took off her sneakers.
“May I see your ankle?” She cautiously swung her leg in his direction and he brought it to his lap. He carefully took off the bandages and brushed off the dried paste that Hilda had applied earlier. He held her ankle in his warm hands and shut his eyes for a few moments. His hands seemed to grow incredibly warm the longer they remained on the skin. In the silence she felt some of the pain dissipate.
“It seems fine to me,” he said. She turned it in a circle one way and then the other. It did indeed seem much improved.
“What did you do to it?” she marveled.
“It’s just a trick.”
“Does it have to do with you being an elf?”
“Perhaps,” he said and smiled mysteriously.
“Well whatever you did, thanks.”
With her ankle now hurting much less, she temporarily forgot about what a jerk he’d been earlier. The two sat in silence for a few moments.
“You have interesting names for your animals,” she eventually commented, trying to make polite conversation.
“Thank you. I collect names from my travels,” Talvi said as he poked the fire with a stick. “Ghassan is Arabic for youth, and Cazadora—”
“Is Spanish for the huntress,” she interrupted, showing off. “Do you use her to help you hunt rabbits and stuff?”
Talvi smirked at her assumption.
“No, only young ladies wandering about the forest after dark,” he clarified. “Wood elves don’t eat animals. She’s my brother’s pet, and he lets me take her out sometimes. She flies up ahead and tells me what she sees, whether there is a mountain I must climb or a river I must cross. She’d been out flying and saw that the samodivi were coming this way with a new friend. I left as soon as I woke up this morning.”
“That’s amazing,” Annika marveled.
“That’s not. What is amazing, is how you acquired something so rare on your left hand,” he stated casually.
Annika touched the huge ring on her finger. “A lot of people wear diamonds,” she said, trying not to think about the man who’d given it to her. “They’re not that rare.”
“It’s not the stone I’m referring to,” he said quietly. She wasn’t sure if she should tell him anything more about it or not. He didn’t seem like the most honorable guy to be spilling secrets to, but the nymphs did say that he was very old and wise, even if he didn’t look it.
“I…I got it just the other night,” she said.
“Where?”
“At the hot spring farther south. Why? Do you know something about unicorns?” she asked. Talvi looked at her with a serious expression.
“Just be mindful of whom you tell,” he said. “The samodivi are lovely girls; it’s not them I worry about. Unless you tell them, they won’t notice it. They can’t read minds like
I can. But what they don’t know can’t harm them. Do you understand?”

“Yep,” Annika said. “I’ll keep it on the down-low.”

“I don’t care where you keep it, as long you keep it to yourself,” he said, looking at her strangely. “Perhaps we’ll look at one of my brother’s books when we reach my home. He has a few on unicorns, and their powers.”

“Should I take my ring off?”

“I certainly wouldn’t,” he said, as he reached out to stroke her hair. “It’s not a bad thing. On the contrary, it’s very interesting that one of them chose you. They don’t bestow gifts very often. I wonder if it’s because you look so much like Magda.”

Talvi was so close to her, his head just inches from Annika’s. Her eyes wandered up to his, and once again she couldn’t breathe. He was looking at her so curiously, like he recognized her from another life. Annika felt a flash of heat pass through her body; her veins carried it to her neck, her chest, and her thighs.

Why can’t I breathe? Why can’t I move? Her body felt like a magnet, and Talvi was another one held just far enough away that they couldn’t connect. He reached out and touched the side of her head with his other hand, holding her carefully. He leaned down as though he were about to kiss her, but he froze in front of her instead. She was positive that he was peering into her soul. She could feel his slow, deep breathing against her face, and let her eyes study his nose, his ears, and his broad shoulders.

“Oh, holy shit!” Annika cried, entranced by what she saw behind those shoulders. He twisted around abruptly, then sighed in relief at what had gotten her attention. Two moons were rising above a small tree-covered mountaintop. One was an enormous new crescent five times the size of the only moon she knew of, but very pale. It was only a sliver of light, but it was so large and so near that she thought she could throw a stone over it. The other moon was smaller and had a pink tinge to it. Annika felt if she turned away from the awesome sight that it would disappear.

“Where the hell are we?” she asked. “The other night I only saw one moon, and now there’s two?”

“Badra is usually full,” Talvi informed her. “That’s the one you saw last night. Vega is the large crescent. When Vega’s in full bloom she’s really quite breathtaking. The whole sky is lit up in perpetual twilight.” Even though his words sounded so poetic, Talvi didn’t seem nearly as impressed with the sight above them as Annika did, probably because he was used to seeing it all the time.

“Badra and Vega? I really am in another world, aren’t I?” Annika wondered.

“Yes. I don’t know how else to explain it to you, but our worlds of Earth and Eritähti are intricately connected. It has something to do with physics, which I am just dreadful at. I can tell you which plants out here are poisonous and which are delicious, and I can paint nearly anything you could dream of, but regarding physics I know little more than what goes up must come down. Are you any good at physics?”

“Not really,” she replied. “I suppose as a creative person, I can’t grasp such an absolute concept.”

“Ah yes, that’s right. You play guitar,” he recalled. “Are you any good at it?”

“I’m in a band with my brother and a friend of ours,” she told him. “My brother and I always played music growing up. That’s how we met other cool kids each time we moved.”

“What do you mean by ‘cool’?” He looked confused.
“Hmm…different in a good way?”
“Yeah.”
“Then I think you are a very cool girl, Annika Brisby,” he said, trying out the new word.
“Thanks,” Annika said, and looked away before he could see her smile.
Runa, Hilda and Sariel called out in the darkness, all three riding on Ghassan’s broad back, clutching bundles of long, thin branches.
“You’re back already? That wasn’t very long at all,” Talvi said, getting up on his knees.
“We’re starving!” they all said at the same time. Runa and Hilda barely gave Talvi enough time to stand up before they ambushed him with hugs. Annika tried not to roll her eyes as she thought he looked like a movie star being mobbed by his two biggest fans. Sariel just smiled and gave him a nod. They came near to the fire and sat down around it. Hilda and Sariel divided the bundles of wood among each other and took the knives from their boots.
“We found this great wood to make arrows out of,” Hilda gushed. “So we thought we would stock up and take as much as we could carry.”
“Tomorrow we’ll try them out and see how far they shoot.” Sariel said as she whittled away at her branches.
“I used to shoot arrows with one of my neighbors. Maybe I can borrow one of your bows and see if I’m still any good.” Annika said.
“I can help you if you like,” Talvi offered. Runa and Hilda exchanged grins but Sariel only frowned in concentration as she whittled away at a future arrow.
“I’m sure I’ll be fine,” Annika said confidently, playing down his gesture. “I’m sure it’s just like riding a bike. You never really forget how.”
He appeared surprised that she was refusing his assistance, but he said nothing. Out of the corner of her eye, Annika thought she saw Runa try to hide another smile with her hand, but she pretended not to notice. She listened quietly as they filled Talvi in on the details of how they found her and thought that she was somehow related to them. Annika still had her doubts about fitting into this tight-knit circle. She didn’t trust this elven cad, and Sariel didn’t seem too welcoming of her either.
After dinner the chatter faded as everyone’s eyelids grew heavy, and they stretched out in front of the warm embers. Sariel and Annika curled up alone in their blankets while Hilda, Runa and Talvi were all snuggled together like puppies. It was actually kind of cute, even though Annika didn’t want to admit it. There was something about him that made her want to keep her guard up, but there was something else that made her want to set it aside. She got the vague impression that either way, she’d be sorry.
Annika felt a soft *whoosh* of warm air on her face. She opened her eyes to see Ghassan’s huge black nose in front of hers, nuzzling her awake. He gave her a gentle nudge and whickered deep in his chest, like a parent sweetly telling their child that it was time to wake up. Annika stroked his nose and heard shouts and laughter. About twenty yards away, Runa was squealing with delight and Hilda was shouting, “It’s my turn!” Next to Hilda stood a slender man in black, towering over her. A quick glance around their little campsite showed that she had missed breakfast, and Sariel was no where in sight.

“That wasn’t nearly as good as Hilda’s last shot!” he called to Runa. He then turned to Hilda. “You had better give her another go before she starts crying,” he teased. Seeing that Annika was awake, he waved for her to come over to him. She rubbed her eyes and stretched, taking her sweet time. She refused to run obediently to him the way Runa and Hilda had the night before. After inspecting her foot and turning her ankle around a few times, she stood up. It was a little stiff, but the pain was completely gone.

She walked over to where the trio was trying out their new arrows. They were all aiming for a tree far off in the distance which was marked with one of their green sashes. Talvi was concentrating hard with his elbow pulled back, then let go quickly. The arrow moved without a sound through the trees, and hit an inch above the center of the target. He turned towards her and rested his bow on the toe of his boot, wearing an overly proud expression on his face. Runa and Hilda clapped at his achievement, but Annika just gave him a little nod of acknowledgement.

In the bright morning sunshine she could see him almost as if for the first time. His unruly hair was indeed as black as pitch, but his long sideburns turned reddish-brown the closer they crept to his jaw. His skin was fair, but bronzed by the sun during the warmer months. The black suede clothing he wore was covered by intricate designs sewn out of silver thread. It was striking how handsome he was; in fact, he was almost pretty. His lips slowly curled into a mischievous grin as he noticed she hadn’t joined in the clapping.

“Weren’t you going to show me how skilled you are with my bow?” he asked and held the weapon out to her. There was no way she could get out of this situation. She walked closer to him, forcing one foot in front of the other. What if she embarrassed herself in front of all of them, especially after acting so sure of herself when he’d offered to help? He handed over the longbow, and Annika was intrigued to see it was an amazing work of art created from a single solid piece of wood. Intricate carvings decorated the sides and an exotic form of script ran up the length to both ends. After a brief moment of admiration, she took an arrow from him and put it against the string.

“Just like riding a bike, then?” he asked quietly and raised an eyebrow.

“Yep,” she said with her jaw clenched ever so slightly. She went to draw back the string, but he leaned down to whisper in her ear. Runa and Hilda stood off to the left, unable to see him graze her cheek with his nose as he spoke.

“Do correct me if I’m mistaken,” he mused, “but weren’t you telling me last night that you wanted to stay out of trouble?”

She relaxed her pull on the string and looked at him quizzically. “What’s that got to
He returned to his former standing position and began to loosen the strings of his leather arm guard. “I think you’re just asking for trouble, Miss Brisby,” he said with a twinkle in his blue-green eyes.

“Excuse me?” she demanded and lowered the bow. No one had ever spoken to her like this before in her life. It seemed nothing gave him more pleasure than saying the most outrageous things imaginable just to make her squirm.

“Are you a masochist, or are you so tough that you don’t mind a little string-slap?” he asked with that smug smile he wore so well. She immediately felt her face turn red with embarrassment. It would’ve been very foolish and very painful for her to not use an arm guard. She’d acted like a know-it-all and he’d caught her. He couldn’t have looked more pleased with himself if he tried. She said nothing as he slipped the leather guard onto her left arm, determined to keep her composure.

“I get the distinct impression that you are a little of both,” he said under his breath, but she ignored him. She concentrated hard, but she swore she could feel him inhale next to her ear. How was she supposed to focus if he was constantly distracting her? She pulled backwards and shot the arrow so high into the branches of a tree beyond the target that it wasn’t likely to ever be found. She wanted to slug him in the face. Hard.

“Hmm, that wasn’t too bad,” he commented, looking surprised.

“How can you say that when I didn’t even hit the right tree?” she finally erupted.

“Look at the bows they’re using,” he said, motioning to the nymphs, who were preoccupied with their own skills and seemed oblivious to their private conversation. “Now look at how large mine is. It’s much more difficult for a petite girl like yourself to use. I’m impressed by your skill.”

Annika felt a little burst of pride, but it didn’t last long as he continued. “Even though you can’t manage to wrap your little fingers around it completely, I think you handle my bow very well.” She took a deep breath and pursed her lips. Was this guy for real? Who the hell said things like this to a woman they just met? Who the hell said things like this at all?

“Well, thanks for the lesson. It was very enlightening,” she said coolly, handing the bow over to him. But he only crossed his arms. He refused to take it back, and it was far too fine an object to be angrily thrown on the ground.

“Try it again,” he said. She glared at him and took another arrow.

“Keep your feet farther apart. No, no, not like that.” He walked behind her and nudged the inside of her leg with his own until they were shoulder width apart. “You mustn’t be so shy about spreading your legs,” he breathed into her ear. Annika’s head suddenly went fuzzy as her blood ran hot, but she did as she was told. He stood close to her without touching her at all. He only lifted her elbow gently with a couple fingers, helping her perfect her form. It was a wonder that she could focus at all, given the amount of sexual energy he was bombarding her with. Even in his voice, she could imagine him giving her instructions in the bedroom.

“Yes, that’s right. And pull your arm straight back, not down. No, higher. Higher. Yes, that’s good. Hold it right there. Now release.”

Annika let the arrow go and this time it narrowly missed the tree, whizzing right past it. She shot quite a few more times; every now and then Talvi would lightly lift her elbow with his finger, but for the most part he just stood aside and watched her. Finally one hit
the targeted tree. And then another. And another. The samodivi looked over at her.

“Well I guess that settles it,” Hilda said as she shot one of her own arrows into the
tree. Annika looked at them both.

“That settles what?”

“You need to go get some more of this wood if we’re going to have another archer in
our circle,” she said with a silly grin.

“You want me to go?” Annika asked.

“You’re losing more arrows than the rest of us combined,” Hilda explained. “So you
should be the one to go get more. It’s only fair.”

At this, Annika looked to Runa for help, but Runa only shrugged and gave an equally
silly grin, clearly agreeing with her sister.

“I don’t have a clue what kind of wood to get,” Annika said. “How am I going to
know exactly which trees you found last night?”

“Bring Talvi with you,” said Runa, and sent another arrow into the target. “It’s his
forest. He knows every tree that grows in it.”

Annika’s eyes grew wide. There was no way she was going to agree to that idea,
especially not after the comment he’d just made about her legs and his bow’s girth. She
stood like an idiot with her mouth hanging open, looking for a discreet way to refuse his
company. She wondered if she was being set up by Runa and Hilda. Maybe that was the
reason why they’d giggled so much back in the cave when they said she’d wish she’d
never laid eyes on him.

“Runa, you’re so bossy. Maybe he doesn’t want to go,” Hilda chided. But Talvi had
already gathered Ghassan’s reins and was leading him towards Annika. He touched her
shoulder to coax her along, and they started off walking away from the samodivi. Annika
didn’t know what to think. She felt as if every step she took was that much closer to her
doom. It was nearly ten minutes before either of them said anything.

“You seem to be doing fine on that foot,” he observed.

“Yep,” she said, looking straight ahead.

“It’s not causing you any pain, is it?”

“Nope.”

“Well something is making you uncomfortable,” he insisted. “Perhaps you’ve got a
pine needle in your knickers?”

Annika stopped in her tracks and whipped around to face him. She could feel her
blood pressure starting to elevate.

“Has anyone ever slapped that grin off your face?”

“Oh, there have been countless attempts,” he said, grinning wide, “However, as you
can see, none of them were victorious.”

“I can’t believe I let Runa talk me into coming out here in the middle of nowhere
with you.”

All the frustration she’d kept bottled up since she got lost threatened to erupt as
either violence or tears. She turned away and blinked vigorously as adrenaline began to
seep into her bloodstream.

“Hmmm,” Talvi looked the other way for a moment, trying to think of what to say.

“Yet here you are. Do you really think Runa and Hilda would send you off with someone
harboring ill intentions? Do you think I would do anything you didn’t want me to do?”

There was an overall sincerity in his tone that soothed Annika’s frustration.
“It’s hard to say. I don’t know you that well.”
Annika started walking again. Talvi trotted up to her and grabbed her hand. Immediately she could feel that electromagnetic connection between them. He coaxed her near to him, and for a moment she smelled that honeysuckle and spice she noticed from inside the bookstore.

“Well, what do you want to know?” he asked. “Ask me anything.”
“Do you give all the girls archery lessons like that?”
“Not all of them,” he said with an impish grin.
Annika said nothing at that remark but dropped his hand.

“Are you jealous?”
She finally burst out laughing at his response.

“Oh, please! Jealous of what?” she cried, still laughing. “I’ve never met a guy who was so full of himself! You must think just because you’re hot that you’re automatically entitled to sleep with whoever you want. Give me a break! If you try anything with me, you’re going to be so sorry. I wouldn’t think twice about breaking your nose. And the crap that comes out of your mouth, well, you might as well save your breath, buddy.”

“What?” he pretended to be offended, but it was clear that he wasn’t.
“Plus I know you and Runa have something going on,” she said. “You could at least wait until her back is turned around completely before you hit on me!”

“What makes you say that?” he asked, trying his best to look innocent.
“I see the way you act around each other, and I’d rather not get involved with whatever freaky game you two are playing. Just leave me out of it,” she warned.

“Do you think that I have no decency? I can’t help that my best mate is a samodiva,” Talvi said and chuckled.
“I don’t know how decent I would call that comment about my legs.”
“Well, you weren’t standing correctly,” he said. “I was only trying to help you.”
“Oh, right, helping me by whispering in my ear about your big bow?” she said sarcastically. “Why don’t you save those lines for Runa? I’m sure she’d appreciate it a lot more than I do.”

At that last comment, Talvi made a face like he’d just tasted sour milk.
“I could never speak to her like that. She and I are just friends,”
“It would be pretty difficult for me to just be friends with her if I were a man,” she quipped.
“It’s a good thing I’m not a man or I would most definitely be a lost cause in her company,” he quipped right back.
“I thought Runa was your girlfriend,” Annika pointed out. This time it was Talvi’s turn to feel embarrassed.

“Runa is my best mate,” he explained. “I’ve never thought of her in that way. We grew up together…she’s like one of my sisters. I could never imagine snogging her!” He wrinkled his nose at the thought.

“Oh,” she said, and felt a bit relieved. So he wasn’t as much of a creep as she’d thought. She gave him a questioning look. “So what were you doing last night? Were you trying to kiss me?”

“I was reading your mind,” he told her. “It’s far easier to see your thoughts if I can look in your eyes. In regard to kissing you, I thought about it, but I don’t know you that well,” he smirked. At that she delivered a playful punch into his arm, and all the
awkwardness between them dissolved.

“I wish I could read minds the way you can read mine,” Annika said after another few minutes of walking through the leaves. “That would be pretty awesome.”

“It would be useful at the very least. I think if you tried hard enough that you could do it.”

“How would I go about it?”

“Looking into the eyes helps, but as long as you’re really focused, you only have to concentrate on a particular thought and direct it to the receiver. You’re definitely Magda’s descendent. You look so much like her.”

“Did you know her very well? What was she like?” Annika wanted to know.

“I didn’t know her at all; I’ve only seen a drawing,” he confessed with a shrug.

“Only Anthea and my parents knew her. She was very loyal, and very loving. That’s why she never came back to stay. When samodivi marry a man, they almost always steal their clothes back from him and come running home to their river. If they have any children, they rarely bring them with. They’re wild creatures; they’re rarely tamed by anything. They belong to no man for very long, if ever. You’ll soon learn that men are little more than amusement to Hilda and Runa especially. Sariel cares even less for them. Magda was a rare exception. She chose to remain mortal for the sake of her husband and their children. Now she’s only a legend, save for the ones that knew her.”

“How can samodivi just leave their kids behind so they can climb trees and play in the water?” Annika asked. “It seems beyond selfish.” At this question, Talvi became more somber than Annika had seen him in her brief time of knowing him. He gave a sigh after a moment of deep thought.

“As I said, they’re wild creatures. And for whatever reason, not all of their children carry the samodivi blood. Say one of them returns with two children. One child may mature and live as long as her mother, and the other child may remain human and die before their eyes. It’s heartbreaking. That’s why it’s forbidden here. It causes nothing but pain and confusion. It’s an act of selfishness that simply isn’t worth the brief joy it gives. The children grow up, wither and die, not understanding why their mothers stay the same. The fate is even worse for the immortal children left with their fathers. Humans never have reacted well to a creature that walks among them and remains unchanged by time.”

He lifted a low tree branch out of their way as they passed underneath. “Let’s talk of other things, shall we?” he asked politely.

“Sure,” Annika agreed, and decided to shift the conversation. “Can the samodivi read minds or heal twisted ankles the way you can?”

“No. Their abilities are more subtle.”

“Can you elaborate on that? Because Runa’s convinced that I’m a samodiva like her, but I think I’d know it if I was actually a wood nymph.”

Talvi laughed to himself, and seemed much more eager to elaborate.

“Many of the half-nymphs I’ve met had no idea what they truly were. Your powers would register as random things in your life that only you would take note of. For example, have you noticed that birds and other animals don’t shy away when you walk near them? I’ve seen that already in the brief time we’ve been walking. Why, look at this little buggar right here.” He pointed to a squirrel with pointy tufted ears that was nibbling on a seed. Instead of running away, it merely watched them walk past.

“That squirrel’s too fat to run anywhere,” she dismissed. “I don’t think that means
I’m a samodiva.”

“Well then, have you ever noticed that everything near you lives far longer than it ought to?”

“I had a cat that lived for nineteen years,” she joked. “Does that count?”

“Without question,” he confirmed in such a serious tone that Annika couldn’t help laughing at him.

“Yeah…I’m not sure that qualifies me as being a samodiva, either.”

“Perhaps you have incredibly good luck?” he suggested impatiently. “Perhaps you’ve had a close brush with death, only to walk away unscathed? Perhaps you sing in your band and everyone drops what they’re doing to listen? I wonder how many people tell you after a performance that you’ve utterly enchanted them with your songs? Some might say they enjoy the music, but I’ll be damned if it’s not something about your voice, isn’t it?”

Annika stopped right there in her tracks. He’d obviously struck a chord in her.

“How would you know anything about that?”

“Because nothing makes a wood nymph happier than when their soul sings, and it enchants anyone who listens to it,” he stressed, with that intense look in his eyes again. “You may have been born a human, but you have a magical twist. It’s really quite an intoxicating blend. I was expecting an ordinary human girl to be traveling with the samodivi, but that assumption was grossly mistaken.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“It’s got something to do with that hair around your ring. It doesn’t matter if you’re a human, elf, samodiva, or even a fairy…unicorns rarely approach anyone. They prefer to be left alone. It means the one you saw trusted you, which means I can trust you as well.”

“Well…thanks,” she said awkwardly, not sure if he was lying or not.

“It’s the truth. I’m a very bad liar. I always get caught, one way or another.”

Talvi looked down at Annika and winked. This time, however, she felt warm and tingly inside, rather than irritable. It was a nice change from constantly being on the defensive around him.

They walked to the edge of a thicket, which was so dense that he had to search for the right spot to lead Ghassan through. Apparently he really did know every tree in the forest. When they passed through the brush they came upon a group of trees perfect for climbing. The warm autumn air carried the sunshine down from the canopy above. The pale light was bright silver, more enchanting than ever.

“I wish I would’ve eaten something before we left,” she sighed, and sat down under one of the majestic trees. Talvi joined her and opened the bag he’d brought along. He handed her a canteen of water and a large piece of dense bread.

“I ate before you woke up, so have as much as you like,” he said, and lay on his side in the lush, deep carpet of leaves.

“That was very thoughtful of you; thanks.”

“It’s nothing. So did Runa tell you about the grand celebration coming up? I expect you’ll be in attendance.”

Annika frowned as she licked some honey off the bottom of her lip. “What celebration?”

“My birthday. It’s in less than two weeks. We’ve invited just about everyone we know. Now that I know you, you’re invited as well.”
“Really?” she asked, and smiled to herself. “It would be your birthday in two weeks, wouldn’t it? That explains everything,” she laughed to herself as she recalled a bit of astrology she had picked up over the years.

“Explains what?” he asked as he leaned closer, dying to hear more about himself.

“If your birthday’s coming up, then that makes you a full-fledged Scorpio.”

“I hope that’s not a problem,” he smiled and raised an eyebrow.

“Only if you make it a problem,” she said, and shot him a stern look.

“Regardless of when my birthday is, there’s an important meeting shortly afterwards that my father has arranged. We’re trying to find out why the gates are being closed.”

“You mean the portals that have me trapped here?”

“Yes,” he said, examining one of the milky white leaves he was lying in.

“I didn’t think it would take two whole weeks just to get home,” she sighed. Can’t I at least make a phone call or send a letter to my family?” Talvi looked at her skeptically.

“I don’t think you understand the situation you’re in. You’re not being realistic. You’re still thinking of your automatic modern world, where you simply push a button and have what you want. It’s not like that here. You have to realize that it could be some time before you can go home. It could be months, or years, if ever. I really don’t know.”

“Months? Years?” she wailed. “What about my mom and dad? What about Charlie? What about Vince?” Her eyes began to water, and she fought to keep the tears at bay.

“Who is Vince?” he asked casually.

“He’s going to think this is his fault, because I came to Sofia to be with him!” she said, choking on sobs that threatened to become larger if left unchecked. Talvi stopped twirling the leaf and looked up at her.

“Is Vince your lover back home?”

“Eww, gross! No, he’s my uncle!” The thought of Vince as anything but a shaggy, chain-smoking insect nerd was repulsive, and Annika was quickly distracted from her crying.

“What about this Charlie fellow?” Talvi asked. “Is he the one who gave you that exquisite ring?”

“Huh?” she said, looking down at her left hand. “No, Charlie’s my brother. I don’t even know why I’m still wearing this.” She took it off and put it on her right ring finger instead. An image of Danny’s hurt face in the restaurant came to her mind. She could see their fight happening all over again in front of the entire wait staff and other diners. She could have been to Hawaii and back already, married on a nice beach to a nice man with a nice car, a nice job, and a nice house. But she was sitting on a carpet of dried leaves and dirt in the middle of nowhere with a Scorpio elf who oozed sexual innuendo from every pore in his skin.

“Who is he?”

“Who is who?” she replied, and looked over her shoulder to see no one there.

“Who’s the fellow who gave that ring?” he asked. Annika sighed heavily, and realized that her thoughts were no longer private.

“Just some guy.”

“Just some guy?” Talvi seemed perplexed by the ambiguity of her answer.

“Yeah.”

“That ring is far too lovely to be given to you by just some guy.”

“Fine. He asked me to marry him and I said no.”
“Really?” he cried. He sat up a little straighter, as if he had misunderstood her. “I thought that’s what ladies want more than anything, is to trap themselves a husband. That’s certainly been my experience.”

“I suppose a lot of them do want that,” she said with a shrug. “But you said it yourself; I’m not ordinary.”

“So why did you tell him no? Did he philander about? Or perhaps you did?” he crooned, leaning closer with interest. She gave him a mean look.

“It wasn’t anything like that. Danny’s a total sweetheart. My whole family thinks he’s perfect. I just wish…” Annika buried her face in her hands, not wanting him to see the tears in her eyes.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” Talvi apologized, looking sheepish. “Perhaps things will sort themselves out in the future? You know what they say; absence makes the heart grow fonder.”

His well-meant words sent Annika’s tears down her cheeks, and despite her best efforts she began to cry.

“I just wish I could see my family and tell them I’m alright. I know they’re worried by now.” She could just imagine her mother getting the phone call from Vince and felt sick at the thought. Annika had always been in relative control of her life, in control of her goals, but now she was in a strange land where she could only rely on the kindness of strangers. She hated movies where the Hollywood starlet always fell down or was taken hostage and had to be rescued by the leading man, and now she was the girl she despised, sitting on the ground, helpless, and needing to be rescued. Talvi put his arm around her and wiped away her tears with his other hand.

“If you’re as close to your family as I think you are, then they’ll know you’re safe,” he gently assured her. “Picture them in your mind and focus on that one single thought. They’ll most likely hear you.” Annika closed her eyes and pictured her parents, Charlie, Vince, and even James. She repeated over and over in her head to them, I’m safe… I’m safe. It was like a meditation mantra, and had a calming effect on her. After a few moments, she wiped away the tears that Talvi had missed.

“I suppose there’s nothing else I can do, is there?” she asked. Talvi gave her nose an affectionate tap and went back to lying on his side.

“You can try to find something enjoyable about being here,” he said with a soft smile. “A pleasant distraction always makes time go by quickly.”

“Yeah, I guess riding deer around the woods is kind of awesome,” she agreed. “And sleeping under the stars and shooting arrows is pretty fun, too. That reminds me; aren’t we supposed to be finding wood to replace the arrows I lost?”

“I believe we’ve found it,” he said, motioning to the trees surrounding them. He grabbed a narrow stick lying on the ground near him and began to scratch a glyph into the dirt. “All you have to do is climb those trees and cut down a few handfuls of branches.”

Annika took one look at the trees and raised a skeptical eyebrow at him.

“Did you not happen to notice I’m over a foot shorter than you? And even if I could climb up there, what would I cut the branches with?”

“I expect you’ll have to ask someone taller than you who keeps a well-sharpened knife with him at all times,” Talvi chirped with a grin. Annika held back a smile of her own, yet refused to ask him for help. Instead, she watched as he continued to write in the dirt. He strung together a series of characters until it formed a sentence. The writing
resembled Japanese kanji combined with ancient runes, but with even more flourishes.

“What language is that? It’s really pretty.”

“It is quite lovely, isn’t it? It’s Fae,” he explained. “The fairies’ native tongue.”

“Come on,” she said. “You’re joking. Fairies? Like, with wings?”

“What other sort of fairy is there?”

She looked at the word in the dirt. Annika would have laughed out loud if it hadn’t been for the serious look on Talvi’s face.

“Okay…so what does it say?” she asked, playing along with him. He smiled to himself, looking at the words.

“Mo reis to comp an ya vlatzee.”

“Maurice toe, companya vlatzee?” she repeated slowly, making him laugh.

“Your pronunciation is very good.” A faraway look entered his eyes. “I wonder how someone like you ended up not being born here. I get the feeling that you could have grown up as one of Runa’s sisters.”

“Maybe I was switched at birth with a samodiva,” Annika laughed, but Talvi looked like he was actually considering the idea.

“If you didn’t already have the mark of the other samodivi, that would definitely be my guess. You’re such a strange girl,” he said with a sweet smile. That was probably the best compliment she’d heard in years. Annika touched his hair gently, picking out a bit of dried leaf.

“You have split ends,” she observed.

“That’s impossible,” he said, turning up his nose a little. “I’m very particular about my hair.”

“Well, they’re not bad. But you do have a few here and there. My mom’s a hairdresser, so I think I know what I’m talking about.” He ran his fingers through his hair, trying to look at the ends and see for himself.

“If you want, I can give you a trim,” she offered, but he shook his head.

“Oh, I don’t think so.”

“I would only need to take off half an inch.”

“Sorry, but no one touches my hair except me,” he said with authority.

She lay back and looked up at the silvery leaves dancing a hundred feet above her. The wind shushed through the trees gently, and carried the earthy scent of decaying vegetation with it. She didn’t want to leave this place, not right at this moment, anyway. Vince’s kitchen was in the back of her mind, as an afterthought, along with her life in America. She glanced over at Talvi to see him looking back at her with his green and blue eyes twinkling.

Kiss me.

Annika didn’t move. Was she thinking this? Or was he speaking to her with his mind? One corner of his mouth twitched, and all she could look at were his lips. Suddenly she was sucked into a magnetic field, filled with tension and the earliest stages of desire.

Come on, kiss me... I could be that pleasant distraction, the silent voice urged. Thinking she was hearing things, she covered her eyes with her forearm and tried to block out the voice. An image of him crawling over her and caressing her body appeared in her head, and a light dusting of goose bumps covered her skin. Every hair on her arms stood up in the electric wave that passed through her. She opened her eyes and was only
somewhat startled to see him hovering over her.

“What are you doing?” she asked softly. “I’m not going to kiss you.” He seemed to disregard her comment.

“I’ve been thinking about this red hair of yours ever since that day in Sofia. And your eyes…” He ran his hand up and down the side of her body, over her clothing, across her waist, making her quiver in suspense. “Your eyes have haunted my dreams every night since.” She shut her eyes again, caught in a strong undertow of desire. Did he know that he’d been in her dreams as well? Everything he said was so enticing, even his touch carried allure.

“I’m not going to kiss you,” she assured herself out loud once more, but her voice lacked the sternness she was grasping for. Her will had been strong until he had laid his hand upon her skin, and now she could not pull away from him.

“So don’t do it, Annika. I can’t make you do anything you don’t want to do,” he taunted. He pressed his forehead against hers, touching their souls to each other. She was certain that her soul was looking right into his. His eyes were no longer bright and charming but dark and intense, yet they still twinkled. He was tempting, but was he harmful?

“Don’t do it,” he whispered again, touching her nose with his. Annika felt her heart racing as fast as her mind. His lips grazed her cheek as his arm hugged her body against him. She could smell his skin; he smelled like honeysuckle, cherry trees in blossom, cinnamon. His long eyelashes tickled as they brushed against her skin. She closed her eyes and lifted her chin to his mouth in a fathomless kiss. The taste of honey still lingering in her mouth passed into his. It was electric, incredible. It felt too amazing to be good for her, but she drank him in anyhow.

His strong arms tightened around her, pressing their bodies snug against each other. She saw fields of roses in bloom; could even smell them. It felt like running through the forest without her body. She moaned in rapture, not letting him go as he tried to pull away from her.

Annika’s body was swelling and burning for just another taste. She had never been kissed like that; she had never been made to feel like that. He was a powerful drug that she wanted more of, but she got the feeling that even if they kissed all afternoon, it would never be enough. He pried her arms off of him and sat up, causing her to crash back into reality. He looked at her with the same dazed expression she was certain she was wearing, wondering where on earth a kiss like that came from. He appeared inebriated and confused. For being so suggestive since meeting him, Annika was surprised that he’d been the one to stop it from escalating into more than just a kiss. His touch was so erotic, she probably would have let him seduce her right then and there. He abruptly stood and climbed one of the trees, leaving her to sit by herself and try to decipher the strange force between them. He didn’t seem angry or frustrated, and she could still taste his honey-laced flavor in her mouth.

From his boot, he whipped out a knife that closely resembled Runa’s little ebony-handled one, and began cutting narrow branches with gusto. As they fell one by one to the ground, Annika gathered them in her arms. They moved from tree to tree, collecting the fine wood in silence. It wasn’t long before they had two very large bundles, which they tied up and attached to the saddle on Ghassan’s back.

Talvi lifted her up into the seat and hopped up behind her. The animal tossed his
head and set off at a slow gait, letting their bodies sway gently in rhythm with his massive, muscular body. As they made their way between the poplar, birch and aspen trees, Annika relaxed and sank against Talvi’s chest, but he didn’t so much as caress her bare arms. Every time he exhaled, her skin broke out in a new batch of goose bumps, but their lips didn’t meet again on the ride back.

“Tell me something Talvi,” she asked, still dazed by their brief embrace. “What did I see when I kissed you?”

The words he spoke were so soft that she almost didn’t hear them at all.

“Definitely not what I saw,” was his reply.
Chapter 7
Prince Talvi

When they returned to the camp, Hilda was covering the last few warm embers of the fire with dirt.

“Oh? You remembered to collect some branches after all?” she observed, craning her neck up to look at them. “Sariel left without us. She said she had to speak with Yuri right away, and she wouldn’t wait on you two any longer. Where is Yuri anyway? She’s usually with you.”

“She’s at home tending to arrangements for the party,” Talvi said from his place behind Annika. “She’s an elf obsessed. It’s completely consumed her waking life.”

“Haven’t you helped her?”

“Yes, constantly,” he said, scratching his head. He picked out another bit of leaf, letting it flutter down to Ghassan’s huge black hooves. “I had to make all of the music arrangements and then address invitations until my fingers bled, since her penmanship is so bloody awful. Besides, she cares more about the details than I do. The rest I let her take care of.”

“You let her take care of, or you stuck her with?” accused Hilda. When he didn’t answer right away she just shook her head and sighed.

“Oh Talvi! I hope she makes you wear something atrocious!” Runa shrieked.

“Why should she?” he retorted. “For the past few months all she’s done is fret about this party. I don’t understand what all the fuss is for; it’s just another birthday.”

“It’s not just any birthday, and you know it,” said Hilda.

“All I know is that she’s becoming more and more like Anthea every day. She doesn’t go riding with me nearly as often as we used to. She’s taken to wearing dresses all the time.”

“Dresses!” Runa cried. “She’s wearing dresses now?”

“I’m afraid so, along with other feminine nonsense that I won’t go into,” Talvi said with a roll of his eyes, as the sisters gathered their cloaks and gear. Before Annika could try to climb down from Ghassan, Runa brought over her backpack, which Talvi strapped alongside the bundles of wood.

“It’s okay, I can ride by myself,” she said, but her stag was nowhere to be seen.

“Not if you can’t see where you’re going,” he told her. Runa took off the green sash she wore around her waist and handed it up to him. “It’s nothing against your character,” he said, reaching down to retrieve the sash, “but you mustn’t see how to get to Derbedrossivic. I’m your escort. I apologize, but I must do this.”

“Hold on, wait just a minute,” Annika said, turning around to look at him. “Why can’t I see how to get there? It’s not like I could find my way back again. I wouldn’t even be here if I hadn’t gotten lost to begin with. And you aren’t making Runa or Hilda wear a blindfold.”

“It’s not you that I’m concerned about. There are creatures here who could take advantage of your untrained mind and see your thoughts. It’s my duty to make certain that my home and my guests are safe, and I can’t allow you to put everyone in Derbedrossivic in danger. There hasn’t been a human there in ages.”

“Derbedrossivic? Where have I heard that before?” she wondered, recognizing the
unusual name.

“It’s the village I’m from. I told you that already, remember?”

“Oh, right.” She realized her argument was losing momentum. “Do I really have to wear this thing?”

“We’re not going anywhere until you let me put it on,” he said. “We can wait here all day, but I’d rather get home and have a hot meal and a soft bed tonight. I’m sure you would too.”

She sighed nervously. She didn’t know him that well, but she already knew it was useless to argue with him right now. “Do what you have to do,” she said in reluctant surrender. He lowered the sash in front of her eyes and tied it gently but firmly around her head.

“You only have to keep this on until we get there. But please, Annika…if you take it off, you’re putting us all in potential danger,” he told her. “If I have to tie you up, I will.”

“I swear I won’t take it off. Just don’t let me fall,” she said, determined not to reveal the fear in her voice. Ghassan was impatiently pawing at the ground, probably thinking of the hay and oats that awaited him back home.

“That I can manage,” Talvi said confidently, wrapping a strong arm around her waist. Her skin shivered in response, especially at the thought of being tied up. She felt the lurch of the horse’s muscular body underneath her, and other than a small yelp, she managed not to scream even though it was terrifying and thrilling all at once. All she heard was the pounding of hooves against earth and stone, and her stomach leapt as Ghassan flew over logs and rocks. All she could imagine was running off a cliff or getting knocked down by a low-hanging tree limb. She couldn’t even scream, because her breath had been left back at the campsite far behind.

“Don’t be scared,” Talvi said, trying to calm her nerves. “We can’t waste time or we’ll be riding in the dark.”

“I already am riding in the dark,” Annika said in a shaking voice through clenched teeth. “And it sucks!”

“Trust me,” he assured her. “I’m not letting go of you.”

“That’s asking a lot,” she protested, but the protective arm didn’t budge; it only held her tighter. She took a deep breath and wrapped her arms around the strong one that held her. After a quarter of an hour had passed, she began to realize that she wasn’t in danger of falling anywhere. His arm wasn’t letting go of her. They rode all afternoon, and her anticipation grew as the day wore on. With all that time in the dark, alone with her thoughts behind the blindfold, she recalled their conversation from earlier.

*What did he see that he’s not telling me? I wonder what that phrase in Fae means? These people really think I’m part wood nymph! But then, the matching birthmarks are kind of creepy… or convincing.*

Hours passed with little conversation, until the scent in the air changed subtly. Annika could hear rapids growing closer, and the animals slowed down to walk carefully over the uneven terrain.

“I guess you can go ahead and look now,” Talvi said at long last. She wasted no time pulling the sash from her eyes. The sight she saw was breathtaking.

There was a sizeable river lined with different mills that took advantage of the rushing rapids. The swirling whitecaps sparkled in the sun like liquid diamonds. A long bridge up ahead was patrolled by two guards on each side at both ends, each with black
bows similar to Talvi's strapped on their backs and swords at their sides. They were dressed in green jackets and brown breeches, with black boots and fuzzy black ushankas with the ear flaps tied up. The guard on the right nodded his head out of courtesy while the guard on the left waved wildly at Talvi and the girls as they came near.

“Hello, Sasha!” Runa called out to him, and returned his enthusiastic wave.

“Hello, Runa my dear; hello Hilda,” he said cheerfully, and gave a playful, ostentatious bow. “And good evening to you, Prince Talvi. What are you bringing home this time, besides the fair sisters?” Sasha winked at Runa, who shamelessly winked right back. Hilda just smiled and shook her head, not being the incorrigible flirt her sister was. Talvi nudged Ghassan closer to show off his prize.

“Why, I found one of those modern girls wandering about the forest,” he replied, puffing out his chest in pride. “She’s a feisty one, too.”

“I’m betting she is, with hair like that,” Sasha agreed. “A fine specimen indeed.” He grinned up at Annika, making her blush.

“Have you ever seen a modern girl before, Grigori?” Talvi asked the more reserved guard, who shook his head. “Don’t be shy. Come have a look.”

Grigori stepped a little closer towards Annika, but seemed happy to observe from a safe distance. Sasha, on the other hand, had no qualms about walking right up to her.

“Do you have any sisters that we can send Prince Talvi back for?” Annika only managed to shake her head “no”. She felt completely humbled that this impertinent elf she was sitting in front of was a prince. He certainly hadn’t acted like one the previous night, let alone earlier that morning.

“Take a good look, gentlemen,” Talvi instructed them, smoothing her long hair affectionately as if she were his pet. “I do not want her to leave the village unless she’s in my company. If you or your scouts catch her anywhere beyond the walls of my home without me, you’re to bring her back at once. Do you understand?”

“Oh, am I your property now?” she demanded as she turned to scowl at Talvi.

“You might as well be—ooh!” Sasha began, only to have Grigori jab him in the gut, causing him to lurch forward and lose his hat. The earflaps had come untied so that when he put it on they stuck out to the side like airplane wings.

“Prince Talvi is wanting to keep you safe; this is what he’s meaning,” Grigori explained, giving his partner a stern look before returning to his post. Sasha nodded in agreement, making his hat’s earflaps bob up and down while he sent the party on their way. As they crossed the long wooden bridge, Annika could see a small group of curious elves gathered on the other side.

“I see word of your arrival has already spread. I imagine Sariel notified the guards on both ends, as well as my parents,” Talvi remarked.

“Are you going to be in trouble?”

“Oh, heavens no,” he chirped. “I’ve done far worse things.”

“You didn’t tell me you were a prince,” she hissed so that only he heard.

“Does it really matter if I am?”

“I… I’m not sure. I’m not sure of anything anymore,” she said, nervous about what impression she would make among the villagers, let alone his royal family. She hadn’t showered in a few days now, and she was positive she smelled worse than the nymphs by a long shot. When they crossed the bridge she smiled at the elves in front of her as politely as she could. They looked at her curiously, sharing glances with each other. Most
of the women, especially the older ones wore simple dresses or saris made of silks and other soft looking fibers. The beautiful fabrics were all hand dyed and the vivid colors bled into one another. Green became yellow and red changed to scarlet, then violet. Some of the younger women wore pants with long blouses. Most of the men wore old fashioned drop-sleeve shirts and trousers. A few had jackets similar to Talvi’s, though none of them matched the detail put into his.

While it was a fairly large village, it remained picturesque, thick with trees that grew quite high over their heads, sometimes bending to make each stone-paved road a quietly shaded path. Annika couldn’t have imagined a more relaxing place to live. It had all of the tranquility of a spa. There were little stone cottages with pointed roofs and wooden doors with rounded tops. There were no overly-manicured lawns or neighbors jammed so close together that there was no privacy. The trees were so thick that much of the town remained partially hidden. Everything grew wild or only slightly tamed, from the rosebushes to the ivy that grew up the sides of some of the houses. The few fences that did exist were surrounding vast vegetable gardens that lay between some of the homes. Some of the chimneys were sending up thin trails of smoke, and orange, yellow, and red leaves fell slowly in the breeze, twirling madly before they hit the ground.

They passed through the small crowd relatively fast, and headed out of the most populated area. It seemed that there were more shops than houses in the town, and Annika could see the cottages become scarcer and scarcer beyond the dense woods.

Talvi and his guest continued on at their slow pace, but Hilda and Runa darted ahead of them, anxious to meet up with Sariel and Yuri. There was a bluff that towered higher above the rest of the village which was also covered by trees. Ghassan walked up the hill towards the bluff and turned at the bend in the road that led to it. Slowly, the loveliest house that Annika had ever seen came into view.

It was a beautiful country villa built of pale stone and wood, with many wings on different levels, as though it had been built one section at a time. Every doorway was arched and the walls were half overgrown with wild ivy. Annika counted at least eight chimneys and many of the larger windows had a balcony. There was one tower that stood higher than the rest of the house. It balanced on a sheer drop right along the exposed white stone of the bluff, and almost directly below the river sped past. It seemed miraculous that anyone had found the courage or the insanity to build such a structure on such a precarious spot.

Two curved staircases led the way to the massive front doors hewn from dark wood. Stained glass windows ran up the length on each side of these doors, about six feet across and fifteen feet high, where they came together at an arch. It would’ve taken an army of soldiers to break through the solid walnut.

They bypassed the front of the house and instead walked around a wide path that ran along side of it. They stopped at a stable where Talvi dismounted and helped Annika down before leading Ghassan into a stall. She peered down the center aisle at the horses out in the pastures beyond while Talvi coaxed off the saddle and bridle.

“Help me carry these inside, will you?” he said, motioning to the bundles of wood before hauling the saddle to a nearby tack room. Then he gathered the rest of his things and led her past the biggest garden she’d ever seen, where two young women were filling baskets with vegetables. Annika assumed that they were servants, since he didn’t bother to introduce her to them.
There were three great arches that opened to the back yard which they passed through, and the sight she saw took her breath away yet again. She’d stepped into a long rectangular courtyard that had been overtaken by ivy-covered stone arches, six on each side and three on each end, all at least three times her height. At the center was an impressive fountain made of black marble; four black marble fish on top were spitting the water back down the three tiers. At the bottom of the fountain were large black and orange spotted fish swimming leisurely, popping their heads up in hopes of a juicy bug.

The tiles underneath Annika’s feet were made of black granite that went to the edges of the courtyard, where the floors changed to a creamy white stone underneath the colonnade. Annika could see the massive windows just as large as the arches, with mysterious rooms inside that she couldn’t see into.

In each corner grew a white birch tree; all of them adorned with odds and ends like glass beads, prisms, colored bits of ribbon, and feathers that twisted in the softest breeze. From the branches also hung the most elaborate little birdhouses, some with two tiny stories, roofs made of soft green moss and tiny doors and windows that that were so detailed that they might actually open and shut. Then Annika looked directly in front of them, in between the two trees closest to the set of doors that led into this marvelous house, sat a table where two women were having tea. They were busy watching a dark-haired girl of about four chasing a smaller boy with a mop of blonde curls on his head. He waddled so much that Annika thought he had probably just learned to walk, and was now going to attempt running. The little girl ran across the stone tiles that wove around the trees and flowerbeds. Then she looked up and squealed while her brother crawled the opposite direction to the younger of the two women at the table. She grabbed onto Talvi’s leg and didn’t let go until he dropped his bundle and scooped her up in his arms.

“And how are you today, you nasty little larva?” he asked, and shifted the girl to one hip. His manner suggested he spoke to her this way all the time, and the smile on the little girl’s face confirmed it.

“You have funny hair like the fairies!” she squealed in the cutest little voice. Annika thought she could feel her face turn the same shade as the tresses that hung halfway down her back.

“Come on, you may as well meet the rest of my family,” Talvi said as he bent down carefully and grabbed the bundle with his free hand. Annika hoped she looked presentable, but compared to the beautiful women in front of her, she felt painfully self-conscious. She had been wearing the same clothes for almost a week and hadn’t seen a comb in longer than that, while both women had their long dark brown hair swept off their necks and held in place with jeweled pins. They wore elegant silk saris, where layers of silver and blue fabric hung gracefully on their bodies, and the sleeves were covered in the same embroidered pattern of leaves that Talvi wore on his jacket.

“I assume you’ve already heard of her arrival by now, but you should be properly introduced to Annika Brisby. Annika, this is my mother Althea Marinossian, and my sister Anthea.”

The ladies nodded politely to Annika. Althea had silver wisps intermingling in her dark hair, but otherwise looked very much like her daughter. They both had brown eyes, olive skin, and classic features that appeared chiseled by a great sculptor.

“The little ones are my niece Stella, and my nephew Sloan,” Talvi said before setting Stella down lightly on her feet.
“How do you do?” the women greeted Annika with the same English accent as Talvi.
“Very well, your highnesses,” Annika said and gave an awkward little bow.
“Your highness? That’s one I’ve never heard,” his sister laughed, completely caught off guard, and Althea tried not to join her daughter.
“Well the guards called him Prince Talvi, so I figured, uh…” she stuttered, feeling her face turn red again. Her capillaries were getting one heck of a workout today.
“And he let you think he was a real prince?” Anthea cried, hooting with renewed laughter. Annika couldn’t remember ever feeling as embarrassed as she did right now. She glared at Talvi and he seemed just as flustered.
“Talvi Anatolius Marinossian…” his mother scolded. “How can you say such things? You ought to be ashamed.”
“Talvi, that modern slang is no way to speak to your sister, especially in front of the children,” his mother admonished. He turned to Anthea and gave her a very fake smile and batted his long eyelashes.
“I’m so sorry, my dearest sister. Please forgive me for speaking to you in such a crude fashion,” his voice was dripping with sarcasm.
“You are forgiven, my dearest little brother. Now run along and go play with your ladies at court. You mustn’t keep them waiting,” Anthea said, trying to sound regal as she made a dismissive motion with her hand.
“Mother!”
“Do not whine, Talvi,” his mother said with laughter still lingering in her eyes. “It’s so unbecoming on a prince.” Talvi wasted no time rushing past their renewed giggles as Annika followed him through another set of French doors.
“I can’t believe you lied to me!” Annika hissed angrily when they were out of earshot. “I thought you said you were a bad liar. You made me look like a total moron in front of them!”
“I did no such thing. You did it to yourself. I never claimed to be a prince; I just asked you if it mattered if I was one, remember?” he said smartly.
“Yeah, well, at least my middle name isn’t Anatolius!”
He drew his breath in to make a retort, but appeared stumped.
They walked up to the second floor and down a long hallway lined with oil
paintings. Annika heard a door creak open behind her.

“Whisking her away to your chambers already?” asked a deep, rich voice. Annika whirled around and saw a man as tall as Talvi pulling a door shut behind him. Cazadora was perched on one of his broad shoulders, preening her feathers. “And I haven’t even been properly introduced.” He shook his head slowly in disapproval, but was smiling at them both. “Tsk, tsk, tsk. How formulaic of you, Prince Talvi.”

Talvi shot him a withering look, but the man walked up to them as if he were immune to it. He cracked his back and stood up straight, revealing that he was even taller than Talvi, though not by much. While he towered over Annika, there was an atmosphere of pure calm surrounding him which instantly put her at ease. His face was clean shaven and a dark mess of loose curls hung in his eyes, helping to soften what could have easily been an imposing figure. There was nothing remarkable about his plain linen shirt or dark trousers, although he wore a bracelet strung with milky white stones that caught her eye.

“This is my brother Finn.” Talvi looked quite annoyed as he made the introduction. “Yes, the elder and wiser of us,” Finn said in his rich, deep voice. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Annika.” He stepped closer and tossed his curly hair out of his face to get a better look at her. He was just as handsome as his brother, and if it weren’t for the subtle differences in their physical traits they could’ve passed for twins. Annika waited for him to take her hand or bow, but he made no grandiose gestures. Instead, he gave a polite nod of his head, keeping his hands in his pockets. “I’m pleased to see that your ankle has healed.”

“How did you know about that?”

“Cazadora informed me.” He reached up to pet the raven, who puffed out her feathers at his gentle touch. Annika could see that next to the black bird, his curly hair was actually dark brown, not jet black like his brother’s. “She said you had bright red hair, although she was mistaken about your eyes.”

“Oh? I thought birds were colorblind.”

“No, quite the contrary,” Finn said, raising a scholarly brow at her. “They see colors that we can’t even dream of, so when she told me yours were violet like the edge of a rainbow, I had my doubts. I’m more inclined to call them a tempestuous shade of blue… like the sea before a storm.”

“Oh…thanks,” she breathed softly, trying not to blush, but she was reeling from his compliment. Finn smiled sweetly and she wondered how the brothers could have the same smile, yet have it look so different on each of their faces. There was something so familiar about his fathomless dark brown eyes, and the longer she looked into that mesmerizing gaze, the more relaxed she felt. The quiet peacefulness that surrounded him that suggested an emotional depth and a level of wisdom unmatched by anyone else she’d ever met.

“I like the way you draw out your ‘o’s,” he told her with a tender smile. “It’s sort of…twangy. I didn’t know you were an American lass. I’ll have a heap of questions for you later on.”

“Then you can ask her at dinner,” Talvi abruptly announced. He took Annika’s hand, leading her away from his brother. When she turned around for one last look, Finn was already walking down the stairs with Cazadora, shaking his head and humming in his deep voice.

“That thing he said about whisking me away to your room; what was that about? Do
you have a lot of company?” she asked dubiously. Talvi scratched his head.

“It’s nothing. Pay no mind to him.”

“Alright, well, if you’re not a prince, why does everyone call you one? I don’t get it,” she pestered.

“It’s just a nickname that Finn gave me a long, long time ago,” he said, trying to make light of the name.

“Aww, does he call you Prince Talvi because you have such a high opinion of yourself?” she teased.

“Yes, that’s the reason.” He scratched his head again and led her up another staircase to the third floor.

“Jeez, Talvi, how many more stairs are there?” Annika huffed, losing steam. The hallway had hardly any windows, but the ones that were open let in just enough light to see.

“I’m sorry to make you walk all this way,” he apologized. “I’m such a light sleeper that I will wake up to anything louder than crickets chirping. Consequently, I have the most remote chambers.” Annika stopped dead in her tracks.

“If your bedroom is in that tower I saw, I refuse to take another step!”

“I assure you it’s not,” he said, looking a little sad. “No one’s been in that tower in years.” He stopped at the last door in the hall and lifted the wrought iron handle. An enormous suite taking the south west corner of the home opened up before them, lit by large picture windows all along the way. Annika set down everything she was carrying and walked around the decadent room. It smelled like wood and books, flower essences and a hundred other things that worked perfectly together.

If she lived in this place, she was certain this is what her own room would resemble. There was a large bed covered with a quilt made of Indian saris stitched together. But most impressive were the heavy velvet curtains tied back to the four wooden corner posts.

The row of windows that ran along both walls stretched from floor to ceiling, and from the tops of them hung yards of sheer fabric which caught in the breeze. She could see there were two doors in the windows that led to a modest balcony. There were two great armoires next to each other off to the side, and a night table to the left of the bed with a water pitcher and basin. A large desk covered with unorganized piles of paper and stacks of books sat in between two very tall bookshelves filled with antique volumes.

Annika was surprised to see what must have been an original printing of Great Expectations and Oliver Twist sitting among them. There was also a copy of Huck Finn and The Portrait of Dorian Gray. Looking around, she noticed a lot of things that were familiar to her in this unfamiliar land. There were ballpoint pens and colored pencils on the desk, and a few t-shirts lying over the chair, one of which was black, and in white letters it read ‘In Japan, I’m huge’. She almost snorted a laugh—imagining Talvi looming over a crowd of Japanese people was a bit comical.

There was a collection of wind-up toys on another shelf. Her eyes moved over a myriad of Matchbox cars and a little spaceship, and even a monkey with tarnished cymbals. A wide variety of beautiful paintings hung on the plastered walls, as well as exotic Middle Eastern tapestries, but the most interesting thing was the wall over the desk. There were countless Polaroid photographs of unfamiliar smiling faces. Some of them could not have been human. Runa, Finn, and another young woman with long black
hair were in many of them, but Talvi was in quite a few himself.

_He’s either very photogenic, or quite vain. Probably a little of both_, she thought. Among the photos were ones of him standing in front of places like the pyramids of Egypt, the Taj Mahal, Tibetan monasteries, the ruins of Acropolis, and Stonehenge. It was impressive, to say the least.

The second most interesting thing was that there was not one area that hadn’t been embellished somehow with objects from the outside world. A seashell here, a brilliant stone there, bunches of dried lavender hanging from the ceiling by a long, silver thread, a brightly colored feather, glass jars of various sizes and purposes, containing different colored sands. It would take Annika days of snooping, and she’d probably still find things that she’d overlooked.

She walked over to the picture window near the balcony. An easel and a small table holding oil paints were set up next to the large window opposite the door. On the other side sat a gramophone and a large stereo sitting beside a mountain of boxes labeled batteries. Then there was another shelf filled with small portable game consoles, a walkman and a Discman. Underneath those was another level crammed full of vinyl records and cassette tapes, with the CD’s strewn about the floor.

“How do you have all this stuff and not have a phone?” she wondered aloud, and walked over to see what he listened to. Some of his music collection was familiar to her, and it included some of her favorites.

“It’s all battery-powered,” he explained, pointing to a pile of boxes. “We don’t have electricity here, which is unfortunate since I’m rather obsessed with it.”

“Man…what a bummer.”

“What’s a bummer?” He glanced around the room with a confused look. This time it was her turn to laugh at him.

“I mean it’s a bummer you don’t have electricity. It’s too bad.”

“Oh, of course,” he said, looking sheepish. “Well, it would be useful, but the price for it is so high. Besides, Anthea can play nearly every musical instrument I know of. We have two entire rooms just for her instruments.”

“Two rooms? Impressive.” Annika wandered around, looking over everything in his room with great curiosity.

“I suppose she was overindulged a bit, since she’s the firstborn. Finn only has one library, besides what he keeps in his room. But books are a little easier to store than instruments. You should have been there when she discovered the pianoforte. What an ordeal that was to bring home and put together. I was too young at the time to help much, but I remember Finn and my father cursing a lot. Their story gets more elaborate with every retelling.”

“Maybe I’ll hear it sometime.” Annika was half mesmerized by the contents and décor of his room, and half confused. Almost a day ago, Runa had been describing the day the twins were born, and yet Talvi said that they grew up together. But it didn’t make sense, as they both looked to be in their twenties. And it didn’t make sense what he’d just said about the piano being invented. She never heard anyone but snobs called it the pianoforte, and she didn’t get the impression that Talvi had been joking.

“No doubt you will hear that story at some point. It’s one of Father’s favorites,” he said. He grabbed two letters off his desk sealed with red wax and slipped them into his jacket pocket. Annika recognized the pair of sunglasses that Runa had been wearing at
the bookstore lying among the mess. “Have you seen enough?” he asked her.

“I suppose. I’d like to clean up a little if we’re having dinner with your family,” she said, hoping she didn’t smell completely disgusting.

“Then let’s go find the girls, shall we? I’ll give you the complete tour tomorrow.”

“You’ll have to show me Anthea’s rooms. I won’t believe it until I see it,” she said, intrigued at the thought of so many instruments.

The smell of cooking food hit her nose and soon they were in a kitchen almost as large as the one in the restaurant she’d worked at. Herbs of all kinds hung in large bunches from the ceiling, and there was a wall of enormous windows to let in the light. All the wood was light colored, and the floors were clay tiles, making it look like the brightest, happiest kitchen in the world. The two women from the vegetable garden were cutting corn off the cob and snapping green beans into a huge bowl. Runa was crying while slicing onions at one of the tables as she chattered with Hilda, who was happily mincing cloves of garlic across from her. A hearth large enough for Annika to stand in had a cauldron over the fire that Sariel was stirring while talking to a girl with long black hair. Her back was turned to Annika, but she quickly guessed it was Yuri. Not only was she tall and slender like her brother, but he’d mentioned that she had an affinity for dresses, and the one she was wearing fit the bill. Her dress was beautiful, although it seemed less practical to wear in the kitchen and meant for a day at the Kentucky Derby, or walking on a red carpet in Hollywood. The samodivi stopped their chattering and looked over at Annika and Talvi. Then Yuri slowly turned around and marched over to them at once, giving her brother the evil eye while ignoring his companion.

“So, you’re finally back!” she let into him, crossing her arms over her chest. “Why did you leave without telling me? Normally I don’t care where you go or for how long, but this birthday party is important! It’s less than two weeks away and I still can’t find six hundred red and white roses! But apparently it doesn’t matter if I get them or not, because I don’t even know what group you found to play the music, and I need to know where to have them set up! What am I supposed to do? And on top of all this, I don’t even know if Konstantin or Pavlo are coming! They were supposed to R.S.V.P. more than a month ago. I sent out the invitations with plenty of notice—”

Talvi whipped out the two letters from his jacket and dangled them in front of her face. She snatched them away from him and opened them at once.

“Oh,” she said, ignoring him as she scanned the contents of the letters. One seemed to intrigue her much more than the other.

“Annika, this is my delightful sister Yuri,” said Talvi with a wince. “You’ll have to excuse me; I feel a monstrous headache coming on.” Yuri watched him leave, then glanced down at Annika without any expression; without a warm hello or even a smile. Annika found herself wishing Talvi were still by her side.

“Hey,” she finally croaked. An awkward moment was shared by the two girls before Yuri finally nodded an acknowledgement of Annika’s existence.

“You invited Pavlo and Konstantin to the party?” Runa piped up, breaking the silence. She and the other samodivi swarmed around Yuri to look at the letters, but Yuri quickly folded up the opened one and tucked it into a pocket before they could see its contents.

“Are you sure you want them here?” Hilda asked.

“It’s too late to say no. They’ll be here the night of the party,” Yuri said.
“If they bring all their friends, we’re in big trouble. You especially!” Runa chortled, jabbing Yuri in the side. Yuri’s response was a prissy grin.

“I made them promise that it would be just the two of them. I told them that the guards would have specific instructions that only Konstantin and his friend would have permission to enter the village.”

“They must be real party animals,” Annika said, trying to tactfully join in the conversation. Runa looked at her with raised eyebrows.

“You have no idea,” she said. Sariel remained silent, but her lips were pressed together like she had something to say and was keeping it to herself. Barely.

“Enough about that. Now that I finally know they’re coming, I can focus on other things. I swear my brother is next to useless sometimes.” Yuri rolled her brown eyes and turned to Annika as if reading her mind. “Would you like something clean to wear?”

“If it wouldn’t be much trouble. Can I wash up a little too?”

“Certainly,” said Yuri. “You can wear some of my clothes, but they’re going to be a little long on you. We’ll just have to see what I have.” Runa squealed with delight.

“Ooh, I want to play with your clothes too!” she exclaimed. “Can I stop chopping onions, Sariel?” Sariel nodded and made a shooing motion for them to leave.

“Go on. I want to make sure this doesn’t burn,” she said, and the three girls started off down the hallway, leaving Hilda behind.

“Your room isn’t as far away as Talvi’s, is it?” Annika asked his sister.

“No, thank goodness. It’s very close to the bath, which I happen to love. Ah, here we are.”

They abruptly stopped at another door that Yuri pushed open. The room was almost as large as Talvi’s, but not a corner suite. The windows were larger though, and she had a similar bed. There were butterflies and insects too numerous to count mounted in glass shadowboxes on the walls. She had a desk nearby, but it was neat and orderly, with everything in its right place. A tall Japanese screen with silk undergarments thrown over it stood in the corner. There were not two, not three, but four armoires along the wall. Yuri carried a pitcher and bowl behind the screen and then walked over to Annika.

“There’s soap and a sponge already back there,” she told her. “Runa and I will pick out something for you to wear while you clean up, and then when you’re done, we’ll wash your hair.”

Annika wasted little time getting undressed behind the screen and poured some of the water into the basin. It was chilly against her skin, but it was clean and that alone felt wonderful. She listened as Runa and Yuri sorted through each of the four armoires.

“I don’t think we can find a dress small enough for you,” Yuri called out. “And I don’t have the patience to teach you how to wear a sari at the moment. You can wear some old pants of mine for now. I’ll let you borrow one of my gowns for the party though. We’ll hem it up so you won’t trip while you’re dancing.”

“I heard a rumor that you didn’t wear dresses until recently,” Annika said from behind the screen as she climbed out of her dirty clothes.

“That is true. I guess something just clicked and one day I woke up and said, ‘I’m fed up with trousers’. But you modern girls wear them all the time, don’t you?”

“Yeah. Pretty much,” Annika replied. A pair of dark brown pants similar to Finn’s flopped over the screen, followed by a white silk shirt with sleeves too long for her arms. The pants came down far past her feet, but she cuffed them up and stepped out from the
“Do you feel better?” Yuri asked.

“Oh yeah, this is great,” Annika said, looking herself over in a full length mirror. The oversized clothes made her look absolutely tiny, but they were soft and warm, and most importantly, clean.

“You can leave your dirty clothes in the basket back there,” said Yuri. “We’ll wash them later. Now let’s take care of that pretty red hair of yours. I think I see a leaf stuck in it. Were you rolling on the ground earlier?” Annika suddenly saw an image of green and blue eyes, remembering that kiss under the trees. Her stomach did an extremely acrobatic flip.

“No,” she lied. The corner of Runa’s mouth turned upwards, but Yuri didn’t notice.

“You’re just like my brother,” she said. “He’s always got something stuck in that rat’s nest he calls his hair. I wonder what I would find if I cut it off, but he refuses to let anyone touch it. I would wager that’s where he lost his comb.” Runa snorted a laugh at Yuri’s joke, as if might very well be true. “Not that your hair is a rat’s nest, Annika,” Yuri said quickly. “That wasn’t very kind of me, was it?” She draped a thick towel around Annika’s shoulders and leaned down over the basin to let Runa wash her hair.

“It’s okay. My mom says the same thing.” Annika suddenly missed her mother more than she ever had in her life. She recalled her trips to her mother’s salon, where she let her wash her hair while she shared her troubles, and now these strange girls were doing it for her. She closed her eyes so that Yuri couldn’t see the tears forming in them. “How often do you guys come into Sofia?” she asked, quickly changing the subject.

“We all used to go there about once every month or two, but lately I haven’t been there at all,” said Yuri. “You must know about the gateways closing up, or else you wouldn’t be here.”

“You mean the portals? Yeah, Runa and I actually got through just before theirs closed,” Annika said as Runa poured cool water over her head and wet her hair.

“Really? How frightful. All the other gates have been closed for some time, although I’d hoped theirs would stay open.” Yuri said, folding her arms over her chest. She gave Runa a sideways glance before adding, “Still, only a fool would travel through it. You’re lucky you weren’t trapped on Earth or some other godsforsaken place.”

“How many portals are there?” Annika asked.

“I have no idea,” she shrugged. “There’s seven we know of, not counting the samodiva’s secret cave. There’s bound to be others we don’t know about. You’ll probably be at the meeting to learn all about them, but don’t discuss it with anyone outside the family. Father wants to keep it very small and private.” She walked across the room to sit and read her letters again. There was a dreamy look in her eyes as she read one of them over and over.

“It’s really a terrible situation,” Runa said to Annika. “Maybe not for you modern humans, but it certainly is for the rest of us. The vampires are the ones who travel through the gates most often so they can reach their main food supply. With the gates locking them out, they’ve been forced to rely on animals, but animal blood doesn’t satisfy them. If anything, it makes them hungrier for humans; especially the younger ones. And you know what the young ones tend to do.”

“No, actually, I don’t,” Annika clarified.

“Oh, well, they haven’t got much self-control so instead of being satisfied with a pint
here and a pint there, they drink every last drop and kill their victims. And it’s not like
your world where people go missing all the time and no one notices. We definitely notice
here when someone goes missing,” Runa said, and scrubbed the soap harder into
Annika’s head. She felt irritated by Runa’s comment, but bit her tongue.

“Oh Annika, I’m so sorry!” Runa wailed. “I’m such a toad! I wasn’t thinking. I’m
sure your family misses you very much. I’m sorry.”

“I guess I’m nothing but a warm body around here,” she mumbled.

“I didn’t mean it like that!”

“It’s not you, Runa. It’s something Finn said.”

“Oh, you met Finn already? Why would he say something crude like that to you?
He’s such a gentleman.”

Annika checked to make sure that Yuri was out of earshot before she confided in
Runa. Whatever was written in that letter must have been astounding, because she was
completely absorbed in its contents.

“He didn’t say it to me. He said it to Talvi. Something about whisking me away to
his room before he could introduce me. Does he bring home a lot of girls?” Runa slowed
down her scrubbing to a light massage, but didn’t answer her immediately.

“I think you must have misunderstood what Finn meant,” she said.

“I don’t think so. I think Finn was perfectly clear about Talvi’s character…or lack
of,” Annika said firmly. Runa bit her lip as she thought of a response.

“He does have a bit of a reputation because he’s always had a lot of girls chasing
after him. How could he not? Isn’t he adorable?” Annika wrinkled her nose. Something
Runa was or was not saying still bothered her.

“Well, Finn is cute too, so does that mean he has the same problem?” she asked
innocently.

“Oh goodness, no! Finn would never dream of—well, what I mean is he, well…”
Runa stammered. “They’re very different when it comes to ladies. Finn tends to avoid
them, and Talvi, well, I suppose he makes up for his brother. He never gets serious with
them, though. Yuri sees to that,” Runa said in a very quiet voice.

“What do you mean?” Annika was becoming very interested in this bit of gossip.

“She always chases them off. She doesn’t think they’re ever good enough for him. I
think because they’re twins, she expects him to be devoted to her before anyone else.”
Runa was about to say more, but just then Yuri walked over to them and Annika
dismissed the thought for the time being.

“So uh, weren’t you saying that there’s a lot of vampires here?” she asked Runa
quickly. It seemed that Yuri had been oblivious to their private conversation.

“No here, but about two weeks or so up north,” Runa said.

“It’s sixteen days’ ride, actually,” Yuri corrected her. Runa wrinkled her little nose at
Yuri for being so nitpicky.

“Really? Do you think I’ll meet any?”

“You will sooner than you think. I hope they mind their manners,” Runa said and
rinsed her hair, drying it with the towel.

“Speaking of manners, we should finish up. I think it’s time to set the table,” Yuri
said.

“Don’t you have someone to set it for you?” Annika asked, under the impression that
evnen if they weren’t royalty, anyone living in such a grand house and dressed in such
luxurious clothes probably had a complete staff of maids and butlers to help run the household.

“Someone such as whom?” Yuri replied, not sure what Annika meant.

“What about those women in the kitchen?” Annika asked.

“Oh, them?” Yuri stifled a laugh. “They’re only working in trade. We don’t use money for every little thing like modern people do. The ladies in the kitchen help with the gardens, and for that Finn tutors their children. It’s really quite nice.”

The girls walked back towards the kitchen where the scent overpowered them, but continued on to a spacious, yet intimate dining room. There was a very large, ancient looking china cabinet nearby. They set twelve ornate china plates and twelve matching bowls on a long wooden table with eight legs. Runa lit all the candles in the chandeliers above them with a long brass candle lighter while Yuri placed the silverware carefully beside each plate. Orange light from the setting sun was coming through the windows, casting an ethereal glow throughout the room. Hilda and Sariel came in with large covered dishes in their hands and set them along the length of the table.

“Don’t just stand there, you three! There’s a lot more to bring out,” Hilda chided playfully. When they returned to the kitchen, Talvi was standing there with Finn, sampling the different dishes that had been prepared.

“I see your headache was remedied by the magical healing powers of potato soup,” Yuri remarked sarcastically to him.

“I know. It’s truly astounding how quickly it cures my ailments. Why haven’t you told me how well it works until now?” he retorted and took another generous sample.

Finn walked up to Annika, peering at her though his dark curls.

“Do you drink wine?” he asked, ignoring the now bickering twins. She chuckled to herself a little bit. He was definitely asking the right person the right question.

“Only after lunch,” she said, coaxing an easy smile out of him.

“Then why don’t you come with me,” he winked at her, taking a lamp in one hand and opening a narrow door with the other. “We’ll let Talvi finish setting the table.”

Annika looked up to see Hilda thrust a huge stack of plates into Talvi’s arms. He seemed irritated that his older brother had volunteered him to set the table, but then, older brothers are good at that sort of thing.

Finn led her down into a large cellar where there were glass jars of pickles, jams, sauces, dried fruits, and other food stacked on shelves, along with bushels of apples, onions and potatoes, braided strands of garlic, sacks of brown rice and flour, but most importantly, many, many long rows of wine.

“Whoa…you could lock me in here for a month and I wouldn’t even make a dent in this collection,” she remarked, walking up and down the rows in awe.

“Pick a few that look good,” he instructed, “but nothing from the top shelf.”

“Why nothing from there?”

“Because that’s not wine,” he explained. “It’s Father’s good fairy brandy. He has a photographic memory, and he’ll know right away if we’ve been in it.”

“I don’t think I could reach it anyway,” she said as she failed an attempt to do so. She picked up a bottle and looked at the unrecognizable writing on it. She picked up another and got the same result. “I’m used to seeing French and Italian labels, but I’ve never seen ones like these.”

“That’s because these come from my cousin’s vineyard down south,” he explained,
and suddenly he had Annika’s full attention. He took the nearest bottle off the rack and showed her the label, pointing to a word in a language she’d never seen before. “That says Marinossian. Why, I remember that year. He lost half his yield to botrytis but the rest turned out quite good.”

“What’s botrytis?”

“It’s a type of mold,” he said, handing her the bottle. “And I had the unpleasant task of separating all the good grapes from the bad that season.”

“I’d still pick through moldy grapes just to work at a vineyard,” she sighed wistfully.

“Does he pay you in wine?”

“You’re looking at it,” he grinned, and motioned to the rows of wine surrounding them. After much deliberation they picked out a few more bottles and brought them to the table, where everyone else had gathered. A stately, dignified looking man was seated at the head of the table, and Annika could only assume he was their father. He’d clearly given his sons their looks, but he appeared more rugged than either of them. He sported a neatly trimmed graying beard and black hair that was heavily streaked with silver. It was shorter than Talvi’s, but it seemed just as unruly. He looked stern, a force to be reckoned with if necessary. And while his eyes twinkled with the same greenish blue of his youngest son’s, they held that same level of intelligence as his oldest son’s.

“Does it matter where I sit?” Annika asked.

“Sit next to me,” the brothers said simultaneously, and Talvi shot his brother a nasty look. There were a few muffled laughs coming from both sides of the table that Annika hadn’t noticed. Since she was right next to Finn anyway, she sat beside him.

“Father, I’d like you to meet Annika Brisby. Annika, this is my father, Ambrose Marinossian,” he said, taking great care with the formality of his proper introduction. This earned Finn yet another irritated scowl from Talvi.

“We haven’t dined with a human in quite some time. It’s a pleasure to meet you Annika,” their father said, nodding to her.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Mr. Marinossian.”

“Please, call me Ambrose while you’re under my roof,” he said, still looking at her.

“Now, it’s my understanding that you may be here for an undetermined length of time, so please know that you’re welcome to stay while we sort out this matter of the locked gates. I’m holding a meeting about it within the next fortnight, and since you’ve been affected I expect you’d be interested in attending.”

“Then I guess I’ll be there,” she shrugged awkwardly. It wasn’t as though she had other plans. “Thanks for letting me stay here.”

“You’re quite welcome. Let’s see about opening that wine, shall we?”

As everyone began passing their plates to be filled, Finn poured her a glass of wine and Hilda took her plate and bowl and returned them full of food. There was creamy potato soup, fresh corn and beans, a salad of chopped tomatoes and cucumber dressed with oil and vinegar, and warm pitas with hummus and olives. Annika didn’t realize how hungry she had been until the soup touched her lips. It was so delicious after having bland vegetable stew for the past few days at every meal. She took a few bites of everything, then swallowed a mouthful of wine, then repeated, enjoying the chatter among the Marinossians and the samodivi. It was clear that they’d been friends for years and years, but exactly how many remained a mystery to her.

“Would you like a refill?” Finn asked as he reached for another bottle.
“Sure,” she said enthusiastically. “This stuff is great!” She was slightly inebriated, but only enough that it made the candles overhead shine just a little brighter and dissolve the nervousness she had felt earlier.

All throughout the dinner conversation, she caught Talvi’s glance every now and then from across the table. He seemed like he had a lot on his mind, although his eyes clearly let on that he wasn’t particularly pleased with his brother. As the meal was winding to an end, Anthea gathered her children for bedtime while Althea and Yuri began to clear some of the dishes. Ambrose took out his pipe and leaned back in his chair, giving his wife’s hand an affectionate squeeze when she reached for his plate.

“Would you like me to help you?” Annika offered.

“No, but that is very kind of you to offer,” Althea said with a grateful smile. “You should relax with Sariel and the girls. I know you’ve had a long day and you’re probably very tired. Besides, there will be plenty for you to help with tomorrow. It takes a bit of effort to feed twelve mouths.”

Annika watched her walk away and then turned to Finn.

“I heard you have some books about unicorns and their powers,” she quietly mentioned.

“Yes, I do. I’d be delighted to share them with you,” he said, turning in his chair to face her. “Some of them have the most exquisite illustrations, but if you wish to learn anything factual I’ll have to translate, as they’re all in different languages…none of which are English, I’m afraid.”

“What languages are they in? I speak a few.”

“Do you, now?” he asked. His brown eyes sparkled with intrigue. “Which ones?”

“Besides English, I know French, some Macedonian, and a little Spanish. What about you?”

“I won’t bore you with naming them all, but it’s somewhere around one hundred and fifty, including the ones you speak. And then there’s all the dialects to consider.”

Annika’s mouth fell open in amazement.

“You’re not even sure how many you speak? Well, I have to test you. Parlez-vous couramment le français? J’ai remarqué qu’une partie de votre vin était étiqueté en français. Avez-vous l’achaté en France?”

“Je parle assez à l’aise pour acheter le vin sans identification,” Finn replied with a grin.

“Your accent is trés bon,” she remarked. “I’m impressed. ¿Es usted bueno en el español? Aprendí tanto el funcionamiento justo en restaurantes de la cocina.”

“Estudié en España por un año y una mitad,” he said flawlessly. “Si usted mira en la parte posterior del sótano, usted encontrará algunos vinos de España. Asumo que mi acento era absolutamente bueno allí también.”

“So which language is your favorite?” She took another drink of wine, astounded by his intelligence.

“Eu acredito que Português é a minha língua favorita para falar em voz alta. É tão poético, para não falar útil. Estive com Talvi no Carnaval três vezes, e estou ansioso para ir novamente. Desta vez com menos tomates.” Finn winked at her and raised his glass to his lips.

“Quit being such a show off, Finn! She doesn’t know Portuguese!” Talvi blurted out, trying with all his might not to let the scowl on his face seem so obvious. Ambrose bit
down hard on his pipe, his eyes twinkling merrily at his sons, but he remained silent.

“I think it’s awesome that you guys went to carnival three times,” Annika said confidently, proving him wrong. Talvi seemed surprised that she knew what Finn had told her, but she actually had no clue what Finn had said other than deciphering this one fact due to the similarities with Spanish. “Do they really have giant food fights there, or did you behave yourselves?” she asked.

“We went to a masquerade ball the first time. The second time we got into the biggest food fight I’ve ever imagined. There were tomatoes everywhere,” Finn said, grinning a little as he reminisced.

“What did you do on the third visit?” Annika asked. Finn stopped smiling and glanced first at his brother, and then at his father. Talvi’s eyes opened wide, but he didn’t say a word. Ambrose puffed his pipe, and a huge, mischievous grin slowly spread across his bearded face.

“I see the cat finally caught that fluent tongue of yours, Finn. Why won’t you tell her what you did?” He looked to be on the verge of laughter. Annika and the nymphs waited on the edges of their seats for the rest of the story, but Finn was silent. At long last, Ambrose set his pipe down.

“The third time they went to Sao Paulo—”

“No, Father! Don’t!” the brothers pled.

“They went to jail!” Ambrose roared as Talvi and Finn’s jaws fell open, utterly betrayed by their own father. The girls joined him in peals of laughter. “And after I brought them home from South America, they built the greenhouse for their mother. Perhaps you should go back to Brazil, boys,” he said with a twinkle in his eyes. “I’ve been wanting to expand the kitchen.” The girls only laughed harder as Talvi and Finn scowled at each other.

“Talvi, why don’t you be a gracious host and find the girls some extra blankets?” his father said, still smiling. “There’s going to be a frost tonight.”

“They know their way to the linen closet,” he said as though this were a great inconvenience to him. Finn started to get up to help, but Talvi was faster on his feet. “Though I don’t imagine they can reach the blankets on the highest shelves,” he added to his amused father and brother, and sauntered away.

The girls followed him down the hall towards Yuri’s bedroom after stopping at the closet for the extra bedding. There were two more rooms on the left of Yuri’s, and Talvi opened the door closest to it and carried in the blankets for Sariel, Hilda, and Runa. They turned down their beds while he built a fire that would keep them warm until dawn. He left Runa and Hilda with big bear hugs, kisses on their cheeks, and wishes for a good night’s sleep. Then he motioned for Annika to follow him further down the hall.

“You know where the bath is, and you have a basin in there if you want to wash up in the morning,” he said in the darkness, setting the blanket on the bed. He lit a candle on the nightstand, then walked over to the fireplace and used it to coax a few warm flames onto the tinder. Annika looked around at her dark surroundings. It was much smaller than Yuri’s bedroom, but still bigger than any of the rooms she had lived in while moving around the world with her family. The plaster walls had a few large cracks exposing the original stone underneath, but there were no drafts. The windows were shut tight and she could see thousands of stars through the uneven glass. There was one dresser along the wall, and a small table next to it where the pitcher and bowl sat.
“Do I need to wake up at a certain time? Are we doing anything important tomorrow?” Annika asked, still somewhat nervous around him. After their kiss in the forest that morning, she had no idea what else to expect.

“No, just come down to the kitchen when you wake up,” he said, still gazing at the fire. “Unless you sleep like a bear in winter, someone will be down there by the time you get up.” He took the blanket and spread it across the bed, then drew back the covers. He sat down on the edge and reached into the blankets.

“Come sit beside me,” he said, keeping his hand hidden underneath the blanket. “I want to show you something.”

“Oh, I’m sure you do,” she said, “but I’m not getting into that bed with you.” He snickered a little.

“Silly girl, it’s not what you think. Like my father said, you and I will be under the same roof for an undetermined amount of time, and I truly want you to enjoy your stay here. I left the door open for a reason, Annika.” She glanced at the open door, realizing that he made a good point, and found herself sitting next to him.

“Now close your eyes,” he instructed. She shut them, wondering if she was going to regret it or not. Runa hadn’t been able to fully convince Annika if he was a womanizer, but her instinct was leaning towards yes. And she wasn’t counting on his courteous and sophisticated brother being so handsome, either.

Her skin prickled in anticipation, and then her nose was overcome by the scent of summer. It was lavender, without a doubt. Something tickled her upper lip and she opened her eyes. He’d been holding a sachet in front of her nose.

“I can’t believe how good it smells,” she said, breathing in the sweet fragrance.

“Wait until you pull these sheets over your head,” he told her. “You would never believe that a long winter is on its way.”

She looked at him in the dim firelight and was taken back to that same morning, sitting on the leafy ground with the trees rustling overhead. Something she had been meaning to ask had suddenly come back to her.

“You know Talvi, you never told me what Maurice-toe companya vlatzee means.”

“I’ll tell you when the time is right. You have my word.”

“Alright, then. I won’t hold my breath.”

“I keep my word, Miss Brisby,” he said, giving her a serious look. “I asked you to trust me this morning, and I didn’t let you slip out of my arms for one second, did I?”

“No, but that was different,” she said, remembering her blindfolded horse ride earlier that morning. It was true, he’d never let her go for even a moment. “We weren’t alone on a bed in a dark room then.”

“Now that is a bummer, isn’t it?” he said, recalling her use of the word in his room earlier. She let out a snort, grateful that he’d turned a serious moment into something funny and light. He leaned over and brushed the corner of her smiling mouth with his lips. By the time she turned to kiss him back, he’d already stood up.

Annika felt like her brain was going to short circuit, but then a cold feeling passed through her body like a ghost. She’d been having so much fun with her new friends that she hadn’t thought about Uncle Vince and the rest of her family in a very long time. I just hope they know I’m safe, she thought, feeling guilty for enjoying herself when others were worried about her.

“I’m certain they know you’re in good hands,” Talvi said from the doorway, having
read her thoughts. “The best thing you can do keep telling them that.” He quietly shut the
door behind him as he left the room, and she didn’t even bother to undress as she climbed
into the sheets. She was a smart girl. She could hold her own. Her family had to know she
was alright. They just had to.
Annika woke up fairly early the next morning but didn’t open her eyes right away. Instead she opened her ears and listened to the birds singing outside her bedroom window. For a moment she thought she heard Vince scrambling around the house, trying to get ready for another day of chasing bugs in the countryside of Bulgaria. But her ears had deceived her, and her eyes were met with a grand quilt over her body and tapestries that hung on the walls.

She stepped onto the cold stone floor and walked to the window. The bright yellow sunshine was blinding, and it promised to be another beautiful day like the one before. A wool cardigan had mysteriously appeared on the table overnight, and after pulling it on and stopping by the bathroom she made her way into the empty kitchen.

Is it really that late? Maybe I do sleep like a bear in winter, she wondered as she looked around. The air was sweetened by the dried herbs that hung overhead. She walked around the room, exploring and touching everything curiously. There was a large sink with a water pump beside it, and the black hearth needed to be cleaned. The dishes from last night were clean and piled in a massive drying rack on the counter, and a ceramic pitcher of fresh milk sat on an island in the middle of the cooking area. A high-pitched shriek broke the silence followed by a giggle, announcing the arrival of the children with Anthea chasing after them.

“Good morning,” Annika said as Sloan toddled up to her leg and Stella hopped around her, meowing like a cat.

“I’m sorry. Playing kittens is her new favorite game ever since the stable cats had kittens,” Anthea apologized. Her hair had come loose and she’d given up trying to pin it back into place.

“It’s okay,” she said, crawling on her hands and knees to mew back at Stella. “I used to baby-sit a lot growing up. They seem really well-behaved.” Anthea laughed, putting her hair in place.

“If you still think that after being here a full day, let me know. It would be nice to take a nap like my lazy little brother does so often.”

“I’ll let you know, don’t worry,” Annika smiled.

“Did you have breakfast yet?”

“No I just woke up.”

“Lucky you. Well, here…” she said, and walked over to a smaller cauldron in the hearth. After spooning some oatmeal into a small wooden bowl, she poured some of the milk into it and set it on the table beside a honey pot.

“Spoons are in the drawer to the right of the sink.”

“Thanks,” Annika said as she fetched one and sat down at the table. “Hey, this is pretty good!”

“Eat it like a kitty! Eat it like a kitty!” Stella urged in her little voice as her mother set a shallow dish of milk on the floor. The little girl stuck her nose in it and focused on drinking it like a cat until Annika’s spoon was scraping the bottom of an empty bowl.

“I think that’s where the big girls are; in the barn playing with the kittens. Do you know where that is?”
“Yep. Hey, thanks for breakfast Anthea.”

She buttoned up her sweater and ventured outside in the crisp air towards the stable. She saw Finn down at the far end lifting a pitchfork of hay from a wagon in the aisle and tossing into a stall. A round of laughter erupted from nearby, and she turned to see Sariel, Hilda, Runa and Yuri lying in a huge pile of straw, covered by scampering kittens.

“Good morning,” Runa called to her.
“Did you sleep well?” Yuri asked.
“Oh, it was great. The bed’s super comfy.”
“How’s your foot?” Hilda asked, pulling a kitten off her shoulder. “Is it better?”

Annika rotated her ankle in a circle and was pleasantly surprised to find it had returned to normal.

“Yeah, it’s just fine.”
“Didn’t you say that you could use your foot as a weapon?” Runa asked. Yuri’s eyes lit up.
“I want to see!” she said. Annika was pleased at the opportunity to finally show off some of her skills.

“Well, one of you has to attack me. I’ll try to go easy on you. I did just wake up, after all.”

“Count me out,” Sariel said.
“Me too. I’m content to watch,” Hilda said with a smile.
“I don’t know if I can attack you. You’re so nice!” Runa pouted. Annika smiled and led them to the lawn outside, where there would be no chance of accidentally stepping on the small, fluffy kittens hiding in the straw.

“Just run at me, or try to grab me. Do anything; I don’t care. I’m probably rusty anyway,” she instructed, planting her feet far apart on the ground. She heard running feet, and then Yuri was grabbing her elbow. With ease, Annika took hold of her arm with her free hand and flipped the tall elven girl right over her back. Yuri landed on a soft bed of grass and leaves just as Runa jumped on her back, trying to tackle her. With expert skill, Annika flung Runa over her just like Yuri. They each tried twice more, but every time they landed on their backs. Finally Runa gave one last run, and was met with a roundabout kick to the chest that sent her flying a few feet back onto the ground.

“Ugh, I can’t even imagine what that would feel like if you weren’t going easy on me!” Runa winced from her spot on the ground. While Annika was surprised by her abilities, she was more concerned about Runa.

“Are you okay?” she asked, kneeling down beside her. Runa smiled weakly, gasping for air.

“I will be,” she wheezed. “I’ll get over it soon enough.” Annika let her lay for a moment, while she caught her breath.

“I didn’t mean to kick you so hard,” she said. But Runa wasn’t mad in the slightest as she waved her hand in dismissal.

“Will you teach me how to do that later?” she squeaked from the ground. Annika laughed and held out a hand to help her up.

“Of course.” Just then a powerful force struck her from the side, sending her to the ground. Strong hands had pinned her wrists close to her ears with her back against the ground, and there was Talvi, gloating over her.

“Are you really that proud that you’ve tackled a woman almost half your size?” she
asked him. “Because I know I’m not very impressed.” He frowned a little, but his impish grin returned as he leaned down close to her face.

“I’m just trying to keep you on your toes. You let your guard down; that was your mistake. The next time you do that around me, you may not be so lucky to have an audience to save you,” he said in a soft whisper that only she could hear. She grinned and nodded in total agreement. “Or perhaps you don’t mind having an audience?” he asked in a very low voice.

“Actually, I prefer it,” she challenged, laying on a thick dose of flirtatious charm. She pulled her knees up towards her chest, brushing the sides of his torso with them. His eyes widened, thinking she was going to wrap her legs around him. He dipped his head down to touch her lips and that’s when she pushed her feet with all her strength against his hipbones, sending him flying backwards. She jumped to her feet and heard Finn, Runa, and Hilda roaring with laughter. Even Yuri and Sariel couldn’t contain themselves.

“I’m just trying to keep you on your toes, Talvi!” Annika sang playfully as he stood up, brushing dried grass and leaves off his shirt and pants. He wore an unusual expression, a combination of chagrin and intrigue. He was at a loss for words as the laughter died down, and he gave an arrogant toss of his head before walking back into the house. After a few congratulatory remarks, Finn hauled a burlap target from out of the barn and left the girls to their archery practice. Yuri shared her bow with Annika, giving pointers here and there, and although she said nothing about her weapon’s girth, she did insist that Annika keep her legs apart.

“Once you get really good, we’ll try it from horseback. If you can’t shoot from a horse, you’re in trouble,” she said, then sunk an arrow slightly off center of the target.

“That doesn’t sound like something I’d need to worry about. When’s the last time you were in a situation where you needed to shoot something from horseback?” Annika asked her. “It’s not like you go hunting. Aren’t you vegetarian?”

“Yes, but one time Talvi and I ran into a handful of maenads, and it got a little messy.”

“Maenads? What are those?”

“They’re some of the nastiest demons around,” Yuri shuddered. “They’re as mad as they are deadly. They poison their bodies to the point of insanity with alcohol and other substances, and then mutilate anything or anyone that crosses their path. Sometimes they’ll lure you close with a song or a dance, but they’re like piranhas—they’ll rip you to shreds.”

“That’s messed up. Are they common around here?”

“Not at all. They’re much farther west,” she said offhandedly while she brought another arrow from the quiver at her side. “I’m so glad Talvi was with me that day or we never would’ve made it back alive. It was terrible.” Annika lowered her bow and looked at her curiously.

“What happened? What did he do?”

Yuri grew quiet as she positioned her arrow and pulled back on the bowstring.

“I’d rather not go into detail about what he did.” Annika watched as she released the string and pierced the target with a perfectly clean shot. “Like I said, it got messy.”
Chapter 9

Annika, Yuri, and the samodivi most of the day outside; shooting from horseback, playing with the kittens, working in the garden and learning a few kickboxing moves until it was time to wash up and begin cooking dinner. Annika had wanted to get her backpack so she could listen to her music or write in her journal, but Talvi had mysteriously been absent all day and she didn’t remember exactly how to get to his room. She headed upstairs, having found the hall that led to the third floor where she thought his room was, when she passed an open door. She stopped, poked her head in, and was amazed by the bookshelves that reached from floor to ceiling. A towering window illuminated the room, and a set of French doors were cracked open to let in a bit of fresh air along with the light. A forlorn telescope sat out on the balcony as if waiting patiently for nightfall, but what got Annika’s attention was the sheer number of books that filled the room.

There were books stacked in piles everywhere; books by the windows, books on the nightstand by the bed, books on the floor beside the bed, books on the trunk at the foot of the bed, and books on a chest of drawers. There was a simple desk with none other than books on it, and an overstuffed chair and ottoman where Finn sat reclined and barefoot with his long legs stretched out before him, reading. He looked up and set his book aside on a small table that was piled with none other than books, but remarkably there was also a glass of water sitting on it as well. His room wasn’t bursting with opulent material possessions like those of his younger siblings, and none of his clothes were lying about… just books.

“I was wondering if you would come by,” he said, leaning his head back on the chair. His curls fell to the sides of his head, revealing a warm look in his soft brown eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Annika said apologetically. “Have you been here all day waiting for me to show up?”

“No, I’ve been here all day because this is what I do when I’m not teaching or doing chores,” he said, still resting his head on the cushion. His expression was welcoming, yet free from expectation. He moved one of his long legs and invited her to sit on the ottoman in front of him. As she came into the room he lifted his head, causing his curls fell back into his face.

“I was hoping to hear more about unicorns,” she said as she took a seat.

“Yes, I recall our conversation from dinner. Why are you so curious about them?”

“I don’t know,” she fibbed. “Ever since I was a little girl I always wanted to see one.”

“Then you must be quite content.” He glanced at the ring on her hand and lifted a brow at her, and she couldn’t help smiling in embarrassment. “Don’t worry—Talvi already informed Father and I. Your secret’s safe with us.”

“He said it wasn’t common for them to do this; to come near me in the first place and then to give me something like this,” she confessed. “I guess it’s more than just a strand of hair.”

“Without question. And Talvi’s correct about the manner in which it was given to you. I imagine your mystical benefactress thought you needed it for a reason, which is
very—’’ He pressed his lips together and looked up at the ceiling, searching for the perfect word.

‘‘Weird?’’ she suggested.

‘‘Prognostic was the word I was searching for, but I suppose it qualifies as weird,’’ he said and stretched in his chair.

‘‘How did you know it was a she, and not a he that gave it to me?’’ she asked. He sat up and took her right hand, thumbing the ring gently.

‘‘I can tell by the color,’’ he said, pointing at the long strand of hair wrapped around the ring. ‘‘It’s dark silver, not pure white. She was as dark as the night, wasn’t she?’’

‘‘Yeah. How did you know that?’’ Annika wondered, but then remembered the telepathic nature of these elves. ‘‘What else do you know off the top of your head?’’ she asked as he gently set her hand down.

‘‘What do you wish to know?’’

‘‘Why are they so secretive? It doesn’t seem like there’s anyone else living in these forests, so what do they have to be afraid of?’’

‘‘What do they not have to be afraid of?’’ Finn replied. ‘‘Have you ever been in one’s company, only to find yourself tired, irritable, and exhausted after speaking with them?’’

‘‘Oh, sure.’’

‘‘It’s essentially the same thing for unicorns, except much worse. They’re such sensitive creatures that they can’t afford to be in the presence of anything with less than four legs. Their empathic nature absorbs a lot of psychic residuals projected out and left behind by others. The other reason they’re so rare to behold is that they’re very powerful and magical. Sometimes they’re hunted for their horn or their blood as a remedy to cure the sick and dying. Their blood will heal nearly any wound, and if you drink enough you can become nearly immortal.’’ Annika’s eyes grew wide.

‘‘Really?’’

‘‘Yes, really. In the wild, ravens live an average of seventeen years, but Cazadora has been with our family ever since Father was my age. She still flies as though she’s a young bird.’’

‘‘How did that happen?’’

‘‘She most likely fed on a dead unicorn; that’s my guess. Ravens are scavengers, you know,’’ he said. ‘‘She’ll eat just about anything, so don’t ever bring food into the library, unless you don’t mind sharing.’’

‘‘Good to know,’’ she replied with a chuckle. ‘‘So if unicorn blood can do that to Cazadora, have people ever done that to live forever?’’

‘‘Yes, but it’s a high price to pay. One would have to kill the animal to acquire the amount of blood needed.’’

‘‘There is a certain amount? How much?’’

‘‘More than a thimbleful, I’m sure. But no one has killed any of the creatures in centuries, and I doubt they ever would. It’s punishable by death in every realm. It’s said that if you kill one, the pain you cause it to suffer is multiplied by a thousand, and your immortal life will be afflicted with this pain as long as you live. The few that have committed such a heinous act always killed themselves before they could be tried and executed.’’

‘‘But if they’re immortal, how could they die?’’

‘‘Oh, countless ways,’’ he said matter-of-factly. ‘‘Severing of the head or a main
artery and bleeding out, being run through the heart, breaking one’s neck, falling a great
distance, being crushed in a carriage accident, drowning at sea, being eaten by wolves…”
He paused and took a drink of his water. “I think you get the point. Being immortal isn’t
the same as being invincible. Even the stars above die, although it’s millions of years
later. A unicorn won’t live anywhere near that long, but as long as they suffer no terrible
injury, they grow very old. Even I don’t know how old they can be, and while I’m not
trying to be boastful, for me to not know something about something is rather…
infrequent.” He made a little gesture to his literary surroundings and she nodded.

“Wow…” Annika sighed, and shook her head in wonder. “I still can’t believe I’m
sitting here, having this conversation with you. I’m talking to an elf, which I didn’t think
existed, about an animal that I didn’t think existed until I saw it with my own eyes. I
spent the day shooting arrows and kickboxing with your elf sister and three wood
nymphs, which I didn’t think existed, either. I keep thinking at some point I’m going to
wake up and have dreamt all of this, but I’m really here.”

“Yes, you certainly are,” he replied, studying her from behind his curls. He was
holding back a smile, prompting Annika to try and guess what he had on his mind. Was it
simple curiosity? Academic intrigue? Romantic allure? There was only one way for her
to find out, so she leaned a little closer and held her wrist within inches of his fingertips.

“Maybe you should pinch me. You know…so I can be sure,” she suggested with a
flirtatious grin.

“And cause you pain? I wouldn’t dream of it.” He shook his head and folded his
hands over his chest, leaving Annika to wonder if he’d just turned down a perfectly
innocent reason to touch her. Maybe he was such a gentleman that he honestly couldn’t
imagine pinching her. Or maybe he was one of those scholars who was a genius in the
classroom, yet completely oblivious when it came to the laws of attraction. She’d met a
few guys like that, ones who couldn’t tell the difference between a woman being nice and
a woman hitting on them. She rested her hands in her lap and decided to give him the
benefit of the doubt.

“Your bracelet’s really pretty. Where did you get it?”
“Hilda made it for me,” he answered without further elaboration.
“Do you ever take it off?”
“No,” he said in a neutral tone.
“What stones are those? They look like moonstone.”
“Yes, actually they are.” Other than looking down at his bracelet, nothing in his body
language or voice changed, much to Annika’s frustration.

“I’ve read that the whiter the moonstone is, the more potent it is in matters of love…and
those stones are really white,” she pointed out. He glanced at her in slight surprise.

“I’m very impressed, Annika. I didn’t think you would know so much about magical
matters,” he said, and rose to his feet. He walked to his desk and retrieved a notepad and
pen before returning to his chair, this time sitting up in a more formal position. “Now, I
do believe it’s my turn to ask you some questions.”

For the rest of the afternoon, Finn picked through Annika’s brain, asking about
everything from science and medicine to American pop culture and slang, but the subject
of magical stones did not come up again.
Chapter 10
the powers of pixie dust

Finn’s younger brother had kept to himself most of the day, and even at the dinner table Talvi was quiet as a mouse. His mother asked if he was feeling well, but he only smiled and replied that he was just fine.

After the dishes had been cleared, he led Annika into a parlor where numerous lamps lit the room brightly. Runa grinned and patted the space next to her where she was curled up on a settee, and Annika took the seat. Yuri was playing with Stella, and Althea held her grandson in her arms while Anthea played piano for them. It was a large grand, and she plinked away while her father smoked his pipe beside her. Talvi sat on the floor near Annika and reached under the settee, pulling out a small wooden box inlaid with mother-of-pearl camels. He opened it and took out a small leather pouch of tobacco and a package of rolling papers, fashioning a cigarette for himself. They listened to Anthea play for a while, but she kept faltering at her notes.

“Darling, why don’t you take a break? We’ll have Yuri play something for us,” her mother suggested as she swayed back and forth with Sloan.

“I just don’t…I can’t understand why I can’t remember the notes,” she stammered, and covered her eyes with her hand as she stood up. Ambrose held her in his arm and said something inaudible in her ear, and she gave a weak smile.

Yuri cracked her knuckles and stood up, but she passed by the piano and found a violin instead.

“Annika, why don’t you play with her?” Talvi asked.

“I play electric guitar,” she tried to excuse. “I can’t remember the last time I played an acoustic.”

It didn’t matter what her excuse was, because Talvi had already found an old Spanish guitar mounted on the wall and handed it to her. Annika didn’t feel worthy to hold such a lovely thing in her hands, but the instrument spoke to her and beckoned to be played. She strummed it a few times, and only needed to adjust the strings a tiny bit to get it in tune.

“Alright, I doubt you’ve ever heard this song, but it’s one of my favorites.” She’d barely picked out the first handful of notes when Talvi laughed and sauntered over to the piano.

“Over the Hills and Far Away? What an appropriate choice considering where you are,” he smirked, and sat down at the bench to play. Annika was so pleasantly surprised that she completely forgot the first measure of lyrics to the song she knew so well. She watched his fingers dance effortlessly along the keys, and soon Runa and Hilda were humming along with them. The experience was remarkable to Annika, as if the elves and nymphs had always known about Led Zeppelin. They played for almost an hour and she wanted to play more, but it was clearly someone’s bedtime. Althea couldn’t keep Sloan from fussing any longer, and Stella was fast asleep in Anthea’s lap. Talvi pulled the cover over the piano keys and watched his parents help Anthea take her children to bed.

“I can’t believe how this thing sounds! Is this a magical guitar?” Annika asked no one in particular.

“Oh dear…did someone give Annika some of my pixie dust when I wasn’t looking?” Finn asked with a sly grin.
“You have pixie dust?” Yuri squeaked.
“Yes, I do,” Finn smiled.
“You do not!” his sister argued.
“I do so. I just got it the other day.”
“I doubt that.”
“You’ll see soon enough.”
“What does pixie dust do?” Annika asked curiously. Sariel stood up with her nose in the air.
“It makes you do asinine things like invite vampires to your own birthday party, that’s what.” Everyone grew quiet, and even Runa suppressed her giggles. Finn spoke up before the silence got too awkward.
“You know that they’ll be here for Father’s meeting, don’t you? He included a letter inside of Konstantin’s party invitation.” Both Yuri and Sariel’s jaws dropped.
“He invited them?” Sariel gasped in surprise.
“He opened my invitation?” Yuri repeated in complete horror. But whereas Sariel just looked a little shocked, Yuri seemed overwhelmed with worry.
“So when are they getting here?” Yuri seemed distraught.
“Now don’t work yourself into a tizzy. They’ll be here in time to celebrate your birthday. It’s not exactly easy for them to get around,” her older brother reminded her. She still seemed irritated that her party hadn’t been the only reason for their R.S.V.P. and even more irritated that her father had tampered with her allegedly sealed invitation.
“Great, I guess we’re on coffin duty,” Talvi sneered.
“Coffins? They really sleep in them? I thought that was just movie stuff,” Annika asked in disbelief.
“Well, what if they walked in their sleep? I dare say they’d wake up a little toasted,” Finn chortled, and reached for Talvi’s cigarette box.
“That’s not very nice, Finn,” Hilda said reproachfully.
“Hey Runa, weren’t you telling me that the vampires crave human blood more than animals? What about me? If I’m supposed to be at this meeting does that mean I’m screwed?” asked Annika.
“Well, it’s not, um—”
“I can’t predict whether or not you’ll be screwed by the time of their arrival, but you ought to be escorted everywhere whilst they’re among us,” said Talvi.
“Don’t worry, she’ll be with us constantly,” Hilda snickered. He tried hard to hide his displeasure while the samodivi exchanged amused glances. Yuri ignored them as best as she could.
“Are you guys all going to be at this meeting?” Annika asked. Everyone nodded their heads.
“All of us except Anthea. I’m not sure if she’ll have the strength for it,” Finn answered.
“What’s the matter with her? I noticed her act strange tonight,” Hilda asked. Finn looked at the floor for a moment and then into Hilda’s eyes.
“Her husband Asbjorn is trapped on the other side, or some other place in between.” Hilda and Runa seemed greatly upset at the news, but Sariel didn’t flinch. Apparently she had learned this when she had reached the house before them.
“That place looks so awful! How would he even survive?” Annika asked.
“You’ve seen it?” Yuri implored her. “I’ve only heard of it.”
“It’s really creepy,” Annika admitted, feeling shivers go down her spine. “It’s like a desert with black sand and the sky’s all red.”
“I try not to think about how narrowly we escaped it,” Runa cringed at the memory as well. “Poor Anthea! Those poor babies! I hope we can find their father!”
“Let’s not talk about this anymore,” Sariel said, still standing. “We shouldn’t bother getting all worked up when we don’t know enough about that place. We’ll know more soon.”
“Not soon enough,” Yuri mumbled.
“This will calm you down,” Finn said, and handed a lit cigarette to his sister, who took a couple puffs.
“You’d just think we could put our heads together and…” Yuri trailed off, at a loss for words.
“And?” Finn asked, wearing an uncharacteristic grin that was typically sported by his brother.
“You’d just think…” She scratched her head and handed the cigarette to Sariel, who took a deep drag. And then another. And then another.
“You’d just think that somewhere around here there have got to be six hundred red and white roses!” Talvi and Finn burst out in hysterical laughter as Sariel choked on the smoke.
“You put pixie dust in this?” she screeched while looking at the little stub in her fingers. She tried to look annoyed at them, but sure enough, within seconds her face had melted into the sweetest smile Annika had seen. It was a welcome change from the perpetual frown she always wore. Yuri stood up and took Sariel by the arm.
“We need to go and look at the arrangements I have made so far! I want to know what you think of the tablecloths I found! Come on!” The two of them giggled as they stepped out of the room and together they tore down the hallway, hooting along the way with giddy laughter.
“Wow, that stuff works pretty fast,” Annika said, mystified at the potency.
“I can’t believe you fooled Sariel. She hasn’t fallen for that in a long time,” Hilda said, shaking her head in disapproval of Finn’s behavior.
“I was only trying to cheer up Yuri. Father’s been snooping through her mail. And I can’t help it if Sariel smokes like a chimney!” Finn laughed again.
“What’s going to happen to them?” Annika wondered.
“Oh, they’ll probably come up with some fabulous idea for the party and then fall asleep before they write it down. I doubt they will even remember what they did tomorrow morning,” Hilda sighed.
“But it’s not harmful at all,” Finn assured Annika. “You’d have to smoke all the time to have any negative effects.”
“It sounds like it could be fun. I’ll try just about anything once,” Annika said.
“Would you really?” Talvi asked from his place at the piano bench. Her eyes darted over to his but he only smiled innocently.
“Talvi, I’m curious. How many people did you invite to this party anyway?” Finn asked his brother. Talvi bit his lip as he counted on his hands.
“Perhaps two…no…three hundred…hmm… I honestly don’t know,” he shrugged a little, and Finn let out a howl of laughter.
“You’re in such hot water if you don’t even know how many guests will be here,” he said, wiping a tear from his eye. “I’m not bailing you out this time.”

“Pish Posh,” he said, and motioned for Runa to bring over his box of tobacco. “Mother and Father are well aware of the parties I throw.”

“Yes, but unfortunately, so is everyone else in the area. Who’s going to be watching the door for the pixies? Remember what happened last time they showed up?” Talvi stopped rolling his cigarette and lifted a brow, giving his brother a smile. It was not so much a hopeful smile as much it was an expectant one.

“Me?” Finn groaned loudly. “Why can’t you find someone else?”

“You know everyone as well as I do, and I’ll be too busy tending to details,” Talvi said, and lit his cigarette.

“What details have you tended to, anyway?” Finn inquired with a skeptical expression.

“You’ll see,” he said, but offered no elaboration on what he had up his sleeve.

Runa gave a big yawn and Hilda pulled her up from the comfortable cushions they’d been resting on. She motioned for Annika to join them, but Annika was reluctant to leave. While she was curious about the powers of pixie dust, the allure of having two sexy brothers all to herself was harder to resist.

“It’s getting late, and we’re all going to town first thing in the morning,” Hilda told her. She stood in place with Runa, waiting for Annika to get up and join them before bidding the brothers good night. Although she was frustrated with Hilda for making her cut her evening short, she knew it was for the best. Still, one foot dragged in front of the other, and she found herself trailing behind next to Runa as Hilda marched ahead. When she arrived at her room she quietly pulled her aside.

“Hey, Runa, can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” she said sweetly. “You can ask me anything.”

“Do you mean mo rees toe comp an ya vlatzee?” Her brown eyes got very large, but not as large as the smile spread across her face.

“Yeah, that’s it. What does it mean?” Runa asked, still wide-eyed in amusement. Annika glanced at her toes, but eventually nodded her head. “Oh my, I haven’t heard that one in a while!” Runa covered her mouth, but her eyes now had a dreamy look in them.

“It’s not bad, is it?” Annika asked, and leaned against the doorway.

“I really can’t translate it. I don’t speak the language as well as he does. There’s so much that gets lost in the interpretation.”

“Can’t you give me a rough idea?” Annika was dying of curiosity.

“Well, yes, but it sounds so unrefined,” Runa hesitated.

“I don’t care. Just tell me!” she urged. Runa finally caved in, not that it took much convincing.

“Word for word it means something like, ‘lick my bees’ legs’.”

“That sounds a little vulgar,” Annika said, wrinkling her nose.

“No, no, no!” Runa shook her head. “It’s a saying in Fae, the language of the fairies. A lot of what they say gets misinterpreted. Anyway, you must know how the flowers are such an important part of their lives?”
“Uh, sure,” Annika nodded, figuring fairies and flowers just went hand in hand.
“So, pretend you are a flower stuck in the ground, and Talvi is another flower, far across the meadow, and the bees…you send them back and forth to one another, and, you know, it’s…” Runa blushed bright red.
“What? Come on, Runa! What is it?” Annika was anxiously awaiting the explanation.
“It’s the only way you two can make love!” she hissed.
“Oh, right, because the bees are pollinating them,” Annika whispered, recalling Vince telling her this when she was very young. “So he…I guess he wants to send some bees my way pretty bad, huh?” Runa giggled again and her blonde hair trembled with her laughing body.
“Yes, I think it’s quite obvious that he does. I wish you spoke Fae so you would understand its meaning better. You’ll have to trust me on this. What he said is so much more beautiful than I can ever explain.”
Annika slept in late again for the second morning in a row, which wasn’t a challenge. Compared to the cold hard ground she’d been sleeping on for the past few days, this bed felt like a cloud… an incredible, warm, lavender scented cloud that she wasn’t eager to climb out of. She lay for a long time under the covers until hunger drove her out. There was no one in the warm, bright kitchen when she arrived, but a heavenly smell was teasing her stomach. On top of the stove sat a pan of fresh cinnamon-raisin bread. She helped herself to a piece and looked out the window over the sink. Just then the back door opened and Finn walked in with a pile of wood in his arms, which he dropped into a bin near the hearth.

“Good morning,” he said cheerfully. “I see you found something to eat. Isn’t that bread delicious? Anthea makes it every now and again.”

“Yeah, it’s really good,” Annika said with her mouth full. “Where is everyone? Did the samodivi go to town already?”

Finn nodded and wiped the sweat from his brow.

“Yes. They left over an hour ago. Yuri was insistent that she stay on schedule with her errands.”

Annika felt awkward being left behind, but couldn’t help grinning at the way Finn pronounced the word schedule. With such a deep voice, she could’ve listened to him read the phone book for hours.

“Do you need any help with chores around here? I could help you bring in more wood.”

“That’s very kind of you, but I believe we’ve more than enough for now,” he said, taking off his boots and setting them by the door. “And I’m all finished cleaning out the stalls; perhaps you could help Talvi feed and groom the horses?”

“Oh, okay.” Annika didn’t know the first thing about grooming horses, but at least she’d have something to do.

“Well then, I’ll see you later. I’m off to take a bath,” he said before leaving the kitchen. Annika grabbed another hunk of bread and headed for the stable. The air was crisp but the sunlight warmed her shoulders on her way to the stable doors, which were cracked open.

“Hello? Hellllloooo?” Annika called out. Her eyes adjusted to the indoor light and she peeked into an empty stall to see at least half a dozen fluffy kittens playing in the straw. She walked over to them and picked up a little black ball of fluff that immediately began to purr.

“I didn’t think it was possible for anyone to sleep later than me,” Talvi remarked from the aisle. He set down a pail of water and brought the other the stall beside her.

“Finn said you could use some help with grooming,” she said, and set the kitten down. She followed him to the roomy stall where a huge palomino stallion stood, eating his hay in dainty little bites. “What do you want me to do?” He thought for a moment, filling a container with the fresh water.

“You can pick their hooves. I haven’t done that in a while.”

“Pick their hooves?”
“I’ll show you,” he said, and slipped a soft rope halter over the horse’s dark muzzle. He led the stallion away from his hay and out into the aisle, then grabbed a sinister looking object resembling an ice pick from a box of tools. After securing the horse in the crossties, he ran his hand down the palomino’s foreleg until the animal lifted it, and then held the hoof against his thigh, scooping in an outward motion with the strange tool.

“That’s all there is to it,” he said, releasing the stallion’s massive hoof to the floor. “Now you try.”

“I don’t know…” Annika hesitated. “What if he kicks me?”

“Galileo wouldn’t hurt a fly. He’s certainly not going to kick you,” Talvi assured her. Then, to her surprise, he crawled underneath the horse and patted his stomach from below. The golden horse tossed his flaxen mane but his powerful legs didn’t budge. “See? He’s a perfect gentleman, just like his owner.”

“So what you’re saying is that he’s not your horse,” she quipped. An amused grin spread across Talvi’s face as he rose to his feet.

“No he isn’t, you cheeky lass. He belongs to Finn.”

He gave her another demonstration, showing her how to pick up the other foreleg before letting her have a try.

“This isn’t so bad,” she remarked. While she dislodged small stones and mud, he went into the next stall with the other bucket of water. When he returned, he helped her move on to the next hoof, instructing her how to stand with much more manners than he’d used during their archery session together. When Galileo’s hooves were clean, Talvi handed her a curry comb and demonstrated how to use it, then picked up another brush and started on the horse’s other side. Their eyes met and she looked away quickly.

“Do you know when the others are coming back?” she asked.

“I have no idea what time to expect them,” he replied, trying to catch her gaze again. “I was still asleep when they left.”

“That must be a nice life, sleeping in late and lying around all day long like you do,” she said, partially teasing and partially envious of such a lifestyle. “I’m working now, aren’t I?” he pointed out.

“Yeah, but what else do you do, exactly?” she prodded.

“What else do I do?” He scrunched up his face and looked as though he had never been asked this question before. “Well, sometimes I work in the garden or do chores around the house. Sometimes I fetch things for others, or help them solve some type of conundrum. Then I like to take a nap in the afternoon or paint, or read, or work on some other project. Sometimes I help cook dinner, if I’m home. I like to go to the Tortoise and Hare a few nights a week, but my favorite thing to do is go riding through the mountains and watch the weather change.” He paused to smile wistfully. “I’m rarely home.”

“So you don’t have a regular job?” was her surprised response.

“No I do not. Do you?”

“I did until recently,” she said, reaching under the stallion’s mane to brush his neck.

“What was your duty?”

“Before I was a waitress I translated documents,” she said, thinking how unexciting it must have sounded.

“Did you enjoy it?”

“Well, no. It was boring as shit. That’s why I stopped doing it and went back to waiting tables. I made a lot of money while I did it though.”
“What’s the point of having all that money if you don’t enjoy how you make it?” he asked curiously. She laughed at him.

“Like I haven’t thought of that myself? Trust me, I wonder that all the time. Where I come from, money is everything. It’s the reason people get out of bed and work jobs that they hate all day long. We all just want to be rich like you.”

“Like me?”

“Yeah, like you,” she said, surprised that he could be so naïve. “I wish I was rich like you so I could spend my days worrying about things like if I should play in the garden, read, paint, or nap today. Hmm, let’s see, it’s so hard to decide,” she said, mocking him.

“Do you think I swim in a pool of gold as well?” he said sarcastically.

“Maybe. Is that on the tour?” she joked. He looked irritated that she would say such a thing.

“Have you ever spent an afternoon in the freezing wind, digging potatoes out of the cold, hard dirt? Have you ever had to chop down trees so you’d keep warm in the winter? Do you have a crazy father who, on impulse, decides to construct yet another addition to your home, only you have to go get the marble yourself? That alone makes the pianoforte story sound like a walk in the trees. Or if you tear your shirt, you probably just throw it away and get a new one, don’t you? I’ve been mending this single shirt for sixteen years. Look.” He pointed to a small spot on the sleeve that had been patched.

“Okay, okay, I believe you,” Annika said, trying to avoid a fight.

“No, really. I want you to look at this,” he insisted. He walked under the horse’s neck and pointed to the spot on his shirt. “Here’s where I fell out of a tree four years ago. And here,” he pointed to his other sleeve. “I got caught on a rosebush last spring. And this one is from breaking up a fight between some of the barn cats.”

“Fine, I see your point,” Annika surrendered.

“I’m not convinced that you do,” Talvi answered, still nettled. “It’s different here, Annika. When I don’t feel like cooking for two hours, I can’t put something in one of those white boxes and instantly have food or clean clothes.”

“You mean a microwave and washing machine?” she tried to correct his terminology.

“Whatever you call the blasted things, it’s not an option,” he said with a hint of indignation in his voice. “We may have a comfortable looking life, but it requires a lot of work. There are times when I would give it all up to have what you have. Why do you think I visit the modern world often enough to be familiar with some of the same music as you? I would love to have an auto and be somewhere in a matter of hours, not weeks. I would love to have hot running water instead of building a fire to heat my bath. I would love it if my mother could just put her clothes in one of those micro-boxes and walk away, instead of scrubbing them by hand and hanging them to dry. But we can’t do that here, and that’s just the way it is.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you, Talvi. I’m sorry if I did,” she found it humorous, imagining Althea loading clothes into a micro-box. He tossed his brush into the bin before turning to look her square in the eye.

“It’s an argument that can’t be won; progress and the high price you modern humans pay for it. Has technology really freed up your precious time? I may work hard on occasion, but at least the air is clean and our rivers run clear. It’s far more than any modern city can claim, what with all that pollution. Who honestly enjoys the scent of
auto exhaust and factory farms? Or the smell of festering waste in the back alleys? It really makes one question what progress is, doesn’t it? Personally, I don’t know how you can live in such a place and be happy.”

“It’s not as bad as you make it out to be,” she said quietly. She felt embarrassed to have insulted him in his own home, but she didn’t appreciate him bashing the world where she came from either. “Obviously it’s interesting enough for you to keep visiting.”

Neither of them spoke as he released Galileo from his lead and sent him out to the expansive treed pastures. Clearly there were aspects of Talvi’s life that she didn’t understand. It was still so hard to believe he lived in a land without cars, without microwaves or telephones, without hot running water and electricity; not when he was surrounded by such extravagance.

“Did you still want that tour I promised you?” he asked her on the way out of the stable. They stopped by the water pump to rinse their hands and take a drink of the cool well water.

“Oh, well, only if you aren’t busy,” she said, offering him a chance to change his mind.

“I think I have some time.” He dipped his hand into the pocket of his pants and pulled out a pocket watch, furrowing his brow as he checked the hour. “Yes. I could schedule a tour in between reading and doing nothing. Oh, bollocks, there was that nap I was supposed to take, but I’ll fit it somewhere into my busy schedule,” he said with a smirk. She gave him a punch in the arm at his teasing, glad that the tension from a moment earlier had evaporated. And the way he said schedule...with such a velvety voice, she could’ve listened to him read the phone book for hours as well.

“Let’s go to the greenhouse first, shall we? That’s where Anthea and my mother spend a lot of their time.” They walked to a nice sized greenhouse, with four long rows of plants inside. The two eldest women of the house were wearing aprons and were repotting a selection of plants dotted with tiny red flowers. Stella was sitting on the floor, jamming dandelions and blades of grass into little pots of soil.

“Hello Talvi; hello Annika,” his mother greeted them.

“Good morning, Mother.”

“I don’t know why you insist on telling me that every day when it’s always well past noon by the time I see you,” she said, brushing a stray hair from her face. Her affectionate smile showed that she must have been the most patient mother in the world, raising such an incorrigible son as her youngest.

“If I have not yet had lunch, then it is still morning,” Talvi explained to Annika, and then turned to his mother. “You know my philosophies on the rest of the world starting the day too early.” Althea could only nod.

“What are you doing?” Annika asked, noticing the meticulous care that Anthea and Althea handled the flowering plants.

“Oh, I’ve been procrastinating,” Anthea answered. “The clang sheng will never flower if we don’t get it transplanted.”

“Is that Chinese?” asked Annika.

“Why yes,” said Anthea, impressed at Annika’s knowledge. “Chinese medicine has been one of our favorite areas of research for quite a while now. And these plants will be used to cure fatigue and weakness. It’s also helpful if you lose your appetite. This one over here is suan zao ren. It’s used for insomnia and anxiety.”
“It sounds like you know your stuff.”

“Well, I do,” Anthea smiled. “Talvi, would you be a dear and check on Sloan for me? I put him down a little while ago, but he was fussy.”

“We were just going in anyway,” he said, hiding his disinterest. “I suppose if I’m to give you a proper tour, we should start at the front door.” He led Annika out of the greenhouse, then around the side of the massive spread, and finally up one of the curving staircases. He opened the tall doors that stood parallel to the stained glass windows and let her in. She looked up and her eyes grew wide. There was the largest chandelier she’d ever seen, shining bright silver with thousands of tiny crystals glittering and reflecting prisms of color everywhere in the foyer. A staircase to the left led up to the next floor, and the handrail running alongside it was an intricate work of art in itself, made up entirely of wrought iron curling into grapevine tendrils. A simple mural ran up the wall along the staircase, depicting fields of wildflowers and birds flying through the sky.

“This is one of the first things that Yuri and I painted in the house,” he said. “We used to do everything together, but time changes all things.” He shook his head in disapproval and continued describing the work that went into the rest of the room. It was incredible to think it was built without bulldozers and power tools; just the willing hands of its inhabitants.

They walked through the arched hallway and turned to the right, strolling down another hall with a series of four identical double doors. He opened the one closest to them and they were greeted with light from a row of arched windows that led out to the courtyard. Looking around, Annika saw a vast ballroom, with high ceilings and smaller chandeliers similar to the enormous one in the entrance, but less elaborate. The wide arched ceiling was painted with fairies, butterflies, bumblebees and dragonflies hovering in a bright blue sky dotted with fluffy silver lined clouds. The floor was arranged in simple geometric patterns made of the palest pink and white marble. Round framed mirrors hung high up to reflect the chandeliers, and Annika could only imagine what the room looked like when it was lit up at night, with the windows overlooking the courtyard. At that moment she was willing to dig potatoes all day and maybe even give up running water to live in a place like this.

Sensing her awe, Talvi clasped her hand and spun her around. He guided her in a semicircle and dipping her down until her hair touched the floor. It caught her off guard, but she yielded to his movement easily.

“I didn’t think you would be so graceful,” he said, pulling her back up to him with strong arms. “You have to promise me a dance on my birthday.”

“Well, since you said please,” she laughed, and a flush crept over his face.

“Please?” he asked with a sheepish smile. She nodded and walked away from him, staring up at the paintings on the ceiling and the thousands of tiny rainbows bouncing off the walls from the cut crystal chandeliers. There was magic in this place; she could feel it pouring out of everything around her.

“Come along, there’s much more to see,” he ushered her kindly. They stepped into a round room with ten tall, narrow windows forming a crescent, all arching to a soft point in the center. There were two chaise lounges, both covered in soft chocolate brown velvet. Each had a soft knit afghan made of yarn dyed in brilliant hues lying upon it. Between the lounges stood a very tall ficus tree, whose branches draped lazily over the furniture. In front of the lounges was a short round table with a pile of books upon it. At
the center of the room on the stone floor sat a small wood burning stove.

“I guess you would call this the conservatory, but I call it the reading room. The libraries are just down the hall, but the light in here is incredible, as you can see,” he told her, pointing at the lovely ironwork of the windows.

“No wonder you call it the reading room. I can imagine sitting here all day long in the winter, watching the snow fall,” she said dreamily. She walked over and lay down on one of the lounges and looked out the windows to see the stable and the pastures full of trees. Their autumn colors popped against the backdrop of a bright blue sky. The ficus branches overhead gave her the impression that she was outside, lying in the forest with all the comforts of home. Wrought iron sconces shaped like curling grapevines were affixed to the wall between every other window. Underneath the windows were long narrow tables that held dozens of potted plants, filling the room with clean sweet smelling air. She could have spent the rest of the day right there in that spot, but something caught her eye that made her sit up in curiosity. On the portion of the wall that was not taken up by windows hung a beautiful painting. There was something very familiar about it, and very odd.

She stood up, studying the bright painting closely. A woman dressed like an Egyptian goddess was looking down and to the side at a glittering green serpent she held around her arms. A multitude of colors made up her intricate patchwork gown and she wore a jeweled ring on every finger. A young man in black, silver and green stood beside her, whispering something tender in her ear. The woman’s eyes were outlined with dark kohl, her features strikingly familiar. They both had black hair. The boy…his hair…it was wild, sensual, soft and catching the wind. The longer Annika gazed at the painting, the more she thought it looked like Yuri, with her twin brother telling her a secret. It was the twins, she realized.

“This is amazing!” she remarked, squinting at the brush strokes in front of her nose. “That looks like it was painted by Gustav Klimt.”

“I’m surprised you know his work.”

“Of course I know it,” she breathed. “I think my uncle’s taken me to every art museum in Paris. This isn’t like the ones I’ve seen at the Musée d’Orsay. Is it real?”

“Well it’s not imaginary,” Talvi said with a little grin, which faded to a little frown. “He was a very strange man…lots of cats. Yes, far too many cats. His house smelled like piss.”

“You say that like you’ve got firsthand experience.”

“Firsthand and secondhand, unfortunately. We had to air out our clothes for a week, but he captured our likeness quite well, don’t you think?”

“You and your sister sat for Gustav Klimt?”

“Lots of people sat for him,” Talvi said with a shrug. Annika looked at him in disbelief, then at the painting, and then back at him. She kept waiting for him to crack a joke or smile or laugh, but he simply headed towards the door. They walked down a different hall where an enormous grandfather clock stood looming over them. The woodgrain of the cedar shimmered as her eyes wandered over the intricate carvings of tree branches and two horned owls that stared straight ahead like silent watchmen. An image of the full sun leaned slightly to the right on the clock face, telling her that it was well past noon.

“We best hurry; when this thing strikes you might jump out of your skin. It always
scared me when I was younger,” he said, winking at her. They walked to the end of the hall and turned left. She recognized the doorway to the dining room and saw the row of doors, which they strolled past, along with the entrance to the music room, and finally stopped at the next door.

“I’ll show you those other two rooms you didn’t believe me about. Watch your step,” Talvi cautioned as they entered the dark room. “Most of these things are put away, but the larvae are always playing with something.”

“Larvae? Do you mean Stella and Sloan?”

“Yes. The smaller they are, the more they squirm like insect larvae,” he said as he walked to the nearest window and drew back the curtains, causing a bright light to illuminate the room.

“Wow!” she sighed, taking it all in. They were surrounded by shelves of sheet music and countless different horns and woodwinds. Most of the room was uncluttered and there were a few red velvet chairs and a sofa situated around a baby grand piano in the center of the room. The floors were covered with exotic carpets and the walls were adorned with numerous instruments. Some she recognized, and many she did not. Thankfully Talvi pointed them all out to her.

“A dulcimer, three different harps, a sitar, guitar, mandolin, violin, viola, cello, a harpsichord and a virginal.” He seated himself at the harpsichord, playing a few somber notes as she watched over his shoulder. Annika recognized the music and couldn’t help being moved by the passion with which he played. The way his body moved made it seem as though he felt every single note pass through his soul.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard Moonlight Sonata on a harpsichord,” she said, looking at Talvi in a completely different way.

“When I heard him play this I simply had to learn it,” he replied, fingerling the keys faultlessly.

“When you heard who play it?”

“Beethoven, who else?”

“You saw Beethoven play?” she asked skeptically.

“Mmm hmm,” he nodded as he continued to play. “Vienna, 1801. My entire family went to see him perform. It was incredible. He had a gift for evoking an extraordinary range of emotion.” He finished the segment that was most familiar to her and pulled the protective cover over the keys. Then he turned around on the bench to face his audience of one, leaning back on his elbows.

“Talvi, exactly how old are you that you saw him play, and that you and your sister sat for Gustav Klimt?”

“Two hundred and ninety nine,” he replied without a trace of deception. She kept waiting for him to burst out laughing, but he never did.

“Like, years?”

“I told you I’m a dreadful liar.” He looked into her soul with those hypnotic eyes and Annika felt the magnetic pull between them again. His eyes seemed to smile, but his mouth remained motionless. The only thing that moved was one of his hands as he turned up a palm and beckoned her to come to him.

“You’re nothing but trouble, do you know that?” she accused. He nodded in agreement, and motioned again, this time with an inviting smile. Against her better judgment she took another step closer until his hands rested firmly around her waist.
They felt as though they belonged there. He slowly coaxed her down to sit on his thigh and she couldn’t help sinking her fingers into his messy hair to relive the scent of cinnamon and dried leaves that clung to him. He pressed his forehead gently against hers, looking into her eyes.

“I wonder what you brought me for my birthday present?” he murmured. “You know, I wouldn’t mind opening your gift a bit early.”

“What makes you so sure I’m giving you anything?”

“Look where you’re sitting? All I’ve left to do is unwrap you,” he said as he gave her a lecherous look and bounced his thigh ever so slightly. “And play with you, of course.”

“I think your problem is that you just expect to get what you want,” she said, even as she was breaking out in goose bumps.

“I’ve never thought of that as a problem.”

“I’ll bet you have a really hard time dealing with rejection, don’t you?”

“I regret to inform you, my dear,” he closed his eyes and opened them very slowly, “but I do not know the meaning of that word.”

Annika took a deep breath swallowed hard before looking at him. She’d dealt with egotistical musicians hitting on her, using their best lines to try to coax her into going home with them after a show. She could disregard almost anything they promised her, and sometimes she just laughed at them, but not this time. This one was different. This one was actually getting to her.

She considered the situation she was in. He’d advised her to find something pleasurable to pass the time and this definitely fit the bill. For one thing, she knew she could keep it casual; they both knew she wasn’t staying, and by the time he grew bored with her she’d be gone. It might be fun to have a harmless fling with an elven guy from another world. His offer was more than tempting. She let her fingers trace the outside of his pointed ears, making his eyes close and his head tilt to one side as a small sigh escaped his parted lips. Her mind was racing, scrambling to think of an excuse not to give in, as he reached underneath her shirt and let his fingernails lightly scrape against her waist. He leaned down to speak into her ear, even though there was no need to whisper.

“Are you certain you don’t want me to open your gift early?” he purred into her ear.

“Do you honestly think you can wait until my birthday?” His wanton tone and warm lips and the things they suggested were the most erotic sensations upon her ears. Thankfully she was sitting and not standing, because her knees were shaking slightly as she pressed them together. He adjusted his belt and looked at her intently, waiting for her response.

“I don’t think I can. You win,” she whispered back, trembling with anticipation.

Talvi smiled to himself before he pried her knees apart.

“I think we both win.” He wrapped her legs around his waist and ran his hands down her back, causing it to arch slightly against his body. Every passing second felt like an eternity until their lips met, and when his tongue slipped into her mouth she felt the rush come along with the visions of his kiss. She was greeted with images of countless sunsets, hands playing piano keys, fingers strumming a guitar, Ghassan rearing with his long black tail blowing wildly in the wind and trees speeding by. Overwhelmed by the experience, Annika pulled away from him.

“Why do I keep seeing this stuff? How come every time I kiss you, I see things like the forest zooming by?” He raised his eyebrows in interest.

“You can see that? What else do you see?” She told him about all the things she’d
experienced when their bodies touched. “Why does that keep happening?”

“Well, you’re describing experiences which I find pleasing, so I imagine a kiss from you is a divine trigger of sorts.” He leaned close to kiss her again, but she backed away.

“Then what did you see the other day in the woods?” she pressed. “You never told me what you saw the first time you kissed me.”

“I don’t recall,” he said, scratching his head a little.

“I don’t believe you for a—”

His mouth prevented hers from finishing her sentence, and the next thing she knew she was sinking backwards and onto the floor in his arms. He used his knees to spread her legs further apart before nestling his narrow hips between them, then began a slow grind against her while his mouth traveled hungrily along her neck. Those wild, untrimmed sideburns made her laugh when they brushed against her ear, and they made her moan when he pushed up her shirt and took each breast into his mouth. He covered her ribcage in soft kisses and tugged at her pants until he’d exposed her hips. When he untied the drawstring of her pants and slapped his hand under the waistband, he stopped kissing her long enough to ask, “Is this alright? You know I can’t make you do anything you don’t want to do.”

“Oh, if I don’t like something, I’ll let you know,” she assured him. With a nod of approval at her response, he leaned on his right elbow and caressed her inner thighs with his left hand, squeezing and teasing her mercilessly with his fingertips. Then he slipped a finger inside of her, and suddenly he became still. His mouth and his eyes pressed shut and a long, drawn-out sigh escaped from his nose.

“What is it?”

“It’s you,” he murmured, and shook his delirious head before looking down at her. “I didn’t expect your hot little honeycomb would be spilling over with nectar already.” He carefully slipped another finger inside, making her shudder and twist in pleasure at his fluid movements. “Why…you are absolutely dripping with honey! Gods be damned if I can’t last long enough to savor every drop.”

“Then you better start thinking about baseball statistics, or we’re going to have a serious problem,” she warned him, quivering under his touch. He snickered and withdrew his fingers, thoroughly distracting her with the long, deliberate strokes of his tongue as he sucked them clean. Unable to wait a minute longer for him, she reached for his belt and gasped when he took her hand and slid it down below his buckle.

“Do you still think elves are small?” he taunted, cupping her hand over his hard bulge. “Or have I convinced you otherwise?”

“I stand corrected,” she half-laughed, half-whispered.

“Now, now…you’re too short for that. Let’s keep you on your back—at least for now,” he hummed, then reached for her pants, tugging them down past her ankles before crawling over her once more. He dipped down to kiss her again, and she could only imagine what sorts of statistics were running through his head. Their breathing was so interwoven with urgent sighs and moans that she barely heard him unbuckle his belt over the faint chimes of the clock in the hall.

“Blast!” he hissed with an angry scowl. He rolled off of her and lay on his back, panting as he stared intently up at the ceiling. She sat up and gave him an accusatory look.
“What the hell? Don’t you dare tell me that you blew it already!” she sputtered as she began to feel the first inklings of outrage at him. While the clock continued to chime, he let a small sniggle escape his mouth, until it turned into a full blown belly laugh. She was about ready to punch him out of frustration.

“No, that’s not it at all.” He turned and looked at her with a pained expression, letting his eyes rove up and down her naked body. “Right now I want nothing more than to pleasure you for the remainder of the afternoon.” He took a deep breath and spoke though clenched teeth. “That bloody clock woke up Sloan. He’s upstairs crying as I speak. I’m sure you can imagine that is not the soundtrack I want to hear during this particular performance.”

“Oh, I see,” Annika said in disappointment. She pulled her sweater back on and strained to listen for the crying toddler, but heard nothing besides the clock finally striking noon. “I guess we should go check on him then.”

Talvi nodded, stood up reluctantly, and buckled his belt.

“What a bloody shame,” he lamented when she rose to put on her pants. “Letting all that honey go to waste.”

“I’m sure they’ll be more,” she said with a coy smile and smoothed her disheveled hair. “And I’ve been meaning to get my backpack from your bedroom. It might take me a while to remember exactly where I put it.”

“Yes, it very well might. I would plan to spend at least a few hours on your first attempt,” he agreed with innocent eyes and a wolfish grin. “Although my room is quite large. I expect you’ll have to return multiple times before you get what you came for.”

They left the room and passed the now much-despised clock, then hustled up the staircase to the second floor. It was mostly bedrooms, where they stepped into a room that had to be the children’s nursery. The drapes had been pulled shut, and a howling little boy was anxious to get out of his spacious crib. His red face was covered in tears, and he only screamed more when his uncle picked him up. It was obvious that Talvi had no desire to interact with what he referred to as larvae. He held Sloan out at arm’s length as though he were radioactive.

“I don’t understand why you’re still crying,” he said impatiently to his nephew as they walked out of the nursery. “You’re out of bed; what more do you want?”

Annika tried to be patient with the shrieks as they echoed and bounced off the walls, but it was quickly getting on her nerves before they even reached the end of the hallway.

“Here, give him to me,” she insisted, and took the screaming boy out of Talvi’s obliging hands. She hugged him close with his head resting on her heart and rubbed his back, swaying from side to side as she soothed him with her voice. In less than a minute he was silent, except for the little sniffs here and there. She walked into the reading room and sat down on one of the chaise lounges, lying back with Sloan’s head resting on her chest.

“That’s amazing. He never calms down with me, he just screams in my ears until I want to scream,” said Talvi while he looked on in disbelief.

“I’d scream too, if you held me like that,” Annika said, frowning at him. “You have to reassure him that he’s safe.”

“Where did you learn that?”

“My dad used to volunteer me to baby-sit a lot of the kids on the army bases when I was growing up. I guess I was good at it.”
“You certainly are. I can’t believe how quickly he quieted down,” Talvi said, observing how content Sloan was capable of being.

“It’s a pretty simple technique, see? I put his head over my heartbeat so he can feel it. It’s really comforting. And then you rub their back, and hopefully they end up like this,” she pressed her nose against Sloan’s curls and smiled.

“You better not move unless you want to do your trick again,” Talvi warned under his breath. “He’s fallen back asleep.”

“No, I definitely don’t want to wake him. If he doesn’t have a good nap he’ll be a sour little boy. Even worse than you,” she teased. Talvi shot her a look, but eventually smiled. He’d been knocked down more than a few pegs since meeting this saucy American girl.

“What’s in this pile of books? Anything interesting?”

Talvi stood there, deep in thought, then bent down and silently moved the table off to one side. Then he swung the other sofa around so that it touched the one Annika was lying on. He covered her and Sloan with the afghan and grabbed a green book from the table, settling in the chair diagonal from them. It was a fantastic idea; it looked like their own little island. He opened the book and she recognized the cover immediately.

“Is that Andersen’s Fairy Tales? Let me guess; 1944, right? With a little Dachshund in the bottom corner of the inside cover. And the man on the left is dedicating this book to his granddaughter,” she whispered excitedly.

“Why, you know this very book?” he asked and showed her the inside cover. Her description was perfect.

“Yeah, my grandma gave them to us when we were in high school. There were two. I got the green one and Charlie got—”

“The red one?” Talvi asked, and held up a red covered book the same size as the green one.

“Yeah, that’s the one. How crazy is that?” Annika marveled, trying to keep her voice low.

“I don’t know, you tell me. The green one is mine and the red one is Yuri’s copy.” Talvi was looking at her very strangely at the coincidence that they owned the same exact books. “Finn gave them to us not that long ago it seems, but I suppose it’s been a few years.”

“Why don’t you read me my favorite story, then?”

“You ought to know, it’s probably your favorite too, Prince Talvi,” she teased. He ignored this comment and cleared his throat, turning the pages to the very first story in the book. Instantly she was lost in the world of a young prince who, in his quest for knowledge, met the winds of the North, South, East, and West and in the end was brought to the Garden of Paradise. As Talvi read, he gave each character a different voice or accent. The prince in the story had claimed that he could resist the very thing that drove Adam and Eve from the Garden. Sin. Temptation. But alas, he did not even last one night when he was tempted by a lovely fairy princess and was removed in an instant from the wonders of the garden.

Annika saw herself become the fairy princess from the story, dripping in shimmering gauze and jewels. She was sleeping under the heavy branches of the enchanted, glittering tree in the center of the garden while waiting to see if the prince would come to her and
sin, or stay away and preserve the garden for all time. The tall, black-haired prince entered the room, and by the look in his blue-green eyes, there was no question that he had sin on his mind. He watched her for a long time, wondering if just a light touch on the lips was really enough to banish him from the garden. He leaned down to kiss her as she lay in her little bed of velvet and silk and rose petals. As his weight rested on her chest and his lips brushed against hers, the garden did not sink into the center of the earth as he had been warned. He kissed her deeply with a soft touch, and his hands moved over her skin, warming her bare arms. She felt her body stir as giant flowers pushed out of the ground and rose all around them. Tulips, roses, snapdragons, and daisies lifted their heavy, fragrant blooms, searching for the warmth and light, but there was no sun. The flowers were bending and hugging each other, planted in the ground, yet touching and caressing one another as though they were lovers.

Annika blinked sleepily and was greeted with a rested smile, bright blue eyes and a mass of blond curls. She must have dozed off, hearing Talvi tell the story. The book he’d been reading from was resting on his chest, still open, and his head was nestled into the chair as he slept. Sloan let out a little squeal and his uncle opened his eyes.

“How long have we been asleep?” she asked him, wiping some drool off of Sloan’s tiny mouth.

“A while. I skipped to the end. You talk in your sleep, did you know that?” he said while he stretched and yawned.

“Yeah, I do that sometimes. What did I say?” she asked curiously.

“It wasn’t decipherable,” he said, sitting up and closing the book. “But it was amusing, nonetheless.”

“Did it sound anything like mo rees toe comp anya vlatzee?”

“You don’t even know what that means,” he taunted.

“Is that so? Then I guess we were just two flowers in a meadow with no bees to help us out today,” she smirked.

“Who told you that?” he seemed slightly more than surprised, maybe even upset.

“Oh, I have my sources,” she smiled, and any trace left of his cocky arrogance disappeared. It was replaced with a tender gaze, so sweet and innocent, that she couldn’t even begin to understand the force that was fueling it.

“Then I suppose I can tell you how glad I am that my little bee crossed that meadow when he did. I was beginning to doubt if flowers like you even existed,” he said and leaned over, about to kiss her in the afternoon light that poured through the tall windows around them. She didn’t quite understand what he meant, about her even existing, but she didn’t want to admit how clueless she was.

She closed her eyes, expecting a kiss, but she only heard him gasp sharply. She opened her eyes and saw that Sloan had grabbed a fistful of his uncle’s long hair and pulled himself to a standing position, using it as leverage. Talvi groaned and winced in pain. Carefully he unwound the small fingers that threatened to give him a bare spot on the side of his head.

“You’re a better chaperone than your mother, aren’t you, you wretched little maggot? Now when am I going to have Annika and nearly the entire house to myself again? You completely ruined it for us today,” he told the little boy, who smiled like he’d planned it all along.

The three of them walked to the kitchen where the smell of something delicious was
coming from the oven. Anthea was talking with her mother while Stella clutched at her
dress. She turned around with a smile on her face.

“There’s my handsome little boy! You must have had a good nap. You look so
happy,” Anthea said and took him from Annika. “Thank you for watching him. I was able
to get so much done in the greenhouse, and then we made eggplant and zucchini lasagna
for dinner. You’re just in time.”

“Well thanks for cooking. It smells delicious,” Annika said graciously.

“After dinner, would you like to accompany Finn and I to the village? We could find
the girls,” Talvi offered as he gathered some plates and silverware.

“You know where they are?” she asked. “I thought you said you didn’t know!”
He smiled sweetly at her.

“I didn’t know where they were today, but as long as Runa and Yuri are together,
they’ll be at the Tortoise and Hare by sunset.”

“If we’re going out, should I dress up?” she asked.

“No, you can wear that if you like. It’s nothing fancy; it’s a pub. We’ll just have a
pint.” Anthea burst out laughing at this comment.

“With you it’s never just a pint! Why else would Dorsey put up with your antics?
What you’ve spent in the past year and a half alone could support that establishment.”
Talvi stuck his tongue out at his oldest sibling while their mother’s back was turned.

“Back when I used to go to the Tortoise and Hare, we were happy with a couple of pints.
Now it’s turned into this event,” Anthea added and kissed her little boy.

“Back when I used to go, we were dancing on the tables at the end of the night,
nearly every night,” Althea said, wiping her hands on a kitchen towel. “Times change,
but many things never do.” Talvi cast his mother a doubtful look.

“I cannot see you dancing on a table, Mother,” he said dismissively.

“I did a lot of things that you probably cannot imagine me doing,” she said with a
secreteive grin.

“Like what?” he asked, suddenly very interested, but Althea only smiled and shook
her head. She took two large pans of lasagna out of the oven and brought them out to the
courtyard, and Talvi followed behind her with the plates and silver. Ambrose and Finn
joined them and everyone sat down to their early dinner al fresco. The breeze was just
enough to make the crystals and ribbons that hung in the four trees dance around,
catching Annika’s eyes.

“Why do you have so many birdhouses? I don’t even see that many birds back here,”
she observed.

“Those aren’t birdhouses, they’re for the fairies when they come to stay with us,”
Finn told her. “Talvi’s craftsmanship is excellent. I suppose that’s why the fairies are
always dropping by. If I were a fairy, he’s the one who I would ask to build my house,”
he said, and began to cut a piece of lasagna.

“And I suppose they have tiny chairs and beds, and an itty bitty set of plates that they
dine on?” she joked. Finn seemed surprised that she found this amusing.

“Well, yes,” he said, putting the slice on her plate before cutting another for his
mother. “What house doesn’t?”

“You can’t be serious.” Annika didn’t believe him for a second. The chairs would
have to be an inch and a half tall at the most, to fit in the little houses.

“Go and see for yourself,” he told her. She looked at Althea, then Anthea, then
Ambrose, waiting for one of them to tell her to ignore Finn’s joke, but they just smiled and shared a glance. She got up and walked over to one of the little houses with the thatched roof covered in moss, and peeked in a window. Indeed there was a little table and chairs, one of which was tipped over from blowing in the wind. The smallest bottle of wine was rolling back and forth across the floor with each sway in the breeze. A tiny staircase led up to the second level where there were tiny pillows and blankets strewn about the entire floor.

“You make those? I’ve never seen anything like that before in my life,” she said, returning to the much larger table with the much taller elves seated at it. Talvi was smiling fondly at her as he stood and pulled out her chair, and pushed it back in after she was seated.

“Thank you,” she said, not noticing the looks being exchanged by his family at his impeccable display of manners. “Those are little pixie palaces, aren’t they?” she remarked.

“Oh no, not pixies. Fairies,” Finn emphasized.

“What’s the difference?”

“What’s the difference between fairies and pixies?” Finn blustered, but Talvi spoke up before his brother started spewing out facts right and left.

“The main difference is that I’ve invited the fairies to the party, but not the pixies,” he said, and reached for the water pitcher, refilling Annika’s glass. If she hadn’t been so focused on the swaying houses in the background, she might have noticed that his mother and brother could have used a refill themselves, but Talvi hadn’t bothered to fill their glasses.

“Uncle Talvi, I want a glass of shut the hell up too!” Stella whined as her uncle set down the pitcher. Ambrose let out a snort while Annika and Finn covered their laughing mouths.

“Stella, it’s water. Do not call it anything but water,” Anthea said in a shrill voice, and turned to her brother with an equally annoyed frown. “Thanks a lot, Talvi. She thinks everything that comes in a glass is that now.”

“I’m sorry Anthea,” he said, trying not to laugh. “I guess I wasn’t thinking when I said it.”

“No, you certainly weren’t,” she replied with the expression of reprimand that only mothers can wear.

“But I want a glass! I want a glass of shut the hell up, Uncle Talvi. You gave the fairy girl one!” Stella sang in her little voice. Ambrose had to turn around, he was laughing so hard. His wife looked less than impressed.

“Stella, stop it,” Anthea scolded. “Do not say that word.”

“But I’m thirsty, Mummy,” she giggled. “I’m thirsty for a glass of sh—”

“Stella!” Anthea cried angrily. “Enough!” Annika didn’t know how she managed to keep herself composed when even Ambrose couldn’t. He eventually faced forward and gave Talvi a very patronizing look before turning around again to surrender to his laughter.

“So, Talvi, what’s the difference between pixies and fairies?” Annika asked, trying to get him out of his predicament. He looked relieved that she remembered.

“The pixies have a habit of showing up uninvited at the most inopportune times and causing a lot of havoc,” he explained, and helped himself to seconds.
“Oh, I get it. You’re afraid they’ll crash your party,” she clarified. Althea gave her youngest son a stern look.

“They better not crash anything or I’ll lock up Ghassan until you’ve repaired all the damage,” she informed him. “I’m certain you remember how your last grand gala ended up.”

“No, I don’t mean crash, like breaking anything,” Annika said quickly. She didn’t want to get Talvi into more trouble. He had enough of a penchant for doing that on his own. “It’s just an expression for showing up without an invitation. Crashing a party, you know, not being invited.”

“Well I don’t see the logic in that slang, but if you say so,” she said dubiously, and filled her water glass herself.

“How many guests are you expecting anyway?” Ambrose asked. The brothers shared a glance, but didn’t look their father in the eye.

“Oh, I tried to keep it conservative. I don’t think I sent out any more than two hundred invitations,” Talvi said offhandedly, scratching his head.

“Ha!” Ambrose let out a whoop. “So you’re probably expecting four hundred then, isn’t that about right? I don’t know why you bother lying when you’re so bad at it!”

“Talvi Anatolius, where exactly do you expect everyone to sleep?” his mother cried, clutching her head as though she were about to have an aneurysm. “You know our guest rooms are already promised out to your cousins and Konstantin, and what about Dragana? She’s far too old to tolerate your rambunctious friends keeping her awake all night!”

“Dragana is coming?” All three siblings asked at the same time. The Marinossian children appeared uncomfortable at the thought of this person showing up, and Annika noticed the fork in Anthea’s hand wobble. Maybe Dragana was a crotchety, mean old woman that the children had feared from an early age.

“Of course she’ll be here for your father’s meeting!” said Althea, and cut a few more bite sized pieces of lasagna for her granddaughter. She seemed determined to keep her precocious mouth busy with chewing.

“You will have a room for her,” Ambrose declared, and gave Talvi such a look of warning that even Finn and Anthea seemed concerned for their little brother.

“I didn’t promise anyone a place to sleep other than the fairies,” he said, looking a bit pale. “Most of the guest list is local anyway, Mother. Don’t worry.”

“Four hundred?” she repeated, shaking her head.

“It will be fine, my love,” Ambrose said cheerfully while giving his youngest son another severe look. “I’ll serve you breakfast in bed and you won’t have to come downstairs until he’s done polishing the very last of the silver that was used.”
Chapter 12

*the Tortoise and the Hare*

They left for the pub on horseback as the sun was setting. Finn let Annika ride his gentle giant Galileo and took his father’s horse instead while Talvi let Ghassan bolt ahead. He’d grabbed a couple of the guitars from Anthea’s room and wore one over his back, relinquishing the Spanish guitar to Annika. She felt like a traveling bard looking for her next gig, and was even getting the hang of horseback riding, as long as she didn’t look down. Galileo was by far the tallest, biggest horse she’d ever seen, and sitting on him was still slightly unnerving. It helped to have Finn ride beside her, and he chatted with her along the way, naming the types of trees they were passing and pointing out the differences in the leaves, in the bark, and in the shape of the branches.

The few homes along the narrow streets were lit by lamps and candles, with the families inside moving about their evening routines. She heard muffled laughter and voices down the dusty trail, where they stopped and tethered the horses to a hitching post a ways outside a large stone building with a thatched roof. The only thing giving an indication of where they’d arrived was an inconspicuous wooden sign hanging above the door. It was cut in the shape of a turtle with a white rabbit’s head painted in the center.

“How am I going to pay my tab? They probably don’t accept Euros here, do they?” she asked Finn, who just laughed and shook his head when he helped her down from the saddle.

“Don’t worry about it.” He pulled something from his pocket and jingled what resembled a keychain full of tiny gold and silver rings of various sizes. “You’re our guest.”

Talvi opened the door for them, and Annika stepped into a softly lit and very warm pub full of elves talking amongst themselves. Quite a few craned their necks to look at the human girl walking in the door, making her feel even more self-conscious. It was not a small place by any means, but it was still intimate with many of its regular clientele, which did not include humans. Trying not to make much eye contact, Annika distracted herself with observing the new environment. All of the stools along the bar and the many tables had been made of solid wood and wrought iron. Upon closer inspection, she saw that they were all etched with names that had been collected over the centuries. She heard a squeal and saw the samodivi and Yuri waving them over to their table in the corner by a window. Finn sat next to Annika, but Talvi just waved at them, handed his guitar to Annika, and headed straight to the bar.

“Hey, thanks for leaving without me this morning,” she teased as she sat down, leaning the guitars in the corner where they were safe from the other pub patrons.

“I didn’t want to wake you!” Runa cried. “I’m sure you loved sleeping in a soft bed for a change.”

“Yeah, it was pretty sweet,” Annika said. “I had an awesome day at the house. What did you guys do all day long?” Yuri looked like she was ready to burst with information about their goings-on.

“Well, first we went to the fabric shop, but they didn’t have what I wanted so we had to go to the silk mill and make a special order. Then we went to the bakery to try some of the food that will be at the party. I finally decided to have chocolate raspberry cake with
white icing and red roses—that way it gives the illusion that I have even more red roses than I originally planned! It’s going to be absolutely divine! Then they had spinach scones on sale, so we of course had to have a picnic…” Yuri went on and on about the details to such an extent that Annika’s eyes began to glaze over. She had plenty of practice listening to her fellow waitresses gush on and on about planning their weddings, and then she got to hear about it all over again when the groom ran off with the maid of honor. Or his best man.

While everyone else let Yuri yammer on, Sariel rolled her eyes and took a drink from her little ceramic cup. It was smaller than the pint glasses in front of the other samodivi, which were all filled with ale. Finn looked on, assessing who needed a refill.

“What are you drinking over there?” Annika asked.

“It’s called otrova. Do you want to try it?” Sariel pushed her cup forward just enough for her to take it back if Annika declined her offer. The others groaned.

“Eww, yuck,” Runa stuck out her tongue.

“You won’t like it, trust me,” Hilda advised.

“I can’t believe you drink that rubbish,” said Finn. “Do you truly enjoy it, or do you merely drink it because no one else has the stamina?”

“Let me see what all the fuss is about. I drink gimlets at home, and they’re just vodka with a splash of lime juice,” Annika said boldly, taking the glass that Sariel passed to her. It smelled strong, like any other hard liquor. She took a drink, expecting the fiery feeling it sent down her throat, but she was unprepared for the horribly bitter aftertaste.

“Ugh! How can you drink this crap?” she said with a sour face. It was a misleading drink, promising bravery and delivering punishment instead.

“Here, wash it down with this,” Finn said, handing her the rest of Hilda’s ale. Hilda frowned irritably, but said nothing.

“Thanks,” Annika choked after emptying the glass. “I guess we’ll need a few more of these, huh?”

“Yes. Why don’t you help me carry them back?” he suggested. This earned him another sideways frown from Hilda, but neither of them noticed.

Annika was properly introduced to Dorsey, the barrel-chested, brawny creature tending the bar. He wasn’t as tall as Finn but his arms were more muscular from switching out beer kegs day in and day out. He had a bit of a belly from sampling his large selection of handcrafted brews, and his shaggy, sandy hair hung in his dark eyes. Finn ordered a round of the seasonal ale for the girls and himself, and pulled out the strange little keychain. He opened the clasp and handed a few of the smallest silver rings to Dorsey before slipping the remainder of his elven currency back into his pocket. As they weaved through the crowd with their drinks, Annika realized she was the shortest one in the entire pub aside from the samodivi. She stood on her tip toes to catch a glimpse of Talvi, but all she saw was a flash of his wild black hair before it disappeared in the crowd.

The girls and Finn lost track of time as they talked about some of the people who would be attending the upcoming party. Even Sariel had grown chatty, but the laughter died down when she asked Yuri, “What exactly is the situation with Konstantin?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Yuri shrugged innocently. “I imagine it’s been difficult for him to live only off of animals.”

“I don’t mean what’s the situation with him. I mean…what’s the situation with him
and you? I happen to know you’ve been corresponding quite a bit with someone from the north country.” Yuri looked away, but her body language gave her away too easily.

“You’ve been writing letters to Konstantin?” Hilda squeaked.

“You only just realized this?” Finn asked Hilda, and guffawed out loud. “I assumed all of you knew about it.”

“What?” Yuri gasped. “You’ve known the entire time?” Her brother just laughed harder.

“I’m not a gossip like you little hens are,” he laughed and then made clucking sounds until Yuri turned red in the face.

“You and Konstantin?” Runa shrieked with full-hearted approval. “He’s so…ooh!”

Annika was out of the loop, but determined to find a way in.

“Is he a hottie or something?” she asked. Runa looked confused at her question.

“Right after feeding, I suppose he’s quite warm,” she replied, making Annika laugh.

“I mean, is he good looking?” she clarified. Runa’s face beamed.

“He is gorgeous! Simply stunning!” she gushed. “In fact, he’s so absolutely beautiful that it’s impossible to look away from him when he’s speaking to you…and he’s got these hypnotic green eyes that make you feel like you’re the only two people in the world!”

“It’s called being a vampire, you ding-a-ling,” Hilda huffed, and smacked her blonde sister upside the head. “They’re all like that.”

“No they’re not,” Runa argued, frowning at Hilda. “I mean, well I suppose that’s part of it, but you really must speak to him one-on-one to see what I mean.”

“Please don’t,” Yuri said, forgetting her embarrassment and becoming suddenly quite serious. “I don’t think it is wise for you to be alone with him.”

“But you think you should?” Finn asked. His sister scowled at him.

“Don’t worry Yuri, I don’t think Konstantin is the one Annika wants to be alone with anyway,” Runa laughed, having grown less inhibited by her fourth mug of ale since Annika had arrived.

“Runa, you really are a ding-a-ling!” Annika said, trying not to appear annoyed.

“I think someone fancies your brother,” Runa taunted, but Annika just rolled her eyes and shook her head. Yuri gave Annika a strange look, as though she were let down, pissed off, grossed out, or all perhaps all three.

“Well if you do fancy him, take a number and get in line,” she sighed, glancing over her shoulder. Annika followed her eyes to where Yuri had looked and her heart sank. Talvi was engrossed in conversation with two tall beautiful blondes, while a brunette beside him kept finding reasons to touch him on the arm, on the chest, and his face. He had one arm curled around her shoulder while holding his drink in his free hand. Every time he stopped talking, he took a long chug of ale, finishing his glass before Annika had even taken two sips of hers. She looked away quickly, before the hurt she felt registered on her own face. She didn’t want to appear jealous, but she couldn’t help it. He’d been the one to invite her to the pub, and yet he’d completely ignored her for nearly an hour.

“Tell us more about Konstantin,” Hilda asked with impeccable timing. “When did this all start?”

“We’re just friends,” Yuri insisted. “That’s why we’ve only been writing back and forth. It turned out we had a lot in common, and we’re almost the same age…”

“Yes, and he’s nocturnal, he drinks blood, he murders on a regular basis,” Sariel
added coolly. “You have plenty in common.”

“He can’t help what he is!” she said and slammed her glass down. That was the end of that conversation.

A tall girl with hair slightly less platinum than Runa’s walked up to them. Her clothing was elaborately stitched with a floral design around the neckline of her blouse. She wore a shorter green skirt and black boots up to her knees. Over her blouse she wore a black vest that matched the boots, and two pins held the front part of her hair out of her face as she looked down her nose at everyone. She looked like a runway model, only with slightly pointed ears.

“Hello there Yuri, Finn,” she said and smiled, but neither her voice or her smile were sincere.

“Hello,” Yuri said back to her, not even looking at her. She was still steaming at Sariel’s comment about Konstantin. The samodivi said nothing, but at least they were looking at the tall elf.

“Good evening, Sevan.” Finn stood and greeted her much more warmly than his sister had. But he was so kind that it wasn’t hard for him to do. “I didn’t think you would be in the village for at least another week.”

“Believe me, I didn’t think so either, but Zaven dragged me out to this…place.” She looked around, wrinkling her nose in disgust. He told me the reason for our early arrival, but I was too busy loathing him to pay attention,” she sneered. As she flipped her long silky hair over her shoulder, Annika got the distinct impression that nobody at the table really liked this young woman.

“Would you like to sit down and join us?” Finn offered politely. The blonde girl gave another fake smile.

“Unless they serve champansko in crystal glasses, I don’t think I’m staying much longer.” She turned her steely blue eyes to Annika. “I can’t believe that you really have a modern girl sleeping under your roof. Has your brother no shame, endangering the village like this? He really needs to stop taking in every stray dog he finds. He can barely take care of the ones he already has,” the girl said, glancing at Talvi and his girlfriends. She squinted at Annika, wrinkling her pointy nose as if she were giving off noxious fumes. “Does she even know how to speak, or does she simply lack in civility?”

Annika was livid. She stood up, and pushed back the sleeve of her right arm, making a fist. While she valued good manners, she also valued sticking up for herself.

“Would you like to see how civil my knuckles can be to your face?” she threatened through clenched teeth. She stepped towards the girl, whose smug expression was replaced by a startled one instead. Finn took Annika by the shoulders and held her tight against his chest to avoid a fight between the girls.

“It’s a tragedy that someone as beautiful as you can be such a hideous creature deep inside,” he said to the girl. “Perhaps if something other than repugnant filth escaped your lips, you would have had a lover kiss them by now.” Annika was surprised that something so cruel could come out of Finn’s mouth, but the girl clearly deserved it. Sevan glared at him, but couldn’t think of any way to respond, and left the pub in a hurry.

“Who was that?” Annika demanded. She was still furious at being spoken to in such a degrading manner, but then, she was still wrapped up in Finn’s strong arms. He turned her around rubbed her shoulders, trying to get her to calm down.

“That was Sevan Derbedrossian,” he said apologetically. “My least favorite cousin.”
Annika was in disbelief that the two came from the same family.

“That bitch is related to you? Is she coming to your party?” she asked in horror.

“She had to be invited,” said Yuri with a helpless shrug. “It would be an insult if I didn’t personally make certain that her family had an invitation.”

“If she talks to me like that at the party, I’ll—” Annika started to say.

“You’ll do no such thing,” said Finn, and stopped rubbing her shoulders. He brought her closer to him and bent down so that he could speak without the others hearing. “You know, Annika, reacting to her ill manner only robs you of your sweet nature, which I’m quite fond of.” He tossed his loose curls out of his eyes and looked at her so intensely that she felt herself blushing. Was he flirting with her? She couldn’t tell. Annika fidgeted with her fingers, wishing she had a beer or even a pixie dust cigarette to distract her. Without saying another word, he winked at her and guided her to sit back down.

“You can’t let her bother you,” said Runa. “Her whole family is like that, except Zaven.” At the mere mention of this name, Runa’s eyes misted over as though she were lost in a daydream. Finn pulled out his tobacco pouch as though he’d read Annika’s mind.

“I just can’t believe she’s your cousin. You guys are so nice,” she said to him and Yuri, still feeling miffed over the insults. “How come your families are so different?”

“That’s quite a story,” Yuri began. “Sevan and Zaven’s mother and our mother are sisters. They fought all the time growing up and they still don’t get along. Mother’s side of the family saw it as an embarrassment that she married into a less traditional family like Father’s. Rather than put up with her stuck up family, our mother came here to live in Father’s village. Together they built the first mills with their own hands, and that’s how it grew from just a few neighbors of families into the busy place it is today. Perhaps we get preferential treatment on occasion, but we know how to return a favor. Father renamed the town after my mother’s family as a gesture of goodwill. Her family has always said that we were too wild, too uncivilized, because they were formally educated while we went through the portals and interacted with humans all the time. Personally, I always thought they were too dull to be around anyway.”

“I’m sorry your cousin’s a snob, but nobody talks to me like that,” Annika said and downed the last of her ale.

“Listen here, you modern girl—you’re going to have to get used to a few things,” Yuri said, folding her arms across her chest. “You’re an outsider here. You never would’ve made it past the guards if it weren’t for the fact that you were escorted by a Marinossian, so don’t test your luck. Especially not with her.” Annika got the impression that she probably shouldn’t test her luck with Yuri, either, by the way she was acting.

“What are you, like, the Mafia or something?” Annika asked. Yuri looked at her sideways.

“You can call it what you want, but I call it part of my duty as a Marinossian. That’s why I have to include my cousins in my birthday celebration. Their whole family is invited because to disrespect them would be, well, it would be bad.”

“Did I get you into trouble with my fist comment?”

“Just don’t carry it out or things will get ugly,” Finn laughed and handed her a cigarette. She reached out for it, but stopped her hand in mid-air.

“What’s going to happen? Will I do anything stupid?” she asked.

“Only if you’re greedy like Sariel,” he said and winked at Sariel, who sneered half-
heartedly back at him. “If you share with everyone it will be fine.”

“Alright,” Annika conceded, and took the cigarette from him. He lit it with a flip-top lighter and she could see a couple tiny sparks that rose up and disappeared immediately in front of her face. It smelled like tobacco. It tasted like tobacco. No wonder Sariel had fallen for this trick so easily. She held the smoke in her lungs for a moment, not sure if it was the same concept as smoking pot. She passed the cigarette to Yuri and slowly let a stream of smoke escape from her lips.

Her anger towards Sevan quickly melted away. She looked down in front of her at her empty glass as she passed the cigarette to Runa. She wasn’t drunk yet, not with only two pints under her belt. Finn slid one of the golden key chains over to her and asked if she minded getting him another pint as well. Without consciously deciding to get up, she found herself drifting to the bar and ordering two more drinks. Compared to the secluded corner she’d been sitting in, everyone seemed giddier at the bar, far livelier and animated with talk and laughter. She found herself snared in a conversation with Dorsey about the differences between his pub and the bars in America. When she eventually turned around, she realized she was standing right next to the tall brunette and her two gorgeous friends, who were still talking to Talvi. His eyes met with hers and grew wide as the brunette kissed him on the cheek. At the same moment, one of the blondes mussed his hair affectionately.

“I know you’ll figure it out Talvi. You always find a way,” the other blonde said playfully. He looked surprised, even guilty, and he opened his mouth like he wanted to say something to Annika, but she beat him to it.

“I just met your cousin Sevan,” she said to him, ignoring the brunette’s kiss. “She’s the most delightful person. Have you ladies met her?” The brunette clutched Talvi’s arm tightly, eyeing Annika carefully up and down but not saying anything.

“Ugh, I can’t stand her!” one of the blondes said.

“Her brother is much more tolerable to be around,” the other said with a grin. “Why, I just saw him in town earlier today.”

“Zaven is here already?” Talvi asked, and glanced away from Annika for only a moment.

“And you didn’t tell me?” the first blonde said with a pout.

“If you see him, be sure to let him know that his sister was this close to losing a few teeth,” said Annika, not sure if her refreshed anger was caused by Sevan or Talvi.

“What happened?” Talvi looked concerned.

“Oh, nothing you need to worry about,” she said, and put on her bravest smile. “Finn put her in her place before I had a chance to break her nose. I’m so glad he was there looking out for me.” She turned and waved at Finn, who waved back with a big grin.

“He’s a real gentleman, your brother.” She kept smiling at Finn as she sailed past Talvi and his girlfriends. She wanted so desperately to turn around and see his reaction, because nothing made a man more jealous than showing interest in his brother. She walked back to the table feeling triumphant, but when she plopped down next to Finn, he and the girls started laughing at her.

“What’s so funny?” she asked them.

“Did you forget something?” Finn asked her with a huge smile. She looked around the table, patting her pockets. The rings he’d given her were still there.

“I don’t think so. Why?”
Hilda and Runa were holding their stomachs in pain from laughter. Annika tried to remember, but she was definitely experiencing an altered state of mind. The candles burning in the chandeliers never seemed so bright. They looked like living things with their firelight dancing all over the place. And the plants that were growing outside the windows seemed to beckon to her. They moved as if they were seaweed under the water; they appeared to be living, breathing animals in various shades of green. They rose and fell countless times, their leaves moving ever so softly.

“Hey, I need another drink. I can’t believe mine’s gone already!” Annika complained, seeing no glass in front of her. Runa howled again, and fell right off her seat, causing everyone else to laugh even harder, even Sariel. Finn moved close to Hilda and made room for his brother, who set a full glass in front of Finn and Annika, before setting down his own. She scooted closer to Finn, not wanting to be next to Yuri any more than her twin brother.

“You are either a very lightweight drinker, or you’ve been in the pixie dust,” Talvi observed, sitting down on the bench between her and Runa. “And I know you can handle your wine, Miss Brisby.” Annika wanted to disappear right then and there.

“I don’t think I need any more of that stuff,” she said as the laced cigarette came her way again. “I’ll just stick with my beer.”

“So Talvi, what did Pavelina and Milena have to say?” Finn asked. Talvi muttered something too low for Annika to hear.

“What?” he called out louder over the noisy room.

“I’ll tell you later. This isn’t the best time to mention it,” Talvi replied, looking around the table. He seemed preoccupied with something serious. Annika sipped on her beer in silence, ignoring Talvi as he chatted with the nymphs and his siblings. When the pixie dust cigarette came her way again, she changed her mind and took another long puff. She saw the smoke form into the shape of a horse, and then a fish as it swam up to the rafters and dissipated. She smiled in amusement at the sight. The vote was in…pixie dust was alright.

“When are you going to play me something?” a female voice crooned nearby. It was that brunette again, hovering over Talvi, but he didn’t seem to mind the attention.

“Well, give me a moment,” he said patiently, but the girl walked over and grabbed the Spanish guitar in the corner before he could get up. He handed it to Annika, much to the brunette’s disappointment. Hilda picked up Talvi’s guitar lying nearby and passed it over to him. He straddled the bench to face Annika.

“Let’s have a duel, shall we?” he asked her as he picked out a few chords.

“What are we going to play?” she asked, unsure of what songs they would both know. But the annoying girl standing next to them spoke up again.

“If she doesn’t want to play, Talvi, don’t make her. You know that I could listen to you until Dorsey locks the doors.” Annika caught Hilda and Runa rolling their eyes and pretending to gag. She suddenly felt empowered by her anger at him, and at the sappy bimbo standing before them. She let her fingers fall over the strings softly as her mind searched for the right song.

“Do you know any gypsy songs? Anything like Flamenco?” she asked him.

“Ha! Do I know any gypsy songs? I thought this was going to be a duel, not a massacre!” he snickered, and tightened a string.

Annika smiled to herself and took one more sip of beer. She was determined to kick
his ass, in a musical sense. She tore into a song native to the south of France, tapping her foot hard against the floor to the beat. She closed her eyes and the song took on a life of its own, for as many times as she’d jammed in the garage with her brother while they smoked a joint, she’d never done so while high on pixie dust. It nearly became an out-of-body experience. She could hear Talvi struggling to keep up with her notes, and it only made her play harder. She couldn’t hold back her overwhelming desire to give voice to the emotion of the song. If she hadn’t been under the spell of the pixie dust, she might have been content to just strum along. Her head fell back as the words came to her, pouring out of her lips in the French her mother had taught her. There were loud cheers of encouragement from the crowd feeding her with even more energy. She could hear Finn’s deep voice joining hers now, singing with perfect harmony, and incredible talent. She turned away from Talvi and sang with Finn. Together the three of them put on quite a show.

“Votre coeur est un océan, mystérieux et foncé, sauf votre fidélité n’est pas à moi, c’est aux étoiles au ciel…” they sang together, harmonizing their voices with ease. When she turned back to Talvi he was watching her intensely, keeping up and improvising complex harmonies to compliment her quick paced melody. She paused briefly to take another drink.

“Don’t stop!” yelled Runa as she stood up to dance on the table. Then Hilda joined her, and then Sariel of all people climbed up as well. All around the room there were girls getting up onto the tables.

“Keep playing!” Runa yelled again, shaking her hips like a belly dancer. Finn eventually took Hilda off the table and led her to an open section of the floor, and it wasn’t long before their end of the pub was dancing or stomping their feet along with them. Annika felt urged on by how much the crowd around her was enjoying the music. Even Dorsey had come out from behind the counter and was occupied by dancing with every single girl in the establishment. She stood up so that the music would project even further out to her audience. A drop of sweat ran down her forehead and stung her eye, but she didn’t stop.

There were whistles and catcalls as Runa jumped off the table and into Dorsey’s huge arms. She played as long as she could, letting Talvi lead her into a different song. They played some modern songs with a twist; good old rock and roll in this tavern of intoxicated elves and wood nymphs. Eventually her fingers gave out and she had to set the guitar down. There were claps, cheers and laments at the silence, but she couldn’t go on.

Talvi leaned close to her and said in her ear, “Where did you come from?”

“What are you talking about?” she snapped. “I came from the states of madness, remember?”

“I didn’t think they made girls like you, Annika Brisby.” He leaned back and just smiled his sweetest smile, watching her with fascination. She took a drink of the complimentary ale that Dorsey had set in front of her and wiped the sweat from her head. She had no idea how to respond to his remark. She wondered how he could treat her the way he did; nearly seducing her only hours ago, and then snubbing her for three other girls right in front of her and everyone else. There was nothing she could say. The only one who knew her true level of humiliation was him, and he obviously didn’t care.
“Will you come with me to the washroom?” Yuri asked Annika while the others were busy mingling with the crowd that had gathered around them.

“Sure, I guess I could go.” She didn’t need to use the restroom, but there was a sense of urgency about Yuri; plus it was a great excuse to get away from her brother. They got up and walked through the crowded pub to a separate building out the side door. They stood in awkward silence, waiting for the last woman to leave them alone.

“You have to tell me something, Annika,” she said in a serious voice.

“What is it?”

“Runa is terrible at keeping secrets. Do you honestly have feelings for my brother?” Yuri had asked her so directly that Annika was caught off guard. She didn’t know what to say, so she told the truth.

“I, uh…well I’m not really sure.”

“I’ll tell you right now, it’s a bad idea to get involved with him,” Yuri said, looking the other way.

“Is it because he’s a cad? Oh, trust me, I’ve dealt with those types before,” Annika said, feeling quite confident.

“It’s not just that. Look, it’s like this. You’re how old?”

“Twenty-five.”

“Yes, well, my brother and I are turning three hundred in just a few days. It won’t work out; it’s not practical at all, and it’s completely unacceptable in our society.” Yuri had folded her arms over her chest once again, eyeing Annika suspiciously. “Humans and elves do not belong together. It’s not natural. It’s a devastating ending every time, always surrounded by death.”

“By death?” Annika repeated with a skeptical look. “Come on Yuri, get real.”

“I am getting real,” Yuri insisted, still frowning in disapproval. “There’s the legend of the elf that fell in love with a mortal woman from your world, but he kept his identity a secret. They went to her hometown and tried to live a normal life. It wasn’t long before his wife was old and grey, yet he remained the same. The ignorant townspeople suspected he was a demon and they burned his body to ashes in front of her, leaving her to die of a broken heart! There’s another story of the human man who loved an elf long ago. He gave her mortal children who died not long after he did. There was only one child who inherited her longevity, but he looked just like her dead husband. The boy grew up to look more and more like his dead father every day, until it drove his elven mother insane and she threw herself out of the tower and to her death!” She stopped herself just short of giving any more grisly details, and the two young women stood in that awkward silence once again.

“You can never be like us, Annika. There’s no magic potion to let you live the lifespan that we do. There’s no long-lost ancient spell, either. And personally, Talvi has so many female admirers that even I can’t keep track of them all. You’ve seen how he acts around them, especially his old girlfriend, Zenzi. She’s always all over him like that. That’s why he couldn’t be bothered to join us for the better part of the night. He loves the attention too much. He can’t ever seem to get enough of it, especially not from just one girl. I’ve seen him promise the world to so many. He’ll say anything, telling them that he’ll change for them, but he only changes long enough to get what he wants. I can’t believe I’m actually telling you this, but…” Yuri stopped, looking uncomfortable. She lowered her voice before going on. “He told me that he’s just pretending to be interested
in you until, you know... He said something about wanting to try out a modern American girl because they’re supposed to be...oh, what’s the word? Dynamite. Yes, they’re rumored to be dynamite in bed.” Yuri stopped speaking only long enough to let the idea sink in, and when it did, it cut like a knife.

“He’ll never change. He’s been like that for over a hundred years. I love my brother, but I despise the way he treats females. I don’t want to see you get hurt just because he decides this week he might like to have a modern American girl as one of his lovers. It’s just not worth it. If you keep your distance, perhaps the two of you can have a pleasant friendship. Nip it in the bud and you’ll get over it like it was nothing. He’ll be distracted by the next shiny object that comes along. He always is. Besides, you’re going to go home at some point, and his home is here. I’m sure your family misses you and wants you back home as soon as possible.”

Annika felt like she’d been punched in the stomach. Repeatedly. She felt nauseous as the words sank in, realizing their meaning. It was one thing to have a brief yet meaningful romance during her unscheduled vacation in another world, and something totally different to be used like a paper tissue and thrown away. She wanted to be home, now more than anything in the world. Even the thought of a lifetime on the couch watching sports with ho-hum Danny was more appealing than where she found herself now. What was she doing, getting mixed up with a womanizing jerk anyway? She knew better than that. How could she have not put it together?

“I think I smoked too much pixie dust,” Annika said, avoiding Yuri’s eyes. “Do you mind giving me a minute?”

“Sure, that’s fine,” Yuri said in a tone that was almost cheerful. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Thanks. I’ll just be a few minutes,” she lied. She waited until Yuri had left her alone, then snuck out around the front of the pub to where the horses were. Galileo was so tall that she couldn’t even get her foot in the stirrup. Without Finn there to help her into the saddle, she realized she’d have to walk home in the dark, in a strange land, unescorted, but she didn’t care. She didn’t know whether to be more upset at Talvi’s behavior, or mad at herself for being so stupid, but she was positive that Yuri only had the best of intentions.
Annika didn’t remember falling asleep, or even waking up. She just lay in a self-loathing stupor for most of the morning, except when she snuck out to use the bathroom. She crawled back into bed and pulled the covers over herself, hiding from the dreary grey sky outside. She felt more homesick than she ever thought possible. She’d always been an adventurous type of person, and didn’t have much experience getting into a situation she couldn’t get herself out of. The only comforting thought was how Sloan had stopped things from going too far. That, and the way that Finn had looked after her the entire night, but he was spoken for. The sounds of lunchtime had long since passed, and occasionally she heard voices traveling down the hallways. She had no idea what time it was, but it was probably late afternoon. She tried to think of a way to back out of her future visit to Talvi’s room without sounding irrational or insecure. As luck would have it, she was about to be tested, because at that moment there was a light knock on the door.

“Yeah?”

“I have something for you,” a velvety voice said playfully. She felt pissed off all over again. She slipped out of the bed and cracked the door open. Talvi stood barefoot in a snug white t-shirt and loose brown cargo pants. He could have passed for any other drop dead gorgeous twenty-first century guy if it weren’t for his slightly pointed ears. He leaned against the doorway and smiled at her. She frowned back at him and quickly looked away.

“I was concerned about you last night,” he said. “Yuri told us that you weren’t feeling well. You really should have let me know. I don’t like the idea of you wandering around in the middle of the night like that. I would have taken you home myself if I’d known.”

“I’m sure you would have loved that, wouldn’t you?” she thought.

“It’s no big deal. Did you remember to grab the guitar?” was what she said.


“I’m fine,” she lied. She waited a moment for him to speak, but he just looked down at her with concern. “So, did you say you had something for me?” she reminded him. He held up her backpack proudly, like a wolf who’d caught his rabbit.

“I got impatient waiting for you to come find it,” he confessed, gazing at her with bedroom eyes. “I thought perhaps I’d hide it under your bed and watch you crawl around on all fours to get it.” She reached out for her bag, but he lifted his arm. He stood well over a foot taller than her, and she normally would have played along and jumped up to catch it. Not this time. She reached out for her bag, then crossed them over her chest anxiously. She didn’t know what to do with herself.

“Thanks for bringing it by. I’ll see you later,” she said, trying to dismiss him.

“What have you been doing all day?” he inquired, passing by her and walking to the window. He’d slung the bag over his shoulder, not ready to relinquish it just yet.

“Nothing. I’m really tired, actually.” She scratched her head, trying to figure out the most polite way to get him to leave, but she got the feeling he wasn’t about to be shooed out like a house fly.
“No you’re not,” he said, looking out the window.
“And what makes you an expert on my sleeping habits?”
“That first night in front of the fire,” he replied and turned to her with a sweet smile.
“I wanted to get to know you better whilst the others were sleeping, but you were already dreaming. I’d still like to get to know you better.” Annika turned her head to hide her face as she rolled her eyes. She was sure it was just another one of his many lines.
“Yeah, I bet you would,” she said with feigned enthusiasm, letting him know she was onto him. Leaving the door wide open, she walked over to him and reached for her backpack, but he turned towards her and took her outstretched hand, intertwining their fingers. His other hand pressed into the small of her back, forcing her to step close to him. She hated to admit that he had some smooth moves. His fingertips curled under the hem of her shirt, tantalizing the flesh over her hip bone.

She couldn’t look him in the eye and instead gazed out the window at the samodivi who were working in the gardens below. She tried to remember what she’d rehearsed in her head to say to him, but it wouldn’t come to her. He leaned down and let his lips and fuzzy sideburns graze her jaw line. Her skin prickled in reaction to his touch, but she felt too bittersweet to let him continue. She didn’t understand how something could feel so right and then so wrong at the same time. She stepped backwards, but he held onto her.

“Let me go,” she whispered.
“What’s wrong?”
“Nothing, I’m just tired.” She wrenched her hand out of his and was free.
“That’s a lie and you know it,” he said, calling her bluff. But then she remembered his old girlfriend kissing him, and she could imagine him kissing Zenzi the same way he’d kissed her in the leaves of the forest floor, or on the rug in the music room.
“I’m not leaving until you tell me what’s wrong.”
“Then you better get comfy because I’ve got nothing to say to you,” she replied, feeling cold inside once more. He looked completely puzzled and hurt, but he dropped the bag and pulled a chair in front of the window, crossing his arms with indignation as he sat down. She hadn’t expected him to take her up on her challenge.

Annika snatched her bag, finding her journal quickly and fell onto the bed with her back facing him. As much as she wanted to sneak a look at him, she managed to not turn her head in his direction once.

_That Talvi thinks he’s so clever, but he’s just a spoiled brat!_ She scribbled across the page. _What a piece of work! What was I thinking? Everything he says is some kind of line, some romantic bullshit that nobody says. ‘Who the hell really says ‘I didn’t think they made girls like you Annika Brisby?’ Even that thing in Fae is just to get in my pants! I’ll admit I really liked him until yesterday. Why not? He’s attractive, sexy, and we have great chemistry. But when he read me my favorite fairy tale, my heart started to melt. I actually thought he might be different. It doesn’t matter now, though. I know his type. They’re so vain and proud; they don’t change. Why would they want to?_

She wrote for a long time, over half an hour. Even when her hand began to hurt she pressed on, only stopping when Runa popped in through the open door.

“Hey there you two! What are you doing?” her sing song voice called out. Annika looked up from her spot on the bed.

“I think we’re ignoring each other,” she said.
“Is it some sort of a game?” Runa looked thoroughly confused, even for being a
platinum blonde.

“Yep. Talvi likes to play games, doesn’t he?” she asked facetiously, but he didn’t make a sound.

“He does, although I’m not familiar with this one,” Runa seemed very perplexed, and then shrugged it off and put on a bright smile. “Well, let me know who wins!”

The moment Runa left, Annika whipped around and saw Talvi had made himself quite comfortable, slouching in the chair and stretching his legs on the side of the window. He was listening to her mp3 player, wearing her large headphones, and looked like he didn’t have a care in the world. She sighed and realized that they were both so stubborn, they might be there all day. Maybe all night, even, and that wouldn’t do. She had to get him out of there. Fast.

She closed her book and rolled over to her side, waving to get his attention. He slid one of the speakers away from his pointed ear and raised an expectant eyebrow in her direction.

“Okay, I’m ready to talk,” she announced. “I don’t think is going to work. I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“It’s not so bad. I could sit here all day. I can’t believe how many songs this tiny thing holds! I need to get one,” he said, nodding his head to an unheard drumbeat.

“No, I don’t mean this bullshit right here. I mean you and me. It’s a bad idea,” she clarified, feeling grossed out by what Yuri had confided only hours ago. He turned off the device, took off the headphones, and sat up straight in his chair.

“Bad ideas make for the best stories, and I love a good story. You’re going to have to do better than that, if that’s your excuse.”

“You know, after last night I don’t think I owe you jack shit.”

“I don’t think I appreciate the tone of your voice,” he said coolly.

“Don’t treat me like an idiot. I may be twenty-five, but I wasn’t born yesterday. I know about Zenzi and all your other girlfriends. And it’s not that I care how you treat them, but I’m not going to be treated that way. At least most of the players I’ve met try to be discreet about it. You don’t even bother!” she snapped.

“What do my guitar playing abilities have to do with the way you are acting? Are you jealous that I’m a better player than you? Is this a particularly hormonal time? Are you frequently subject to such extreme emotional instability?” he snapped right back. She gasped, realizing that he was calling her not only crazy and premenstrual, but a bad guitar player.

“Are you really that stupid that you think I’m talking about guitars?”

“No, but you’re the one with the pine needle in your knickers, so why don’t you enlighten me on how to work it out?”

“I’m not talking about guitars, Talvi!” she hissed angrily, realizing that the door was left open. “A player is a guy who’s trying to sleep with as many girls as possible at the same time!”

“That’s the most absurd thing I’ve ever heard of,” he said, reaching up to scratch his head. “You modern girls have such strange phrases for the damnedest things. Do you really think I would prefer Zenzi over you? She’s no one.”

“You didn’t seem to have any trouble taking my pants off and then putting your arm around no one right in front of me last night,” she said with a biting tongue. “If she’s no one, why did you invite me to the pub and then ditch me as soon as we got there and go
“Kiss her? God, you’re such a pig!”

“She kissed me, if you recall,” he insisted. “Or were you too high on pixie dust to remember?”

“Oh right, that’s right. My bad,” Annika said sarcastically.

“Well, since you’re so mature for being twenty-five, calling me childish names and whatnot, I guess you deserve an explanation,” he said, still frowning. He glanced at the wide open door and went to shut it, then returned to sit on the edge of his chair. “Zenzi is just someone I used to spend time with years ago, and since I’ve been meeting with her cousins recently, I suppose she misunderstood my intentions for dropping by so often,” he quietly explained. “I had to speak with Milena and Pavelina about the party. They’re good friends of some of the musicians, as well as good friends of mine. It took me so long to get back to you last night because it turns out that there will be far more guests than I expected; certainly more than four hundred. Apparently the musicians are bringing a lot of their mates, and some of their mates are bringing some of theirs as well. I don’t know where they’re going to bloody sleep, and Yuri will have my head if I ruin this party! She’s put so much work into it. I also took my sweet time joining you because I know Finn was passing around a pixie dust cigarette, and when I smoke and drink at the same time I do things I regret, like getting mixed up with stupid girls like Zenzi in the first place. I was trying to avoid looking like a complete ass in front of you. I tried to make it up to you later when we were playing guitar. I had a wonderful time, and I thought you enjoyed yourself as well, but then you disappeared without telling anyone and decided that I’m utterly detestable in the meantime.” He was trembling a little as he explained all of this to her. “I’m not certain what happened between yesterday and today, so if you’d like to explain in further detail why I’m so stupid, speak up.”

But Annika couldn’t speak up. He might be telling the truth, but then, he might not be. Yuri had warned her that he would say anything. He got out of the chair and sat next to her on the bed.

“I think it’s difficult for me to remember that you’re only human, and you can’t read my thoughts like a book,” he said gently. “I wish you could. I think there are a lot of things I try to tell you that you simply don’t understand. Perhaps I don’t understand them either.” She just shrugged, examining the quilt underneath her so she didn’t have to look at him. She felt confused enough as it was, whether he was lying or not.

“I know there’s more you want to say to me Annika. Get it off your chest while we’re coming clean with each other. You should be able to tell me things. You’ll feel better if you do,” he persuaded, rubbing her back with one hand. Annika took a deep breath, but didn’t look at him.

“I think some things happen for a reason,” she began. “Maybe Sloan woke up when he did for a reason. Maybe his timing was more than a coincidence. What I’m trying to say is… I think we should just be friends. I think it’s for the best. The whole mortal coil thing just doesn’t do it for me. Do you ever think about that?”

“Yes, actually. I’ve thought about that quite a bit,” he quietly answered.

“So then you see how nothing good would come of it,” she said, looking up at him. “What’s the point of us wasting our time with each other, especially when I’m supposed to be going home soon? It would just be a disaster.” He looked down at her with a slightly wounded expression.

“Do you think it’s a disaster when we touch, when we kiss?” he asked. Her eyes
He stung at the sincerity of his comment.

“No,” she said, trying not to sound cold. “But I think it would be easier to deal with this now than waiting until we go past the point of no return... know what I mean? We’re from two completely different worlds. We both know that you’re like, ten times older than me.” She went back to examining the fine stitching of the quilt pattern.

“It’s twelve, actually,” he corrected her.

“Whatever; it’s all the more reason,” she pointed out. “You’re a lot of fun to be around, but I can’t... I just can’t get overly involved right now. We can’t spend so much time together.”

Talvi was quiet for a long time before he spoke.

“I understand,” he said, standing up slowly. The light in his eyes was gone, but he still carried himself regally towards the door. “I’ll respect your wishes, and if that means I have to keep my distance, so be it. You know that I can’t make you do anything you don’t want to do.” He walked out the door, shutting softly behind him, and Annika cried herself to sleep.

She dreamt that she had wandered into the village and found herself surrounded by disapproving elves who wanted her to leave. She asked them why, but she knew why. It was forbidden for a human to be romantically involved with an elf. Her black-haired prince appeared before her and she was sure he was going to rescue her. But instead of coming to her defense, he wouldn’t even touch her. And then the three elves from the Tortoise and Hare joined him. Together they all watched her be forced out of town with smiles on their faces. He stood right in front of Annika with his arms around the other girls, watching her burn as he smiled the cruelest smile of them all.
Annika woke up the next morning blinded by the sun. Her hair was stuck to her cheek with dried tears and she combed her fingers through it, washed her face and stepped over to the window. The Samodivi were outside, back at their target practice. Annika opened the door and looked around. There was no sign of anyone, which wasn’t that odd considering the labyrinth nature of the house. She walked along the hall, padding along silently on her bare feet. She knew there were libraries somewhere, and a good story about someone else’s bad ideas sounded like a wonderful distraction. She followed the hallway down another corridor until she finally came to a set of tall arched doors that were propped open. She peered through the vertical crack and her jaw dropped.

Bookshelves lined the walls from the floor all the way up to the three-story ceiling, holding what must have been tens of thousands of books. She boldly stepped into the round room, where she looked up to see the domed ceiling had been painted with ancient mythological figures. A golden chariot leapt over a giant orange and yellow sun painted in the center. Pegasus was chasing Cupid through the air while Zeus watched, surrounded by his many beautiful lovers. She turned in a full circle and saw that the bookshelves had been arranged to line up with the rays of the painted sun, leaving a circle on the floor where there was a great long table piled high with books, almost as long as the dining room table. The room wasn’t too dark, thanks to long vertical windows cut into the stone. They looked like slits of light that let the dust sparkle in the sunbeams.

Annika walked towards the center of the library towards this table and picked up the book on the highest stack. It was in a language she couldn’t read. She guessed it was Greek, recognizing some of the letters from attending frat parties in her college days. She flipped through the pages and found only two pictures. One illustration was very odd, showing a pentacle and strange symbols drawn around its five points. In the center of the star was an eye staring back at her. The other depicted two men, one looking cautiously through a door and the other standing outside under a crescent moon. His arm was outstretched, and he held his palm up to reveal this symbol drawn inside of it.

“Oh dear,” a weary voice sighed. She lowered her book and gave a yelp. A hand without a body was resting on the stack of books. Then the owner of the hand stood up, and Ambrose was there, smiling at her.

“Thank the gods! I thought I’d lost my favorite pen,” he remarked, and tossed a cobweb-covered fountain pen onto a pile of papers.

“Thank you,” she replied, and held up the book in her hands. She pointed to the illustration of the two men. “I can’t remember where, but I’ve seen this image before.”

“I’ve seen it too,” Ambrose asked. “That’s a secret meeting between Pythagoras and his order. Did you know they had to remain silent for five years before they could contribute their ideas at those meetings?”

“No, I didn’t,” she said, looking around in awe. “Your library’s beautiful. Who painted the ceiling?”

“Why, Talvi began working on that when he was only eighty-four. Can you believe that?”
“Well, no, not really,” Annika admitted and craned her neck to look up at the mythological creatures again. When she glanced at Ambrose, she saw his kind eyes twinkling with familiar glints of blue and green.

“He painted most of the ballroom too. I almost wish he found himself in trouble more often.” Annika gave him a questioning look, but he just smiled at her. “I could use the help around the house.”

He motioned for her to join him at the other side of the table, and peered into her eyes for a moment, raising a curious brow now and again.

“I heard a rumor that you are a descendant of the samodivi. I’m very interested to learn more. Are you?”

“I guess,” she shrugged. “They seem pretty convinced, but I don’t know what to believe.”

“You do have a startling resemblance to Magda. Shall we find out if the rumor is true?” he asked, stroking his neatly clipped beard. Annika had her doubts, but she saw no harm in humoring him.

“How can you tell? Do I need to take a DNA test or something?”

“No, nothing of the sort. Come this way.” He walked in between a set of shelves separated by a sweeping archway and led her into a second library, not quite as majestic but very elegant nonetheless. There was a large globe off to one side, and a long blackboard mounted on wheels displayed the longest mathematical formula Annika had ever seen written out. There was a desk positioned almost exactly where Finn’s desk was positioned in his own room, as well as an overstuffed chair identical to the one upstairs. The room had numerous built-in shelves that ran up to the ceiling, and a spiral staircase in the corner led to a balcony that wrapped around the upper level. A wheeled ladder was mounted on a track for easy access to the lower shelves, which were still higher than any of the elves could reach on their own. In this library Annika found more than a few familiar books, and she wandered around freely. Plato, Shakespeare, Emily Bronte and Mark Twain were just a few of the names she knew.

Just like Finn’s bedroom, one wall was almost entirely dedicated to an enormous window and a set of French doors which led out to a private patio, with a view of the barn and pastures in the distance. There was a large potted tree near the window where Cazadora was perched, preening her feathers. The two walls on either side of the first were lined with books, but it was the wall opposite of the window that was the most striking. It was made of the largest piece of black granite that Annika had ever seen, and buffed so smooth that it reflected the light from the huge windows like a dark mirror. There were countless deep, fine lines carved into this wall that resembled an extensive road map, which spread out from the center of the wall like a disjointed starburst.

“Finn? Where are you?” Ambrose called out, walking closer to the polished black wall.

“Over here,” a deep voice answered from among the rows of bookshelves.

“Bring the ladder over here. Best get the black quill while you’re at it.”

“The black quill?” he repeated. “Annika must be with you then. Hello Annika!” he called out from the other side of the room. Annika meant to return his greeting, but she was distracted by the apparent connection she had to this black quill. She looked closer at the granite wall Ambrose was standing beside and saw that it was no road map at all but
an enormous family tree. There were thousands of names written in multiple languages and branching out in every direction. She looked towards the center, where there was one name surrounded by three others. These four names were larger and cut deeper into the stone than any of the others.

“What does this say?” she asked him, pointing to the center name.

“That’s Sariel’s name in her ancient tongue.” Annika squinted hard and stepped back, stunned by the myriad of names before her. She recalled something Sariel had mentioned the first time they met back in the cave; “How is it that I managed to not keep track of you?” Could this family tree be what she was referring to?

“Here you are, Father,” Finn announced, carrying a ladder in one hand and a long black box in the other. He handed it to Ambrose and leaned the ladder carefully on the wall, so as not to scratch it, before cracking his back in a few places.

“I wasn’t expecting you to leave us unannounced last night,” he said to Annika, and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Why didn’t you tell me you weren’t feeling well? I would have happily taken you home.” She shook her head and mumbled a brief apology, but she didn’t want to discuss her mysterious illness with him. She also didn’t want to admit that she would’ve liked him to take her home, but didn’t want to give Hilda a reason not to like her. After her experiences with Talvi, Yuri, and Sevan, she was pretty sure she needed all the friends she could get.

“If it happens again, will you please promise to let me know so I don’t worry myself to pieces looking for you?” he asked, gazing down at her with those big, soft, infinite brown eyes. Annika could only smile back at him and nod in response.

“Shall we start searching, young lady?” Ambrose asked as Finn let his hand fall from her shoulder.

“I don’t even know where to begin,” she said, wrinkling her forehead in confusion.

“Of course you don’t, dear. Forgive me.” He took her shoulder and scooted her two large steps closer to the wall. “First thing’s first; you need the black quill.” He opened the long black box and inside lay an exotic black plume on a bed of black satin. An exquisite, slender handle of solid gold came to a graceful point at the tip.

“Go on then; take it out and write your name on the wall.”

“Does it matter where?”

“Preferably in a blank area.”

“Um, Ambrose? Don’t I need ink?”

“No, just write your entire given name,” he replied. She shrugged and wrote it just as he’d asked. The three of them stood back and waited for something to happen, but nothing did. There was no mark left where the gold tip had touched the marble.

“Hmm. Perhaps your father’s name?”

She wrote her dad’s full given name, but the same thing happened. Nothing.

“What about your mother?” Finn suggested. “The blood characteristics of the nymphs tend to be passed down through females.” She slowly spelled out her mother’s full name, feeling slightly ridiculous for writing on polished stone with an inkless pen. He and his father stood back, looking around the chart.

“Aha, look!” Finn cried, pointing to the upper left corner. Annika looked up and was startled to see a small name in her mother’s handwriting glowing reddish gold. “Badra’s beard—there she is!” He moved the ladder to the side of the illuminated name. The other names next to it also began to faintly glow, and then it snaked slowly to the center until it
reached Sariel’s name.

“Now draw a small line from your mother’s name, like the others, see? Then write your name at the end of that line.” She climbed up the ladder and did as Finn instructed. This time the place where she wrote glowed as well, but it was in her own handwriting. Right as she dotted the last ‘i’ in her name, the softly glowing tree of names suddenly lit up as if set on fire, sending out rays of radiant white light. It was so sudden and intense that Annika squeezed her eyes shut and leaned away, blocking the light with her hands. She groped blindly for the ladder and grabbed empty space as she lost her footing. She braced herself to hit the hard stone floor, but tumbled into Finn’s arms instead.

“It appears that the rumor is true after all,” Ambrose said after the light had dimmed down, but he didn’t sound very surprised. He seemed only to be confirming something he already knew. From the safety of his embrace, Annika felt Finn’s body stiffen abruptly.

“That means Dragana’s prophecy is true as well.”

“There’s a time and a place for that discussion, Finn, and the present is not it,” Ambrose said so sharply that Annika did not dare question him about what it meant. Finn carefully set her to the ground and rested his hands on her shoulders. She couldn’t see the sad expression he wore, but she could sense it. Whatever it meant, her name was permanently and magically etched in the stone, still glowing red like the embers of a latent fire.

She looked again at the center, barely comprehending that she and her mother were Sariel’s relatives. The illuminated trail came back to one of the three names connected to Sariel’s. One of the other two names had no names stemming from it, and the third name had only a few in comparison to the one Annika’s branched out from.

“Who is this?” she said, pointing to the most prolific of the three names. “Is this Magda?”

“Yes,” Ambrose said. “And here’s Hilda, and here’s Runa.”

“But it looks like they’re all Sariel’s daughters.”

“That’s because they are,” Finn informed her. She turned around and looked up at him, feeling mystified. There was so much she didn’t know, so many old mysteries to learn, and now a strange prophecy of that was tied into her being part samodiva.

“Interesting. Very interesting. Well, I must return to my research. I have a lot more preparation to do before I meet with Konstantin next week.” Ambrose excused himself and ambled back through the corridor to his wing of the library. Finn appeared deeply disturbed, and seemed to be searching the wall of names for an answer to his troubles.

“Where did this thing come from? Did you make it?” she asked Finn regarding the unique wall. She didn’t like seeing him so glum.

“Yes, it was a research project of Sariel’s,” he explained. “Together we etched her records on this wall. It appears she’s grown slightly lax in her efforts to track her offspring, but don’t mention it to her. Sariel is incapable of making mistakes, you know,” he said, and winked at her.

“Can I ask you something?” Annika turned to him. He towered over her with his arms crossed over his chest, but the expression in his eyes was anything except intimidating.

“Anything you wish.”

“Where am I?”

“Ah…” Finn said, raising his brows with interest. “I’m surprised you waited this
long to ask such a question, and I’m even more embarrassed that I never thought to tell you.” He led her over to the globe near his desk and gave it a slight spin, then planted his finger on a specific spot on the northern hemisphere, which looked a lot like the northern hemisphere of Earth. “You’re in Derbedrossivic, in Srebra Gora, on Earth’s twin, Eritähti. But I’m sure you wish to know more. My father and I have studied extensively, and I’ve traveled far and wide seeking such answers. That’s how I became a polyglot.”

“A what?”

“A polyglot,” he repeated with a modest smile. “It’s someone who speaks multiple languages, and does so quite well. Now there are gates or bridges between your world and ours, although I believe you’ve referred to them as portals. Regardless of what you call them, they all lead to corresponding locations between the two planets. Typically they’re located inside or at least somewhat near older cities.” He pointed to a scattering of seven blue stones embedded into the globe, and put his fingertip on one of them. “For example, this is London, and here’s Paris. Those are the gates we pass through most frequently. Sometimes we use the ones in Prague or Jerusalem. It all depends on the reason for the visit.”

“What about the portal in Sariel’s cave? I don’t see it on your globe.”

“That one’s undisclosed, as are many others,” he said with a grin. “The seven you see here are the only ones officially known the public. They’re regulated by our government to keep things in order.”

“I thought that was just stuff you read about in sci-fi books,” she sighed in wonder. “And now the portals are closing between the different worlds, right?”

“As far as I’m aware, they’re all inaccessible. It’s very troubling because they’re closing without warning, and you and Asbjorn aren’t the only travelers who’re missing. We have yet to find out who’s responsible, so hopefully Konstantin will have some useful information that will bring both of you back home.”

“Wow,” she sighed, trying to comprehend all he’d told her. She returned to gaze at the granite wall, and stared at her name burned into the stone. The glowing had faded, but the permanence was impossible to ignore. Finn came to stand beside her, studying her name on the wall the way one studies a Rembrandt at the Louvre.

“You really are between two worlds, aren’t you?”

“It seems that way,” she agreed.

“I have something you’ll be interested to see.”

He walked over to the ladder mounted to the track along the bookshelves and climbed halfway up, pushing from shelf to shelf with his foot. Finally he stopped at a row of books that he pulled down, revealing that it was only a façade for a secret drawer, from which he withdrew a glass case. He climbed down carefully and set it on his desk, and as Annika came to have a look, she saw a very tattered thing lying under the dusty glass cover. Finn sat on the corner and patted the space next to him before opening the case.

“You’re going to love this,” he said as Annika hopped up and scooted closer to him. The book hiding inside the case looked like it would disintegrate at any moment. As if he’d read her thoughts, he remarked, “I really need to preserve this better. I keep thinking it will last forever, but its age is definitely starting to show.” He opened the cover gingerly, revealing a text in a forgotten language on one page and a beautiful drawing of a young boy on the other.

“Already it is Gudrun’s tenth birthday,” Finn read in his soft, deep voice. “I
mistakenly thought he would take his time growing as Althea’s firstborn is, but he is 
sprouting like a weed. He will be a man in just a few short years. I fear the mortal life I 
have chosen for myself and for him, but I must remain strong. I can feel this body dying 
all around me, but my son should know who his mother is. He should know what his 
mother was.”

He glanced over at Annika, and then carefully turned another page. Her image was 
staring right back at her, immortalized in fading charcoal. There was something sad and 
mysterious about her expression. At first Annika thought it was some kind of elaborate 
jest, but Finn wasn’t laughing. His expression was far away, even though he was gazing 
right at her.

“What was it that your dad didn’t want you to tell me?” she softly implored. “What’s 
this prophecy about?”

Finn looked into her eyes, at a loss for words. It seemed bittersweet, whatever it was, 
because even though he tried to smile, she could see that behind his large curls his eyes 
were watering up. His hand reached out to hold her face, because he unable to believe 
how much she resembled the drawing lying in front of them. The likeness was real; his 
hand did indeed rest on something tangible. He leaned in closer, reading her soul, 
studying it closely with his scholar’s eyes. He lifted one hand to stroke her hair and 
cradle her cheek.

“Annika, you mustn’t tell anyone about this…” he implored, to which she nodded. 
He moistened his lips and took a soft, hesitant breath, but it was a venomous voice that 
broke the silence.

“Am I interrupting something?” 
Annika jerked her head around and smacked it hard against Finn’s jawbone. Her 
eyes immediately began to sting as she clutched her forehead. 
“Oh you poor thing…that had to hurt,” Finn winced, and gently brushed her hair 
back to see the damage he’d done. 
She peeked through her fingers to see Talvi standing there, stewing and steaming, 
with an incredulous look on his face.

“Apparently you’re too busy to help me with dinner,” he spat.
“Actually we are. Give us a moment, would you?” Finn countered with more than a 
hint of agitation in his voice. Ignoring his brother, he turned to Annika and placed his 
hand lightly on her forehead.

“Take all the time you need!” his brother snapped. “I’ll personally see to it that no 
one disturbs you!” He turned on his heel and stormed out of the room, slamming the 
heavy doors behind him.

“Shit,” Annika muttered and looked up at Finn. “That must have looked pretty bad.” 
Finn simply shook his head.

“Pay him no mind. He can be so astonishingly melodramatic that it’s become rather 
expected. How does your head feel?”

“It’s better. It’s actually a lot better! Elves must have a magic touch,” she said with a 
grin.

“You could call it that.” A tender smile sat on his lips. “Now where were we? Ah yes…your greatest grandmother had a flair for capturing likenesses.” They looked back 
at the book and Finn turned the page again. There were the faces of Hilda, Runa and 
Sariel.
“I can’t believe she kept a journal just like I do,” she remarked.
“She had others, but this is all we have left of her.”
“Why do you have it here? Why not give it to Sariel?”
“She brought it to us a long time ago, thinking it would be safer here. She was reading it so often that the pages were beginning to disintegrate. She felt that having limited access would force her to preserve it longer. It’s quite miraculous that it’s survived all this time.”

They took their time looking through the book, and Finn translated all of the old writings and shared what stories he could tell about Magda and her life. Annika was taken away to a harsh world of raising a family among raucous men, with husbands away on long journeys at sea and cruel winters when there was little to eat. It was difficult for her to see why Magda had willingly entered into such a life, except for the moments where she doted on her beautiful and beloved children.

And as much as she enjoyed the family history lesson with Finn, there was still that unanswered question that Talvi had stopped Finn from answering. Out of respect she didn’t ask him again, and out of feigned forgetfulness, he conveniently didn’t mention it again.
Chapter 15
the healing powers of banitzia

After exhausting every fiber of Magda’s journal, Annika and Finn headed for the kitchen, where the twins were bickering with each other. As soon as they entered the room, Talvi and Yuri clammed right up. Yuri seemed in a fine mood as she busied herself near the hearth across the kitchen, but her brother still acted aloof towards both Annika and his older brother.

“You said you needed help?” she asked him.

“Here,” he said gruffly, shoving a large basket of tomatoes and cucumbers between Annika and his brother. “You can chop these up for the salad.” He stared at her cruelly, making her feel beyond uncomfortable before he walked away to join his sister.

“He’s just jealous,” Finn whispered in her ear after his brother was out of earshot. “He thinks you should only pay attention to him.”

“Is that so?” she whispered back.

“Yes. It’s driving him mad that you aren’t falling all over yourself trying to make him notice you.”

“You mean like that girl last night?” she hissed. Finn stifled a snort.

“Yes. And if you’re ever as obnoxious as Zenzi, I’ll personally lock you in the cellar,” he hissed back. This time it was Annika’s turn to laugh.

“Like I would complain about that,” she laughed, fantasizing about the endless supply of wine she would have full access to.

“Oh, don’t get too excited. I wouldn’t give you a bottle opener,” he clarified. She punched him in the arm playfully as Talvi glared at them from across the room.

They scraped their piles of chopped cucumbers and tomatoes into a large bowl and Finn went down to the cellar for the wine. Annika quickly found her way around the kitchen and was dousing the salad with oil, vinegar, salt and pepper. Talvi watched over her shoulder for a minute, shaking his head in disapproval.

“That’s too much vinegar. And not enough salt. You’re going to ruin the whole thing,” he nitpicked. She didn’t look up at him right away.

“Then you don’t have to eat any of it,” she said quietly.

“This is my dinner as well, and you’ve bloody ruined it. And you cut the cucumber pieces far too small. Why did I think you could cook? I suppose you modern girls don’t really know how unless it involves ringing your nearest takeout restaurant. Perhaps my brother can show you how an oven works, but if I left you two in charge of dinner it would never get done,” he said with a stinging, malicious tongue. That was it; that was the last straw. She set the saltshaker down hard on the counter and turned to him.

“What is your problem, anyway?” she demanded. “At my uncle’s house I cooked for eight full-grown men almost every night, and they happened to love everything I made. They’d never dream of talking to me the way you are now, so what gives you the right? I didn’t ask to come here! I just want to go home!” Talvi’s eyes widened, but no retort came forth. “And for the record, I didn’t cut up the cucumbers! Finn did!” Annika added. She looked away from him and saw Finn standing in the cellar door, the samodivi were frozen at the kitchen entrance and Yuri’s eyes were as wide as both her brothers. Talvi looked down his nose at her incredulously and rushed past the nymphs, with Yuri
following close behind.

Annika turned away from her audience and sank against the cupboard onto the floor, trying unsuccessfully to hide as the stinging tears crept into her eyes. With a shudder of anxiety, they overflowed to a full blown bawl. She couldn’t keep it in anymore, and she didn’t care who heard her cry. She didn’t ask to be treated like this, and she knew she didn’t deserve it. She wanted to be a tiny thing, like a particle of dust in the air. She wanted to disappear, and most of all, she wanted to be home. She felt a soothing pair of arms around her back and glanced down to see a small pair of feet at her side.

“Don’t be upset over his words. You were right to stick up for yourself,” Runa said softly, kneeling beside her and patting her back. Annika wiped her wet cheeks on her sleeve and looked at her friend.

“Why did he have to be such an asshole?” she sniffed, trying not to sob anymore.

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen him act so horrid. Well, maybe when he was forty,” said Runa. Annika mustered a smile and Runa pulled her up to where Hilda, Sariel and Finn were standing.

“This will cheer you up in no time,” he said, filling a small glass from an ornate bottle.

“You can’t make everyone’s problems go away with pixie dust and fairy brandy, Finn,” Hilda said with a frown. “You’re clever enough to know that’s not the answer.”

“Of course I know that, Hilda,” he said cheerfully. “But I can’t think of a better excuse than my brother’s recently abhorrent behavior to require a rare sampling of Father’s collection. I think this one is made from peaches.” His reply seemed to make perfect sense to Hilda, who reached for her glass with more enthusiasm. Annika took a sip and was surprised by the sweet, fiery trail it left running down her throat.

“That’s not like any brandy I’ve ever had, but it’s damn good,” she confessed, turning the glass around in her hand. Finn filled her glass once more and then corked the exquisite bottle.

“You know, Annika,” he sighed and leaned against the countertop. “I really do like having you around. I think my brother has finally met his match.”

“How so?” she sniffled, and wiped away the last of her tears. “Because I don’t let him disrespect me?”

“You’re very different from the other girls that have chased him around.”

“I don’t chase men,” she said defensively.

“I’ve noticed. We all have,” Finn continued. Hilda and Runa both nodded. “I surmise that’s why he’s so taken with you, because you don’t pursue him. You make him seek you instead, and he’s never had to do that before. He doesn’t know what to do, because his old methods aren’t working.”

“It’s true,” Sariel agreed. “That’s why he was so cruel to you just now, because he fancies you so much that it scares him. I’ve never seen him so stirred up over a female.” Runa nodded in complete agreement.

“He likes me?” Annika was totally surprised. “Like, in that way?”

“Isn’t it obvious that he’s smitten with you?” Hilda asked, but Annika shrugged. “I didn’t think he was capable of having genuine feelings for anyone but himself,” she muttered. She still wanted to know more about what Yuri had said about him adding an American girl to his to-do list, but she wasn’t about to ask in her present company. Hilda pursed her lips in frustration.
“That’s a misconception. You don’t know him the way we do,” she said. “You can’t see the forest for the trees. Speaking of the forest, remember the day after he met us in the woods, when we were shooting targets?” Annika nodded slowly as she recalled that day not too long ago. “He was very insistent that we find some excuse to leave you alone with him so he could talk to you. We didn’t really need more wood,” Hilda said with a smile.

“Did you know that he went back to look for you after that day at the bookstore?” Finn asked her. “We urged him not to return, since we knew that the gates could close at any time without warning, but he insisted. He simply had to find the saucy American lass he’d met in Sofia. Good gods…the way he carried on…” Finn shook his head and smiled to himself. Annika wasn’t sure if it was the two glasses of fairy brandy or something else warming her insides, but she was leaning towards something else.

“When he tackled you and you kicked him off like it was nothing…why, that was the funniest thing I’ve seen in a long time!” Runa laughed. “Did you see the look on his face?” Annika was feeling better already.

“Yeah, that was pretty funny,” she agreed. “I wouldn’t mind seeing that look again. Maybe I’ll show him that I know exactly what the inside of an oven looks like. Do you have any sheep’s cheese and some yogurt?”

“Yes…why?” Finn asked curiously.

“Oh, just let me try something out. I think you’ll like it,” she said, feeling her confidence bolstered by her new friends. The kitchen quickly became a happy place again as the brandy poured freely and everyone began to chat about their days’ activities. Finn and the others busied themselves with the rest of the dinner courses, while Annika beat fresh eggs and mixed them with the cheese and yogurt. In two large pans she layered thin sheets of dough with the mixture and baked it until it was crisp and golden on top.

They set the table and the rest of the family came wandering in. Ambrose sniffed the air from the head of the long table.

“What is that I smell? Is it what I think it is?” he wondered with a curious look in his eyes.

“You’ll see soon enough!” Runa chimed. She lit the chandeliers while Hilda set the mysterious dish in front of Finn, who at once cut it into ten pieces and served everyone except his brother. The tenth piece he divided in half for the children.

“Why didn’t I get any of that?” Talvi said, feeling slighted.

“You wouldn’t like it,” Hilda said after a delicate bite.

“It’s terrible,” Sariel said after a larger bite.

“Oommph,” Runa mumbled with her mouth crammed full of hot, flaky pastry.

“Oh you’ll hate it. We know how much faith you have in Annika’s culinary skills,” Finn said with a grin, making Talvi’s eyes flash. Ambrose gave the brothers a questioning look but said nothing. The samodivi were trying not to laugh too hard as they could see Talvi desperately biting his tongue. He’d been bested, and he hated that they all knew it.

Even Yuri, bound as she was by loyalty to her twin, couldn’t help stifling a snort.

“Why Annika, I didn’t know you could make banitza! I haven’t had this in ages,” Ambrose marveled, quite impressed. He sighed in pleasure as he sank his teeth into the hot pastry, and devoured it before all the other dishes.

“Well I make it fairly often at home. From scratch. In an oven,” she replied emphatically, looking right at Talvi. But he was avoiding her gaze at all cost.

“I’d give you a permanent room here if you made this for me just once a week,”
Ambrose told her with a satisfied smile. “And the salad is quite good tonight. There’s usually too much salt and not enough vinegar. I swear I could drink vinegar straight from the bottle!”

“Sometimes you do, Father,” Finn reminded him, unable to hide his bright white grin. Talvi looked like he was going to die of embarrassment right then and there as a scarlet shadow crept from his cheeks to the tip of his softly pointed ears. His lips were pressed together so hard that there was only a thin line across his face. Runa burst out laughing, and Hilda and even Sariel joined her.

“What is so amusing, girls? Have you had too much to drink already? I happen to know someone was in my special fairy brandy,” Ambrose inquired, but no one would tell him the real reason. Anthea and Althea exchanged glances with Finn, who was telling them telepathically of Talvi and Annika’s spat in the kitchen. They knew, but they only smiled sweetly.

“Talvi, you look ill. Why aren’t you eating? Are you not feeling well?” his mother asked, feeling his forehead with her hand, but he didn’t say a word. “You must be getting a fever—goodness you’re warm!” Runa broke out in a new round of laughter at this comment.

“You look like you need to lie down, son. At least step outside and get some fresh air.”

“Gladly!” he growled at his mother, and threw down his napkin before leaving the table.

“Would you like to hear something interesting?” Ambrose asked his wife and daughters once the giggles had died down. “There’s really no sense in keeping it under wraps.”

“What is that, dear?” Althea replied.

“Today a new name was added to Sariel’s family tree.” A few forks clattered on the ceramic plates and Runa squealed in joy.

“I knew it! I knew it had to be true!”

“Annika, that is delightful news!” Hilda exclaimed.

“So we really do have a long lost sister!” Runa cried, hugging Annika so tightly that she almost choked. Sariel looked at Annika with faraway eyes, and her gaze was softer than it had ever been, but that sadness was still visible. Annika didn’t see Althea clasp her husband’s hand underneath the table, or the expression on her face. It was similar to the bittersweet look that Finn wore earlier in the library. While Hilda and Runa ran through brief histories of some of the names that lead Annika to them, Sariel and the eldest of the Marinossians remained fairly quiet. Yuri was the quietest of all; she didn’t crack a smile or utter another word for the rest of the meal.
Chapter 16

interlude

The next week went by incredibly fast. With the number of guests expected, everything had to be polished and spotless, and as soon as a task was finished, ten more seemed to take its place. Ambrose had hired a cleaning service made entirely of brownies, who specialized in completing their work at night and dazzling their customers upon waking. However, Althea still managed to find things around the house that needed extra scrubbing and dusting.

When she wasn’t feeding the horses or feeding her hosts, Annika was practicing her archery with the nymphs and showing Runa a few more kickboxing moves. Yuri had become less and less congenial to be around, but Annika chalked it up to nerves.

At night she kept returning to the reading room to gaze at the remarkable painting and write in her journal, or read from the book of fairy tales. Talvi would join her after dinner, reading quietly in the chair beside her for a few hours before he went to bed, or engaging her in a game of reversi or backgammon. When she was thirsty, he would pour her a glass of water before she even thought to reach for the pitcher. When she got cold, he would shut the window and fetch her a blanket before she sat up to do so herself. He even turned down a couple visits to the Tortoise and Hare, leaving the others completely bewildered when he politely declined their invitations.

There was something about those evenings that made Annika wonder even more about him. Did he always come here to read after dinner? Was he proving that he could be her friend after all? He made no more sexual references and kept his conversation geared towards refined topics like art, literature and music, but the most touching gesture he made was when he came to her with a comb and a pair of scissors.

“Half an inch, just like you said,” he warned, “and not a bit more.”
The day before the party, the samodivi and Annika went to Yuri’s room after
breakfast to choose their dresses from the numerous armoires.

“I’m so nervous,” Yuri said of her twin brother as she selected some pretty gowns. “I
don’t know what he’s planned for the music or planned to wear, and I’m getting worried. We have to match. Everything has to be perfect! At least he trimmed his hair. It was beginning to look scraggly.”

“Yeah it was,” Annika agreed, holding a blue dress in front of Runa. “I did that the other night while you guys were at the pub.” Yuri gripped the side of the armoire as though she’d suddenly developed a painful stitch in her side.

“He let you cut his hair?” she hissed through clenched teeth. Runa and Hilda’s eyes grew wide in shock.

“He just had a few split ends. It’s not like I chopped it all off or anything,” Annika said with a dismissive shrug.

“I think it looks nice,” Runa said quickly, grabbing the dress closest to her. “Yuri, what do you think of this dress? Can I wear this one? I think green looks so pretty with my dark eyes, don’t you think?”

“You’re holding a blue dress, you ding-a-ling,” Hilda cried in exasperation. “Although it does look nice against your complexion. If you’re wearing that one, then I’m going to take the green one since it’s already hemmed.”

“Either of those is fine with me,” Yuri said, looking distracted. “I think I’m wearing the purple one anyway.” Sariel didn’t seem to be very interested in the girlish pastime of trying on dresses.

“Why do I have to get frilled up?” she complained, but Yuri wouldn’t hear of it.

“You always wear the same things. Leather skirt, white shirt, green sash and fur trimmed boots, every single day,” she frowned. “You look fine enough right now, but you will stick out like a sore thumb if you aren’t dressed up like the rest of us tomorrow night. It’s only one evening of your bloody life, Sariel. You don’t even have to get ready until the sun sets. Now here…you should wear something that will compliment your skin and eyes. What about this red one?” Sariel shook her head as Yuri pulled a ruby red gown out of the bureau.

“That is way too flashy. I don’t want to bring attention to myself, remember?”

“Wow, that one is amazing!” Annika breathed, looking at the satin gown. “Sariel, if you don’t want it, I’ll wear it. Red is my favorite color.”

Yuri narrowed her eyes at Annika and shook her head in disapproval.

“It won’t look good on you. It will compete with your hair,” she declared, and reached into the armoire again. This time she retrieved a black silk dress and gave it to her. “Yes, I think this would be perfect. Wouldn’t it be interesting if you and I matched?” she asked Annika, who was amazed by the meticulous beading and lace. “Between our hair and our dresses, we’ll both be in black and red.” Annika was so preoccupied at examining the dress that she didn’t see the samodivi exchange confused glances behind Yuri’s back.

“I don’t know, Yuri. What if I spill something on it? It’s really elaborate,” Annika
said. But Yuri wouldn’t have it any other way.

“But you must wear this one! It’s gorgeous. It will contrast perfectly with that bright red hair of yours. You’ll look so pretty,” she said with a smile so fake that Annika could see right through it. She didn’t want to make a fuss though, so she graciously took the dress to the mirror. She had to admit, the black silk did make her hair stand out more than the red ever could.

“How many dresses do you own, anyway?” Runa asked as she squeezed in front of the mirror beside Annika.

“I’m not really sure. Isn’t that terrible?” Yuri counted in her head. “I really have no idea. Since I stopped riding around the forest with my lazy brother I have so much more time to enjoy dressing up and looking respectable.”

“I like how you used to dress just fine,” Sariel said as she chose the purple gown Yuri had originally wanted. “I don’t know why you changed.” Yuri rolled her eyes but said nothing more on the subject of clothes.

“Now that we know what we’re wearing tomorrow night, we need to see if the florist needs any guidance. If we don’t hurry them along they’ll never be done in time.”

Yuri’s entourage followed her through the house and they spent the rest of the day draping sheer fabrics over table tops in the ballroom and helping to arrange close to three-hundred red and white roses. While taking orders from Yuri was beginning to test her patience, Annika was surprised how quickly the day flew by. That evening she drew a bath and soaked in the tub. It was quite an ordeal to heat the water enough and pour it into the giant basin, but it was worth it. She found it paradoxical that she was bathing by candlelight, and yet beside the giant tub were all sorts of shampoos and soaps that looked like they belonged in a rustic, yet upscale spa. Everyone’s modern-looking wooden toothbrushes sat by the sink next to a large jar of homemade toothpaste, and a large hutch was at one end, stuffed with fluffy towels and baskets of sponges and washcloths. It was so familiar, and still she knew she was so far away from home. All it took was one look through the steamy windows where the larger moon, Vega, was nearly full beside tiny, steadfast Badra.

She’d been gone for almost three weeks and was surprised how easily she’d been distracted from her other life. Her life with a family and friends and a band in America, and an uncle in the Balkan Mountains felt so far away, yet so close. She thought about what Finn had said about parallel universes and the blocked paths that led between them, and wondered if she’d ever leave. She’d grown to care about these people, but she still felt like an outsider. She didn’t want to think about living here indefinitely, and when she thought of the pain her mother must be experiencing at that same moment, she broke down and sobbed, rinsing away her tears with the bath water only to find more had taken their place. She tossed and turned in bed for a long time that night, feeling pulled in two different directions by a heart in love with two different worlds.
Chapter 18

a night to remember

The day of the big celebration had finally arrived, although Yuri seemed disappointed that something else hadn’t arrived along with the cake and wine. She was starting to drive Annika nuts, what with her obsession to have everything be perfectly perfect and completely under her control. She’d even gone so far as to move every plate and fork that Annika put beside the cake, because she felt they should be on the left instead of the right. Annika held her tongue and silently prayed that Yuri would mellow out after the party.

The twins disappeared as it grew closer to sunset while the samodivi and Annika got dressed up in Yuri’s room. She gasped as Hilda pulled the cords tight at the back of her gown, causing her small waist to shrink even more. The girls spent nearly two hours getting ready, perfuming their skin with scented oils and adorning their hair with some of the flowers and leaves they had left over from decorating. Hilda let Annika sweep her mess of thick hair into an elegant updo and held it in place with jeweled hair pins. Runa had woven some deep green ivy into her friend’s bright red hair, and even Sariel had broken down and let Annika apply eyeliner and mascara like the rest of them. In a dress and makeup she was almost unrecognizable, and she looked at herself in the mirror for a long time before giving a stoic nod of approval. They slipped on hard heeled shoes and clicked through the halls to see if any guests had arrived yet.

Finn was leaning against the heavy front door, but when he saw the four of them he nearly slid to the floor. He was dressed to the nines himself, in a dark brown frock coat and pants, and a red waistcoat embroidered with green and gold patterns. He tried desperately to appear composed, but he was clearly not prepared to see either Hilda or Sariel looking so feminine. Before he could comment there was a knock on the door. He opened it and for a moment Annika thought he was talking to a large moth fluttering in the lamplight. He invited it into the threshold and then suddenly a human-sized fairy stood there. Then three more, and then four more, until there were over thirty of them milling about on foot and a few feet in the air.

“Hello Dardis, Hello Sirvat. How was your journey?” Finn asked the first two fairies who had materialized from their previously minute size.

“Oh it was not too bad at all, really. We made very good time. It’s so nice to see you Finn!” one of them said. She had short blue hair and purple eyes, and her clothing was otherworldly. Her periwinkle wings fluttered before they lowered and hid underneath her billowing lilac cape. “My my, how you have grown even more handsome is a mystery to me,” she said flirtatiously as she walked up to the girls with her entourage. Annika wasn’t certain, but she thought she saw a flicker of jealousy in Hilda’s eyes.

“Hello Dardis,” Hilda said stiffly as the blue-haired fairy strolled past her.

“Hilda, is that you?” Dardis stepped back to look at the nymph in front of her and her large violet eyes widened even more. “Your hair is…well, it’s cooperating with you quite well tonight.” Hilda wrinkled her nose but said nothing. “You look so lovely, all of you. And Sariel!” Dardis exclaimed. “Why, you look like a princess! You should dress up more often.” Sariel grumbled a response but tried to appear gracious.

“Who is your new friend?” asked an older fairy decked in a yellow dress and green
cape. The dainty and majestic creature wore a crown made of pussy willows on top of her long waves of golden hair that fell down her shoulders.

“Sirvat, I’d like you to meet Annika, Finn politely introduced. “She’s a modern girl who’s staying with us for the time being. Annika, I’d like for you to meet Sirvat. She’s our fairy godmother.”

“It’s nice to meet you Sirvat. I… I’ve never seen a fairy before. I thought you were tiny.” The blonde fairy smiled sweetly as Dardis laughed a laugh that sounded like silver bells ringing.

“We usually are, but it wouldn’t be much fun to dance with the elves if we only came up to their ankles!” Dardis said, and they walked to the ballroom. The other fairies followed her, speaking in a strange language that she couldn’t understand.

“Let’s see what you’ve done with the place… ah, yes,” Sirvat sighed.

“Is it good? Are you pleased?” Hilda asked.

“Very much so! Let’s liven it up a bit though, shall we?” They stepped into the huge room where a group of twenty or so musicians had gathered. One of Anthea’s pianos had been wheeled in as well. The musicians wore black pants and black vests stitched with roses and vines, with white drop-sleeve shirts. They each had a different instrument, some that Annika didn’t recognize. A female musician stood up and played a few long, slow notes on her violin, then a pair of male violinists joined her. The pianist sat down and with great flair he hammered out a commanding tune. Dardis squealed, and her periwinkle wings trembled in excitement from underneath her cape.

“Chivanni, come dance with me!” A very slim, youthful man with hair just as bright red as Annika’s emerged from the group of fairies, his orange wings vibrating noiselessly as he flew across the floor.

The toe of his red boot dragged on the marble tiles as he stopped himself near Dardis. He wore red leggings and an orange tunic with a glittering red belt. His hair was combed forward, and he’d carefully brushed his bangs off to one side. He took Dardis and dipped her down as an accordion player joined the violins and piano, and the ballroom transformed from a cavernous and empty place to a vibrant dance hall. Annika was mesmerized by how Dardis and Chivanni danced together. He reminded her of a nimble flame hopping from side to side, trying desperately to catch the watery and languid blue-haired fairy. Some of the fairies floated up to the chandeliers and curled their hands into fists in front of their faces, and then they slowly released them and puffed as if they were blowing kisses. Within a few moments all of the candles were lit and a warm glow filled the room, creating a surreal atmosphere. The lights twinkled as if they were living and joyful just to burn. There was a fine dust of golden frost covering all the flowers, making them glitter in the light as the colors of the room came alive.

“Well there’s the birthday boy and girl!” Sirvat said as the host and hostess of the party stepped through the archway. Annika turned around as well and saw Yuri escorted by her twin brother. Over her red dress, she wore a black shawl that resembled a spider’s web. He brother looked absolutely dashing, wearing a black frock coat and slacks, and a blood red waistcoat to compliment his sister perfectly. Together they made quite a stately pair, and they stopped so that Talvi stood with his sister on one side, and Annika on his other.

“How is my favorite fairy godmother?” Talvi asked as he let go of Yuri’s arm, bowed down, and hugged Sirvat gently, keeping clear of her delicate wings.
“Oh, I’m so glad to see you two on this day,” she breathed as Yuri embraced her. “How excited you must be, finally turning three hundred! It’s a very magical number, the number three,” she said, gazing at them lovingly.

“I like the black,” a voice behind Sirvat said.

“I like the red,” another said.

“I can’t decide,” yet another cried. Sirvat turned her crowned head around to look at the fairies.

“What on earth are you bickering about? We didn’t fly for days only to argue now.”

“We aren’t arguing, Sirvat,” they laughed. “We were trying to decide who looks more striking beside Talvi.” Annika prayed her face didn’t turn red as she realized that it was probably Yuri’s intention all along to see who looked better standing next to him when she’d picked out their dresses.

“I say the girl with hair like Chivanni’s.”

“I say Yuri in her red dress.”

“I can’t decide! They’re both so lovely,” the third voice wailed again. Yuri looked at Annika with a satisfied smile before turning to Sirvat.

“Shall we make sure the wine hasn’t been poisoned?” she asked her fairy godmother. “That’s a fine idea,” Sirvat laughed and together with Yuri she led the fairies and samodivi towards the refreshments. Relieved that Yuri had gone away, Annika turned to Talvi, who had none of his arrogant airs about him. He only smiled sweetly and offered his arm to her, which she took.

“You um…you look incredible tonight,” she said, trying not to gush.

“I would tell you the same, but the words pale in comparison to what I see before me,” he replied in such a low voice that only she could hear. Her heart thumped hard in her chest as he poured her a glass of wine and introduced her to the other fairy folk. More and more guests began to arrive and Talvi tried his best to introduce her to all his fairy friends and his Aunt and Uncle Derbedrossian, carefully avoiding Sevan. He introduced her to the other elves from the village, and even other samodivi from far away. But eventually Yuri took him away, and they wandered off into the sea of people.

Dardis pulled a handful of objects that appeared to be marbles from a pouch on her belt and began tossing them into the air. One at a time they exploded and sent a spray of fine dust around the room. At first Annika couldn’t tell what she was doing as the dust settled on her skin and the flowers. Then they began to come alive and slightly sway to the rhythm of the music. It was clear to Annika that even with elves, samodivi, and fairies in attendance, this celebration was going to magical. The colors seemed more intense, the candles burned brighter, and the music was a lyrical elixir to her ears. In no time she found herself dancing with a cute fairy boy with turquoise hair and tribal tattoos on his forearms. She caught glimpses of Ambrose, Althea, and Anthea talking with the heads of the Derbedrossian family. They seemed to be getting along well as they watched Stella and her little brother try to catch fireflies. The room was full of light and laughter, and as the music swelled with waltzes and tangos, Annika danced with her friends until she was out of breath.

As she went to get her drink refilled, she could see Talvi and a blond young man in black from across the room talking to a group of tall, willowy elves from the village. The women they spoke to were so beautiful, and so enrapt at the words Talvi spoke, she could only wonder if they were anything like the words he’d said to her. She watched as he set
his glass down and escorted a blonde onto the floor. It didn’t seem fair how effortlessly
they glided across the floor, and she felt the slightest tinge of jealousy. But she was being
irrational. She knew it was the right thing for him to be dancing with another elf. Not
someone who was from a different world, a different species, and two hundred and
seventy-five years younger than him.

After some time, Finn came into the room and took Hilda away from the others.
Runa giggled like a school girl.

“Did you know that they have fancied each other for years?” she asked Annika.
“Well, did she ever tell him that she liked him?”

“She tried, but she’s terrible at it. Oh I’m so glad they’re dancing together. Look at
them move. It’s like they were made for each other,” Runa sighed dreamily.

“Even though they were made the wrong size?” Annika joked, but Runa didn’t catch
it. “There’s almost a two-foot difference between them!”

Why would that stop love? It’s the force between them that makes them move the
way they do,” she said and glanced at Annika, who was trying not to laugh. “Just watch
them.”

Annika did watch them, and envied their happiness. They dreamily gazed into each
other’s eyes as if they hadn’t seen each other in forever. She couldn’t help noticing that
Finn’s brother had chosen another elf from the small group of admirers and was moving
similarly. After dancing with her, he chose another. And then another. She tried not to let
it bother her since she was the one to ask that they only be friends, and nothing more.

The waltzes died off as the musicians took a break. The room quieted and everyone
gathered around Ambrose, Althea, and Sirvat as toasts were made to the twins’ good
fortune and passage into their three hundredth year; how the number three was such a
magical number, and to expect great things to come. As the comments were wrapped up,
the room stirred when a troupe of nubile young belly dancers appeared at the edge of the
room. They wore silver bracelets on their wrists and ankles, and elaborate silver belts
with tiny bells attached. A dark-eyed woman had seated herself at a small table along the
opposite wall from the platform. She wore black and purple skirts, and a feather earring
in one ear. Her long wavy hair was dyed with indigo and adorned in gold bands. She
wore gold bracelets and a gold belt made of hundreds of tiny beads and bells that jingled
when she walked. With rings on every finger, she spread out a silk cloth covered in batik
images of magical symbols, and placed a white candle to her right, and a few sticks of
incense to her left. A group of fairies had already gathered around her, and she brought
out a leather pouch which she removed a deck of cards from. Shuffling the cards, she
looked around at the fairies and one sat down across from her.

“Should we go have our readings done?” Runa asked her.
“Like tarot cards?”
“Yes! Pesha can see the future. Do you want to go find out what yours is?”
“Sure,” Annika agreed, and followed her to the crowded table.

“Welcome back, my dear Runa,” the woman said kindly after she had finished with
the fairy’s reading. Her eyes shone black and mysterious, but her smile was warm and
friendly. “Who is your friend?”

“This is Annika. Annika, this is Pesha.” Annika nodded at the gypsy woman, who in
turn nodded at her.

“Let’s see what the cards have to say.” Runa sat down in front of Pesha. The gypsy
waved the incense smoke over the deck as she shuffled slowly, letting Runa cut the deck, and lay out some cards. She turned one over.

“The fool? Oh no!” Runa wailed. But the woman only laughed.

“It’s not a bad card,” she assured her. “It’s actually quite good. This shows your pure heart is a positive influence to yourself and others.”

“Oh. Well that’s a relief! What’s the Three of Cups mean?”

“Mmm, you have a lot of merriment to look forward to. Oh, but wait.”

“What? What is it?”

“Unforeseen danger or illness. If I were you I would stay alert tonight. You best not drink too much wine, little samodiva.” Pesha continued the reading, telling Runa to expect a new lover soon, and to be more responsible.

“Alright, enough about me,” Runa said as she stood up. “What about you Annika, do you want to have a turn?”

“Sure, why not?” Annika sat down and Pesha smiled as she ushered the smoke over the deck and had Annika cut it into three stacks. Pesha took the first card from the first pile and set it in front of Annika.

“The High Priestess card represents an ideal wife and mother. This is you.”

“Believe me, marriage and children are the last thing on my mind,” Annika said with a laugh.

“Well, he thinks otherwise,” she said, revealing the Page of Rods. “Who is your devoted lover? Is that where your ring came from?”

“I… I don’t have anyone special like that,” Annika said, feeling her face grow hot. “This ring was just a present.” Pesha raised an eyebrow suspiciously at her.

“I’ve been doing this for a long time, and the cards do not lie. Well, whoever he is, you’re about to go on a journey with him that will change you forever. Yes, some very great changes are in store for you,” she continued, flipping the last card over. The image depicted a woman crying, her face covered by her grieving hands over a tombstone impaled by nine swords.

“That doesn’t look too good,” Runa said.

“No, no it doesn’t,” Annika agreed. “Pesha, is this bad?” The woman appeared stunned for a moment, but forced a smile onto her lips.

“I’m sure it’s a mistake. I never draw this one,” she said.

“But you said the cards don’t lie,” Annika reminded her.

“There are a lot of people here tonight. Their energy must be interfering with my capabilities,” Pesha insisted as she began to gather the cards from their separate piles. “I would take it with a grain of salt, my dear.”

“But I’m the one who cut the deck, Please, just tell me what it means, because I’ll find out sooner or later,” Annika begged. Pesha gave a reluctant sigh.

“This card represents death. But it doesn’t refer to you; it refers to someone close to you. That is all I can tell you, and I still advise you to disregard it. Sometimes a death card means rebirth. If I were you, I’d be more concerned about that journey with your mystery man,” she said abruptly and motioned for her next client to step forward.

“Thanks Pesha!” Runa said, and grabbed Annika’s arm, pulling her towards the refreshments. Annika didn’t want to think about the last card that she’d been dealt, and redirected her thoughts on the first two. Pesha’s words echoed in her ears. ‘Who is your devoted lover?’
“You don’t think Talvi’s my devoted lover, do you?” she asked Runa skeptically.

“Of course! He let you cut his hair,” Runa proclaimed as though Annika were asking if the sky was blue or not.

“What’s his hair got to do with anything?”

“You don’t understand,” Runa insisted as her big brown eyes grew even wider. “He’s so vain that he doesn’t let anyone cut his hair. Not even me, and I’m his best mate. Not even his own twin sister! I thought Yuri was going to scream when you mentioned it the other day. That’s why I distracted her. Why do you think I chose this dress?” Annika wrinkled her forehead at her friend. “I wanted the green one, but Hilda got it instead,” she wailed.

“I guess it’s a pretty big deal then, huh?” Annika said, trying to appear sympathetic to Runa’s dress situation. Runa seemed baffled at her remark.

“Annika! How could he not be your devoted lover? Hasn’t he been a perfect gentleman for the past week? We all see it, so why can’t you?” Annika thought long and hard for a simple answer. The truth was that she had none, other than what Yuri had said to her. She watched Talvi lead a laughing dark-haired elf around the floor. Then she looked a little closer. It was Zenzi. She thought she was going to be sick, but it faded as she took a deep breath.

“If he’s so devoted, then why is he dancing with every single girl in the room?”

“Probably for the same reason his sister is dancing with every single boy in the room. It’s their birthday party. What did you expect?” Runa gave her a nudge in the side as though to say ‘stop being so ridiculous’.

“I don’t know. I wasn’t thinking, I guess,” Annika said, trying to brush it off, but she couldn’t help glaring just a little at the twin dancing with Zenzi.

“Of course they do. Now stop being silly and come watch the dancers with me. They’re about to start!” Runa said, leading her towards the belly dancers and drummers.

The crowd had opened to let the dancers file into the center of the ballroom. There were cat calls and howls from every corner of the room. One of the women let out a whoop as they pranced on their tip toes with exaggerated movements, arching their bodies as their loose fitting skirts caught the air. They held something in their hands that Annika couldn’t see. With every shake of their hips a series of chimes went off. They pranced in a circle and lowered to their hands and knees, curling up in tiny balls on the marble floor. The drums began to pound, starting softly but then louder and louder until the women had slowly risen, like snakes being charmed out of their baskets. They stood on their toes, with henna covered hands and arms outstretched to the ceiling. A man on the platform shouted “Al Habibi!” and the band started playing a Middle Eastern inspired melody. The women’s bodies began to soften and melt, their hips shaking to the drums and tambourines. Their arms moved as if they were casting spells around the room, and by the look on everyone’s face, they were indeed. The music stopped for a second, and the women’s arms shot up. Half of them bowed down as the other four chimed three times with finger cymbals. The room roared with approval as the music returned. They danced with each other, then pranced in a circle, swirling their hips and revealing their navels. There were more whistles and then they stopped and danced in the opposite direction. One of them ventured out and returned with an embarrassed looking girl in a bright red dress.

“Look,” Runa said, jumping up and down. “They’re going to make Yuri dance!”
They ushered Yuri into the center of the circle and the man on the platform started to sing. The girl with Yuri taught her a few basic moves, making slow circles with her waist, and then went to join the others dancing around them. Like so many in the crowd, Annika and Runa had started to move with the same hypnotic motions of their hips. One by one, the dancers brought elves and fairies into the center to join Yuri, who was giddy with laughter, adoration, and probably a healthy dose of wine.

A tall elf with deep blue eyes and pale blonde hair came up to Runa and Annika. He looked slightly confused, dressed in black with a sapphire vest that brought out his eyes. Annika recognized him as the man Talvi had been standing with earlier that evening.

“I don’t know how to dance to this strange music, but you two seem to have it all figured out,” he told her as he watched them dance.

“The secret is not to worry about how you look,” Runa butted in. “Everyone is worried about how they look—they’re definitely not watching you.” The young man raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“Thanks a lot, Runa. Do you know what I went through to look this good tonight?” he said, feigning a pout on his full lips. Runa giggled a little, fanning her flushed face.

“Well, perhaps some of us were watching you,” she admitted. The handsome elf turned to Annika and offered her a hand.

“This might sound strange, but I feel like I’ve seen you before,” she confided to him as they moved their bodies and stepped to the beats. He gave her an embarrassed look.

“I’m Yuri’s cousin Zaven. I think you’ve already had an encounter with my little sister Sevan.” She tried not to gasp as he told her he was related to the horrible girl from the Tortoise and Hare.

“I know, I know,” he said apologetically. “She needs to work on her manners. But she can be a very sweet girl.”

“Maybe when she’s sleeping! Oh, don’t even get me started!” Annika said as he twirled her in a circle.

“It would appear I already have,” he replied with a playful grin. “Let’s undo that, shall we?” With that, he stopped her and twirled her in the opposite direction, literally unwinding her and making her laugh. It was no wonder Pavelina and Milena were so sorry to have missed his company, because he was an utter delight to be around. The two of them talked and laughed and danced over a number of songs, and just as Zaven pulled her closer, Talvi cut in.

“Won’t you give me the honor?” he asked politely.

“Isn’t it rude of me to leave my dance partner?” she asked.

“It would be rude for you to refuse me when you promised me a dance,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “In fact, you promised me right in this very spot. Do you recall that day? Or are you in the habit of breaking your promises, Miss Brisby?” She kept waiting for some devilish grin of his to surface, but he only stood there, with an expectant look in his eyes.

“It’s been a pleasure Annika,” Zaven said to her with a smile, “but don’t go breaking promises on my account.” He slid his hand around Runa’s waist and started dancing with her instead.

Annika looked at Talvi, who seemed to have grown even more irresistible under the veil of pixie dust floating around the room. He held out his hand, which she took as a drumbeat began, joined by a foreign, exotic sounding bagpipe and flutes. His other hand
ran down her back and pressed her close to him as a woman began to sing a hypnotic Assyrian song. He leaned down as their bodies moved together to the drums.

“I asked them to play this for you. I thought you’d like it,” he said, and she wondered if he had any idea how right he was.

The olive-skinned singer crooned and the dancers now tossed confetti in the air, landing on the ground where everyone was dancing. Whistles and whoops filled the air as the dancers around them stomped on the floor. He ran his hands along her arms and curled them around his neck, pulling her close and catching her by surprise.

“I’m trying my damnedest to be your friend, but it’s next to impossible when I know you’re lying to yourself about your feelings,” he said in her ear. She stepped away from him as soon as he said this to her, rounding her hips in slow circles and spinning on her toes like the dancers. She was intentionally avoiding him and he didn’t much care for it. He took her in his arms again, more forcefully this time, and flipped her around so she couldn’t see his face. “I know you think about me, but I’ve thought about you a lot longer than since the day we met in Sofia. So much longer…”

He took one of her hands and spun her around, then guided her back to him. His hands ran down the sides of her dress, pressing her against his leg and sinking down, then rising slowly to the drums. Annika could see Zaven dancing with Runa the same way. She couldn’t help but wonder what he had meant by what he’d just said. She’d never seen him in her life until that day in the bookstore. She danced with Talvi for a little bit, but again stepped away from him, dancing on her own. This time he took both of her hands and lifted them high as he stepped in unison with her, mimicking her steps. He reached over her head and turned her in a slow circle, until she slowly faced him.

She gave him a long, hard look, and tried to twist out of his grasp. His eyes flickered back at her, determined not to let her go again. He dipped her backwards gracefully, and when he brought her back up, the longing in his eyes was priceless.

“It’s okay. I’m so over that day in the kitchen,” she said nonchalantly. “But I know about all the girls you string along, and I’m not going to be one of them. I know you’re only being sweet until you get what you want, and it doesn’t matter what you say; I won’t let you disrespect me like that.” Talvi’s eyes grew wide, then narrow.

“What have I done?” he asked, stunned. “What more can I do to prove that you’re the only one I want? Why do you think I chased you out of the bookstore? Why do you think I came back to that place every day for two weeks, hoping to see your face just once more?” This time it was Annika who appeared stunned.

“Two weeks? Finn didn’t tell me you spent…I didn’t think you would have spent…” she stammered.

“Well, I did! And it was like looking for a fairy’s needle in a troll-sized haystack, only I realized I had a better chance of finding the needle than of ever finding you again,” he said, exasperated. Now that he had her attention, he pulled her even closer to him. “If I were that hard-pressed for a meaningless shag, why would I have spent all that time searching for you?” Annika wanted to run away, but he wouldn’t let her go.

“I know you can feel this power between us,” he continued. “I knew that day when I watched you follow Runa and I into the bookstore. I was devastated by the idea of never seeing you again, yet here you are in my arms. Why do you think Anthea knew about you when you met her? Or Finn?” He stared into her eyes, and Annika was shaken to the core. It had been so easy to dismiss him like every other man in her life, but then again,
he was not a man.

“As I said before, you’re the only one I want, and I know you’ll come around eventually. I just hope it’s sooner than later. I’m dying to kiss you again, even if that’s all you would permit me to do.” He cradled his hand around the back of her neck, forcing her to look deep into his burning eyes, and she was lost in a world where only the two of them existed. Annika suddenly had a flashback to the day she first met him in the bookstore. She recalled with disbelief that she had seen this very image of her standing here, held tightly against him, about to be kissed. But it wasn’t a strange vision anymore. She was living that very moment right now. She curled her arms around his neck, trying not to fall on her weak knees. It was as though they were meant to be here, in this very moment, in this room, together. No one had ever spoken to her like that before. Every word that came from his lips sounded so perfect, like something out of a dream. He looked so handsome in the dim light, the music was intoxicating and sensual, and he was holding her tight, spilling his heart out to her.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” she finally managed to ask. He bent his head down and sealed his mouth to hers, and she could taste the sweet cake he’d been eating earlier. Her heart wanted to shoot out of her chest and break through the windows to join the stars, but luckily it remained in place, thumping wildly as his arms tightened their grip on her. Sure, he’d danced with every pretty girl at the party that evening, but he hadn’t kissed any of them, and certainly not like this. They danced for a while longer, her head resting on his chest as he held her close.

“I don’t know why I listened to Yuri,” she accidentally sighed aloud.

“Yuri?” Talvi asked curiously. “What did she say to you?”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” she said, silently kicking herself for saying anything at all. He held her away from him just enough to look at her.

“Tell me what she told you,” he said with a face that left no room for glossing over the truth.

“She just thought I was a bad choice for you because I’m mortal, and that I should leave you alone because it’s unacceptable and impractical. I don’t know, I don’t remember everything she told me,” Annika said, avoiding too many details.

“I think you can do better than that,” Talvi instructed. “Tell me the rest of it.”

“She said…she said that you were only being nice to me because…because you wanted to try out an American girl,” Annika confessed.

“Those were her exact words?” he asked, still looking down at her. She couldn’t say yes, but her face gave her away as she recalled a few more fragments of what Yuri had said. “He’ll say anything…he only changes long enough to get what he wants…”

Talvi was quiet for a long time, now that he understood his own twin sister had been the cause of Annika’s rejection all along.

“She told you that night at the Tortoise and Hare, didn’t she?”

“How did you know?”

“Because it makes complete sense as to why you ran hot one moment and then cold the next,” he said quietly. He was trying his best to conceal his anger, but she could tell by the look in his eyes that his blood was boiling.

“I’m sorry; I shouldn’t have said anything about it on your birthday.”

“No, I’m glad you told me. If I’d known this earlier I doubt I’d even be here tonight. You don’t begin to understand how upset I am right now,” he said through clenched
teeth. “When was the last time you saw that scheming snake of a sister, anyway?” he asked Annika, looking around anxiously for that bright red dress among the crowd.

“I haven’t seen her in a while. Oh, don’t go yell at her now! Don’t ruin the moment. Just forget about it and dance with me,” Annika tried to convince him, but it was pointless. Asking him to forget about what Yuri had said was like asking the stars to stop shining.

“Something isn’t right,” he muttered, looking at his pocket watch. “I haven’t seen her for nearly an hour. Don’t go anywhere. I shouldn’t be long.” Annika didn’t want him to leave, but her arms fell helplessly to her side as he let her go. He was gone before she could protest.

Turning around, she saw Runa still dancing with Zaven while Sariel had her hands full with two fairy boys who’d both asked her to dance and were bickering over who got to be with her first. Annika didn’t want to interfere with her actually dancing that night, so she just tried to keep her within her view.

The belly dancers were now dancing with members of the crowd. Many of the elder guests had retired for the night, but the rest of the party was going strong. The chandeliers spun slowly and were reflecting prisms of color around the room, and some of the fairies who had shrunken back to their normal size were buzzing overhead, sitting and talking on them. Just like the tiny crystals surrounding them, they glittered from thousands of jewels sewn into their garments.

“Well now, that was some performance you gave us,” said Chivanni, having appeared at Annika’s side out of nowhere.

“What?” she asked. “You mean dancing with Talvi?” The other redhead nodded enthusiastically and his wings fluttered with joy.

“Everyone was watching you two. I mean every one. You must have practiced that for weeks!” he exclaimed, and a dreamy look entered his cinnamon brown eyes. Annika couldn’t help laughing at how expressive he was.

“No, actually that wasn’t rehearsed at all. I didn’t realize he could move like that.”

“You made it up as you went?” he cried. “Oh that is so romantic!” His wings fluttered again, making a passer-by spill some of their wine, but fortunately they were too drunk to care. “I’m going to fetch another glass of wine and then I want you to tell me all about your stay so far. Would you like me to bring you back a glass as well?”

“Sure. I’ll wait here for you.” She watched him skip towards the refreshments and saw a glint of intense red out of the corner of her eye. She turned her head and saw three figures making their way through the crowd in her direction, one of which was the mysteriously missing birthday girl.

Yuri had added a matching silk scarf around her neck, and she was smiling so big that she looked positively radiant. Of the two men she was accompanied by, the one whose arm she held was much taller than the other. His straight golden blond hair tumbled to his elbows, and his complexion was as fair as his eyes were dark. Instead of wearing a suit similar to Finn’s or anyone else’s, he wore a suit that could’ve come off a runway in Milan that week. While he had all the features of a stoic Norse god, the shorter man looked more exotic, which got Annika’s interest right away. His skin was light brown from the kiss of the desert sun. His thick eyebrows and short wavy hair were black as the night, and his eyes were so dark they appeared black as well. They were enchanting, as if he’d lined them with dark makeup, but it was only his long black lashes
that gave the effect. He didn’t smile as he caught Annika’s glance, but he held her enrapt for an extra-long moment. He turned to his blond friend, speaking in his ear as he leaned down to listen.

With laser-like precision, the tall man’s eyes shot up and settled on hers. He slowly stood upright again, and lifted his chin, breathing in the air. Yuri gave him a fond embrace, causing him to break his gaze. He gave her a soft smile and spoke to her, giving her a little nudge, and Yuri led him to where Annika was standing.

“Lemme introduce you two…introduce you to,” she slurred. She had obviously made sure that the wine wasn’t poisoned, along with the ale, and probably some brandy too. Without being told her name, the blond man held out his hand which Annika took as though to shake it, but he turned it over and tenderly kissed the back of it.

“So this is Miss Annika,” he observed in a thick Slavic accent. His seductive smile drew her to him immediately; she was completely enthralled by his mouth, his jaw, and his presence. “Yuri did not tell me that you were such a feast for the eyes.” His loose hair fell forward, and for a moment her heart stopped. She felt as though he were a demigod, acknowledging her in all his radiance. He gave her a little nod as his beautiful eyes scanned her face, and his nose breathed her in as if she smelled like the sweetest perfume. She could have sworn that she saw a smidge of envy register in Yuri’s face, but she was mistaken. It was more like a flashing, bright green traffic light.

“This is my good friend Konstantin. He arrived late,” Yuri gushed. Annika withdrew her hand quickly. Konstantin tilted his head to one side, as though he knew she was aware of what he was, and of what he hungered for.

“You will have to forgive Vaj.” He made a motion towards his quiet friend. “He is not very comfortable in these types of situations.” Vaj nodded his head, standing off to one side.

“Konstantin, are you going to dance with me on my birthday or not?” Yuri asked playfully. He held out his arm for her and she turned to lead him away.

“What?” Yuri hissed impatiently.

“I thought someone is supposed to stay with me if he’s around.” She made a motion towards Konstantin with her head. But Yuri only rolled her eyes and sneered in annoyance, as if Annika’s concerns were beneath her.

“You’ll be fine,” she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “He’ll be with me for the rest of the night anyway. Nothing bad can happen to you tonight—there are too many guests around. Don’t worry about it.” She walked off arm in arm with Konstantin, and didn’t look back.

Vaj watched Konstantin disappear into the crowd, and then stepped towards Annika. He didn’t smile, but he sidled up next to her in a deft move, swaying slowly to the beats of the drums. She was slightly taken by surprise, but continued to dance with him. He kept his eyes closed as he moved effortlessly. Then his eyes snapped open, the whites piercing through the darkness that surrounded them.

“Come,” he instructed and held out his hand to Annika. He didn’t ask; he demanded. Before she could consider whether he was being rude or not, she took his hand and was led into dance steps that were exhilarating and energizing. He cast her out at arms’ length and then reeled her back in. She didn’t know if she should appreciate his strength or fear it. She looked into his black eyes and heard the music fade into the background. The
drumbeats morphed into the sound of heartbeats, to her body’s very own rhythm. It was almost as if she were underwater, hearing the music and voices around her mashed together in an unfocused arrangement of white noise. Those eyes were burning a hole in her mind. Those eyes wouldn’t let her move anywhere except where his hands were guiding her. He brought her wrist to his face and inhaled the thin flesh that covered her blue veins. He brushed her wrist across his cheek and set her hand on his shoulder. She shut her eyes and relished the pleasure it sent throughout her body. Her knees bent slightly and she moved against him as if they were one being. He was an incredible dance partner, teaching her new moves right then and there, and she learned from him without any effort at all.

“Where did you learn to dance like this?” he asked her. She snapped out of her trance and looked around. She caught a glimpse of Yuri and Konstantin nearby. Yuri’s eyes were shut in ecstasy as Konstantin tugged at her scarf and buried his face in her neck. She looked around for Runa, but she was so short that she couldn’t see over the tall elves. The sounds of the instruments around her came crashing back to her ears, sharp and nearby once again.

“I, I go out dancing quite a bit at home, actually. I just let the music tell me what to,” she told him.

“Mmm,” Vaj hummed and smiled almost unnoticeably, as if he was deep in thought, but at least he was smiling. “Aren’t you tired?”

“Yeah, a little. Are you?”

“I’m just waking up,” he said softly in her ear. She felt his soft lips touch her neck slightly below her earlobe. She shut her eyes and the music faded into the background. She was underwater again, with nothing but the swaying of their bodies and the sound of her heartbeat and the drums filling her head. It was a very long time before she could muster the energy she needed just to open her eyelids. They felt like lead weights had been sewn into them, even though her body could move, there was something wrong with her head. She felt like she was drugged; she could see her body but couldn’t control it. She didn’t see anyone she recognized, and the bodies she could see were far away. Like a clever wolf, Vaj had separated her from the flock. Her languid eyes looked one direction, focused, and blurred. Then another direction, focused, and blurred, desperate to see a familiar face. Her voice was tiny inside, and she couldn’t even speak out loud anymore. She tried to shout over the thump-thump-thump of her own heart, but her throat was closed up. She saw Vaj smile again, even wider this time, and her stomach turned icy cold. There were teeth in his mouth that were inhumanly long. Even if she’d managed to scream at the top of her lungs, she knew it would be lost in the din of the party.

Stop! Let me go, you psychotic vampire! she thought. His grip was unrelenting. She began to panic, but her head was too fuzzy to think straight. An image filled her mind of black hair and burning eyes. The eyes were like two black holes; something was missing from them. What was lacking from black holes?

Light, she thought. There isn’t any light! The eyes began to glow with blue flames, like two pilot lights in a gas stove. They erupted into spinning wheels rimmed with green, like Talvi’s eyes. A fragment from an earlier conversation they’d shared pushed its way into her head.

“You just have to look into the other person’s eyes and concentrate on those particular thoughts.” She focused all of her remaining energy on these green-rimmed
eyes of blue as she thought frantically over and over:

*Talvi, where are you? Help me! I need you! Help!* Her eyes were wide open, but she could see hardly anything at all. Her field of vision had filled with a murky gray and finally black. She was deaf, blind, powerless, and voiceless. She felt numb and devoid of emotion, and it barely registered when an arm grasped her around her waist and she felt her feet lift off the floor in a sudden, rough, jerky movement. Her breathing was shallow and she was still in her stupor as her arm fell to the side. She didn’t even have the strength to lift it up. She could faintly hear the heavy breathing of the man and after some time she landed in a heap on a soft surface. A pair of strong hands seized her arms, pushing her onto her stomach as they tore at the complex laces of her gown. The swelling in her throat had begun to recede and now she felt a fear like no other she’d experienced in her life. It welled up inside of her until she was able to voice it. Her screams and shouts grew louder and louder as her body lay in its nightmarish coma. Terrified, she began to shriek and cry hysterically, but she was too weak to fight his strength.

“Annika! It’s me! Annika, wake up! It’s me, it’s Talvi! Listen to my voice! It’s me, I’m here now; you’re safe!” She was crying hard, causing her makeup to run and sting her eyes, and even though they were wide open, all she saw was darkness. She could barely move her head. She didn’t recognize where she was, but all that mattered was the voice beside her. Talvi eased up on his grip, and brushed her hair out of her face with his trembling fingers.

“Can you speak to me? Say something if you can.”
“Something?” she replied in a whisper choked with sobs.
“Listen to me,” he said quickly. “I have to make sure that you haven’t been bitten by him. Don’t be alarmed, but I have to strip you of your clothes.” He took her arms out of the sleeves and reached underneath her chest to pull down the dress that had covered her so beautifully only moments earlier. Her skin prickled as it touched the cool air, reacting as the gown passed over her shoulders, stopping at the small of her back. After a few seconds he flipped her onto her back, still crouched over her, and pulled the dress down her legs and over her bare feet. His warm hands sliding down her skin was a welcome diversion to the fear she had been trying to forget. She felt his hands lift an arm, and then the other, and then they were on her neck, brushing her hair away. There was a relieved sigh, and then he sat her upright, dressing her like an overgrown doll. She felt the fabric fall over her head, and she could smell his scent on it.

*It must be one of his shirts,* she thought. He lay her down again and covered her with heavy blankets. Her ears searched for what she couldn’t see. Footsteps walking away, footsteps coming back. Two thuds as he kicked his shoes to the ground. Water being poured, and then dripping into the basin. She felt the bed sink with his weight beside her and a cool wet cloth cleaning the smeared makeup and tears from her face. It was so soothing, so calming, but her mind and body felt completely exhausted. There was a knock on the door.

“Go away!” Talvi gave a severe warning. But the door creaked open anyway.

“Is she alright? Did he bite her?” a deep voice asked. It was Finn.

“No, he didn’t. She’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure? Maybe I should look, just to be certain.”

“I said she was going to be alright!” he snarled.

“Well, I’ve gotten the situation under control. For better or for worse, not that many
guests saw what happened. If you like, I can stay with her and let you get back downstairs.”

“Finn…” Talvi said, exasperated. “The sun will be rising in what, two, three hours? I’m certain our remaining guests can cope with my absence. I can’t go back down there like nothing happened, not when they’re both under our roof. She’s not leaving my sight; do you understand?”

“Yes. Right. Well, as long as there is no physical wound, she should be fine in a few days,” Finn said informatively. “She’ll need plenty of sleep, and you’ll need to keep her warm. I’ll send Mother up in the morning. No need to trouble her at this hour if there’s little else that can be done.”

“Tell the others to leave us alone, would you? I don’t wish to see anyone.”

“Not even—”

“Not anyone!” he said, raising his voice to his brother. Finn shut the door behind himself and there was nothing but silence. Annika realized now that they were in Talvi’s room, far away from the noise of the festivities at the other end of the large villa. She was suddenly very grateful for his light sleeping habits and the remote location of his bedroom. The peacefulness was a welcome retreat for her ears and her mind, and she began to see faint shadows in the lamplight. He stood up and walked to the door, locking it tight.

“What happened?” she asked in a barely audible whisper. He sat on the bed next to her, burying his face in his hands.

“Vaj is what happened. I’ve never seen anything like that before. He was holding you in a trance. I don’t know if it was his idea of entertainment, to see how far he could push you, but…he pushed you too far.”

“You heard me call your name,” she sighed.

“Yes, I heard you in my mind,” he said softly. “I could feel your terror. It makes me sick to know what you experienced. I didn’t think he was so powerful, that he could have that strong of an effect. You have to promise me that you’ll never go near him again. It’s too dangerous.”

“I don’t ever want to see him again,” she mumbled.

“I can’t make that happen. He’s here for other reasons, and you must beware what he and Konstantin are. You have to turn and walk away if you see them again and you’re alone…but there’s no excuse for that anymore. I don’t want you out of my sight after sunset.” Talvi lay down beside her with his head resting on one hand; the other hand had taken the cloth and was wiping her neck and shoulders. “I don’t want you out of my sight at all. Not even for a second.”

“Why can’t I move my body? Why can’t I see anything?” She felt thick and lightheaded again.

“You’re going to be weak for some time. You might feel drained for days. I have no way of knowing how soon you’ll recover. Speaking of which, you need to sleep.” He crawled under the blankets, arranging her body so that her head rested on his bare chest and one arm curled protectively around her back while the other hand stroked her hair. She wanted to ask more questions, but she was too exhausted. She felt his breath and his chest shudder. He was crying.

“I’m so sorry I ruined your birthday,” she whispered, unable to hug him back or even see him. Her heart broke to know he was shedding tears over her.
“Hush. It’s nothing you’ve done, you poor little dove,” he said, trying to comfort her, but the pain in his voice was something he couldn’t hide. “Don’t even entertain that notion for a second.” While she drifted off quickly, he gazed out the window until the stars began to fade with the light of dawn. Only when the sun had risen was he able to sink into sleep.
Chapter 19
recuperation

Annika drifted in and out of consciousness throughout the next day. Talvi didn’t leave her side until there was a soft knock at the door. He ignored it, but the knock came again.

“Talvi, sweetheart, open the door,” a woman’s voice said patiently. He got up and let in his mother, who was carrying a tray of food and a little teapot. Together they walked over to Annika, and sat on the side of the bed.

“She doesn’t look as bad as I had expected. That’s good,” Althea observed. She took her pulse, her temperature, and asked her son if Annika had slept soundly or not. “Make sure she drinks all of this. I brought enough food for both of you, but only she is to take the tea. Let it brew a few more minutes and then put a quarter of this in it.” Althea pointed to a small glass bottle containing a dark liquid.

“What’s in that?” Talvi asked.

“It’s a blend of reishi mushrooms, milk thistle, and dandelion root,” his mother replied. “The dandelion root might make it taste bitter, but it will help purify her liver. Even psychic attacks leave behind toxins,” she explained. Talvi nodded with concern, and set the tray on the nightstand as his mother left. He propped Annika up on his mountain of pillows and poured a cup of tea, blowing on it to cool it down.

“I’m so tired. I just want to sleep,” she argued.

“You can sleep after you drink this.” He held the cup to her lips and she drank the herbal concoction, spilling some down her chin. He wiped it away with his hand and lifted the cup until she had finished it all. He didn’t touch the food beside the bed. Instead, he tuckered her close to him and read a book while she slept. He only roused her every few hours or so to have her drink the rest of the tea infused with medicinal herbs.

The next time she opened her eyes, she could see the dreary grey afternoon sky through the window. She heard only the rain falling and the soft deep breaths of slumber above her head. He had laid watch over her diligently all night long. Even if she wasn’t staying long, he’d proven himself to be sincere, and she couldn’t deny the electricity between them, especially after the things he confessed the night of the dance. She yearned to feel him closer to her, to feel his flesh touch her own. Her hand ran across his chest and stomach, studying how smooth his skin was, and how his strong muscles rippled underneath. She slid her hand down again, touching her fingertips to the waistline of his black pants, but the arm that had been holding her close caught her wrist and gently pushed the hand away. Annika looked up at him with a guilty grin.

“I feel better,” she said.

“Good. I thought you might sleep another day,” he yawned, and wrapped his arm around her again. She nuzzled back into his chest, but after a while she grew bored with lying still. She began to caress his skin again, this time with her cheek and her lips. She remembered how their bodies had moved so perfectly together to the music at the party. She wondered how perfectly they might move if there were only the music of the approaching thunderstorm.

“What are you doing?” he whispered, trying to appear serious. “You’re supposed to be resting.”
“You’re three hundred years old and you can’t figure out what I’m doing?” she replied with a smirk. The scent of his skin made her body stir.

“No, Annika, not now. You need more rest.”

“I’m sick of sleeping,” she whined. “I’ve been here all day. I’m starting to feel like a prisoner in your bed.” She draped her leg over his hips.

“Stop it,” he told her in a stern voice, trying desperately to resist her charms. She slid her leg up and down the back of his thigh. “You need your strength,” he insisted, breathing harder.

“I think I have my strength back, Talvi,” she said, giving him a prim smile. She lifted up her shirt a little, her fingers dancing over her hip bone, tempting him deliciously.

“What I need is you. I didn’t get a chance to give you your birthday present.”

“This isn’t the way I originally had in mind.” He appeared to be in great mental turmoil. “Annika…this isn’t right.”

“What do you mean, it isn’t right? What about the things you said while we were dancing? I thought you said you wanted me,” she implored. His tortured expression softened up considerably.

“I did say that, didn’t I?” he said softly, looking out the window at the darkening clouds.

“And I’ll let you to do a hell of a lot more than just kiss me.” She caressed her waist in front of him and lifted her shirt up higher. All she wanted was to be free from this tension built up between them, and there was only one remedy for it. “Are you sure you don’t need to double check me for vampire bites?”

“That was completely legitimate,” he defended, eyeing her bare skin with the deepest hunger. She knew he couldn’t hold out much longer.

“Please…Talvi…look again.”
Chapter 20

Konstantin

The once distant thunderstorm had finally reached them, too loud for Talvi to bother snoozing any more. He propped himself up on his elbow and tenderly kissed Annika awake before stealing away to search for his pants. He found a smaller pair of trousers and a shirt and set them next to her but she didn’t rush to dress. She was too preoccupied watching him slide his pants up his long, lean legs.

“I thought you were hungry,” he noted while buttoning his pants. “Don’t you want to go downstairs and eat something besides tea and toast? I’m certain there’s leftovers from dinner.”

“I’ll eat something later,” she said with a weak smile. “I don’t know if I can even walk after what you did to me.”

“If you don’t get dressed soon, you may very well never walk again,” he warned her. He sauntered back to the mattress and crawled over her body, pinning her wrists against the pillows. “Perhaps I will have to hold you prisoner in my bed, since I haven’t come anywhere close to exhausting all your mysteries.”

“You don’t have to figure them all out right away,” she sassed. He snickered to himself and forced his knee between her legs, then brought down the other to spread them apart.

“I doubt I could even if I wanted to,” he purred, letting his eyes run up and down her naked body since his hands couldn’t. “But what a fun experiment that would be for my little prisoner. I can see you now…chained to my bedpost without a shred of clothing, without any privileges aside from giving…and receiving pleasure. I’d reward you with cake and fairy brandy for your good behavior.”

“What if I wasn’t good?” she challenged, trying to pull her arms out of his grip.

“What would you do if I misbehaved?”

A devilish gleam lit up Talvi’s face, and his mouth curled into a wicked smile.

“If you misbehaved? More like when you misbehave. I don’t believe for a second that a saucy, feisty girl like you would take pleasure in taking orders. No,” he paused, shaking his head, “I fully expect you to misbehave…and I fully expect I will have to punish you for it.”

A shudder of intrigue ran through Annika as she considered the infinite possibilities that could entail. He grasped both of her wrists in one hand and let his fingers travel down her ribs, then hesitate over her hip bone, and eventually slip down between her legs.

“I don’t think I can do that again. At least, not for a while,” she sighed, which made Talvi pout.

“Was I too rough?”

“No, but you know what they say about too much of a good thing.”

“What? That it can be wonderful?” he guessed with a sincere grin. She couldn’t help laughing, and to her surprise he let go of her wrists and crept off of her. He patted the clothes that he’d set out for her and gave her a stern look. “Seriously, Annika; if you’re think you’re having trouble walking now, consider this your final warning.”

For as many guests that were rumored to be staying in the sprawling home, Annika
was surprised that they didn’t see any of them on their long walk to the kitchen. Sariel and Runa were quietly washing dishes at the sink, but they both stopped and looked at Annika with concern in their faces.

“How are you feeling?” Runa asked, walking up to her. Talvi kissed Annika on the head and busied himself with fixing a couple of plates for them.

“Oh, I’m just tired and hungry,” she said nonchalantly, but the ditzy blonde shot her an unusually clever smirk.

“I’d wager you are,” she said with a wink and a grin.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s your hair that’s giving you away,” Runa laughed. “Goodness, I’ve never seen such love snarls! And to think I was worried about you…I should’ve known better.”

Annika’s hands reached up to her head, and she felt her cheeks turn red despite herself. Her hair felt like one giant, balled-up dreadlock.

“Come here and I’ll fix it before anyone else sees you.” Runa bade Annika to sit while she found a comb, and then together they sat down at the table, chatting out of earshot of Sariel and Talvi.

“Where is everyone?” Annika asked while Runa worked on a small section of tangled hair.

“It’s almost sunset, so I suspect they’re upstairs in their rooms to avoid the vampires, although Althea and Hilda will probably come back down after they’ve hunted,” she explained, and then a dreamy look entered her eyes. “I was hoping to run into Konstantin and invite him to play cards with me again. He’s such a divine partner to have when playing spades. Or hearts. Or anything, really.”

“What else have you been up to all this time?” Annika asked, not wanting to dwell too much on the vampires staying under the same roof as her.

“Oh, we’ve been cleaning up since yesterday morning. There were a lot of people that didn’t go home right away. At least the pixies didn’t show up,” she said in quite a cheerful voice, considering how much work that must have been. Annika felt a dash of guilt as she imagined what cleaning the ballroom alone must have entailed, let alone the countless plates and wine glasses and silverware used.

“I feel like a jerk—I should have been down here helping you instead of…instead of getting my hair tangled.”

“No, we were actually helping Yuri. Her parents are making her do all of the cleaning up without any fairy magic to make it easy,” Runa said in a hushed voice. She glanced up from her task at hand and saw Sariel and Talvi talking with each other, and turned back to Annika. “She’s in serious trouble for what happened to you.”

“Why is she in trouble?” asked Annika. “She’s not the one who attacked me.”

“She may as well have done it herself. She put you in harm’s way! She ran off with Konstantin and left you with that creep Vaj. Konstantin at least has some manners, but his friend…ooh I don’t like him at all.” She shivered a little and combed harder.

“Well Yuri wasn’t counting on a human showing up to her birthday party,” said Annika, trying to give Yuri the benefit of the doubt.

“She wasn’t counting on a lot of things. Sariel hasn’t spoken to her since the incident. You know how much she likes vampires.” Runa said sarcastically.

“I’m so embarrassed. I should’ve walked away.”

“Stop blaming yourself,” Runa said irritably. “You couldn’t walk away, that’s the
problem. Vampires put you in a trance when they’re on the prowl; that’s what makes them so dangerous. I’ve heard that it’s like being caught in a spider’s web. And we were expecting Pavlo to be with Konstantin, not Vaj. We all know Pavlo, but none of us had met Vaj before. Apparently Yuri lied to her parents about when they arrived, because we didn’t see them until late in the night, and Vaj said they arrived much earlier. I think Yuri went out hunting with them! And if she wanted to dance with Konstantin so badly, she could have found Talvi or Finn to stay near you. Instead she left you with that fiend, and that’s where you got into trouble. I’m just glad the brothers found you when they did.”

“What do you mean?” Annika asked.

“Well,” Runa began, “I ran into Chivanni at the bar and he said you were with Yuri, but when I looked, I saw you were dancing with Vaj and that Yuri was gone, so I told Finn that I thought you might be in trouble.”

“Oh no! Did I cause a scene?”

“Not at all,” Runa informed her, and Annika felt considerably relieved. “All I saw was Finn dash off into one of the darker hallways, and shortly afterward Talvi went running in the same direction. I can’t believe they knew where to find you—especially Talvi since he was outside! You two must have some connection.”

Annika smiled to herself as Runa worked her way through her messy hair, jerking her head from one side to the other. Of all the people under the Marinossian’s roof, Runa was the one she wanted to see the most.

“I’ve never seen him like this before,” she continued affectionately. “He thinks he can hide it, but I’ve known him since the day he was born. It’s so precious to see him falling in love.”

Annika whipped around to face her friend.

“Love?” she hissed. Runa looked startled.

“Well, yes. Isn’t it obvious how much he cares for you?” Runa hissed back. In her exasperation, she tore out a few long red strands of uncooperative hair, making Annika cringe even more.

“I think it’s obvious he likes me, but I don’t know about the L—word. From what Yuri told me, it’s the last thing on his mind…especially when it comes to me.”

“Oh really? What did she say to you?” Runa eagerly asked, tugging harder with her comb. Annika struggled just to keep herself sitting on the bench and not on the floor.

“She said she didn’t want me causing problems because humans and elves aren’t supposed to be together. Apparently it’s frowned upon…but I get it. I’m twenty-five; he’s three-hundred.” Runa pushed Annika’s head forward and began working on her hair again.

“I can understand being concerned because he’s an elf and you’re human, but that’s not her choice to make,” she remarked. “Did she say anything else?”

“Yeah…” Annika began, glancing over at Sariel and Talvi to make sure they weren’t listening. “She said he’s just being sweet until he gets what he wants. Remember the night we all went to the Tortoise and the Hare and those three girls were all over him?”

“Yes.”

“Well, she said he loves that kind of attention so much that he’ll never change. She said he was only interested in me because he’s never been with an American chick before. I’m not sure what to think. All I know is that I owe him my life,” said Annika, relieved to feel Runa’s harsh comb had finally been replaced by skillful fingers forming
her hair into two long braids.

“It makes so much sense why he hasn’t wanted to see her, now that I know what really happened that night at the pub!” Runa cried, feeling betrayed. “She said you were sick! That makes me so angry.”

“But still…I think I’m coming between them,” Annika pointed out. “Look how mad she got when I cut his hair. Or how she manipulated me into wearing the black dress to see which one of us looked better standing next to her brother?”

“There’s a lot more that’s come between them besides you,” said Runa kindly. “You shouldn’t blame yourself. You should be thrilled to have such devotion. Remember what Pesha said? He’s your Page of Rods.” Annika snorted a laugh at the thought. He was definitely the something of rods.

“Well, either way, love is a pretty strong word. I’m just having fun. I hope he doesn’t get too attached to me. He knows I’m going home at some point, hopefully sooner than later.”

Runa was silent and Annika couldn’t help wondering whose benefit she was saying this for. Was she really that concerned about Talvi getting too attached, or was she more concerned about herself getting too attached? She frowned a little, unable or unwilling to consider the second option as a possible truth.

“How he feels about you is not your decision to make; it’s his,” Runa answered profoundly. “And by the looks of things, I’d say he’s already made it. Just enjoy him while you have him. Things always seem to turn out for the best anyhow.” At that moment, Sariel and Talvi joined the other two.

“Where’s Finn?” Talvi asked Sariel as he set a plate in front of Annika and handed her a fork. “And my father, where are they?”

“They’re in the library, waiting for them to wake up,” said Sariel, pouring herself a small glass of wine from a half empty bottle. “Now that the sun’s gone down, they’ll be up and about at any moment.”

There was a scratching at the kitchen door and Runa leapt up to get it. Annika jumped in her seat as two enormous wolves padded into the room, sniffing the air curiously. Runa didn’t seem concerned at all as they glanced around the kitchen like they owned the place. They must have weighed nearly two hundred pounds each. One was dark brown with tan legs and rust colored ears; the other was silvery grey with tan undertones and black ears. Both had gleaming yellow eyes. They yawned lazily, showing their rows of long white teeth.

“I’ll bet you two are ready for a nice long nap by the fire, aren’t you?” Runa cooed as the silver one scratched his head. The other rusty-eared wolf actually nodded his head as if he understood Runa perfectly before they sauntered out of the room.

“Where did they come from?” Annika asked, still feeling nervous. She didn’t remember seeing wolves or any dogs at all since she had come to the Marinossian household.

“They’re sentries,” Talvi replied. “They sleep at night while the vampires are awake and keep watch over them during the day. I’d say Konstantin and his wretched accomplice just woke up,” he said, wrinkling his nose a bit.

“Are they friendly? Can I pet them if I see them again?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t,” he advised as he pulled a piece of crusty bread apart and handed her half. “How do you think their masters dispose of their victims’ bodies?” Annika shook
her head. “They literally feed them to the wolves, and those wolves would tear you apart if their masters ordered them to.” Annika shivered to imagine the giant canines feasting on flesh and crunching bones to powder. Sariel let out a sigh and folded her arms on the tabletop to rest her head on them.

“What’s wrong, Sariel?” Annika asked her, eager to think of something else. “I hope you haven’t been killing yourself helping Yuri with all the chores.”

“Yuri…” She shook her head in disgust before downing her glass of wine. “I’ve never been so disgusted with her in the past three-hundred years as I’ve been this entire visit.”

“I feel the same way.” Talvi frowned and took a bite of taboule and tomatoes drizzled in olive oil.

“First she starts dressing strange,” Sariel began to explain. “That’s fine, I say. It’s fun to wear dresses and makeup every now and again. After all, if I did it, it can’t be that bad. Then she’s been fussing over the celebration for weeks. No, actually it’s been months! Strange, I say, but I suppose that’s understandable. It’s an important birthday and we all know she likes to have things be just so. Next she’s inviting nocturnal killers to her birthday party. But it’s her party and she’s entitled to some leeway with the guest list. Then I hear from who else but your cousin Sevan that Yuri is drunk as a sailor and has some vampire’s face in her neck! Now, what the hell can I say about that?”

“She didn’t,” Talvi said under his breath. Sariel made no effort to hide her contemptuous laugh as she decided to forgo the hassle of a glass and drank straight from her bottle.

“Oh she most certainly did, and right in front of everyone,” she sneered. “And by everyone, I mean your pious aunt and uncle, your fairy godmother, your parents, and the other five-hundred and six souls that showed up for your birthday!”

“That’s going too far!” Runa exclaimed. “Do you think she wants to become one of them?”

“At this point I think anything’s a possibility,” Talvi said bitterly. “I don’t even know who she is anymore. The Yuri I knew would never have allowed such disrespect in our home. You know how she is when she feels slighted.”

“Yes. She’s unbearable,” Sariel muttered, and said no more. They finished their dinner in silence and Runa volunteered to clean up while Sariel, Talvi, and Annika walked to her guest room to gather her things. He was quite serious that he didn’t want her to spend a moment out of his sight, which she discovered when she headed out the door and was scared half to death by a tall, dark figure leaning against the wall. At first it looked like Finn’s silhouette, but his hair wasn’t curly. It was straight and long, hanging far past his shoulders. Talvi pulled Annika behind him, and squeezed her arm so hard that it hurt.

“What are you doing here?” he said in a cautious voice. The figure didn’t budge. Only his lips moved.

“I came to offer Miss Annika my most sincere apologies for Vaj’s behavior. He is still young, and a little rough around the edges. I should have locked him up for the night.”

“Yes, you should have,” Talvi replied harshly. “Speaking of being locked up, why aren’t you? Where’s my father?” Konstantin tilted his head to one side, then the other, eyeing his host carefully.
“I will not be monitored like an unseasoned fledgling. Your father and brother are playing cards with Vaj in the library as I speak. I stepped out to get a bite to eat.” He chuckled at his last remark and struck a match along the wall, lighting the lantern in his hand. The flame danced in his dark eyes and cast a warm glow on his pale, but gorgeous face. He offered the lantern to Annika, but Talvi snatched it away.

“I only wanted the lady to see where she was going. It is very chivalrous, how you keep her under your wing...although I am wondering which one of us she is safer with, Prince Talvi.” The low, steady tone he used seemed to work just as effectively at hypnotizing Annika as it did to antagonize Talvi.

“Konstantin, I’m curious,” Sariel asked, just before Talvi could put a stop to Konstantin’s twisted humor. “Why didn’t Pavlo come? We were expecting him, not that monster you brought along in his place.” Konstantin’s beautiful features transitioned from looking amused to becoming unreadable.

“It was not my decision to bring Vaj. As for Pavlo, I don’t know where he is. I hoped to discuss this at the meeting. Again, Miss Annika, I apologize for Vaj upsetting you. If he causes you further harm he will cease to exist. I give you my word.” He gave her a polite nod of the head and continued down the hallway towards the kitchen, carrying himself regally as Annika watched in fascination.

“Hurry along,” Talvi said sharply, breaking her trance. But instead of heading towards his room, he turned in the direction of the kitchen and stormed back to it with the girls trotting behind him. They saw Runa laughing at a comment Konstantin had made while Yuri was slipping into her coat. The long-haired vampire looked up at Annika and smiled ever so softly. His eyes reflected the light like two glowing emeralds, and she swore she heard him ask, Who do you think will keep you safer? The lieutenant who commands an army, or a prince who commands none?

“What are you doing?” Talvi demanded of his sister.

“We’re going out,” Yuri replied flippantly as she pulled her hood over her head. “Konstantin is still weak from his trip, and I’m accompanying him.”

“Don’t you think you embarrassed yourself enough the other night, or is there still more shame you can bring upon this family?”

“It’s none of your business what I do, as long as I’m not hurting anyone,” she defended.

“Oh really?” Talvi asked her in a voice that made Annika’s stomach lurch. “Is that a fact? What about when you are hurting someone? Is it my business then?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Yuri said, blowing him off. “You know damn well what I’m talking about!” he roared in her face so loud that everyone winced, except Konstantin. He looked completely unimpressed by the outburst. “How dare you serve Annika up on a platter to a vampire in our own home! And what about the lies you spoon fed her about me? Why would you do such a thing? What is wrong with you?”

“Oh ho ho…what is wrong with me, you ask?” Yuri gave him the meanest look Annika had ever seen. “What is wrong with me? I thought you had changed! I thought perhaps you turned over a new leaf, but nooo…I was wrong. You haven’t changed a bit! You’re still The Prince, aren’t you? Are you happy with yourself, Prince Talvi?” She shot Annika an awful expression and then looked back at her brother. “You got what you wanted, didn’t you, Prince Talvi? And you dare to call me the bloody liar of the family?”
Yuri shook her head in disgust and ran out the door to the back yard, but her brother
didn’t bother to follow her.

“As for you,” he continued, stepping in front of Konstantin. “If you touch anyone
else in my home, I’ll make sure—”

“You will make sure what?” Konstantin interrupted, suddenly standing in front of
Talvi’s face. The elf and the vampire stood the same height, their noses almost touching,
but while the elf was glaring furiously, the vampire only seemed mildly annoyed. Talvi
shoved him hard against the wall and let his fist fly at Konstantin’s jaw, but the vampire
cought his forearm in a move barely visible to the eye. Talvi tried to pull away, yet
Konstantin’s grip was equally as powerful.

“Perhaps you should give your father more credit. Do you really believe he would
welcome me into his home if he felt I would harm his family?” The vampire released him
and brushed off his jacket nonchalantly. “It would not be wise to test me again, Prince
Talvi. I wouldn’t want to prove your father wrong after working with him for all these
years.” He gave Runa and Annika a courteous nod and then walked outside to join Yuri
as though nothing had happened. Before the heavy door shut all the way, Talvi kicked it
so hard that he put a large dent in the solid oak. The glass from the window of it fell out,
splintering upon contact with the tiled floor. The girls looked frightened, and even the
fearless Sariel was unsure what to think as she stepped carefully away from the broken
glass. Up until this moment, Talvi had always been as gentle as a pussycat, never acting
with such violence.

“He’s not that bad, Talvi,” Runa said softly. “You could try being civil towards him,
at the very least.” His head whipped around and he looked like he was going to say
something terrible, but instead he took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“I’m losing my sister to him. She’s been acting so strange ever since they began
writing to each other. She wants nothing more than to be like him. I can
insisted from where he stood in the shards of glass that crunched under his shoes.

“I’m sure it’s nothing serious,” Hilda tried to assure him. “Besides, how could an elf
ever become a vampire?”

“Why don’t you ask Konstantin?” Finn suggested, having come into the kitchen just
in time to see Talvi break the door.

“What are you saying?” Sariel asked soberly.

“You mean you really don’t know?” asked Finn.

“Don’t know what?” Talvi demanded.

“He was one of us before he was made into a vampire.”

“What?” Sariel hissed. “How could we have not known this?”

“I certainly couldn’t tell you. Haven’t you ever wondered why he’s so much taller
compared to other vampires?” Finn asked dubiously. “He wears his hair long so that his
ears aren’t revealed.” No one had an answer. “Well…it doesn’t matter what he once
was,” he continued, while giving Talvi the most disappointed look Annika had ever
thought him capable of. “What matters is that Father trusts and respects him, Mother
trusts and respects him, as do Anthea and I, and you ought to as well. Now get out of here
so I can clean up your bloody mess.”

With nothing left to say, Talvi led Annika back to his room where he locked the door
shut. She went to the stereo to play some music, thinking it would help him calm down,
but he wouldn’t allow it.
“If anyone comes nearby I might not hear them,” he excused. He sank into the chair at his desk and stared blankly at the mess of papers in front of him. Annika didn’t know what to do. She felt bad for him, that he had so many things upset him in so little time. She walked quietly behind him, and set her hand on his shoulder. He tensed up even more, but she reached out her other hand and began to rub the many knots in his muscles. He closed his eyes and sighed as she tried her hardest to turn those knots into putty.

“Will you promise me something?” he murmured before grasping her hand and looking up at her.

“What is it?” she asked, somewhat frightened by the expression in his eyes.

“I know I’ve already asked this of you, but I want it to be clear that you need to stay very close to me after sunset from now on. Don’t leave my sight. I have a bad feeling… I feel like something awful is going to happen. I can’t trust my sister anymore. In my entire life, I’ve never felt anything like what I’m experiencing right now.” He guided her around to the front of the chair and sat her down in his lap, looking at her. “Can you promise me that, my little dove?”

“You’re not following me into the bathroom,” she said, trying to joke with him. He smiled faintly, but did not alter his request. “Fine, I swear, I promise.”

“And while you’re at it, promise me that you won’t go chasing after Konstantin, no matter how charming he acts towards you.” Annika looked at him skeptically. Sure, Konstantin was a babe, but so was the man whose lap she was sitting on. She wondered if it was his jealous streak acting up again.

“Why would I chase after him?”

“I don’t know, just don’t do it.”

“Trust me—I have no desire to be a vampire,” she sighed as she nuzzled against his sideburns. “And if anyone’s going to bite my neck, it’s going to be you.”
Chapter 21

a different living legend

Two more days dragged by while everyone waited for the mysterious druid named Dragana to arrive. She was probably the only person alive who hadn’t been at the birthday party. Annika was no longer free to roam about the house unchaperoned, and she was locked in Talvi’s room at night. It wasn’t unpleasant by any means. The Derbedrossians were staying in the house as well, waiting for Dragana to arrive, and that meant there was a chance of bumping into Sevan. Between the angry glares from Yuri and the spiteful sneers from Sevan, Annika preferred to spend most of her free time in Talvi’s room anyway. She passed the time playing backgammon with him, reading, listening to music and being made love to over and over, which wasn’t a bad deal at all until a loud knock interrupted them on the third morning of her house arrest.

“Dragana is here,” Finn announced from the other side of the door. “We’re going to gather in Father’s library right away, so if you’re in the middle of something, wrap it up.”

A half hour later they filed into the library and took their seats under the rotunda around the large table with a handful of the guests from the birthday celebration. The wolves were curled up near the fireplace fast asleep, but their ears remained alert, twitching and swiveling at every abrupt sound.

There were two people she didn’t recognize, a young man and a very, very old woman clutching a gnarled oak cane. There was a wild, untamed look to both of them, especially the man. His brown hair had been formed into narrow dreadlocks that faded to blonde towards the ends, and his skin was deeply tanned like he’d spent every day of his life surfing in the sun. He wore a goatee and his blue eyes were so pale that they were like two bright lights in contrast with his tan skin. But the ancient woman next to him was even stranger looking. Her silvery white hair was also in long, thin ropes that almost touched the floor, and her age could be measured by the amount of color that remained at the ends. The wrinkles in her face were so deep that they seemed to have been carved with a sharp knife. But when she looked up, her eyes scared Annika. They were completely white, except for the tiny black pupils. The woman wore a very plain brown robe, while the young man next to her wore the same brown colored tunic and furry boots that laced up over his knees.

Around their necks and waists hung an array of talismans and amulets with colorful stones and magical runes inscribed in the metal. He helped the woman into a chair and sat beside her, looking around at all the books with a curious expression. Yuri walked in on Konstantin’s arm, looking content with herself. Her escort seemed less gaunt, and there was more color in his cheeks, which Annika took to mean he’d recently eaten. They sat across from the samodivi and next to Vaj, and Konstantin gave him a silent glance that made him lower his fledgling eyes in submission.

“I’m glad all of you could make it this evening,” Ambrose said from the head of the table. “I know there are a few of you who don’t know each other very well, so I will make the introductions.” He motioned around the enormous table. “You all know my wife Althea, and my sons Finn and Talvi, my daughters Anthea and Yuri. Our dear friends Runa, Hilda, and Sariel, and her greatest granddaughter Annika. The fairies Dardis and Chivanni, my wife’s sister Gousine Derbedrossian, her husband Ishkan and
their children Zaven and Sevan. Our friends from the North, Konstantin and his companion Vaj, and finally the druid Priestess Dragana and her grandson, Nikola. It’s of utmost importance to set our differences aside and put our minds together to arrive at a solution. All of us at this table have different views and different strengths, and this is precisely why I wanted as few attendants as possible. The problem is already complex enough without involving additional chatter. Konstantin, why don’t you share your thoughts on the closing of the gates between Eritähti and Earth?”

“I would be happy to, Ambrose,” he said and stood up, brushing more invisible lint from his modern-cut jacket. “Finn, if you would be so kind.” Finn went to the wall and pulled down a giant map that measured nearly ten feet across. “We are already aware of the extent of the problem, so I am getting straight to the point,” Konstantin told them, looking quite dignified as Finn handed him a long, slender pointer. “Now…the way I see it, there is only one motive for the complete closings of the portals. It is to keep our world here pure and untouched by anything from the modern human world. But the laws of nature have always meant for our worlds to coexist. Any other arrangement is not natural. It is impossible to deny that we all benefit from humans or their inventions to some degree. Just look at the mills on your river, not to mention there are some of us who rely on humans for more…basic needs.” His eyes moved to Annika, and a cold feeling passed over her as her pulse quickened. He walked to the map and pointed to seven specific locations, which Annika recognized from her geography lesson with Finn. Then he pointed to a few other places that she assumed were the other secret portals like the samodivi cave. “The gates have been locked in this specific order, and they all now lead to a wasteland which we know nothing of,” Konstantin continued. “I am suspecting that it is a mirage…a false image meant to deter further investigation, although that is not to say we haven’t tried. I will tell you that I have seen a handful of volunteers step inside of this place…and I have yet to hear of one returning.”

“But it seemed so real,” Runa interrupted. “How can you say it’s a mirage?” The vampire set down his pointer and turned to face his audience.

“It is my opinion, and I am not alone in my beliefs, that the only ones who would have the power to organize and the power to alter nature to such an extreme level are the druids.”

There were more than a few breaths sharply drawn from around the table, but the old woman didn’t flinch at the apparent insult.

“That’s impossible! How can you disrespect Dragana like that?” Ishkan bellowed. “The duty of the druids is to protect the land and teach others to do so, not to tamper with it. I would like to know where you came up with this vile theory.” Konstantin walked slowly to where the Derbedrossians were sitting, making them stiffen in their chairs.

“From one who would know better than you.”

“And just whom might that be?” Gousine asked through her thin lips.

“I was invited here by Ambrose, but I was ordered to attend by Vladislav.” There was a murmur around the table that told Annika this person must be very important.

“Vladislav?” Ishkan asked, apparently stunned. “But…he…”

A thin voice mixed with a hissing sound spoke up in a language no one could understand. Everyone at the table turned to look at the old woman.

“You knew all along?” Finn asked, quite taken aback, and Konstantin took his seat beside Yuri. There was a brief moment as the old woman spoke at length to her grandson.
It sounded like a faint windstorm, swirling and blowing and gusting at times for emphasis. It was the strangest thing Annika had ever heard, like what the trees might sound like if they could speak.

“What Vladislav suspected is true,” Nikola confirmed. His voice carried the essence of the moving air, but it was more of a summer breeze than a harsh winter wind. “No creature has such abilities as we do; no other being has the strength or skill to block the bridges between the worlds. But we don’t take responsibility. It’s against our teachings to alter nature like this. There can only be one explanation…” He stopped and looked at his grandmother again.

“Pa…za…chi…” she breathed in a barely audible voice. More silence.

“The Pazachi are a myth,” Ishkan arrogantly scoffed, and his wife nodded her head.

“I assure you, it is no myth,” Nikola said coolly. Ishkan glared at him.

“There is no proof that they exist!” he insisted.

“Well, actually—” Finn began, ready to share some contradictory information, but Nikola cut him off.

“No proof? You ask for proof?” Nikola asked. His blue eyes blazed angrily, but his voice remained calm and steady. “Tell me, Ishkan; tell me why my brother and I were orphaned and left for my grandmother to raise. Try telling Anthea that there are no Pazachi. Then tell her where the father of her children is.” Nikola and Dragana’s icy stares were enough to shut Ishkan up for good. “The Pazachi are very real, and they have been gaining strength in their numbers.”

“Aren’t they fairly radical?” Finn asked him.

“The term ‘fairly’ is very kind of you to use, Finn,” Nikola answered. “Ever since humans started traveling to the heavens above and building massive weapons that could obliterate an entire city within seconds, the Pazachi have grown more and more extreme in their beliefs and larger in their numbers. I think they are afraid of how fast human technology is advancing, and of how far removed modern humans have become from the very land that sustains them. The Pazachi’s views continue to gain sympathy and support as time goes by, and this is what makes them so dangerous,” he explained.

“But most of them are human,” Yuri stated. “How can they be so intolerant of their own race?”

“Wouldn’t you be intolerant of a population that could destroy not only your village, but your entire forest in a matter of heartbeats? They’ve already done it to each other in the modern world. They still do to this day…every day.” Nikola’s eyes looked heartbroken as he said these things.

“But you care to elaborate on that?” Sevan asked with contempt from her place beside her parents.

“I think we are all aware that modern humans have a tendency to leave nature worse for the wear after they’ve set foot on it,” Nikola said, and glanced towards Annika. “No other creature does what humans do to their environment. They poison their land, their water, their food…they even poison the air they breathe. It affects all living things, from the enormous whale to the tiny ant, and humans only grow more ignorant and disconnected from the land as time goes by. They chew down the forests that serve to clean the air, but unlike termites who only feed on dead wood, humans are indiscriminate. They are the only animal that is capable of such intelligence and yet do such asinine things. It’s only a matter of time before their species dies out. Already there
is such a high level of violence and disease among them. I have heard that some of them
will go as far as to cut out their stomachs when they grow too large. They’re sick;
mentally and physically, and it has a ripple effect on everything around them.”

“They cut out their stomachs? That can’t be true!” Hilda frowned with a look of
revulsion that a few others around the table shared.

“Yeah, it’s true,” Annika replied, feeling suddenly ashamed for being one of these
detest ed modern humans. “It’s called gastric bypass. People do it all the time.” There was
a round of horrified whispers of disbelief around the table.

“These are but a few reasons to explain the logic behind the Pazachi’s actions,”
Nikola concluded.

“Regardless of the reason, their intolerance of the mortal realm is unacceptable,”
Konstantin said. “It is not their choice to make for any of us.”

“Can’t the Pazachi just tell them to stop what they’re doing?” Runa asked naïvely.
“They could help teach the modern humans how to live closer to nature.”
“If only it were that simple, little samodiva,” Nikola said with a bemused expression.
“I think it will take more than diplomacy to stop them. They’re trained to fight to the
death for their beliefs. Negotiating is not a likely option.”

“Blood will be spilled over this,” Sariel said in a scornful tone. “The only question is
how much, and whom it belongs to.”

“We have to know where they are first,” Finn explained. “Then we can strategize.”
Konstantin nodded in agreement and walked over to the map.

“Unfortunately, since they are nomads, they could be anywhere in this general area.”
His hand passed over a large body of water and made an arch to the northeast of it,
covering two feet of the map. Annika didn’t know how many miles or kilometers it was,
but she knew it was a lot of territory to cover.

“I still have a hard time believing this,” Ishkan disagreed with his nose in the air.
“There are too many uncertainties. And even if you’re right, that it’s the Pazachi’s fault, I
certainly don’t mind cutting off interaction with humans. I’m not willing to risk traveling
so far away, and for what? Destruction of our land for the sake of convenience is not the
way of the elves!”

“This mindset is exactly what has allowed the Pazachi to become so powerful,”
Nikola argued.

“Call me what you will, but I won’t risk losing life or limb fighting against them
when deep down I agree with their motives.”

“I would go myself if my children didn’t need me,” Anthea stammered, choking
back her tears. “I would leave this very instant if I knew I had a chance to have Asbjorn
home!” She abruptly stood and left the table, sobbing loudly as she ran out. Her mother
glared at Ishkan and followed her distraught daughter out of the library.

“I agree with Konstantin,” said Nikola. “I’m willing to seek them out to try and stop
them, but I cannot do it alone and be victorious.”

“We will accompany you in scouting their location. When we find them I’ll send
word for reinforcements, if necessary,” Konstantin said, looking at Vaj for a moment.
“It’s not exactly a simple matter for us to travel during daylight, but we will do what we
can to restore the natural balance of our worlds.”

“I’ll go,” Sariel volunteered without a second thought. Hilda and Runa looked at
each other and nodded their heads.
“If she’s going, then we’re going with her.”

“Well, I’m sure we can help,” Dardis nominated herself and Chivanni. Chivanni’s eyes grew wide in surprise. He clearly hadn’t planned on volunteering, but he didn’t have time to protest. Sevan gave a sarcastic harrumph, crossing her arms haughtily.

“So one druid, two vampires, three samodivi and a couple of fairies are going to battle against a potential army of Pazachi extremists?”

“As of right now it’s only a scouting expedition,” Nikola reminded her.

“Well good luck!” Sevan sneered.

“Thank you, I’ll need it,” Zaven said quietly. His sister’s jaw dropped.

“As will I,” Talvi volunteered right after his cousin.

“You’ll need someone who knows the many languages of the land,” Finn advised.

“Which I think qualifies me as well.”

“What do you think, Nikola? Is that a good enough start?” Ambrose asked, stroking his short beard.

“It’s acceptable,” he said, looking around at the volunteers. “But this journey is not to be entered into lightly. The last I heard, the Pazachi were living near the Mesoyadna Forest, beyond the Sea of Forneus.”

“The Mesoyadna Forest?” Zaven gasped. “Aren’t those the trees that—”

“Oh, it should be fine to travel through,” Finn said quickly. “It’s dormant this time of year.”

“Yes, but still…” Zaven trailed off, looking like he regretted his decision.

“I don’t care,” Sariel said loudly. “I’m not afraid!”

“But Sariel, we’ve never been that far,” Hilda tried to reason. “The Sea of Forneus? The Mesoyadna Forest?” Sariel gave her daughter a fearless shrug of dismissal.

“If we were to travel to the Dark Horse, we could contact a paladin who would be willing to fight by our side,” Konstantin suggested.

“It wouldn’t be the honorable Justinian, would it?” Nikola asked him. Konstantin’s eyebrows raised in interest.

“Why, yes, it would. You know of him?”

“You could say that,” Nikola smiled softly at his grandmother, who smiled back.

“He would be an extremely valuable asset to us, if you know how to locate him. I haven’t seen him in years. But we must leave as soon as possible. Time is working against us.”

“What’s the Dark Horse?” Annika whispered to Finn.

“The Dark Horse is a very old tavern farther up North where Konstantin is from,” he explained. “It sits directly below another gate…another portal that opens up to Bucharest, which is directly south of Transylvania. That’s why so much of vampire lore stems from there. As you’d expect, it’s a popular place for vampires from both worlds to gather.”

“Okay, but what about me?” Annika asked him. “What am I going to do? Just hang out here and wait for you guys to come back?”

“You would be safer here, it’s true,” Ambrose told her gently. “But I’ve already told you that you didn’t end up here by accident. It’s more than ironic that you are trapped between the two worlds. I believe it’s your destiny to go on this journey, and I’m not the only one.”

“Just who else are you talking about?” Sevan screeched. “She won’t last a week!”

“That, my dear niece, is between Annika and the one who told her.” Ambrose said. Talvi squeezed her right hand again, pressing her fingers against her large diamond ring.
She remembered sitting in the hot spring, and the dark, magnificent and mysterious creature that had spoken to her without a voice for her words. *You are here because Fate invited you. You cannot go back the way you came. I suggest you go forward instead.*

Annika lowered her eyes before anyone could read her thoughts. She’d been under the impression that the unicorn meant she had to finish her journey home, not travel even farther away than she was now. But what if going on this trip was the only way for her to do so?

“Right…right,” she said softly.

“You’ll be in good hands,” Ambrose assured her.

“You already are,” Talvi whispered in her ear, and squeezed her hand again.

“We can leave tomorrow,” Konstantin decided. “It is a little more than two week’s travel north to the Dark Horse, where we must speak with Justinian.” There was silence again around the table.

“That’s it? That’s it? We’re just going to send our children off in less than a day?” Gousine said, growing hysterical. “I forbid you to go Zaven! I forbid it! Do you hear me?” Her husband helped her from the table and led her out of the room, but her son ignored her. Zaven’s face was like stone as he let his mother’s hysterics fall on deaf and pointed ears. Sevan rushed to follow them, giving him the worst look she could manage, which was quite appalling. When they were done with their melodramatic exit, Zaven sighed and rolled his eyes.

“I swear, I was born into the wrong family,” he lamented.

“Don’t say that, Zaven,” Ambrose said warmly. “You are my nephew. You are definitely in the right family.” Zaven smiled a little and ran his hand through his short blond hair.

“Well, we need to get packing, don’t we?” Finn urged the others. “I suppose we’ll be up all night gathering supplies and whatnot.”

“We can help you with that,” Dardis said cheerfully. “We’ll take care of the food, but we need to get started right away.” She shrank into her original tiny hummingbird size along with Chivanni, and the two of them flitted to the kitchen. The samodivi, Annika and Talvi ran up to his room where the bundles of wood had sat for days untouched. For hours they did nothing but whittle the branches into arrows and listen to music. As she cut the wood with long strokes, Sariel looked giddy for the first time since she’d smoked the pixie-dust laced tobacco. They worked late into the night, and when they came downstairs for a snack, they were nearly clobbered with a bowl of rising bread dough floating through the air.

“What the heck is going on?” Annika asked, amazed.

“We’re cooking, silly!” Chivanni exclaimed. “We’ve got to eat on this trip, so we might as well bring as much as we can.”

“How are you doing that?” she asked in wonder, and dodged a row of apples that had come up from the cellar and landed in a basket on the counter. “Is it pixie dust?”

“No!” Dardis choked, “It’s fairy dust! Pixie dust could never cooperate the way fairy dust does.”

“Okay then, I’ll just grab a quick bite and get out of here,” she replied, and plucked an apple out of the air.

“Finn’s in the stable with Zaven and Nikola getting the horses ready,” Chivanni said before Talvi could ask. “He told me to tell you not to worry about Ghassan. He’s taking
care of him for you.”

“Brilliant,” said Talvi. “It appears that everything is accounted for, but I need to pack a few more things before I go to bed. We’ll see you two in the morning.”

“It nearly is morning, you ding-a-ling!” Dardis laughed. Talvi looked out the window and sure enough, the sky was beginning to turn blue with the approach of dawn.

“I guess I’ll see you in a few hours, then,” he said, and he led Annika up the maze of stairs to his chambers.

Back in his room, the faint light tinged the walls with a blue hue. He locked the door shut and all they heard were the birds outside singing to greet the approaching sunrise.

She let Talvi guide her to the window by the bed, but rather than climbing under the covers, he abruptly reached around her body and pulled her back against his chest. Suddenly all that mattered was the strength with which he held her, as though he never wanted to let her go. He nuzzled into her neck, making her forget all about the serious atmosphere of the meeting and all that was said about humans disrupting nature so severely that the Pazachi had closed the portals between the two worlds. He held her for a long time, slightly swaying back and forth, and she couldn’t imagine feeling safer than she did right at that moment.

“I suppose it’s going to be a long time before we’re alone together,” she said quietly.

“Mmm hmm,” he hummed. He reached his hands down and untied her pants.

“You’re insatiable. I used to hate that whole refractory period thing, but you’re making me start to wish that elves had it,” she joked.

“I do have a tendency to overindulge,” he admitted, nibbling on her ear. “I should exercise more restraint.” She felt her blood pressure rise as he rested his hands inside her pants and slid them down a few inches.

“I thought you said you were going to exercise more restraint,” she scolded, to which he only laughed a little under his breath.

“No…I only said that I should.”

Annika felt her body react in anticipation of his next move, shuddering when he didn’t stop caressing her.

“I don’t know if I can do that again. I’m still in recovery.”

“Perhaps I’ve been too rough with you,” he suggested, and let his fingers dance over her hips. “You’d tell me if I was, wouldn’t you?”

“I’d definitely let you know. I’m just not used to having this much sex.”

“Better get used to it,” murmured near her ear. She felt her blood pressure rise as he rested his hands inside her pants and slid them down a few inches. “Will you at least let me undress you for bed?”

“Yes,” she whispered. She watched as he untied the closure at the front of her shirt and cupped her breasts through the fabric, then pushed it up her body and over her head. He knelt down behind her and gently kissed down the length of her back. He slid her pants down a little more, kissing her hipbone, and then the other. He slowly rose to his feet, covering every inch of her exposed skin with gentle kisses from her hips to her neck, until her sore body began to ache and grow warm. He stepped in front of her and knelt down again, holding her close as he brushed his cheek against her nipples before carefully taking each one in his mouth. Her fingers curled around his hair as she closed her eyes, relishing his soft kisses and warm tongue on her skin. His hands coaxed her pants down a few more inches while he ran the tip of his nose between her breasts, down
to her navel, and further still until he stopped at the soft bit of fluff. He inhaled her scent of arousal deep into his lungs, and exhaled the hot air through his mouth and onto her skin, making her tremble.

“Are you certain you want to go to sleep?” he asked with mischievous and dark expression. “I’m not very tired.”

“Me neither,” Annika said with a grin, yanking her pants up. “Where’s that blindfold you used on me when you first brought me to town?” When she turned around Talvi’s eyes were filled with intrigue. He immediately went to his desk, digging around his piles of papers until he found the green sash. He was about to use it on Annika again, but she snatched it out of his hands.

“It’s not for me. It’s for you,” she gloated. Talvi’s eyes narrowed as he shook his head.

“I don’t play that version of our game.”
“I thought you weren’t tired,” she pouted. “Come on. It’ll be fun.”
“No. Now give me the sash.”
“No,” she said, digging in her heels. Talvi lifted a brow and grinned.
“If you keep misbehaving, I’m going to have to punish you.”
“You always get your way,” she said, crossing her arms. “If you don’t want to play with me on our last night alone together, I’ll go sleep in my room downstairs. Or…you can let me have my way for a change.”

Annika knew that Talvi was stubborn, but she also knew that he was even less enthusiastic about the idea of having no privacy in the near future. To her pleasant surprise, he sighed in defeat and took a step towards her.

“Fine, then. I’ll give it a go. What would you have me do?”
“Take off your shirt.” He seemed a little unsure what to make of her intentions. “I mean it. Take it off.” Surprised, he did as he was told. “Now sit down.” He obediently sat down at his desk and she stood behind him, tying on the blindfold.

“What is this? What are you up to?” But she didn’t answer him. Instead she noiselessly picked up the rope from the bundles of wood.

“Put your hands together behind your back,” she instructed.
“You are not tying me up.”
“You’ve done it to me; now it’s my turn,” she explained. “Besides, you were just saying that you need to learn some restraint. Let me help you.”

“Annika, really…” he protested. “You don’t know what you’re doing…or what you’re asking.”
“Yes I do. It’ll be fun. Wait and see.”
“It would be more fun if I could see all the things I’m about to do to you,” he replied with a wry grin, yet he put his hands behind his back. Annika tied the rope around one wrist, and then the other, pulling them tightly together. She unbuckled his boots and took off his socks, then made him stand up and turn in a circle half a dozen times.

“This is ridiculous. You’re going to make me dizzy,” he complained.
“That’s the point. You can’t get away if you don’t know where you are.” She led him around the room to further disorient him, ending up next to the bedpost.
She carefully removed his belt and looped it around the post, and then swiftly ran it between his hands, pulling the buckle tight and knotting it before he knew what she’d done. He jerked his hands to pull away but it was of no use. She stepped back, admiring
her handiwork.

“You are in so much trouble when I break free!” he hissed.

“Go ahead and try.” She challenged him. “Really, I want to see if you can.” He lurched forward and pulled his wrists against the rope, but nothing happened. He wasn’t going anywhere. When he realized this, the tolerant look on his face shifted to one that reflected his heated frustration. “It looks like you’re the one who’s in trouble now,” she laughed, and kissed his chest while running her fingernails lightly over his skin. Her tongue made its way from his neck to his navel while she unfastened the top button of his pants. She stood up to bring her lips near his mouth, but she wouldn’t return his attempted kisses. Instead she caressed his chest up and down, brushing her breasts against him. His breath shuddered every time she unfastened another button of his pants. She knelt down and exhaled her hot breath through the clothing, making him toss his head in torment.

She stepped away and observed him for a minute or two. His black hair fell over the blindfold and he seemed to be drowning in his own desire. She felt her body growing more and more aroused just by watching him, knowing that he was suffering exactly the way she’d intended. He twisted his head again, searching for a noise, or any sound at all to tell him where she’d gone.

“Where are you? Annika, come back and untie me at once!” She tiptoed in front of him and gave his nipples firm biting kisses as her hand rubbed over his thighs. She could feel him growing ready for her underneath her fingertips, and she finished unbuttoning his pants. She pulled them down just enough to reach her hand in and free his eager sex, stroking it with both of her hands.

“Come now, Annika—let me go! I’ve had enough of this nonsense!”

“You like it and you know it. You’re just mad because I’m better at it than you.”

“Annika, I mean it,” he warned. “If you don’t let me go right now, you’ll be sorry.”

“If you don’t be quiet I won’t let you go at all,” she threatened playfully. “I’ll go back to my other room and leave you here to call for help.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Don’t test me. If I leave, who do you think is going to let you loose?”

Practically fuming, Talvi gritted his teeth, not wanting to find out. Annika walked away again and let her pants fall to the floor, then tiptoed over to where her shoes from the party still lay on the floor. She slipped them on and walked around the room slowly, watching as Talvi’s ears followed the hollow sound her heels made as they struck the stone floor. A couple minutes went by and he didn’t say anything, so she snuck up and took him into her mouth, sucking hard. He threw his head back in pleasure, groaning as he pushed his hips towards her face. She pulled his pants down to the floor, helping him step out of them. With one hand she reached down and covered her finger in her own moisture, then dragged it across his bottom lip. At once he lunged forward, but she’d already stepped back beyond his reach. He licked his lips and moaned as she kissed his face. His mouth sought hers again, but she wouldn’t kiss him just yet. He sighed plaintively as she licked a wet trail down his chest and stomach until she reached the black curls that tickled her nose. She knelt in front of him again to taste his hard flesh. She bathed him in wet kisses, then pressed the organ against her cheek. The blood was coursing fast underneath the delicate skin, and she sat back on her knees to look up at him. His nostrils were flaring, his chest was heaving, but he was silent and subservient.
She put her mouth close to his protruding flesh once again, watching it quiver in response to her warm breath. She began to pity his anguish, so she rose to her feet and removed the blindfold. Talvi’s eyes were brimming with lust as he examined her naked body, clad only in shoes and her ring. He still said nothing, and was promptly rewarded with a sultry kiss.

Annika stepped backwards to sit on his bed, watching as Talvi climbed onto the corner and sat on his knees, but he could only lean down a little before the bedpost stopped him. He glared at the canopy and curtain rods that had him trapped in place, then drew in his breath as if he was about to ask her a question. Annika pressed her forefinger against her lips and shook her head, then smiled. Lying on her back directly in front of him, she put her shoes against his chest, capturing his length between her thighs, and then squeezed until he whimpered.

“I told you to be quiet,” she reminded him. Her legs spread apart and fell to the mattress, revealing herself for him to see her drenched in dew. With one arm behind her head, she let her other hand wander up and down her body until it slipped between her legs. Her hips rolled from side to side into the sheets as she touched herself while he watched in stunned silence. She dipped her fingers into her hot folds and brought them to her mouth, sucking them clean. A look of madness crept into his eyes, and his lips parted just enough to reveal clenched teeth. He strained even harder against the rope, which was beginning to cut into his wrists. She covered her hand in her abundant wetness again and spread it onto the tip of his sex, then sat up and licked it off of him slowly. He tossed his head to one side, and then to the other, boiling over with sexual frustration. The look of pain in his face was proof that he had endured enough torture, and was deserving of his reward. Annika got up and reached behind him to unfasten the buckle, letting the belt fall with a ‘clink’ to the floor and untied the knots around his hands.

“Might I have a word with you?” he asked, rubbing his raw wrists and looking at her with the same intense, half-crazed expression.

“Sure,” she grinned. “I’m really impressed with how well you listened to me.”

“I warned you,” he said in a low voice, reaching down for the belt. Holding it in one hand, he pushed her down forcefully to the bed and flipped her onto her stomach with rough hands pressing against her back. She winced, expecting the sting of the belt to come any second, but then she yelped as she was filled with the hard beast that she’d so ruthlessly teased. He thrust deep into her moist, snug body only a handful of times before piercing the air with a fierce roar. She tried to roll over, but he held her down with one hand as he pulled out of her.

“You’re not getting away with what you’ve done to me that easily,” Talvi panted. “No...that would be far too charitable of me. I’m going to teach you a lesson you’ll never, ever forget.”

He let the leather smack her firmly on the ass. Before she could protest, there came another smart blow, followed by another. It didn’t hurt as much as it burned, and it excited her to know that she was being punished for the state she had put him in. He struck her again, caressing her backside with his tender hand before continuing. With each snap of the belt and touch of his hand, she grew more and more feverish.

“What do you think you can behave if I release you?” he asked in his velvety voice.

“Yes! I’ll be good!” she promised. His fingers reached between her legs, gathering as much of their combined fluids onto them as he could. He rubbed it onto the flesh that was
now a rosy shade of pink from the leather strap. The cooling sensation it produced made her skin tingle in relief.

“I don’t think you can behave.” He let the belt fly again, hitting her wet skin, and she flinched at how much it stung. Her back arched as she writhed under his strong hands. Again he dipped his fingers into her flood of arousal, massaging her as her hips rose and fell on his hand in anguish.

“Well, naughty girl? Have you learnt your lesson?”

“Yes!” she whimpered.

“Then tell me…what have I taught you?” She fumbled through her mind for an answer that Talvi would approve of.

“I learned that it pays to misbehave.”

He withdrew his fingers and flipped her onto her back, studying her with an unprecedented intensity. He didn’t say it, but she knew she’d given him the right answer. His eyes were dark and blazing as he pulled her knees apart, gripping them with his powerful hands. With her shoes still on, he spread her legs as wide as they could go and thrust himself deep into her. She cried out as he filled her again and again. With each motion the weight of his body shoved her farther from the edge of the bed until she was about to fall off the other side. Undaunted, he picked her up while still inside of her and carried her over to the window. He pressed her against the wall beside it, furiously driving into her flesh with his own, but he could not be satisfied.

He turned to the right, smiled devilishly, and turned back to her. She searched for what he’d found so amusing and saw a gorgeous creature looking back at her in the reflection of a large standing mirror. His arms lifted a small woman by her thighs, keeping her little black heeled shoes curled around his torso. She watched him glide steadily in and out of her body, captivated by their movements. He picked her up again and carried her to the rug in front of the mirror, then set her down on her hands and knees. He pulled her thighs apart again and with his hands on her hips, he backed her up onto his rigid organ. She looked up into the mirror, admiring her lover’s smooth, flat stomach and his sleek, muscular arms. His hand wandered up her back, passing between her shoulder blades. Gathering a large handful of her hair, he pulled her towards him slowly until she had risen to her knees. She watched as he caressed her breasts, exhaling his heated breath into her ear as they moved in harmony with each other. His fingers made their way around her hip and gently nudged her clitoris. She felt the tension building, but he abruptly ceased his thrusting and lay still inside of her. He held Annika tight, gazing at their reflection.

“What are you doing? Why did you stop?”

“Shhh, let me enjoy you.” With his other hand occupied, Talvi ran his nails up and down her skin, pinching her nipples and cupping her curves. He began to move in and out of her again, excruciatingly slow. Her head rested on his shoulder as his fingers sent waves of pleasure through her body, culminating in the tidal wave she’d been waiting for. He clutched her tight as her pleasure released his own. His eyes closed while he buried himself deep inside her in an attempt to meld their bodies into one perfect union, crying softly into her ear. Together they sank to the rug to catch their breath, with Talvi still nestled deep inside of her.

“It’s such a pity that we didn’t meet sooner,” he said before nuzzling into her neck. “Think of all the time that was wasted.”
“It’s probably a good thing we didn’t meet sooner,” Annika said with a yawn. “I’d be dead from sleep deprivation.”

He let her go and went to the window sill, squinting at the last rays of sunlight that pierced through the trees.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No, you didn’t do anything,” he said quietly. “I just don’t want to risk sounding trite. It would be an insult to a creature so exquisite as yourself.”

“Just say it, Talvi.”

“It’s difficult for me to find the words,” he excused, biting his lip. He was still fixated on the sun’s orange light now spilling over the treetops.

“What would sound trite?” she asked. He turned his blue-green eyes to her.

“I…I…” he stammered. “I want you to kiss me.” She sidled up next to him and stroked his hair, eyeing him curiously. He enveloped her in his arms once more and as their lips met, she saw them dancing together, and she saw the top of her head resting on his chest. She felt suddenly nauseated to see herself caught in the spell of the vampire from the desert. A rage she hadn’t felt before rose up in her and she saw his arms ripping her from the clutches of the hungry monster. She jerked her head away from his.

“Is that how you felt the other night?” she asked. “It really upset you to see me with Vaj, didn’t it?” There was no other explanation for the vision from his point of view.

“Yes, only more than you’ll ever know.” She took his hand and coaxed him to the bed. She pulled the heavy velvet curtains around them to block the sunlight and tucked the blankets around them, resting her head in the crook of his arm. “I’ve never been possessive, or even jealous of anyone,” he went on, caressing her shoulder as he spoke. “Well, perhaps a little, but nothing like what you do to me. I couldn’t bear it if…I just feel a, a duty to protect you…it’s a very primal sensation. I’ve never felt like this before about anyone, or anything, especially in such a short period of time. I worry that it comes off as sounding trite.”

“I don’t think it does at all.” She got the feeling he wanted to say more, but she didn’t want to hear it. She didn’t want him actually loving her, not when she was leaving. Amazing chemistry was one thing, but another long term relationship was not part of her future plans.

“I have you right now,” he said before he closed his eyes. “If you think about it, perhaps that’s all that really matters.”
Chapter 22

an apology

Annika gained consciousness slowly, thinking she hadn’t slept at all. She ran her hand along the dirty sheets and discovered that she was alone in bed. Sitting up, she pulled back the curtain to reveal an overcast, late morning sky. The fire was dying down in the fireplace, and the white hot coals warmed the room comfortably. She slipped out of bed and saw Talvi fully dressed in his black suede riding outfit, sitting at his desk writing. He seemed very focused on his work, whatever it was. She walked behind him and rested her chin on his shoulder, hugging him gently.

“Ah, you’ve finally woken up. I hope you slept as well as I did.”

“Mmm hmm. What are you writing?”

“It’s nothing,” he said, turning the paper over, scratching his head. “I’ve already packed your bag. I hope you don’t mind. Yuri’s not coming with us, so I borrowed some of her things for you to use.”

“I don’t mind at all.” She didn’t mind that he had packed her bag, but she really didn’t mind that Yuri wasn’t coming with. She’d been cold and prickly towards Annika ever since she arrived, and Annika wasn’t the type of person to bother with such mind games. She reached down into her bag nearby and fished out her camera, only to find that the batteries were dead. She dug through one of the many boxes Talvi kept and put in new ones, snapping a photo of him sitting at his desk. He gave her his most seductive smile as he posed for his photographer.

“What type of camera is that? I want to see,” he demanded rather than asked. She brought it over to him and showed him the instant picture on the screen.

“This is remarkable! Show me how to use it,” he insisted. She took another picture of his room, demonstrating what each button did, and he grabbed it away from her, taking a photo of her wearing nothing but her ring and some very messy hair.

“Talvi! Don’t waste the batteries,” she scolded.

“It’s not wasteful if it’s an image of you,” he said playfully, and took a few more snapshots. “Come sit on my lap and I’ll take our photograph.” She sank onto his thigh and he held his long arm out, capturing the moment forever with a simple ‘click’. She finally stood up and gathered her clothes, bringing them over to the washbasin near his bed.

“Perhaps I should pack some extra batteries in your bag. We could have a lot of fun with this,” he suggested with a devious gleam in his eye as he took more pictures of her.

“As long as my journal’s in there, I don’t care what we bring.”

“It’s in there, alright. What a glimpse into your head! This poor Danny fellow seems very droll. Not your type at all. And I see you think I’m a spoiled brat, among other things.”

“You read my journal? That’s private!” she protested. He howled in amusement as he reviewed his photography skills.

“Who doesn’t love to read about themselves? ‘That Talvi thinks he’s so clever, but he’s just a spoiled brat,’” he quoted her, batting his eyes. “‘When he read me my favorite fairy tale, my heart started to melt.’”

“Shut up! I can’t believe you read my journal!”
“If it were truly a secret, you would’ve kept it to yourself, not penned it in ink, you silly girl.” He waved his finger at her in reprimand as he put the camera in her bag, and she couldn’t deny that he had a point; she just didn’t agree with it. He turned around in his chair to watch her wash the rest of her body.

“Do you mind?”

“No, not at all.” His impish smile had returned with full force.

“I have your smell all over me,” she observed, rinsing out the wash cloth.

“I know. You’re mine now,” he replied confidently. He looked on for a while longer, then cleared his throat. “Annika, I…I want you to know that if anyone in this room has been conquered, it’s me,” he said. She slowly turned to look at him. His eyes reflected a serious and resolute expression.

“What do you mean, ‘conquered’?”

“You wrote in your little book that you think I don’t mean the things I say, that I look at you as a conquest because you are a woman. Hopefully you know better by now. I’ve meant everything I’ve said to you since the day I first saw you.”

Annika didn’t know what to respond with, and luckily she didn’t have to. There was a gentle knock on the door. She rushed to put on her pants as he reluctantly poked his head outside to answer it.

“Hi,” a soft female voice said.

“What are you doing here?” he asked quietly, blocking the speaker from Annika’s view.

“I need to talk to you. May I come in?”

“I’m a little busy,” he glanced over at Annika, who had just pulled her white blouse over her head. She gave him a questioning look as she tied the green sash around her waist.

“Please? I really need to talk to you,” the woman pled. He dropped his head and opened the door, and in stepped a tall woman clad in black. She wore the same silver buckled knee-high boots, the same black suede pants, the same black suede jacket and the same black shirt underneath, embroidered with the same patterns in silver thread as Talvi’s clothing. The only difference was in the cut of the clothing; it was formed perfectly to her slim body. Her shiny black hair tumbled over her shoulders, falling down to her elbows.

“Yuri, is that you? I didn’t even recognize you without a dress on.” Annika was amazed at the transformation from stuffy, prudent and well-planned Yuri to a woman who appeared ready for adventure.

“I haven’t worn this in a long time. It felt good to put it on,” Yuri said, smiling faintly. Her brother sat on the corner of the desk and folded his arms across his chest, but he didn’t scowl at her.

“I wanted to talk to you both while we could still be alone,” Yuri said. “I just wanted to say how sorry I am, for everything, for all the trouble I’ve caused you both. I’m sorry for the things I said to you, Annika. I’m sorry for all the pain I caused.” She turned to her brother. “It’s none of my business to tell you what to do, as long as you’re happy. I, I was just trying to…I thought I knew what was best for you, but I realize now that I can’t decide that for anyone else. Not for you,” she looked back at Annika with watery eyes. “And not for you, either.”

“It’s okay. It’s not a big deal,” Annika said, dismissing her concern.
“No, it’s a very big deal. When you’re a twin, it’s different. You grow up together, you’re connected in a way that no one else understands unless they’re a twin. You get jealous if anyone interferes with your connection. It’s difficult to let go of that, you know?” Her tears spilled over, running down her cheeks, but she remained resolute. “I just want you to know I make your brother very happy. Everyone in the house agrees with that statement, and apparently it was plain to see at the party if I’d only been willing to look.” She turned to her brother again.

“I of all people should want you to be happy. I’m so sorry for the things I said. I’m sorry for not…I’m just sorry.” She began to cry, and Talvi held out his arms and embraced her for a long time.

“I’m sorry too, about Konstantin,” her brother eventually confessed. “Runa’s right. He’s not that bad…at least, not compared to some of the blokes you’ve run around with.” Yuri wiped her eyes and smiled up at him.

“I love you, but you’re always going to be an ass.”

“More likely than not,” he agreed with a good-natured grin. He finally let her go, and looked at her from head to toe while Annika slipped her backpack over her shoulders.

“Are you coming along, then?” he asked, motioning to Yuri’s outfit. She nodded and gave a confident pat on the sword hanging at her side.

“Yes. I’m long overdue to use this,” she said, and grabbed the dark sunglasses off her brother’s desk as the three of them headed downstairs.

They walked into the sunny library where there was a hub of activity going on. Finn and Zaven followed behind the other three, and Ambrose and Althea were arranging things with the samodivi in different piles on the tables. There was a mountain of food, along with cooking supplies, canteens, weapons and armor.

“We’re taking all this?” Annika asked, looking at the tables with a dubious expression. “Where…no, how are we going to bring all this stuff with us?” There was a small purple and blue ‘poof’ and Dardis appeared at her side.

“Pish posh, that’s the least of my worries,” she said, and instructed the group to take whatever armor and weapons they might need. Sariel walked over to the stack of weapons and found a sword about the same size as hers, and buckled it around Annika’s waist.

“What’s this for? I thought it was just a scouting mission.”

“It’s best to be prepared. I’d rather have a sword at my side than not have it at all,” Sariel told her with a knowing look that Annika wasn’t about to question.

“Do you have everything you need?” Ambrose asked, handing her a small metal box. Annika looked up at him, and then saw that he’d passed out similar boxes to most of her friends. “This is a Fairy Poppins box. It’s a popular contraption made by fairy metalsmiths.”

“I’m sorry; I thought you just said ‘Fairy Poppins?’” Annika was positive that she must have misunderstood, but then Ambrose confirmed,

“I did just say that.”

“What does it do?” she asked, thinking she was nuts.

“It holds practically anything you need it to,” Ambrose winked, and went back to distributing the strange boxes. Chivanni and Dardis began packing up the food, and to Annika’s astonishment, the moment a basket or jar touched the inside of the box it began to shrink, until it was small enough to slip right in. In no time the piles of food, armor,
and other gear had been reduced to a handful of containers the size of shoeboxes. Dardis walked over to Zaven and waved her finger at his supplies. They drifted through the air and into the box he was holding before it snapped shut like the satisfied jaws of an alligator.

“Holy crap! That’s just like Mary Poppins’s carpet bag, from the movie!” Annika exclaimed.

“Of course it is,” Finn said. “The Fairy Poppins invented this contraption over a millennia ago. Where else would the idea have come from?”

While Annika watched in wonder, Dardis smiled and moved onto the next pile, coaxing everyone’s supplies into their appropriate container. Every metal box was labeled in strange lettering, similar to what Talvi had scratched in the dirt that one morning in the woods.

“These Fairy Poppins boxes are special. We haven’t used them for this type of purpose in a long time. The writing you see is your name, so you know whose is whose.”

“It looks Greek to me,” Annika frowned, trying to decipher the text.

“No, it’s not Greek, it’s Fae,” Chivanni corrected her. “And by the way, I would make a point to put a bit of silk in the box to keep the contents from shifting too much. I had the most unpleasant experience of having my toast and jam wind up on my nicest dandelion down jacket.”

Yuri jiggled her box a little and locked it tight, placing it into a leather saddlebag while Annika put hers in her backpack. A dark shadow caught the corner of her eye and she glanced up to see two figures in the doorway of Finn’s library; one tall and one short. It was the vampires dressed in their traveling clothes, which completely obscured their delicate skin from the sun’s ferocious rays. During her stay she’d had multiple myths dispelled, and the ones about vampires weren’t any different. They weren’t afraid of garlic, although they didn’t care for the smell; they could be killed by anything being thrust through their heart, not just wooden stakes, and they could stay awake during the day, but the sun would char their bodies to a crisp if they were exposed for too long. The more Annika learned about them, the more they seemed like regular people with a type of sun-related disorder.

“Where is Nikola?” Konstantin asked Ambrose while his glittering eyes surveyed the room.

“He’s saying goodbye to his grandmother,” he replied. “Dragana will stay here with us until he returns for her.”

The group headed outside to the stables, where a row of horses stood, saddled up and anxiously pawing the ground. Annika immediately recognized Ghassan, the only black horse in the group. Beside him stood Galileo and the darker gold palomino that Finn had ridden to the Tortoise and Hare, along with two dark bays. The silver stags ridden by the samodivi were already caught and tied to a fence rail, and an unfamiliar black and white paint horse in the pasture seemed to be making friends with Yuri’s dappled grey mare from across the fence. But of all the pretty horses and striking silver stags, what surprised Annika the most was the sight of a huge elk saddled and standing among them. It took her about three seconds to realize this was probably how Nikola had arrived.

Dragana, Althea, and Anthea had followed them outside with the children in their arms, watching reluctantly as the group attached their belongings to their saddles and mounted up. Dragana hobbled up to Annika and looked deep into her eyes for a long
time. She felt a silent understanding pass between them, as if she were being blessed, and she smiled warmly, knowing she was indeed being blessed. And then Dragana did an odd thing; her hand curled around one of the many talismans she wore around her neck, and she pulled it over her head, slipping it around Annika’s shoulders. She looked down and saw it was a pair of fish swimming in opposite directions, one made of sapphire, and the other of red garnet. They were set inside a ring of silver, so that when she turned it around, the fish were visible from either side of the medallion.

“I can’t accept this,” Annika told her, but Dragana spoke in that windy language that she couldn’t decipher. Nikola rode up to her on his elk, and Annika was taken aback by the sight of him. He was wearing a long furry cloak over his tunic and pants, but it was the soft helmet with a pair of large ram’s horns that spiraled out to the sides which blew her mind.

“She says you are meant to wear this from now on,” he translated. “Taking it off would be a great disservice to yourself, and an insult to her.” Annika turned to the old woman.

What does it mean? Annika asked her in her mind, but Dragana only smiled with her eerie white eyes and took a ginger step towards Althea.

“Tell everyone goodbye, Stella,” Althea said to her granddaughter. The little girl waved with a big smile on her face. She didn’t understand the complex nature of this trip.

“Bye bye! Bring back my daddy if you see him!” Stella cheerfully called out to them as she waved her small chubby fingers at everyone. Tears were streaming down Anthea’s face, dripping off her chin and into Sloan’s blond curls as she held him close. The twins and Finn embraced their family, trying not to prolong the separation. It was a very emotional parting from the family that was a cornerstone to everyone in the group, even to Annika. Although she’d only known the Marinossians for a short time, they felt like family to her.

“Your knapsack, milady,” a deep voice said from beside her. She turned to see Finn standing there with his arm outstretched. He helped lift her backpack off her shoulders and began securing it to Galileo’s saddle.

“You’re letting me ride your horse?”

“Of course,” he said, tossing his curls out of his face while he fussed with a few slender buckles. “He’s the most trustworthy and reliable one in the entire barn.”

“But we’re going a lot further away than the Tortoise and the Hare,” she pointed out as she stroked the white blaze that ran down the horse’s dark nose. “Don’t you want to be the one to ride him?”

“Only in a perfect world where your horsemanship is half as good as mine,” he said with a bright grin. “But we don’t live in that world, so you’re riding Galileo and I’m taking Midas. He’s been rather difficult to handle since Asbjorn’s been gone, and I don’t want anyone getting hurt if I leave him here at home.”

“But Galileo’s a stallion. Aren’t they dangerous?”

“They can be, if they haven’t learnt any manners,” he replied, and double checked the girth strap of the saddle. “But that goes without saying in regards to any horse, and I certainly wouldn’t let you ride him if I had any doubts. Trust me…he’ll be a perfect gentleman for you.”

“Just like his owner?” she grinned. Finn let out an amused laugh, then sighed wistfully as a hint of red colored his cheeks.
“Yes. Just like his owner,” he finally agreed. Even though he wore a gentle grin, there was a liveliness in his eyes that Annika hadn’t seen since the night they’d gone to the pub.

“Are the two of you nearly ready to leave?” Hilda impatiently inquired.

“Yes. I was just making sure the saddle’s on nice and snug for Annika,” Finn replied.

“If it slips off, I don’t imagine she’ll be able to ride upside down for very long.”

“Now that would be a sight to see,” Hilda joked.

“No, it really wouldn’t be,” he countered, not finding the idea very funny at all. She wrinkled her nose at him, and then turned to Annika.

“Perhaps you’d like to keep us all waiting even longer while he tells you about his polo accident? I’ll go prepare us a second breakfast in the meantime,” she said sarcastically, and turned to leave.

“Anything but that,” he muttered under his breath.

“What?”

“I said, you’re going to make me fat,” he quickly improvised, and smiled sweetly at her. Annika held back her laughter until Hilda had joined Runa and Sariel, who were waiting with their deer at the edge of the group. She looked on while he untied Galileo’s reins from the rail. Instead of handing them to Annika, he handed them to his brother, who’d just walked over with Ghassan.

“You’ll have to wait to ride him until we’ve gone far enough from the village,” Talvi explained as Finn headed for the dark gold horse waiting nearby. He gave a gentle tug at the green sash around Annika’s waist and pulled her closer to him. “I didn’t think you’d mind riding with me for a little while, for old time’s sake.

“You’re going to blindfold me again? I’m beginning to think you’re enjoying this a little too much.”

“It’s for everyone’s benefit. I would rather be overly cautious than regretful.” He helped her up and took his place behind her on Ghassan’s back, wrapping the sash over her eyes. “And no,” he crooned into her ear as he knotted the sash at the back of her head, “I could never enjoy this too much.”

She could hear the movement around her and feel the horses begin to walk through the quiet village and over the bridge. They rode for at least an hour before Talvi removed the sash from her eyes and reluctantly let her switch to Galileo. She tried not to watch the ground as it rushed under his huge feet. The giant wolves bounded ahead of the party, always within sight of their masters. Unfortunately, they were always within sight of the deer and the horses, and Annika saw Midas rear up on his hind legs and leap sideways more than a few times.

As the morning faded into late afternoon, the animals grew more comfortable with the sentries and the air grew cool and misty. They slowed to a walk, for the horses could only see a few yards in front of their noses and refused to run any faster. Fog began to grow thick around them, to the point that they couldn’t continue any further. With only a couple hours before sunset, they stopped and set up camp in a densely wooded area.

Annika had spread out her cloak and was unrolling the blanket from her little Fairy Poppins box when a pair of furry boots stepped up beside her from nowhere. She jerked her head up to see a horned figure standing above her.

“Geez, you scared the crap out of me!” She hadn’t even heard Nikola approaching. He took off his bizarre helmet and scratched his head.
“That amulet my grandmother gave you…it’s probably the most powerful of them all.”

“Then why did she give it to me? I don’t understand,” Annika wondered. Nikola sighed and sat down close to her.

“She told me that you were meant to wear it now,” he said in his soft, steady voice. “She doesn’t need its strength and power anymore. The trip to Derbedrossivic was her second to last. There’s only one more journey for her to make.”

“Wouldn’t she want to have this if she was going somewhere else?” Annika asked naively.

“She doesn’t need it anymore where she’s going. She’s over a hundred years old. She’s ready to move on from this life,” he said. He seemed a little sad at the thought, but not so much that it overwhelmed him.

“Oh! So you aren’t like the elves and samodivi then?”

“No, I’m human, just like you,” he smiled at her. “You’re what, eighteen, nineteen years old?”

“Twenty-five,” she boasted. He looked a little surprised as he stroked his goatee.

“Well, you sure don’t look your age.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Nikola,” she quipped.

“If I were trying to flatter you, I would do better than that,” he said with a little smile, but there wasn’t anything conniving about it.

“Aren’t you worried about the vampires? Aren’t you worried about getting attacked or ambushed on this trip?” she asked.

“No. I’ve never been afraid of death. It’s just another part of life. And the vampires…” His blue eyes glanced around the camp without concern. “The vampires I can handle with one hand behind my back. I’ve been training for a long time,” he said simply, without pride or arrogance.

“Since this was your grandmother’s amulet, can you tell me what it means?” she asked. He lifted the amulet from her chest and held it out in front of her nose.

“It has many meanings,” he began, leaning in for a closer look. “It’s a very complex combination in a single amulet. The sapphire is a stone with many supernatural powers. It will protect you against both violent physical and psychic attacks. It will ward off the sorcery of your enemies, and even accidental death,” he pointed to the red fish.

“Now this one is different. The garnet balances yin and yang energies. It will increase your psychic abilities, courage, and confidence, and will fend off evil spirits while you sleep. It will help protect your aura, and if that’s not enough for one little stone to do, it will also keep you safe while traveling. I wouldn’t be surprised if it makes you feel a little…” He smiled to himself and set the amulet back against her chest. “Well, you’ll figure it out.”

“How do you know if it even works or not?” She challenged him. But he just tossed his dreadlocks and reached inside his shirt.

“Believe me, I know,” he said and opened his hand. There lay the exact same amulet.

“You two have matching talismans? Isn’t that remarkable?” Talvi stated casually from behind them, standing tall over them. He had crept up so stealthily, that he could have been standing there for one second or five minutes for all she knew. He sat down on the other side of Annika and unbuckled his boots.

“I can’t believe how many powers this thing has,” she said, and recapped a few of
the things that Nikola had explained to her.

“You’ll have to take good care of it then. I still can’t believe Dragana gave it away. Aren’t you tired?” Talvi asked her with a big yawn.

“I know I am,” Nikola said, taking the hint. He picked up his helmet and walked over to a tree to lie down on the bare earth, nuzzling his face against the grass.

“He is such a strange looking guy,” she remarked as she curled next to Talvi and let him cover them with their blanket.

“He would look even stranger with no hands,” Talvi snickered.

“No hands? What do you mean?”

“What I mean is, if he values them, he better keep them to himself.”
Chapter 23
psychotic vampires

“Drat!” a thin, slightly effeminate male voice complained. “Why won’t it catch fire?” Annika rubbed her eyes and crawled out from the blanket where Talvi was still trying to sleep. The sun was still a long way off from setting on the horizon, and the rest of the world was quieting down. The samodivi and fairies were trying to light a fire to cook their first meal of the long day ahead of them, but Chivanni was having a hard time of it.

“I don’t want to use up all of our matches! At this rate, we won’t have any left,” he complained. Zaven and Finn were trying to help him, but with no luck.

“Go see if Nikola can help you,” Finn told Chivanni. “He ought to be good at this sort of thing.”

“He seems preoccupied,” the red-haired fairy retorted. Annika looked around the tree that Nikola had been sleeping under, but there was nobody there. All she saw were three wolves playing far off in the trees.

“Hey, where did that third wolf come from?” she asked no one in particular. Indeed there was a dark brown wolf with golden ears and legs, chasing the others and then being chased. He wasn’t as massive as the sentries, but he was leaner and faster.

“Nikola, come over and help us with the fire!” Finn called out to the wolves.

“Where is he?” Annika asked. “I don’t see him.”

“He’s right there,” Finn said, pointing in the direction of the wolves, but the only thing Annika could see was the third wolf loping over to them. He padded right up to the wood and leaned his nose down, staring intently on one spot. Within a few seconds there was a small flame crawling over the logs. The wolf stepped quite close to Annika and looked at her with his pale blue eyes, wagging his tail violently.

“Nikola, is that you?” she asked the animal. She recognized his pale eyes, so different from the other wolves’ normal shade of yellow. She reached out to scratch behind his ears against Talvi’s warning. He yawned and curled his long pink tongue, thumping his foot a little the harder she scratched. One of the other wolves gave a sharp bark and he ran back to join them in the trees.

“That was the weirdest thing I’ve ever seen,” she said, feeling utterly mystified.

“You didn’t know that druids can shape-shift?” Finn laughed. “Oh, you modern people have so much to learn.”

The journey took exactly two weeks and two days, although it seemed much longer than Annika imagined it would. The novelty of traveling by horseback wore off after a few days, but she came to enjoy the slower pace. It allowed her to enjoy her surroundings, which were endless sweeping views of foothills and mountains, grassy valleys and rocky outcroppings. Every day they rose at sunrise, ate a hearty breakfast, and then rode along the old, well-worn trail that led to vampire territory. As for the vampires, sleeping during the night was next to impossible for them, and traveling during the day was taking its toll on their strength as well. Every night they disappeared into the woods while their wolves slept, and they didn’t return until after dawn.

It was the day before the group was to reach the Dark Horse that they stopped to
camp not too far from a hot spring. All the girls woke up earlier than usual, and snuck off together to bathe in the pre-dawn darkness. After riding for over two weeks without a bath, the samodivi and Annika had no reservations about stripping down and sinking into the deliciously steamy water, but Yuri was acting unusually self-conscious.

“Come on, don’t be shy,” Runa urged as she ran a bar of soap under her breasts and then her arms. “It’s not as though there are any boys around! You’re missing out.”

“What are you waiting for?” Hilda asked, working suds into her scalp. “I’ll even wash your hair for you.”

“I’m fine, really,” Yuri insisted, turning her nose up at the enticing water.

“What if this is the last time we’re near a hot spring?” Runa asked her. “You’re going to regret it!” She splashed Yuri a little, but she refused to join them. All she did was put her hands in the water and wash her face.

“I just don’t feel like it,” she excused.

“Is there any place where he hasn’t bitten you?” Sariel asked. Yuri’s head snapped up and she glared at Sariel. “That’s the reason why you won’t let us see your skin, because you’re covered with bites, isn’t it?”

“No! That’s not it,” she scoffed, offended that Sariel would even mention that as the reason.

“Then why don’t you take a bath? We’ve seen you undressed plenty of times before,” Sariel insisted.

“I don’t have to justify my reasons to you!”

“You’re starting to stink, so take a damn bath!” Sariel commanded. Yuri glared back at her before she walked silently to her grey mare, and rode back toward the campsite.

“She’s going to get herself into trouble,” Hilda sighed, shaking her head.

“She’s already in trouble,” Sariel denounced. “If she won’t even take a bath, it’s got to be bad.”

“Well you didn’t have to keep pressuring her,” Annika said to Sariel. “Maybe if you hadn’t put her on the defensive, she would’ve at least washed her greasy hair.”

Sariel seemed shocked that anyone might be so bold as to contradict anything she ever said. The other two nymphs listened in uncomfortable silence.

“You know Annika, you have been exceptionally full of yourself ever since Dragana gave you that thing,” she said. Annika’s hand reached up and protectively covered the amulet that lay on her chest. “Maybe it would do you some good to take it off for a while.”

“Nikola told me not to. He said it was meant for me.”

“Oh, well if Nikola said so… I wonder what else he has for you?” Sariel taunted. For a moment Annika was speechless. She kept waiting for the joke to reach its punch line, but none of the girls were smiling. “Oh don’t give me that look. I saw the way you acted around him that very first night of our trip. You were hanging on his every word. That silly look on your face completely gave you away. And right in front of Talvi. How can you treat him like that, after everything he’s done for you?” Sariel shook her head in disapproval.

“How can you even say that?” Annika cried out in disbelief. “Nikola was just explaining what my amulet meant, and it was interesting!”

“I’m certain it was fascinating,” Sariel smirked.
“I can’t believe I’m even hearing this! Runa, tell her she’s nuts!” But Runa and Hilda didn’t have any response. She and Hilda only looked down into the water. Annika felt something mean and ugly rise up from her gut and exit her mouth before she had time to think it through.

“You know Sariel, you can be a real bitch sometimes! I guess it didn’t bother me because you pretty much left me alone until just now. What’s your problem? You never have anything nice to say, and you wouldn’t know a good time if it sat on your face! What has the world done to you that makes you hate everything?” Annika was trembling with adrenaline as Sariel’s eyes flashed with rage.

“Girls, I believe we are done bathing,” Sariel announced, and immediately Hilda and Runa started to get out of the water. They looked ill.

“You don’t realize what you said,” Hilda whispered, getting out of the water and wringing out her hair.

“Oh, I know exactly what I said! And I don’t know what sort of rumors you’ve heard about American chicks or modern girls in general, but we’re actually capable of having friends with dicks without trying to get in their pants. Do you all think that if I talk to a guy for more than five minutes that I must want him to bone me?”

Hilda gave an unconvincing, skeptical shrug, and Runa twirled her hair absentmindedly, which only made Annika even more angry.

“Why didn’t you stick up for me when I asked you to?” she demanded. “I thought you were my friend, Runa. You know I’m not into Nikola…or anyone else for that matter,” she added, glaring at Hilda. Runa shrugged, but wouldn’t look her in the eye.

“I really don’t know what to think,” said the little nymph while Hilda crept out of the pool. “He seems to fancy you quite a bit, and you certainly don’t seem to mind.”

“Well then, fuck off!” Annika shouted. Runa waded to the edge of the pool and hoisted herself out of the water. She turned towards Annika as if to say something, but changed her mind and left with Hilda and Sariel, leaving Annika and the last horse all alone under the dim sky.

She sat for a long time, trying to understand what had caused the samodivi to turn their backs on her. Was it just a difference in the local customs, or were they unfamiliar with her American style of brash confidence and being a little too friendly? She’d lived enough places around the world to know how Americans were perceived; if every country were made up of dogs, they were the Golden Retrievers…some of them were smart and sweet, but there were an awful lot that were overbred and obnoxious. Annika sighed and looked at her fingers. They’d passed the puny stage and were almost beginning to hurt. She wasn’t looking forward to going back to camp, but it would be time for breakfast soon, so she slipped under the surface of the water for one last moment of warm and weightless serenity.

In an instant, a pair of hands strong and cold as steel grabbed her arms and held her underwater. She opened her eyes and they immediately began to burn. She pulled at the hands, at the arms, but they dug into her body too hard to wrench herself out of their grip. She kicked and thrashed, choking and losing what precious little air she had left. All she heard was her underwater screams. The cool hands yanked her out of the spring and dragged her over the jagged rocks and slippery grass. She sputtered and choked and kicked, trying to force the water out of her lungs so she could scream. Her back felt on fire as she realized it had been cut by the rocks near the pool. She felt her attacker
position himself over her body, between her legs. She kicked against his hip bones the same way that she’d pushed Talvi off of her so easily, but this man would not budge. A gargled scream finally escaped as a searing hot pain punctured her neck close to her jaw, and she knew now that it was Vaj, coming back for her with a vengeance. It was a completely different experience this time; there was no soft swooning, no gradual fade to black. She was aware of everything around her; of the fear, the pain.

Annika was still gasping for air in the freezing cold when the body holding her down was abruptly thrown off of her. There was a swish of clothing and the sound of a boot making impact with a body, and then shouting in another language. Still choking, she rolled over to see that the pool of water she had just bathed in was now glowing bright orange with molten lava shooting up through the center. She saw a horned man slit Vaj’s throat with a large white knife and hurl him into the spring. The vampire flailed, his hair on fire, his hands and wrists had slowly burned off, but it looked like melting wax, not searing flesh. Blood dripped down what was left of his body before it was swallowed by the liquid fire. Within seconds, he was gone. All that remained was the sickening stink of burnt hair and flesh. The remaining figure raised his hand and slowly lowered it, and the pool returned to its dark color as the lava receded back into the belly of the earth.

Nikola was kneeling by her side before she could try to sit up. He rolled her onto her side and let her cough out the rest of the water.

“Are you alright?” he asked calmly, even though his face and shirt were sprayed with both Annika’s and Vaj’s blood. “Where does it hurt?”

“My neck…my back…” she sputtered between coughs. He put his hands on her hips and turned her over. She saw the spiraled horns bow down for a closer look. His warm breath falling on her skin in the cold morning air made her ache and tremble even more.

“It’s a bad scrape, but it could be worse,” he said and pulled her into his lap against his chest. He wrapped his cloak around them both, warming her cold wet skin with his body heat. He tore off a sleeve from his tunic and pressed it firmly against her neck to stop the bleeding. “You’re lucky that you didn’t lose much more blood.”

His voice had no anger or irritation, but she could feel his heart thumping in his chest through his damp shirt.

“Is he dead?” she whispered.

“Yes. That’s the last we’ll see of Vaj. Madrook never liked him much anyway.”

“Who’s Madrook?”

“Vaj’s sentry. The dark wolf with the red ears,” Nikola answered. “He was hoping that Konstantin was going to kill Vaj. Wait until he learns that it was me who did it instead. I suppose either way, he’ll be pleased.”

“How would you know what he…oh, I guess you talk to him in wolf, huh?”

“Something like that,” Nikola chuckled a little to himself. “It’s a good thing that you had this on. It could have been much worse,” he said, tapping the amulet that lay on her wet chest. He held her close, and they sat quietly for a while, until she had stopped shivering. She was soggy and bloody and didn’t want to expose herself to the cold air. He moved his hand to look at her neck, and wiped away the blood with his other crimson shirt sleeve.

“You’re going to be fine. We’ll have Hilda look at it when we get back to camp.”

“I don’t think she’s going to talk to me.”

“Why not? Isn’t she a healer?” His goatee tickled her when he spoke.
“We said some crappy things to each other,” she muttered.
“About what?”
“Sariel accused me of…something. And Hilda wouldn’t deny it.” Annika looked into his unnerving eyes and thought over the conversation she’d had only moments ago with the nymphs, and felt as if Nikola understood her thoughts like written words on a page. Rather than belittle their squabble, he only remained silent for a few moments before he spoke.
“Well you know, samodivi are just wood nymphs,” he said matter-of-factly. “They’re known to be quite fickle. Whatever was said, I wouldn’t worry about it too much. Besides, a healer is supposed to do no harm. It wouldn’t make much sense for her to not speak to you.” He took off his helmet and wiggled out of the cloak, retrieving her clothes that had lain on the ground untouched. He pulled the shirt over her head and put her arms through the sleeves carefully.

“Do you think you can stand? Do you have the strength?”
“I think so,” Annika said and let him help her up. He knelt in front of her, helping her step into the legs of her pants. She was dizzier than she realized, and shivering so violently that she fell, catching herself on his broad shoulders.

He stopped still, his head turning very slowly to look up at her face. She wasn’t sure if he knew how much emotional pain she was in, but every warm breath that fell to her thighs made it that much more unbearable. It was like fuel to the fire that burned inside, a fire that wanted nothing but to physically consume and be consumed by him at that very moment. Sariel’s teasing voice entered her head as she felt the blood rushing in her body.

“I wonder what else he said he had for you?”
“You have to finish getting dressed,” he told her in a low rumble. His pale blue eyes did not move from hers.

“I…I can’t move,” she shuddered. “Please, Nikola…” She gripped his shoulders a little tighter, wishing he would pull her just a little closer.

“Annika, you must get dressed,” he repeated. She quivered as he turned his face away from her and towards the source of her frustration. His warm hand slid up her calves and coaxed her knees apart before he resumed that exhilarating gaze into her eyes. She saw him take her by waist and turn her around, and then push her onto her hands and knees right there in the grass. She felt his hands grab onto both her hipbones and pull her backwards onto that white-hot spire of his, diving deeper and deeper into her body. Then she blinked, and realized she was still standing in front of him, clenching his shoulders. He parted his lips as if he were about to say something, but instead bit his lip and pulled her pants up the rest of the way, knotting the cord tight. He rose slowly and looked into her imploring eyes in silence. He led her over to where his elk had been standing, and stuck his warm helmet on her cold, wet head. The great animal knelt down, and Nikola straddled him, pulling Annika to sit in front of him without a word. He held onto her carefully as the elk stood up and began walking back to the campsite. They rode for a long time in silence. Although her upper body was damp and warm under the furs, her damp toes felt frozen inside her shoes.

The physical handicap she had experienced had subsided enough that her thoughts began to make more sense. She had wanted Nikola at that moment more than anything else with an unparalleled hunger, but she didn’t understand why it was so overwhelming. She honestly had no interest in him until that instant.
“Nikola, I don’t know what came over me. I’m so sorry. I totally embarrassed myself back there,” Annika said, beginning to feel tremendous guilt.

“Don’t feel embarrassed. It will wear off after a while,” he reassured her.

“What will wear off?”

“The amulet…it’s just getting used to your energy levels. I didn’t think it would increase your…appetite quite that much,” he explained, stifled a laugh.

“What? Is that what you wouldn’t tell me the other night? That this thing turns you into a nymphomaniac?” she asked, wondering why Dragana would give her such a thing.

“It doesn’t make you experience any qualities that you don’t already possess,” he breathed quietly. “It intensifies your life force and other related traits. I thought that you might notice a slight change in that area in particular. Sex is the source of life, after all.”

“I don’t think I need to be wearing this thing,” Annika said with a skeptical frown. “It’s getting me into more trouble than I can handle.”

“No, it’s almost acclimated to your energy levels,” he observed. “I think the worst is over. The amulet only amplifies what’s there to begin with, utilizing all of your qualities to their fullest potential. For example, I’ve noticed that you’re already more sure of yourself, and it’s just a matter of time before you can see bits of the future or even read a few thoughts from those among the group. You’ll become more level-headed as well.”

“Are you saying I’m not?” she asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

“Now don’t go putting words into my mouth,” he said, but he couldn’t help smiling softly. “What I’m saying is that the yin and yang of it will make you feel more balanced. Just give it time.”

Annika took a few minutes to digest all of what he had told her, realizing that under normal circumstances she never would have been so forward with him. She waited a moment before concluding her interrogation.

“Can I ask you something else?”

“What is it?”

“Why didn’t you, you know, even though I wanted to?”

“Mmm…” He offered no words, as if he were thinking of a reason. Or perhaps there were too many reasons for him to choose just one.

“Is it because of Talvi?” she asked soberly. “Because I won’t tell him what happened.”

“Nothing happened to tell him about.”

“Something almost did.”

“But nothing did,” he asserted. “Nothing that’s worth mentioning.” They rode on for a while longer.

“Nikola, how did you know where I was?” she asked. “I should be dead.”

“No, you shouldn’t. It’s not your time. My grandmother said you are meant for bigger things, and I truly believe it.”

“But how did you know where to find me? How did you know I needed help?”

“I just knew. I have my ways,” was all he would reveal.
Chapter 24

the multiple definitions of what specifically constitutes lying

When they got back to the camp, the only ones to greet them were the samodivi, the fairies, and Zaven.

“Where is everyone else?” Nikola asked as he helped Annika down and set her on a blanket near the fire next to the sleeping wolves. She felt content to hide under his fur cloak and ram’s horns as long as she could; she was hoping that meant forever.

“When we came back, Yuri and Konstantin and Vaj had already left to hunt,” Runa informed them, staring wide-eyed at his blood-soaked, one-sleeved shirt. “Then Talvi took Finn with him to go find you.”

Nikola turned to Dardis and Chivanni.

“Could you find them and let them know Annika is safe?”

“But my omelet isn’t quite done. It just needs another minute or two for the cheese to melt properly,” Chivanni argued, holding a long-handled pan over the fire.

“I’ll take care of it, don’t worry. I would go myself, but I’m sure you can travel faster than I can,” Nikola told him with a wink.

“Well, yes, I probably can,” Chivanni agreed, and handed him the pan. “Nikola, why is there blood on your shirt?” he asked with concern, but Nikola pretended not to hear him.

“Come on, slow poke,” Dardis chirped at her red-haired friend and flitted into the sky. Chivanni huffed at Nikola’s lack of response before disappearing into a tiny flash of orange in search of the elven brothers.

“Why is there blood on your shirt?” Zaven asked after the fairies were long gone.

“We ran into Vaj,” was all he said as he flipped the omelet onto a plate and set the pan aside. He cut it into small pieces and then handed it to Annika. “Here. Eat what you can and I’ll finish the rest. You need your strength.” He instructed, and then took a wool tunic out of his bag and changed in front of them, wiping the remaining droplets of blood from his chest with the saturated shirt. His deliberate avoidance of any details left the others confused and speechless.

“Did you get hurt?” Hilda asked Annika, stepping over to her and kneeling beside her. Annika peeked from under the heavy hat and took it off slowly, setting it beside her. She felt ridiculous as she realized Nikola had been right about Hilda being more loyal to the art of healing than the art of casting a cold shoulder. She tilted her head to one side and revealed the crescent of four puncture wounds from the vampire’s fangs.

“Oh good gods!” Hilda exclaimed in a voice that contained both fear and confusion. “But you’re walking and talking just fine. I thought you’d be in worse shape.” She examined the injury carefully, while Annika stuffed her mouth full of omelet to avoid having to say anything.

“Where is Vaj?” Sariel asked.

“He’s dead,” Nikola said as if it were nothing out of the ordinary. The girls gasped in shock, and Nikola turned to address the samodivi.

“It’s not important, whatever was said out there,” he said in his perpetually calm voice. “You never should have left Annika alone, even at the very break of dawn. The vampires are weak right now. They are hungry and tired and that makes them even more
dangerous. Keep in mind that the Dark Horse will probably be swarming with them, so it would do you good to reconcile. We won’t be defeating our enemy if we’re distracted by picking fights with one another over petty things.” He looked at every one of them until they all nodded, and they did indeed apologize to each other.

Annika could tell by her steely stare that it drove Sariel mad, not knowing exactly what happened after she left or what was said, but she kept her mouth shut. Runa returned to her sweet self quickly enough, and after Annika passed her leftover omelet to Nikola, Hilda applied an ointment to her neck and back. Runa picked up Nikola’s helmet and tried it on.

“Eww,” she whined, taking it off right away. “It’s all wet inside!”

“Yes, well regardless, little samodiva, you do look very nice in it,” said Zaven, giving her a wink. After finishing the omelet in a few quick bites, Nikola yawned and curled up by the fire like an exhausted animal. Like a wolf. A few minutes went by and Sariel waved her hand in front of his face. He was out cold.

“So what happened out there?” she asked Annika quietly. Zaven pretended to be busy preparing more to eat, but his curiosity was just as strong as Sariel’s.

“Vaj tried to drown me in the hot spring,” Annika said, keeping it as simple as possible. “Then Nikola showed up and killed him.”

“Yes, yes, but how did it happen? How did he kill a vampire by himself when he’s just a human?” Sariel asked. “I know he’s a druid, but still…how did he know where to find you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to talk about it,” Annika muttered, thankful that she wasn’t going to sleep anytime soon. The image of Vaj’s melting body was the stuff that nightmares were born of. She set the empty plate down and heard the hooves of two horses approaching. She squinted to see the centaur-like figures of Talvi and Finn bounding towards them in a blur of black and gold. They were followed overhead by two colorful orbs of light; one a fiery blaze and one a periwinkle star. Talvi jumped down from Ghassan and ran to Annika, examining her in his arms.

“Are you alright, my little dove? Are you hurt? Oh gods, your neck!” He grimaced at the wound.

“I’m okay, I’ll be fine. It’s a little sore, but other than that I’m okay,” she assured him, and he held her tight against his chest. She was so glad he was there, yet afraid of what he might see if he looked into her thoughts and saw her wanting Nikola to throw her down on the ground and take her like a beast.

“I knew something was going to happen to you,” Talvi fretted, still hugging her close. “This is exactly why I told you not to leave my side. But I have you now, and that’s all that matters.”

It wasn’t until the middle of the day that Konstantin and Yuri finally returned, just as Nikola was starting to wake up. As he gave the same bare-bones version of what happened out at the hot spring, the vampire didn’t seem too upset at the news that his companion was dead.

“Thank you for saving me the trouble,” he nodded from underneath the hood of his cloak. “I was intending to kill him at some point.”

“That’s what Madrook said,” Annika piped up. Konstantin was not the only one who gave her an odd look, as a few curious glances from around the fire all aimed in her
“Did he tell you this?” Konstantin asked with deep interest.

“Who is Madrook?” asked Hilda. Annika looked at the red-eared wolf, and he lifted his head to look back at her, cocking his head to one side at hearing his name spoken aloud.

“You’re speaking with animals now?” Talvi asked with interest. “What else have you neglected to tell me?” Annika looked away from him before he could delve deep into her mind, and he frowned slightly. He lifted her to her feet, and led her into the trees, out of earshot of the others.

“Are you certain you aren’t in pain?” he asked as they walked away, looking at the blood-soaked cloth around her neck. “I can’t believe the samodivi left you alone when that fiend was out and about. And you never should have left me like that. You know I would have come with you; you only need ask.” He sounded very annoyed with her behavior. “Why did you sneak off in the first place?”

“Honestly, we wanted to take a bath. We thought we’d be okay if there was a group of us,” Annika said with a guilty shrug. “But then we said some stupid things to each other and they got mad and left.”

“What exactly did they say to you?” he asked. Annika pursed her lips, not knowing whether to tell him or not. She chose her words carefully.

“Sariel said I made a fool of myself the night that Nikola was explaining this to me,” she said, touching the amulet gently. “And I basically told her she was full of shit.” Talvi snickered a little. He agreed with Sariel much more than he did with Annika.

“If that’s what you said, it’s no wonder she left. This may come as a surprise to you my little dove, but Sariel is never wrong,” he said with a dry smile.

“I noticed,” Annika said, grateful to see him smile. “I think she’s just jealous that Dragana gave it to me and not her. It’s really powerful.”

“Perhaps. But Sariel doesn’t need it nearly as much as you. I think it’s quite a cold amulet to have.” It took Annika a moment to realize what Talvi was trying to say.

“Do you mean cool?”

“Right, that’s the word I meant.” He touched the tip of her nose affectionately with his finger, but a sadness lingered in his voice. “It’s a good thing that Nikola showed up when he did.”

She hadn’t looked him in the eye for longer than a few seconds; hopefully he didn’t know her secret. “I don’t know about him,” he went on. “I’ve never seen him until at the meeting, but he acts as though he knows me quite well. I can’t figure him out at all. His mind is impossible to read.”

“What do you need to figure out? He’s obviously a good person. A little weird, maybe,” Annika said, and those icy blue eyes appeared again. Nikola’s breath on her bare skin. His hand sliding up her knees, prying her thighs apart. The animal urges were coming back, like an inevitable storm.

“It makes me so angry that I wasn’t there; that I wasn’t the one to protect you. It’s my duty, not his,” Talvi said spitefully.

“If you want to feel more manly, I’m sure there are other ways,” she said, reaching seductively towards his belt, but Talvi pulled her hands away.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m not in the mood,” he said in a sharp tone.
“But you always are,” she insisted, feeling the burn that flickered at her insides.
“Annika, you almost died tonight! In fact, your neck is still bleeding. Forgive me if I don’t feel romantic,” he snapped back at her. “I don’t know how you can even think about that right now!”

Annika didn’t know what to say, and thus they sat in silence until the cold air drove them to return to the warmth of the fire. They rode back without saying a word to each other and lie down next to each other, not speaking. It was pointless to argue with such a stubborn creature as Talvi. Madrook slinked over to Annika and curled up beside her. She fell asleep petting his soft and thick winter coat, but Talvi lay awake, wondering...
Chapter 25
Vladislav

The next day Konstantin took the lead, where the group followed him to a cave. They were met by an enormous draft horse who stood saddled and tied to a tree. The party dismounted their horses and tied them to the trees nearby, and Nikola motioned for them to stand clear of the entrance.

“Can we please stay out here and watch the horses?” Runa begged, grimacing at the darkness of the cave. “Surely we don’t all need to go in there.”

“Konstantin and I both need to go, which means you need to come with. I don’t believe you honestly want to loiter directly outside the entrance to the most popular portal for hundreds of starved vampires, do you?” Nikola asked her. “They’re not all as self-disciplined as Konstantin, you realize.” Runa shook her head. It only made sense to stick together with her armed comrades.

Nikola and Konstantin lead the way into the musty cave, stepping through a thick layer of guano as they found a path leading through it. When the light from outside faded, Dardis flitted above them, carrying a tiny orb of light.

“Be sure not to fly too high,” Nikola quietly reminded her. “You’ll wake them up.” Immediately, Annika looked up, and her jaw dropped. Then she snapped it shut. There didn’t seem to be a single place above them that wasn’t inhabited by thousands and thousands of sleek, furry bats, all huddled together, twitching ever so slightly.

“Oh my god, are they going to start flying everywhere?” she asked nervously.

“They’re hibernating,” Finn informed her. “They’ll remain like that until spring, unless they’re disturbed.”

“Are you certain that the Dark Horse is in here?” Chivanni whined from inside Nikola’s cloak. “How can anyone, even a vampire, bear to live in such a filthy place?”

“At least you don’t have to walk through bat shit,” Annika grumbled, stepping through the soft, musty piles of feces. “This is disgusting.” The limestone walls closed in around them, and they had to walk single file.

“Ugh, what is that other smell?” Talvi groaned long before Annika could smell it. When the repugnant odor reached her nose, she almost threw up. It smelled like the time her family had come home from summer vacation to find the freezer in their garage had broken, and all the meat in it had thawed and rotted. Konstantin said something to Dardis and she hovered in place at the head of the line, holding her nose as she illuminated the path.

“Pay attention!” he commanded. “There is a narrow crack in the path, where many have fallen to their death. Don’t be one of them.” He hopped over a three foot crevice and waited on the other side to make sure the others crossed safely. One by one they all hopped over it easily enough. Had there been no light, they might have stepped right into oblivion. It was impossible to tell how far down the crevice went, but the reek of death that rose from the bottom told Annika that it wasn’t far enough.

They pushed on along the narrow path, which was now clear of obstacles and guano, until it opened into a very large room. Dardis and Chivanni used their trick from the birthday party, sending little orbs up as high as they would go and letting them explode into sparkling dust, lighting the place with its warm glow. The sight before everyone’s
eyes was breathtaking. A stalactite-covered ceiling rose up to four stories at its highest point, with the longest formations dripping into little pools beneath them, one drop of water at a time. The stalagmites that rose from the ground made the place look like an alien world. Annika was amazed. She had never been in a cave before, and the few pictures she’d seen did this experience little justice.

“What is this place? What are these things? They’re like icicles!” she breathed, as they walked around the bizarre formations that ranged from pointy to bulbous.

“They’re called stalactites and stalagmites,” Finn said.

“What’s the difference?” she asked. Finn pointed upwards.

“The way I’ve always remembered it is that ‘T’ is for top, and stalactites hang from the top of the cave. Stalagmites are on the bottom. They’re mineral deposits.”

“How did they get there?” she asked him, and he was only too happy to tell her.

“Well,” he began, “when rain falls from the sky, it absorbs carbon dioxide from the surrounding air molecules. It becomes slightly acidic as it seeps through the soil and reaches the limestone of the cave’s walls. Eventually the acid dissolves and minute particles of—”

“Don’t do that!” Nikola blurted out suddenly. Talvi had snapped off a skinny stalagmite and was inspecting it closely, much to Nikola’s vexation.

“Do you realize that took hundreds of thousands of years to form? And you destroyed it in less than one second! If you’re so curious, why don’t you stoop down to their level to get a better look? That ought to come naturally for you.” No one had ever seen Nikola be so irritable. He was more upset about the snapping of one stalagmite than the death of a vampire at his own hands. Talvi looked at him with narrow eyes and chuckled it among the others, breaking a few more stalagmites before it landed.

“I’m sorry about that, Nikola. It must have slipped,” he said in a sarcastic tone. Annika could hear Finn sigh, before he continued his educational lecture on the creation of caves.

After an hour and a half of following this dark, twisting, treacherous path, Konstantin stopped in front of a wall. He turned around to everyone, looking very stern.

“Don’t touch anything, don’t drink anything, and don’t say anything, even if they speak to you. And put that away,” he said to Sariel, who had drawn her sword. “You will not be harmed here. Not in our present company, at least,” he said, glancing for a second at Nikola. Sariel reluctantly did as she was told, but her fingers were ready to reach for her weapon if she needed to with a second’s notice.

Konstantin turned back to the door, pushing it in a particular spot, and the section of wall in front of them moved to the side, disappearing into the wall. There was a room beyond them, with a handful of men and women standing around. They immediately stopped what they were doing and lifted their noses to the air, the way one does upon stepping into a bakery when the bread is ready to come out of the oven.

Talvi squeezed Annika’s hand so tightly it hurt, but the vampires kept their distance. The creatures were not ugly, hideous Hollywood monsters with giant saber tooth-like fangs jutting from their mouths. Nor were they drop-dead gorgeous supermodels, either. They looked like ordinary people. Very gaunt, hungry, homeless people. Many of them even wore blue jeans and t-shirts, probably taken from their victims, although a few of them dressed considerably worse in torn ragged garb. The only thing that gave them away was their black eyes, empty and dark, sensing the vessels of warm, fresh blood all
around them.

“Where is Vaj?” one of the female vampires asked, slipping out of her chair to approach Nikola. Her nostrils were flaring as she looked him up and down, smelling his living flesh, but he only looked bored.

“I killed him,” Konstantin lied. The only reason they accepted this excuse without question was because Konstantin held such a high rank.

“What a shame. Did you bring us something special? Please tell me that you brought the humans for us. A token of your generosity, perhaps?” she asked flirtatiously, running a finger along Nikola’s sleeve, but he gently took her hand away, shaking his head with a slight smile. He truly wasn’t afraid of the vampires, and because of this, Annika felt less on edge as well.

“They are not for you; they are mine,” Konstantin warned her with a cruel smile. “And if you touch them, I will kill you as well. I need to speak with Vladislav.” The woman tried to smile bravely, but her eyes reflected a fear that Annika could only wonder what Konstantin was capable of causing.

“No doubt you do need to see him. I’ll make your presence known.” She turned and walked out of the room to a hallway on the far right. Konstantin bowed down a little, looking at the nymphs and elves and humans. The fairies had shrunken and were hiding in Nikola’s cloak, trembling. Konstantin’s green eyes narrowed, as if to remind the other vampires of his warning, and he followed the vampire woman down the dark hallway.

The seconds crept by painfully as the other vampires eyed the group, particularly Annika and Nikola. Their eyes were starved, their faces hungered for human blood, and Talvi was squeezing Annika’s hand so hard that she thought it might break. She could feel his pulse quicken through his veins, but when she looked at Nikola, he seemed unconcerned. Maybe he really could handle them with one hand behind his back after all.

A door slammed somewhere down the limestone hall and the vampires quickly scattered, retreating to the corners of the room. A shorter man of Nikola’s height suddenly appeared in the doorway, crossing his arms with effortless intimidation. His dark, dirty hair was slicked away from his face, and he might even have been handsome if he didn’t look so wretchedly evil. Even though his eyes were black like all the other vampires, there was something more haunting in them than all the others combined, as though his soul had abandoned him to save itself. Konstantin had reappeared behind him, looking grave, but he said nothing. The other man in the doorway had to be none other than Vladislav.

“Veesoko momichy suss cherna ta dulga co sa...ela took,” he said, turning his soulless eyes to Yuri.

Finn looked alarmed, grabbing his sister close to him. Vladislav waited only a moment before he marched over to them, stopping directly in front of Yuri.

“Ela took!” he boomed in her face, but she either didn’t know what he was saying or was afraid to come to him, which was what he was demanding. He reached out and grabbed her arm, and pushed the sleeve up to her elbow. There was not an area of her skin beyond her wrist that wasn’t bruised or bitten, to everyone’s horror. The bites followed her veins up her arm’s length, and most likely the rest of her body looked the same. He pulled the sleeve back down carefully, gingerly, as if her skin was as delicate as unfired porcelain, and he turned to flash a look of sheer anger at Konstantin. Vladislav reached up and removed Finn’s protective hands as if they belonged to a helpless infant, gently setting them aside as he made her step forward. He walked around her once,
stroking her long black hair. The look of restrained panic in her eyes was terrible to behold, and Vladislav looked at her as if he could sense this very fear and was feeding off of it. His mouth curled into the most heinous, sadistic smile Annika could imagine a person wearing. His hand closed slowly around her hair at the base of her neck.

“Ela…” he said in a seductive voice, drawing out the last syllable to a long whisper. Yuri refused to walk with Vladislav when he took her by the arm, and he gave her a yank before he stomped back down the hall, dragging Yuri kicking and screaming beside him as if she weighed nothing. Konstantin averted his eyes to the floor as he turned and followed the other two back down the hall. Talvi dropped Annika’s hand and started to run after them, but the other vampires in the room blocked his way.

“Don’t you try to stop me! He’s going to kill her!” he snarled, reaching for the knife in his boot. Nikola leapt in between him and the vampires, holding up his hand when Talvi drew his blade.

“No, he’s not. He’ll bring her back alive.”

“How could you possibly know that?” Talvi demanded. “Can’t you see that she’s terrified?” Now Finn joined Nikola, urging Talvi to put his knife away.

“Of course she is, but she should have known this day would come. If she expected his blessing, well…” he trailed off, not wanting to elaborate on the many tortures that the notorious Vladislav was capable of.

Talvi realized it was useless to fight or argue, and angrily returned his knife to the sheath inside his boot before resuming his place beside Annika. There was nothing to be done. The only good thing about Vladislav’s brief appearance was that it kept the other vampires far away from everyone else. Runa trembled in Zaven’s arms, and Sariel only needed a reason to brandish her sword.

The tension was growing thicker and heavier until the sound of three pairs of footsteps echoed down the hall. A shell-shocked Yuri entered the room with Konstantin, who had his hood drawn so far that no one could see his face. If his expression was anything like Yuri’s, no one dared ask questions. They were just grateful that she appeared uninjured. Yuri and Konstantin were followed by a very muscular man dressed in a knight’s armor. His dark hair was pulled back into a long braid and he wore chain mail under his breastplate and a broadsword strapped to his back that must have been over four feet long. His black leather boots were also protected by armor, and the shoulder pieces had bear-like claws curling upwards, made of metal as well. In one hand he held a large shield, but the thing that struck Annika the most were his pale blue eyes. He walked to the heavy stone door in which they had entered, and Konstantin opened it, ushering them out quickly. When they had found their narrow trail in the dark, Yuri let out a sob that she must have been holding back for a long time.

“What did that monster do to you?” Talvi demanded. Yuri shook with her cries as she continued to stumble forward.

“Nothing. He didn’t do anything to me,” she said, turning her face away from his prying eyes.

“Bollocks he didn’t do anything!” Talvi insisted, but Konstantin gave him a look so severe that it bade him to hold his tongue.

“No time for chit-chat, my friends,” the mysterious knight said with perfect timing. “We need to get out of here as quickly and quietly as possible.”

Ghassan was pawing the ground anxiously when they stepped out of the stale cave.
air and into the clear, starry night. Midas was pulling on the rope that tethered him to his tree, and the other horses seemed just as eager to get as far away from the cave as they could. It was freezing cold outside, but at least the worst of the tension was gone, as everyone wiped the guano from their boots and untied their horses from the trees under the waning moonlight.

“When did you find the time to acquire so many friends, Nikola? I thought you were too busy climbing trees to meet people,” he rumbled in a great big voice, leaning his shield against a tree. He was downright cheerful, a welcome change from the fear that Annika and the nymphs were experiencing. The burly man walked up to Nikola and grabbed the horns of his helmet before jerking it over his eyes, laughing mightily as he did so.

“Are you going to introduce us, or not?” he asked, and when he saw Sariel standing en garde with her hand on her sword, his eyes shone even brighter. Nikola re-situated his helmet and made the introductions to the man and then turned to the group.

“This is my older brother, Justinian,” he said modestly.

“Your brother?” a few voices cried in disbelief.

“Yes, can you see the resemblance?” Nikola joked. The two men looked absolutely nothing alike. He turned his horned helmet up to the knight. “Now what are you doing, spending time with a crowd like that?”

“I can’t discuss that openly, but I was certainly glad to see Konstantin,” Justinian answered with a jovial smile and hefted himself up onto the back of the sturdy draft horse that had been waiting for him. “He told ol’ Vladi that you were going to need my kind of help. How can I say no to family?”

“I say we get as far away from here as possible. How do we know that those vampires won’t come after us tonight?” Zaven wondered. “They can follow our scent, can’t they?”

“There is no risk of them following us,” Konstantin assured them.

“Can I believe that, when you let Vladislav terrorize my sister?” Talvi demanded. “It’s bad enough that you left us alone in there.”

“I knew you were safe,” Konstantin casually replied before swinging into the saddle of his horse.

“Safe?” Talvi huffed, jumping onto Ghassan before he rode up beside the vampire. “We could have been killed down there, and you say we were safe?”

“Yes,” Konstantin said, giving him a dirty look. But then it melted into a smirk as he continued. “Nothing could have happened with Nikola standing beside you. He could have killed them all with a mere glance.”

While most of the party looked at Nikola with astonished admiration, Talvi just seemed that much more annoyed with the druid’s existence. But Nikola only offered a modest shrug and smiled mysteriously before he nudged his elk forward.

They rode for a few hours, but decided to make camp and continue on their journey after a solid night’s rest. So far on the trip the land had been either rolling hills or open plains, but now the ground grew rocky and unpredictable, much like Talvi’s attitude. It had gotten so cold that finally the tents were pitched to keep out the wind, one for the men, and one for the women and the fairies.

“So,” Sariel said, rubbing her hands together to warm them as the others lay out their bedrolls in a little circle. “What was Vladislav so angry about? Did it have to do with the
bites on your arm?”

“Yes,” Yuri replied quietly, making sure the men couldn’t hear her through the tent walls as they stood outside swapping stories of their fiercest battles and greatest victories. It was amusing to Annika, that even among elves, druids, and vampires in a parallel world, that they acted so much like guys on Earth. “Basically he told Konstantin that…” She looked down at the ground and blinked vigorously. “He said that if his loyalty was compromised in any way because of me…he would…he would send my head back to my parents.” There was a fearful silence as the words struck the listeners’ ears.

“Are you sure he didn’t hurt you?” asked Dardis.

“Talvi was worried sick. We all were,” Hilda said.

“You have to stop whatever is going on with Konstantin right away,” Sariel hissed. “Is he really worth dying for?”

“You don’t understand what we have, what we are,” she insisted. “Neither does Vladislav. He’s afraid Konstantin will leave him, and then he’ll be alone with only the weaker vampires. Without fresh blood from modern humans, his army will continue to weaken until there’s nothing left of it.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Sariel asked contemptuously. “His era of reign has passed. Nikola was right…he’s an old dog with no teeth; a general over an army of invalids.”

“He looked to me like he had plenty of teeth left,” Annika said, shivering at the thought.

“He can’t stand the thought of losing the power he once held,” Yuri told them while she wrapped herself in warm wool blankets. “Konstantin said Vladislav used to torture the weakest, youngest ones. He would drain them and then only allow them a small amount of blood, and then leave them in the sun to burn. That was his idea of testing their loyalty. He needs Konstantin to help him rebuild his legion.”

“And you’re going to steal him away when he needs him the most?” Runa looked scared.

“You’ve got to stop this, Yuri,” Hilda warned, appearing more like Sariel in her intense gaze than ever before. “You’re too young to die.” Yuri looked at her friend skeptically.

“I’m not planning on it. Konstantin and I have other arrangements.”

“Such as…?” Sariel pressed, but Yuri made a gesture with her hand implying that she was through speaking.

“You know what I’m wondering?” Annika asked, happy to change the subject for Yuri’s sake. “I wonder how Justinian can hang around the Dark Horse, surrounded by a bunch of vampires and not worry about being attacked. Sure he’s a knight, but he’s still a regular human guy like Nikola.”

“Yes, give or take a hundred pounds of pure muscle, which Nikola does not have,” Dardis laughed.

“Nikola has muscles!” Chivanni defended. “He’s just not built like his brother. Justinian is like a great big ox standing next to all those slender deer out there.” All the girls laughed, imagining the comparison. Annika had to admit, Justinian looked like a professional wrestler or bodybuilder underneath all of his armor. Compared to the toned, lithe elves and Nikola, he looked like a brick wall.

“He’s not just a knight. He’s a paladin. It’s different,” Sariel said.
“What’s a paladin?” Annika asked. She had never heard of this word before.
“They’re sacred knights, and very skilled in magic. They have the ability to heal with their touch,” Sariel informed her.
“Like elves?” Annika asked.
“Even more so,” Yuri said.
“They can the harness energy from their surroundings to protect them, and anyone very close to them. They’re bound by loyalty and honor, they’ll fight to their death for what they believe in,” said Sariel.
“I wonder what he believes in?” Dardis said.
“I don’t know. I was meaning to ask,” Sariel said, looking down at her feet. There was definitely a pixie dust-free smile on her face, for the first time in a very long time.
Annika got dressed quickly the next morning and went to help Chivanni with breakfast while Dardis slept in. The sun was shining and the fire was already burning. Zaven sat on a blanket nearby with Nikola, who was sewing a leather chin strap into the side of his helmet to help keep it in place. Justinian was showing Sariel a few sword fighting techniques she didn’t know, and Talvi was shooting targets with Runa and Hilda. So far, he was in the lead.

“I didn’t notice how bright your hair is, Annika,” Justinian said as she whipped eggs, sugar and flour in a bowl. “I didn’t get a very close look at it last night. I don’t know what they say about redheads on Earth, but here on Eritähti they say redheads are more magical than others, besides being hot-tempered and feisty to boot.” He blocked a strike from Sariel’s sword and laughed. “Though it seems redheads are not the only ones who are so feisty.”

“I would like to know just who they are, since they’re always saying that,” Annika said, tossing her long red mane before she went back to making pancakes.

“She is definitely feisty, I’ll tell you that much,” Talvi agreed, shooting an arrow straight into the center of the target.

“For not being a natural redhead, you do have many characteristics of one,” Nikola observed as he lay back and examined his helmet, admiring his handiwork. Talvi slowly lowered his bow and glared at Nikola as if he were ready to shoot him next. “I mean, such intense red you see on fairies like Chivanni, but on people, it’s not natural,” Nikola said quickly, but it was too late to take back his words. Annika didn’t have visible roots just yet, and there weren’t too many other ways to know her true color.

“I dye it every other month or so,” Annika said quickly, hoping no one else noticed Talvi’s reaction to what Nikola had just said. “I think it suits me.”

“It does,” Talvi and Nikola both said at the same time. Their eyes met and the look Talvi shot him might very well have killed him if it weren’t for Nikola’s innocent smile. Sariel, Runa and Hilda exchanged glances as Talvi threw his bow to the ground. He was obviously livid, or he never would have treated his beloved weapon with such disrespect.

“Is there anything else you’d like to share with the group?” he asked, stepping over to where Nikola was lying. He didn’t bother getting up, and he didn’t seem too threatened either. “Well? Anything at all?”

“No, I’m fairly certain that was all I had to say,” he said in a calm, unconcerned voice, but he looked Talvi straight in the eye when he said it. Talvi on the other hand was seething, his fists curled at his side. He drew one of them backwards, and Annika winced, hoping that he would be more considerate of Nikola’s face than he had been of his kitchen door at home, but thankfully Justinian had rushed over to them, stepping between the young men just in time to save Nikola’s bone structure.

“I don’t know what’s going on between you two, but enough with it! We have a task to complete together, and we’re only as strong as our weakest link.” He waited until Talvi took a deep breath and realized it was probably pointless to take on a skilled druid and his brawny paladin brother. Justinian stepped back and ordered them to shake hands. Nikola held his out for Talvi to take, but the elf spitefully turned on his heel and walked past the
others, stooping to retrieve his bow before he disappeared into the trees.

“I think we redheads are seriously overrated,” Chivanni said to Annika, looking towards the direction Talvi had gone. “If anybody around here is hot-tempered, it’s that one!”

“What’s his problem lately?” Zaven asked.

“I think he’s got a pine needle in his pants,” was Annika’s dry reply, and with that she returned her focus to making breakfast.

Talvi didn’t come back until everyone had eaten and was ready to leave. He kept them waiting almost an hour, and when he returned, he wouldn’t look in Nikola’s direction unless it was down his nose. He was still sulking when they headed out, and the others rode ahead while he intentionally lagged behind. Annika slowed down Galileo to walk beside him.

“You know Talvi,” she began with a heavy sigh, “When Vaj attacked me, I was still in the spring.”

“I’m not an imbecile,” he scowled.

“So…it’s not very common to take a bath with your clothes on, right?” she persisted, trying to be logical with him. He looked at her sideways, and she could have sworn she heard him say, “You must think me incredibly daft to believe any of what you’re about to say.”

“I guess what I’m trying to say is that if you’re being drowned while you’re trying to take a bath, the person rescuing you might just happen to see you naked. That’s all that happened out there. I figured you’d put two and two together,” she said quickly.

“I figured it out long before you thought I did; I just thought he had more class than to mention it in front of everyone,” he said sharply.

“He didn’t mean to…it was an accident,” she argued. “And no one would’ve given it a second thought if you hadn’t made a big deal about it and acted like the jealous boyfriend.” Talvi bit hard into his lip and looked at her with suspicious eyes.

“How else shall I act?” he asked. He stopped Ghassan and she coaxed Galileo to stand next to him, still unsure of how skilled he was at reading her exact thoughts, at seeing what she had seen with her own eyes, and felt in the darkest pit of her desire.

“How else shall I act, Annika?” he repeated. “Would you prefer that I pay no mind to the fact that you and Nikola are both humans of the same age? Would you prefer that I not notice your matching amulets that I really don’t understand, and now you seem to be able to read his mind when even I can’t? Add to this the fact that he killed the vampire that I was only so fortunate to pull you away from, and he saved your life, and he has seen you undressed, and you want me to pay no mind?”

“He was just in the right place at the right time. I don’t know why you have to act so jealous,” Annika said, trying to make him see her point of view. “If Runa had been attacked, you would have done the same thing.” No sooner had she spoken her words, Talvi looked like he’d just been slapped in the face.

“If Runa had been attacked, I can assure you, there would have been quite a few things I would have done differently.”
Chapter 27

an old friend

The scent of salty air hit Annika’s nose long before the pine trees parted, and when they did, they revealed a sizeable fishing village that catered to merchants as well. The frothy edge of the shore was lined with boulders and docks and a long boardwalk that led to different businesses, and most importantly, a pub. Not only was it a place to relax with a much needed tall glass of local beer, but it was the place to make inquiries and connections about crossing the Sea of Forneus. Annika and the samodi were even finished with their first pints when Justinian walked up to them, laughing and joking with a wraith-like creature dressed in Viking armor.

“This is Captain Kovachev. He’s generously agreed to take us on board his ship,” the broad-chested paladin beamed. The captain’s sinewy smile faded as he looked at Sariel with a curious expression.

“Sariel? Is that you?”

“You two have met?” Justinian asked. Captain Kovachev looked astounded as Sariel stood up and stepped forward.

“Silef, it can’t be. Is it possible?”

“I thought you were dead!” they both said to each other at the same time.

“What are you doing here?” they both said at once. They laughed and he reached out to touch her face with his bony hand.

“Sariel…it’s been over one hundred lifetimes since I’ve seen you last.”

“I know,” she breathed. “You’re still trading then?”

“Yes, for an eternity. I wouldn’t give up the life for anything. My men and I belong on the water; you know that. Seeing you brings back ancient memories, but we’ll have plenty of time to catch up,” he said with a spooky grin. “We set sail in an hour.”

Astounded by their good fortune, Annika and the wood nymphs watched as the men guided the horses and deer into the steerage. Konstantin waited until all the animals were secured below deck before boarding with the wolves in Captain Kovachev’s private quarters. The other sailors were curious about having a vampire for their passenger, but had nothing to fear since there was no harming those that were already dead. Just as promised, they set sail right away, designating separate sleeping quarters for the men and women. While everyone was getting situated and settling in, Annika walked out to one end of the ship, where Sariel stood gazing at the sea. Her fierce expression was long gone, replaced with a forlorn sadness. She glanced over at Annika, but didn’t move.

“How do you know Captain Kovachev?” Annika asked.

“Silef…” Sariel whispered. “Silef and I…we fought side by side when the children were babies.” Annika figured she meant Runa, Magda, and Hilda.

“Do you want to hear what the world has done to me?” she asked. Her warrior queen demeanor had vanished, and they were now simply two women speaking to one another.

“Sariel, I’m really sorry about what I said that night.”

“No, I’m the one who’s sorry. I’ve held onto this anger far too long. It’s tarnished my soul. Seeing Silef has made me realize that by remaining angry, I’ve only given them my power, not taken it back.”
“Given who?” Annika asked. Sariel sighed heavily and looked at her with sadness in her eyes.

“It’s a grim tale. If you’re willing, I will tell you. It’s part of your history.”

“Maybe it will help you deal with things, if you talk about it?” Annika suggested.

“I haven’t spoken of it in centuries, but perhaps it’s time.” Sariel’s gaze scanned the water, and then she looked at she began to speak. “When I was first taken as a new bride from my home on the river, the Viking who stole my clothes and brought me to his home was kind enough to teach me how to use a sword. I fought alongside my husband and Silef, defending our ship, and our livelihood. Back then women fought as shield maidens, and I had become as great of a fighter as any man. What I lacked in size, I made up for with agility.”

“However, I soon had my hands full with three young daughters, and the sea was no place to raise them. It was a hard life, with their father traveling for months at a time, but I was always so happy when he returned. I was so in love with my husband and with our children, and we were expecting another. He and Silef had just returned from delivering their cargo, when their ship was ambushed by pirates. I had left the girls at home with a neighbor and went with Silef’s wife to meet him and my husband, but the pirates killed them before we even had a chance to greet one another. They kidnapped me and Silef’s wife and took us back to their ship.” Sariel’s voice choked and she stopped speaking.

“If you don’t want to tell me, you don’t have to,” Annika said, but Sariel shook her head.

“No, I want you to understand what made me the way I am. No one walks through life unscathed, and it’s how we react to being tested that becomes our legacy. So there we were on the ship, and all I care to say is that she and I were violated and tortured in the worst of ways. She was blessed to lose her life quickly, but not me. At first I tried to fight them, but that was what they wanted. Then I begged mercy for my unborn child, but they didn’t care.” Annika was overcome with horror and revulsion.

“They ripped my body to shreds,” Sariel continued bitterly. “When I wouldn’t stop bleeding, they threw me overboard for the sharks. I don’t know how I reached the shore, but as soon as my feet touched the sand, I lost the baby I had carried for five months. The trauma was too much, and there was nothing I could do for my little boy…my only son. He was so small that he fit in one of my hands…he weighed nothing.” Sariel looked down into her palm and tried to fight back her tears, but they rolled down her cheeks until Annika was watery-eyed as well.

“I buried him in the hard soil of early spring. Sometimes, at that same time of year, I can still smell the ground where my cheek rested.” Sariel took a long deep breath and was quiet for a long time. Annika couldn’t believe the story she was hearing. She couldn’t think of anything more dismal, more horrendous, more hideous to happen to another living creature. And yet, with every detail that Sariel shared, she knew it was true. “I cried until I was dry,” she continued. “And then I cried more. I didn’t move from my son’s resting place for a moment. I lay watch over his grave, waiting to die.”

“But you didn’t die,” Annika said in a cracked whisper. Her voice seemed a vulgar thing to pervert the memory that Sariel was reliving.

“No. Instead I was rescued. Her name was Nadira. She appeared before me, white and pure and beautiful, and she told me I must live for my daughters. She gashed a vein in her foreleg with her horn and demanded that I drink.”
“A unicorn?” Annika uttered softly, drawing in her breath.

“Yes. A creature so rare and pure, so sought after for her own precious blood—and here she was, urging me to take from her very life force. She lay by my side through the night to keep me warm, and told me to give a piece of my skirt to the raven you know as Cazadora. She brought the fabric back to Silef, to let him and my daughters know I was alive. He was my husband’s closest friend, and he alone knew my former life as a samodiva. This is perhaps why Nadira wanted me to have a second chance at life. My body healed quickly with her magic blood and she bade me to sit on her back, to ride her as if she were nothing but a common horse, and when she delivered me to the outskirts of my village, she disappeared as quickly as she had come to me, before I could offer any thanks to her. I gathered Silef and his crew and urged them to take me aboard their ship and hunt those pirates down, for I had sworn my revenge, and I was determined to see it through.” The sorrow in Sariel’s eyes had been replaced by an intense ferocity as she continued her story.

“Our ship found theirs quickly, since we were carrying little cargo—only a bit of lamp oil, and as soon as we boarded we hobbled their feet so they couldn’t escape, yet they couldn’t bleed to death too quickly either. They repented for their sins against me, but for the crime committed against my son I never heard a single word. It was really quite compassionate of me to give them their deaths, since I was to live through my nightmare for the rest of my immortal life. I cut off the vile organs that had violated me with such hate only days ago, every last one of them, until those beasts were nothing but a pile of useless flesh. We doused their ship with the lamp oil before returning to ours, and with one beautiful, blessed arrow, I set it ablaze. Silef’s crew and I watched as the ship burned every one of those bastards to ashes. I waited until their ship had sunk, and only then did I return to my daughters. I brought them back to my homeland just outside Srebra Gora and raised them where I knew they would be safe. We’ve never returned to the sea, until now.”

The story was finished. This dreary window into Sariel’s past explained so much. It explained why she disliked men, why she was so passionate about tracking her children, why she seemed perpetually melancholic and angry, why she was so unyielding in her beliefs and opinions, and why she relished in violence. Every time her sword or arrow killed someone, it also killed a little bit more of the pain she’d borne for the past thousand years.
Chapter 28
love and fear

Below deck in the cramped little kitchen, some of the sailors had opened a keg of ale in honor of Sariel and Silef’s reunion and were guzzling it down. The only problem was that their half-decayed wraith bodies couldn’t hold the liquid very well. Instead, it was leaking onto the floor through holes in their stomachs and ribs, and was gathering in golden puddles at their feet. They found this extremely amusing, as did Justinian, and their shrieking laughter was contagious. Annika walked through what she hoped was beer and was promptly handed a glass from a man with half a face yet all of his smile. Dardis was drinking and doing parlor tricks for the sailors, Nikola had a glass in one hand and was thumb-wrestling a wraith with the other, and Runa and Zaven were stealing kisses behind Chivanni’s back instead of following his cooking instructions, although the heat was definitely turned on. Finn and Hilda were discussing how sirens and samodivi were once related, but that the wood nymphs migrated away from the sea and lost their scales and fins, along with the deadly potency of their song. And then there was Talvi.

Annika knew that plants needed sun and rain to live, and lots of it to thrive. Apparently for Talvi, wine was what watered and warmed his well-being, because he’d snapped up a case from the pub and was joking and laughing with the sailors like he was among old friends back at the Tortoise and the Hare. When his met hers from across the room, there wasn’t a trace left of the sullen creature she’d been traveling with; now there was nothing left but smoldering seduction as he subtly nodded his head towards the door. Amidst the commotion in the kitchen it was easy for him to slip away and lead her below to the storage deck underneath the living quarters. They walked blindly in the darkness, until he lit a small candle he’d been hiding in his pocket. The light was weak, but they could see great big chests filled with goods that the sailors traded among the ports they visited. Rows of ceramic jugs lined one area, and hanging from above were countless woven rugs. Talvi pulled down one of the softer carpets, laying it down on the floor and sat upon it. He dripped a small bit of wax inside the handle of one of the jugs and planted the candle into it. They were completely hidden from view, and she lay on her side and propped her head up with her hand, beckoning him to lie next to her. He ran his hand up and down her thigh and let his eyes wash over her as they had so many times in the past, full of desire.

“It’s been such a long time since we had any privacy,” she moaned. “I can’t believe you’re not going crazy by now.”

“What makes you think I’m not?” he asked, stroking her hair, and then her arm. But instead of giving her one of his more lecherous expressions, there was a lost look in his eyes; the same look that he’d worn when he confessed that he’d been the one who was conquered, not her. She reached for his pants but he pushed her eager hands away.

“Don’t you dare tell me you’re not in the mood!” she hissed at him. “You’ve turned me down enough already.”

“Annik…just slow down. You’re acting like a bloody animal, and for once I don’t want to fuck you like one,” he said as his intense gaze met her own.

_I want to make love to you. Let me love you_, she heard him say in her mind.

_I don’t care what you call it, I need you_, she answered him.
Do you really?

“Yes,” she said into his mouth as she kissed him fiercely. He held her in his inhuman grip so tightly she could barely breathe; their tongues tasted and explored each other like long lost lovers, and this time the hallucinations she experienced were ten times stronger than before. His hands managed to entangle themselves in her red hair, run up and down her back, squeeze her breasts, and curl around her waist all at once. His nails dug into her skin, but the repressed desire that had been unleashed only served to excite Annika further. In the dark, she was vaguely aware of him pulling off her clothes before bringing her to life when his hot mouth kissed a trail from her breastbone to her navel, moving to each hip and biting the flesh as if he hungered for her and her alone. His lips wandered freely along the insides of her thighs, and she could feel his nose nuzzle the sensitive crease where her legs joined her body. He flicked at her folds with his warm tongue; taunting, teasing, and toying with her in between his gentle biting kisses. His sideburns tickled her legs; his delicate ears were blazing, and that mouth grew hungrier and more insatiable with every moment that passed. She ran her fingers under his jaw, relishing the feeling of him drinking her in, and she spread her legs even wider. He hummed in approval and slipped a finger inside, then another, building her anticipation while he sat up and unfastened his belt with his free hand. He brought her ankles up to his shoulders and she felt the acute sensation of him plunging deep into her. The steady grind of his hips pushed her backbone into the rug, causing the friction to burn her skin, but she didn’t care. The pleasure he lavished upon her was more than worth it. He gave a few more thrusts and then withdrew his member, replacing it with his flickering tongue. Every nerve ending was reveling in his swirling kisses, offering themselves to him like flower petals begging to be pollinated. She moaned with frustration when he lifted his head and laid her back down on the rug, then sighed in relief when he crawled over her and kissed her with his wet, salty lips. She wrapped her legs around him and guided his body into hers. Annika’s head was swimming as he dove in again and again to the rhythm of the boat while it rocked and swayed on the waves around them. His nose was inches away from hers and his eyes were staring into her soul with longing and need for something beyond physical desire. She wondered if they were reflecting that same longing and need that she felt in her own heart, the need to be loved for who she was, not what someone else wanted her to be. And in that private moment, he grinned and nodded, and she realized that he’d heard her thoughts and felt exactly the same way.

Annika’s gasps were coming closer and closer together until they became as uncontrollable as the waves of the ocean, and her hands flew up to her mouth as she tried to subdue her surrender. He pulled her hands away to hear her sing, and joined her with harmonious notes of his own. That divine instant was pure rapture. It was the hypnotic chord of every song she’d ever held dear in her heart. It was more exhilarating than any drug, any ride, any feeling or sensation she’d ever experienced.

He wrapped his arms around her and rolled onto his back, holding her close as she rested on top of him. For a long time all he did was caress her skin and occasionally kiss the top of her head, and without her having to ask, he found the rug burn on her back and settled his warm, healing hand upon it.

“I wish I could keep you,” she sighed as she caught her breath.

“Is that what you’d like, my little dove?” he murmured.

“Yeah. You could heal my blisters every time I break in a new pair of shoes,” she
joked. “Plus, you’d make a great sex slave.”

“That’s the only thing that holds your interest?” He sounded utterly disenchanted.

“No, it’s not the only thing,” Annika quickly tried to assure him. “But it’s not like you can actually come home with me. You don’t even have a social security number.”

“What kind of number is that?” he asked innocently, but she only laughed at him.

“It doesn’t matter. You don’t have one, and I sure can’t smuggle you into the country in my fairy box. You need documents, like a visa or a passport. Besides, it’s ridiculous to even think about.” She shook her head at the thought, but then something she hadn’t counted on happened. The more she thought about it, the less it sounded ridiculous and the more it sounded feasible.

“Why is it so far-fetched?” he asked, picking up on her ideas. “I’ve traveled to the modern world plenty of times, so why not America? You can teach me how to operate your car, and we can drive down one coast of the continent and come back up the other side! Wouldn’t that be an amazing adventure?” Before the romance of the idea could register, she found a way to crush it.

“Come on Talvi, get real,” she said as she pulled her shirt back on. “That’s not going to happen. I’m going back to my life, and you’re going back to yours. I just hope we can open the portals back up soon. I miss my family so much, and I know they’ve got to be worried sick about me. I’ve been gone over a month and a half now…actually it’s been almost two months.”

“What if…what if we never do mend the portals?” Talvi asked slowly. “What if you were trapped here forever?”

“I don’t know. What if I was? What the hell would I do? Get a job waiting tables at the Tortoise and the Hare? Help your brother translate documents? Live with Runa and Hilda in their cave?” She snickered, but he didn’t think it was funny. “What’s wrong?”

“I thought at the very least that you’d want to come home with me,” he said quietly. She felt slightly sick to her stomach and a lump formed in her throat, somehow managing to make her eyes slightly tear up, but she swallowed the sadness away.

“Even if I did, what am I supposed to do? Hang out making banitza for your dad until I drop dead in front of you fifty years from now?” His wore a wounded frown, but he didn’t answer her. “If there was a way for it to work out, I might let myself…I might not…things could be different. Maybe you should pay attention to those stories.”

“What stories?” he asked.

“You know, like the one about the elf lady who married the human guy, and all their kids were born human and died except the one boy? And then she couldn’t deal with it so she threw herself out of the tower; remember that story?”

“Believe me, I know that story by heart,” he said wearily. “I am so sick of hearing it.”

“So don’t you ever think about how it relates to us? Because I sure do.”

“Blast it all, Annika! I think about it every day!” he cried in exasperation. “It’s rather difficult to not look out my bloody window at that bloody tower and be reminded of that bloody story!” Annika shivered in response to the tone in his voice.

“You mean the tower back at your house?”

“Yes! It was my grandmother who threw herself out of it—that’s the reason why no one goes in there,” he huffed, his voice wavering just enough for Annika to realize how strong his emotions ran. “She couldn’t cope with outliving her husband and all but one of
her children, which happened to be my father. By the time he found her on the river rocks
at the bottom of the cliff, it was too late. No one survives a fall like that.”

“I’m sorry Talvi. I didn’t know,” she whispered, aghast.

“Well now you do,” he said as he looked to the side. “I never knew her. But that’s
why Father won’t allow us in there. He only visits it every few years or so. Sometimes I
sneak up there just for the view, but it’s unsettling. I swear, the only thing that lives up
there are bats and melancholy.”

“Why doesn’t he just tear it down then, if it makes him so sad?”

Talvi’s eyes riveted to hers.

“Would you tear it down?”

“Hell yeah, if it was that depressing to look at.”

“You would destroy the last memory of someone you loved that much? And I
thought I knew you.” He was looking at her with a strange perplexity. Annika didn’t
know how to respond, and she lay next to him in uncomfortable silence for a while.

She imagined him having the same fate if she were to stay, and she imagined being
more than a little blue without him around anymore. As many faults as she could find in
him, there were so many qualities that won her over. How many times in her life had she
ignored her instincts and instead followed her unseasoned logic down a more difficult or
painful path? How many times in her life had she trusted her impulsive heart and
everything worked out as if by magic?

“Do you love me or not?” he asked her, point-blank. “Would you really tear down
that tower?”

“I…I…” Annika faltered. She’d built a wall around her heart ages ago, back when
she was still with Danny and still of the mindset that a lifetime of sitting on the couch
with him was as good as it was ever going to get. Now she felt as if Talvi had popped out
of nowhere and taken a bulldozer to the very foundation of that wall. For a moment she
entertained the notion that maybe he could love her the way she’d always wanted to be
loved, the way she’d always dreamed of being loved, if only for a brief part of her life.

“You try to act like you’re only interested in being physical with me, and yet you
know I can hear what you’re really thinking,” he accused. “You don’t want to admit it to
anyone, including yourself, but you went so far as to write it down in the same journal
you write your music in. Obviously your music and your beliefs are important to you, so
why do you continue to push me away?”

“Because I don’t want you to go through what your grandma did! I don’t want you to
hurt like that!” she stammered, trying not to cry.

“Stop worrying about me, about what hasn’t even happened. That’s no way to live a
life. Spending all of your time wondering ‘what if’ will rot you from the inside out. It
hurts me more that I have you in front of me and yet you hold me at arm’s length! What
for? Just let me love you. I don’t think it’s asking too much,” he implored, and stroked
her hair. She felt cold and guilty, hearing his words of devotion and wanting to walk
away from them. How could he be so sure about her? How could he throw such caution
to the wind? She wanted to be that fearless, that brave. She wanted so desperately give in,
but she couldn’t allow it.

“Maybe it is asking too much, Talvi,” she said. “I didn’t sign up for this. Weren’t
you the one who suggested I find something pleasurable about being here? I’m not
looking for anything serious; it’s just a fling. If you were human it would be totally
different. I’d probably even marry you, and we both know how I feel about trapping myself a husband!” She got up quickly and stumbled though the cargo, running up the stairs to her room.
The room was still. The darkened lanterns hanging from the ceiling swayed ever so slightly from the gentle waves outside the windows, but not a soul was stirring. The women were all fast asleep, and even Chivanni’s little snore coming from the top of the bookshelf had quieted. Annika didn’t understand why she was wide awake, but she felt anxious about something. She felt something tugging at her, calling her to the water. It was almost impossible for her to see anything in the dark, but she felt driven by a force beyond her control. She crawled out of her warm bed wearing nothing but the long nightshirt she slept in, and passed through the door silently. Her bare feet padded on the wooden steps up to the main deck, to the cool night air. Her ears were alert, hearing the sea’s soft crashes against the boat. She looked up to see a starry sky above her head. The world looked like a giant bowl had been overturned and she was caught inside of it, right in the very center, on this little wooden thing floating in a never-ending expanse of black water.

Her eyes scanned the deck’s surface, looking for what had summoned her from her slumber. A figure sat at the platform on the far end, gazing at the water. It was Nikola, covered in a blanket, watching the water. She walked silently over to him.

“Why are you awake?” she asked.

“The same reason you are,” he yawned, looking up at her.

“I have no idea what the heck woke me up. Was it you?” she asked, but he just smiled softly.

“No.” He rubbed his pale blue eyes and turned back to the water. “I think deep inside you already know. You should be the one telling me.” Annika felt stumped by his request, but offered the first thought that came to her mind.

“I think it was the water. I think it was calling me.”

“You’re right. That’s what it was. It beckoned to me also.”

“That’s it? Just the water?” she repeated. She was expecting something more complex and interesting than this simple explanation.

“Just the water?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. “Just the water? You’re obviously not thinking clearly, or you would have put on something warmer than that.” She looked down at her worn flannel nightshirt which only hung down to her knees, and at her bare feet. He smiled a little and opened the blanket, nodding to a space on the platform he was seated on. She sat down close beside him and he covered her gently, facing out to the endless deep.

“Would you like to see what ‘just the water’ can do?” he asked her.

“Sure. As long as you don’t turn it into lava and set the boat on fire,” she joked.

“Heh, I don’t think I could do that even if I wanted to. This water is unusually deep. I’d say we’re about fifteen hundred meters above the floor of the sea.”

“Thanks a lot. Now I’ll never get back to sleep.”

“But you’re safe, you know that.”

“I guess so. I’m a decent swimmer,” she shrugged. “But if it was stormy I’d definitely drown.”

“I wouldn’t let that happen. It would go against everything that I stand for.” His blue
eyes were so gentle, so straightforward. He lifted his arm out of the blanket and made a soft arch with his hand, and on one side of the boat a dolphin made of water jumped out of the waves and over their heads, following his hand as he guided it back into the water on the other side with a light splash. Annika gasped and sighed in delight as he did this again and again, increasing the number of fluid dolphins with each passing of his hand. Then a miniature ship much smaller than theirs appeared out of the water. Another ship rose behind it, and then another, until the dolphins were leaping over a trail of little ships as well. The murky saltwater figures glittered under the starlight in shades of the darkest green and black. The dolphins crashed into the sea, and then the ships too collapsed onto the surface of the water, splashing the viewers with a salty spray.

“It’s not just water…it’s magic!” she breathed in wonder. When she turned to him, she expected him to be bursting with pride, but he only seemed happy to have shared the experience with her.

“It’s how you use it,” he told her, withdrawing his arm back into the blanket they were sharing. “There are those who use magic to their advantage in a negative way, and then there are those like me. I could do tricks like this all day, but I would rather do something more useful with it.”

“Like ridding the world of psychotic vampires?” she asked. He laughed softly.

“Yes, like ridding the world of psychotic vampires.”

“I don’t know if I ever told you thank you for Vaj. So, thanks for saving my life, Nikola.”

“I would do it again in a heartbeat,” he said, pulling the blanket tighter around them, but his hands stayed put.

_I would probably do anything you wanted me to._ He smiled as she became aware she could hear his thoughts in her head.

_Did you just say that to me, Nikola?_

_Yes._

_Can you hear what I’m telling you?_

_Yes I can._

_If you really know what I’m thinking, prove it. Tell me what you were thinking when we were alone at the spring._

“That’s not very fair of you to ask,” he said aloud. “That scoundrel Talvi is a bad influence on you.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“It’s nothing,” he sighed, turning away.

“It was enough for you to call him a scoundrel,” she pointed out.

“I just don’t like him.”

“He says he can’t read your mind.”

“Because I don’t let him,” Nikola told her with a faint smile. “He tries very hard, and he’s very skilled, but then, so am I. Plus the amulet protects my thoughts. It makes it difficult for anyone to read them. That was one thing my grandmother taught us at a very young age: to shield our thoughts from those who would use them to manipulate us.”

“You think he would do that?” she asked, utterly shocked at the idea.

“I know he does. He manipulates everyone around him. That’s why he doesn’t like me, because he can’t get inside my head and use it to his advantage,” Nikola said gently. There was no irritation, no jealousy in his voice, only direct honesty.
“But that’s not true…he’s not manipulating anyone,” she defended him quietly. “Do you know the reason why Finn gave him the name Prince Talvi?” Nikola asked.

Annika frowned in confusion. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Have you heard of a book called *The Prince* by Machiavelli? It’s hundreds of years old, but it’s considered modern since it’s from your world.”

“I’ve heard of it, but I never read it. Isn’t it Italian?” Nikola nodded his head.

“Yes, and the prince whom Machiavelli writes about is amoral, deceitful, and highly manipulative. He does whatever he must to serve his own self-interest. That’s how Talvi got the name. He earned it.” Annika wrinkled her face in denial, even though Yuri’s warnings began to resurface in her head.

“You’ve got to be mistaken. He hasn’t been any of those things since I’ve met him. Okay, maybe a tad bit manipulative, but if he was that horrible, I would’ve seen it by now.”

“He’s only showing you what he wants you to see.”

“What is it that he’s not showing me? Can you see it?” she asked, feeling the first inklings of betrayal. Nikola sighed. You can, can’t you? Tell me what you see that he’s not telling me, she urged him silently. Nikola looked down at his feet, then back at her.

“It’s not my place to do that.”

“But you told me that you would probably do anything I wanted you to,” she insisted. “Don’t you think I have a right to know?”

You won’t simply leave things be, will you?

No, I sure won’t, she thought, and Nikola fully understood how stubborn this redhead could be. He looked up to the stars, as if wondering what to do next, but then gazed into her eyes without any expression.

She saw a flash of countless faces running through her mind, all female, and all of them were beautiful. They were short and tall, curvy and thin, dark and light. There were pale blondes, golden blondes, dark blondes, brunettes of all shades as well, girls with black hair, girls with auburn hair; but only one with hair like a red flame. She saw all of their differently shaped mouths and breasts, their legs, their bellies, their countless naked bodies. It was like an orgy playing in her mind; there were dozens and dozens of mouths kissing, arms caressing. She could see him whispering in their ears as he made love to them all, some of them two, three, or more at a time. She could hear fragments of things, empty promises and pillow talk. You’re the only one I want…the only one. Apparently he was as skilled with words as he was at other things. Then she was looking at Zenzi through Talvi’s eyes. Annika saw herself carrying the obnoxious girl into a secluded place and pulling off her clothes, tearing them somewhat clumsily. She felt a faint sting on her arm and saw that a rosebush had torn her shirtsleeve and pierced her skin.

“That was the rosebush he told me about!” Annika gasped, recoiling from the vision she had just experienced. “The one from last spring when he had to stitch up his own shirt!”

Nikola just shrugged, and the images ceased.

“How do I know that you’re telling me the truth?” she asked angrily. “Think about it, Annika. I’ve never met him before. I’ve never been to Derbedrossivic. How should I know what all those women look like?”
“But a bunch of those girls were at the dance!” she hissed, afraid to wake anyone up. “He said he’d only kissed them! And he says he’s a terrible liar. I’ve seen him get caught at least twice.”

“Did you ever specifically ask him if he’d done anything besides kiss them?” Nikola asked. Annika was flabbergasted, trying to remember exactly what Talvi had said to her the night of the dance. “You know, omitting facts isn’t considered lying by some people.”

“I don’t remember what he said,” she said slowly. She felt the truth sinking in and her body turning very cold suddenly, even though Nikola was so warm next to her. She felt like a jackass.

“Well if that rosebush incident happened last spring, maybe he’s changed,” she said, grasping for the hope that he had since meeting her.

“Perhaps he has. Or perhaps a three-hundred year old being is fairly set in their ways.” He looked at his feet again. “But it really never does work out, the relationships between humans and elves. I know because there was one time that I honestly thought I could love an elven girl. I thought she was happy, but then she began visiting her cousins from Derbedrossivic unusually often, for weeks on end. The very last time my lips touched hers, I didn’t see her brown eyes looking back at me. Instead, I saw another man’s eyes mocking me.” He lifted his head and looked straight at Annika, and for the first time, she saw anger in his face. “They were green, with blue in the centers.”

Annika felt nauseous. Her first instinct with Talvi had been not to trust him, but she’d let him wheedle his way into her mind, into her heart, and into her body. After all that had been said just a few hours ago in the belly of the ship, he’d actually made her think that she could let herself love him. He’d even made her feel guilty for withholding her emotions. But the more she thought of it, the more upset she felt.

I’m such an idiot. Why didn’t I listen to reason? How could I have thought he was different? Nikola put his arm around her underneath the blanket and held her close.

“We’re only human,” he reminded her. “It’s remarkable what we’re willing to believe when we’re afraid to see the truth. When I found a tear in Zenzi’s knickers, she told me the most elaborate story about going out to the privy in the middle of the night at her cousins’ house and getting caught on a broken bit of fence. When it happened again, she claimed it was from a rose bush. That’s when I knew she’d been lying to me for months, because there isn’t a rose in existence with thorns so large. Only the greedy hands of an insatiable trophy hunter who has to have just one more…” he said with bitterness as Annika blinked back her tears. She looked out at the black waves crashing against the boat, making it creak and groan in the dark. Annika felt like the weary old ship being battered around by a force infinitely larger than herself.

At least now I know the truth. At least I can stop things from continuing. But in the meantime I’m trapped on this goddamned boat with him.

They sat in silence until she felt tired enough to return to bed. He walked her to her door, and gave her a sympathetic, understanding smile.

“You’ll feel better in the morning,” he promised. “I’ll see you at breakfast. At least we’re trapped on this goddamned boat together.”
Chapter 30

the prince’s principles

Annika skipped breakfast and lay in bed feeling terrible. She wanted to cry, but she was too angry. She kept seeing breasts and arms and familiar faces in Talvi’s bed, and she kept feeling the pain that Nikola had felt when he discovered his own girlfriend had been sleeping with him behind his back. She heard Talvi’s voice whispering the same meaningless promise to all of them...you’re the only one I want... She slipped out of the room and walked up to the deck, looking out at the sea. They’d only been sailing for a few days, and already she was sick of the view. She saw Hilda and Finn curled up with a book, and she walked over to them.

“Hey, Finn, can I talk to you?”

“Of course. What is it?” There was an unusually bright light dancing in his brown eyes.

“I need to ask you something. In private.”

“Shall we discuss it below deck?”

“No need for that,” Hilda replied before Annika could answer. “I was just about to make some tea.” Finn watched her go down the stairs that led to the kitchen and motioned for Annika to sit down.

“You look upset. What’s troubling you?” he gently asked.

“Tell me why you gave Talvi his nickname. Is it really from that book by Machiavelli?” Finn’s warm smile faded quickly, and she didn’t like the expression in his face at all. He was silent for a long time, before letting out a heavy sigh.

“That was a long time ago. It was supposed to be a joke.”

“But it’s not a joke, is it? Why else would it have stuck so long? Because he’s a pathological liar? Because he’ll say anything just to gain another notch in his belt?”

“He’s not a pathological liar, but he does have some bad habits. Or should I say, he used to,” Finn said delicately, as though it hurt him to admit this.

“I remember something you said back when we first met. You said it was just like him to bring girls to his bedroom without ever introducing them to you.” Finn looked awful as he recalled that conversation.

“I should never have said that, especially in front of you. I was in poor form. I’m sorry, Annika. I am deeply sorry. I hoped that you had forgotten that careless remark.”

“But it’s the truth, isn’t it?” she pressed. Finn looked at her in anguish for a long time but couldn’t deny it.

“What it is, is a defense mechanism.”

“Whatever you call it, that’s still pretty fucked up,” Annika said coolly. Finn watched helplessly as she walked away, and for once in his long life, he wished he could lie as easily as his brother.
Chapter 31
the fall of the kingdom

When Annika returned to the small kitchen, she was very quiet. She mumbled a hello to everyone as she grabbed a late breakfast of lukewarm oatmeal. She avoided looking in Talvi’s direction, where he’d been showing Dardis and Runa a sheet of parchment. He folded it up quickly and made room for her on the bench he was sitting on, but she walked past them and back to her room. She wrote angrily in her journal as she lay in bed, eating a bite here and there.

What am I doing? she scrawled. I obviously didn’t realize what I was getting myself into. When I saw him at the bookstore I was intrigued, but then I got to know him and he thought he was so smooth, a gift to all women. If only I had kept my distance, I never would’ve gotten so involved. Last night I was convinced that we had a serious connection, but maybe I was distracted by the awesome sex. I don’t know what I was thinking, but I need to just stop this before I make myself look like any more of a stupid idiot.

Annika heard footsteps come into the room. She looked up and saw Talvi standing over her. He had an awkward expression on his face as he sat down beside her.

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking,” he began. He was acting bashful, something that he never did. “I’ve been working on this for a long time, and I believe I’m done. I don’t have anything else to say without being redundant.” He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket that was folded into a small square and put it in her hand. He waited expectantly for her to open it, but all she did was tuck it into the flap of her journal and close the little book. She didn’t want to read his pathetic apology. She turned the other way, ignoring him. He didn’t like that too much. He wasn’t used to being ignored.

“I think we both know that this game is pointless, Annika. You can ignore me, but you can’t escape me. You have nowhere to go, and I’m not leaving until you tell me what’s gotten you in such a mood.”

“You want to know? Do you really want to know?” She whirled around and rose to her feet, then played the feast of flesh over in her mind, flashing a few of the other girls faces she’d remembered from the party. She heard his lies repeated in her head, promising anything just to get what he wanted from these girls. He looked astounded as his chin fell.

“Do you even bother to change the sheets on your bed in between whores?” she asked, piercing his soul with her glare.

“How did you…how long have you…?” he tried to ask, but the words stumbled over each other, not able to form a simple question.

“Was that before or after you met me?” she asked in a hollow voice.

“Of course it was before I ever met you, Annika. But you know I’ve had many lovers, just as I know you have. It’s too good for us to be amateurs.” He tried desperately to lighten the impact, but she was more livid than ever.

“I don’t know why I thought you were different. I’ve been wondering all morning how I could’ve been so stupid, to believe that a three-hundred year old womanizer would suddenly change for that one special girl. What a load of crap! Danny didn’t exactly make fireworks go off when we were together, but he wasn’t a lying, pretentious,
arrogant prick like you!”

“Now look here—I’ll admit to being pretentious on occasion and an arrogant prick more often than not, but I have never been dishonest with you.”

“Yeah you have! You told me you tore your shirt on a rosebush, but you just happened to leave out the part where it was because you were screwing Zenzi underneath it!”

“That’s not being dishonest; that’s being tactful. And I already told you that she’s nothing to me. We’ve already had this discussion, remember?” he argued.

“Yeah, I remember,” Annika mocked as she crossed her arms. “I remember that she was all over you at the pub and at your party and that you loved it! I’ll bet that’s why you stole her away from Nikola. That’s the reason why he can’t stand you. I also remember you dancing with all those girls you call friends in front of me on your birthday. You were parading them around like trophies. ‘Look at me! Here’s the hot blonde I banged last week! And here’s my favorite brunette, she’s really something in bed. But if you’re looking for a total freak, you should try Zenzi!’” she spouted.

“You’re the one I’m with right now. That’s all that should matter to you, is right now,” he said quietly. “And I can’t change the past no matter how much I’d like to right now.”

“Oh, then I should be so honored that Prince Talvi wants a redhead human girl right now,” she snapped back caustically. “You know, it’s not that you’ve been with a lot of other girls…I couldn’t care less when it comes to numbers. I really couldn’t.”

“You certainly have a strange way of showing it,” he cut in, which only made her angrier, and that only made him look like he had a point.

“It’s true!” she insisted. “The thing I have a problem with is the fact that you keep leading on girls like Zenzi because you have this sick desire…no, more of an addiction to be validated by women wanting you even when you’re hooking up with me—that’s what I have a problem with! It’s not good enough for you to be with just one person. You’ll always need more. How am I supposed to trust you when you do shit like that in front of my face? What else are you doing behind my back?”

“Oh, Annika,” he said loftily, through piercing narrow eyes. “Perhaps you should be telling me what you’re doing behind mine.”

She hadn’t been prepared for that comment at all.

“You should learn to choose your arguments with more wisdom, little girl,” he cautioned as he stood up and put his hands on his hips. He stepped close to her and looked down his nose, doing his best to make her feel small and disadvantaged. “Do you really think you’re the first person who tried to hide their thoughts by looking away from me? You were concerned enough to tell me nothing happened out there that night with Nikola and Vaj, but I know that you wanted him. I know he wants you as well. When Vaj came after you, the moons hadn’t risen yet. There wouldn’t have been enough light for him to see you unless he was looking quite close. And, given the fact that it was your neck that he should have been inspecting…” Talvi shook his head in disgust. “Then I suppose neither of us is in a position to trust one another.” Annika knew he had a right to be angry, but she wasn’t about to let him win their argument.

“It wasn’t my fault,” she hissed, suddenly afraid that their friends might overhear. “I wasn’t in my right mind that night. The amulet has powers that I still don’t understand.”

“Oh, right, it was the amulet’s fault,” he said with an ugly look. “Perhaps the amulet
is causing you to have double standards, then? Perhaps the *amulet* is what caused you to seek out Nikola just two hours after being with me? I know you were with him last night; I can smell him all over you. In fact, I can still smell a hint of Vaj coming from the wound on your neck. If I may be frank, you smell a bit like a whore, although for what it’s worth, I’m quite fond of them.” Annika turned her head away so that he couldn’t see her cry.

“Runa was right about you,” she said through her trembling voice, unconcerned if anyone heard what she was about to say. “She told me that I’d wish I’d never laid eyes on you, and here I am, wishing I never had!” She combated her tears with the anger and revulsion that she felt in her heart.

“Well now, there’s something we finally have in common, because I find myself wishing the exact same thing about you,” he spat venomously and slammed the door behind him.
Chapter 32

Nikola’s secret

The remaining days on the boat were next to impossible for Annika to get through. The two week voyage was quickly beginning to feel like a prison sentence, although she was surprised at how little she ran into Talvi on the ship, and on the rare occasion that she did, she tried to act neutral. Talvi, on the other hand, made no secret that something had definitely changed between them, and inside of him. The light in his eyes had been extinguished. There was no more playful twinkle or mischievous spark, only a callous expression every time she was near. He didn’t crack jokes at dinner unless they were to belittle or insult someone, which wouldn’t be all that unusual if it weren’t for the fact that his humor had grown a few shades darker. He kept to himself, brooding quietly, deep in thought. This didn’t go on for more than a few days before the others started asking her why, but she only directed them to him, and he only said he was concerned about dealing with the Pazachi.

The most awkward side effect of breaking things off with Talvi was her growing friendship with Nikola. When he took the trouble to speak, it was always something fascinating about the wonders of nature. He showed her a far off spray of water and within a couple minutes a giant eye was poking out of the water. Then the massive head of a whale rose from the surface, and they leaned over the edge of the boat to stroke its firm, rubbery skin. He explained to her why the wolves were still upset that they didn’t get to crunch Vaj’s bones to dust when he died. They’d disliked him the most out of everyone and were looking forward to the time when Konstantin declared his services were no longer needed. When Annika talked about her uncle Vince and the rest of her close-knit family, Nikola told her how envious he was, since his parents had died when he was very young. He told her stories of Justinian picking on him until the time he began to develop his intense magical capabilities.

He didn’t rely on witty banter or suggestive language to charm his way into her heart. He didn’t play inappropriate mind games or let his hands wander wherever they pleased. He was just there when she needed him, which was often since Finn and Hilda spent all their spare time reading books on the deck while Runa and Zaven were obsessed with checking on the horses down in the steerage…for hours at a time. Konstantin had returned to his diurnal sleeping habits while at sea to rejuvenate his strength, and thus Yuri was nocturnal as well.

Annika sat in the kitchen one afternoon teaching Nikola, Sariel, and Justinian how to play gin rummy while the fairies were bickering over what to have for dinner. Sariel and Justinian caught on quickly, since it was very similar to another card game they knew, but Nikola had never picked up a deck in his life. He was having trouble just holding them in one hand.

“I’ve never understood why you call this a spade,” he said, frowning a little. “It looks like a rotten apple.”

“There are only four suits, Nik. It’s not that hard to remember,” Justinian said, growing a little impatient. Annika had a thought.

“Think of it as an actual spade, you know, a little shovel,” she suggested, and pointed to the spade on the card. “See, here’s the handle, and it’s black because you’ve been
digging in the dirt with it.”

“Well I can remember that,” he said, and accidentally showed her the rest of his cards. She rolled her eyes and pulled them out of his hands one by one, lying them down on the table and rearranging them into two piles.

“King, Queen, and Jack of spades, and three fours. Rummy!” she announced, slapping the deck with her free hand.

“Oh, right,” he hummed, and everyone threw in their cards to reshuffle. After a few hands, it was clear that Nikola had mastered the game.

“I should teach you blackjack and then we could play for money,” Annika laughed. “Now that would be the game for people who can read each other’s minds.”

“You two can read each other’s minds?” Sariel asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Only a little,” Annika said nonchalantly.

“But you think you can read his mind clearly enough to play cards for money?” Sariel pointed out with a peculiar expression. Annika gave a shrug, but didn’t go into details.

“I want to see something,” Justinian said, and scribbled a string of words onto a piece of scratch paper before turning it over. He slid it across the table to Annika. “I want to see if you can truly read each other’s minds or not.” A smile crept across Annika’s face as she turned the paper over and looked down at his writing. It resembled chicken scratch, and his spelling was much less impressive than his sword, but she concentrated on the phrase:

*Sariel is the most lovelie creechur to carie a sord.*

“Sariel is the loveliest creature to carry a sword,” Nikola announced, correcting his brother’s grammar. Sariel blushed brighter than Annika had ever seen. It was quite nice to see some color in her usually too serious face.

“Alright you horrible card player, it’s your turn,” Justinian thundered. He grabbed the piece of paper and turned it over, writing something else. But when he showed it to his little brother, Nikola scowled at him. The last time Annika had seen him look so sour was when Talvi had broken the stalagmites in the cave.

“I’m not saying that. Write something else,” he insisted, but Justinian stubbornly shook his head.

“Come on Nikola; just tell me. It can’t be that bad,” she laughed. He looked mortified.

Annika… I… I... I can’t say it. He crumpled the slip of paper and tossed it across the kitchen towards the fire, but missed. He turned away from her as if he were extremely embarrassed, and left the kitchen.

“Did he tell you?” Justinian asked, starting to laugh. Annika was totally confused, and shook her head. Sariel grabbed the paper from the floor and looked beyond amused when she had smoothed it out.

“That wasn’t very kind of you, Justinian,” she said, but she was grinning. She handed the paper to Annika, and it all made sense.

*My brother is jelluss of yor boyfrend.*

“Well, that’s not true,” she said quietly. “Talvi’s not my boyfriend.”

“Oh, is that what his problem is?” Sariel asked, raising a curious brow at her.

“Yes, among other things,” Annika replied, and put the deck of cards away.
Land was finally in sight, if it could be called that. Menacing, jagged rocks poked
out of the water that threw itself in suicidal torrents against them. Wrecked ships lie
stranded in the shallow waters further ahead, victims of the perilous sea. Talvi was sitting
alone at the platform on the end of the deck, watching the approaching black rocks
astutely. Annika looked down into the water, which had transformed from a deep dark
abyss to an entrancing shade of greenish-blue. She stared at the water, hearing it call to
her again. It was stronger than the other night when she’d woken up to its call. It was
singing a low tune over the water, so enchanting that she wanted to dunk her head
underneath the surface and listen closer.

“Do you hear that?” she asked Talvi, but he was ignoring her. She rolled her eyes a
little and walked next to Nikola, where he was hearing it too. His eyes were closed and
his head tilted from side to side, letting the sweet notes caress his ears. He looked to be in
ecstasy.

“It’s calling us again. You can hear it louder than before, can’t you?” he trembled.
Unlike his typical state of being, this time his voice was laden with emotion.

“Where’s it coming from?” she asked.

“It’s in the water. Look,” sighed Hilda, who’d appeared by her side. Annika looked
down and was startled to see a group of faces underneath the surface of the clear aqua
water. The most beautiful women were singing under the waves, with teal and turquoise
hair billowing out around them. Their skin glittered in what had to be the smallest scales,
and fins replaced what might have been their outer ears. Their bodies moved in slow
motion, twisting and turning with beguiling movements. They held out their finned arms
towards Annika, Hilda, and Nikola, beckoning to them as they sang their eerie, yet
captivating song. It washed over Annika’s ears as though the very notes were making
love to her eardrums, falling in cascading echoes that mesmerized her to the point that
she couldn’t move. She couldn’t look away from the faces, or turn her head away from
the song.

“Cover your ears!” Captain Kovachev yelled in the background. “Get below deck!”
But the three of them didn’t budge even though the undead sailors rushed frantically
about the deck, trying to steer the ship between the rocks and shipwrecks on either side of
them. The eerie melodies were in everyone’s head.

“Nikola, get below deck!” Finn yelled as he grabbed Annika and Hilda firmly around
their waists. He managed to drag them away from the edge of the ship even though they
struggled to escape from his strong arms. Justinian and Sariel were close at his heels
along with Zaven, who was carrying Runa over his shoulder while she fought a glimpse
at the source of the enchanting music. Annika tried to look in the direction of the
seductive song, but Finn was forcing them down the stairs and into the kitchen where
Yuri and the others were waiting for them. Konstantin and Justinian stood with their
backs to the door, blocking the others from trying to escape. Zaven held Runa tightly as
she squirmed, afraid to let her go. Finn’s eyes darted around quickly, counting the heads.

“Where’s Talvi? And Nikola?” he asked nervously. He ran to the door but Justinian
and Konstantin wouldn’t let him pass.
“It is too dangerous out there. You know this, Finn.”

“Konstantin, you have to let me out! They’ve gone after the sirens! They’ll drown themselves trying to swim after them!” Finn yelled. The vampire didn’t budge. Finn grabbed a handful of his curls in each fist and screamed in frustration, before clawing at the door like a madman. It made Annika nervous to see Finn so hysterical; it was so unlike him, but the siren song was so alluring, so enticing that she only wandered over to the tiny porthole, looking for a way to open it. Even Konstantin was having a difficult time remaining composed as Finn fought against him, but luckily the door had been locked from the other side by Kovachev’s crew. The sailors were shouting and dashing around overhead as Silef shouted instructions. It sounded like someone had gone overboard. Yuri and Runa started to cry and there was a distinct feeling of dread in Annika’s stomach as she stood on her toes to look out the small window. She would have crawled out of it, if it hadn’t been impossible to open.

An eternity seemed to pass as they crept nearer to the land and out of the range of the infatuating song. Silef opened the door and everyone ran out; Finn and Yuri frantic to find their brother, and Justinian equally as desperate to locate his own. They were relieved to see the two young men safe on deck, sitting near the main mast in a large puddle. Talvi looked sullen as ever, with his wet hair clinging to his face. Nikola wore almost the same expression. Justinian knelt down in front of both of them.

“What happened, lads? Couldn’t resist those aquatic charms, could you?” he teased. Nikola buried his face in his arms in shame.

“He couldn’t,” said Talvi contemptuously, shifting in his wet clothes.

“The daft fool dove right in,” one of the wraiths called out.

“He’s lucky to have such a good friend looking out for him,” another added as he knotted a thick rope.

“No, he’s just lucky,” Talvi muttered bitterly. For saving someone’s life, he didn’t look pleased with himself at all. He stood up with his natural feline grace and took off his shirt, twisting the water out of it before disappearing down the steps to change.

“Nik, are you okay?” his brother asked. But Nikola wasn’t okay. He was mad at himself for succumbing to the sirens. And even worse, he couldn’t believe that the person whom he disliked the most had been the one to save him from drowning.

“Leave me alone, Justinian,” he grumbled with his face still hidden. “Just go away.”
Chapter 34
Mesoyadna Bloodwoods

The ship had finally docked at its port and was purged of all its contents, from beautiful carpets to the extra passengers. The animals were antsy from being cooped up for so long that the men and Yuri took them to the edge of the merchant village while Sariel said her goodbyes to Captain Kovachev. Just as she was turning to leave, he removed his pirate hat and took something from inside the lining.

“When you are ready to return to the other side of the sea, just send this my way and I’ll come for you and your friends.” He handed her an ancient scrap of fabric, and she began to cry.

“You’ve held onto this all along?” she asked, her eyes glistening. He nodded sympathetically.

“I kept it to remind me of your bravery. Every time I find myself doubting a battle between Forneus or a crew of despicable pirates, I remember how you and I fought side by side that day.”

“But you should keep it,” she reasoned, wiping her nose. “I can send you another piece of my skirt.” Silef shook his head.

“It’s a powerful charm now; I’ve put so much positive energy into it. And with all the luck that it has brought me, I think you might need it more than I do,” he told her. Sariel embraced his wraith-like form before letting him return to his ship.

“Those Pazachi better watch out,” he laughed. “I’ve seen what you’re capable of.”

Annika and the samodivi quickly joined up with the rest of their group, who were all waiting near the edge of a forest. Aside from the fact that there were no houses anywhere near the woods, nothing about it seemed menacing to her.

“Well, it’s now or never,” Zaven sighed reluctantly. He appeared to working up his courage. “The Mesoyadna Forest awaits.”

“Make sure to keep moving at all times,” Finn instructed everyone. “This may sound incredibly simple, but take care not to stand still for more than a few seconds. Just keep a slow and steady pace, and watch where you and your horses step. We mustn’t become snared.” They disappeared into the tree line and soon the sound of the waves was gone, replaced by an eerie calm. They couldn’t move faster than a walk because the trees were so thick with overgrowth. Annika didn’t see what all the fuss was about. It did feel kind of creepy, and there was a faint stink of a dead animal somewhere, but it seemed to come from all directions. Some of the trees looked deformed, with bulbous trunks and twisted branches that hung down so low they had to dismount the horses and lead them through the obstacle course. Even the roots were coming out of the ground in some places, forming loops that tempted the most nimble of feet to get caught in them. Annika quickly saw that Finn’s simple instructions were going to be much more difficult to carry out.

Nikola was whistling a cheerful tune behind them as they marched along, while Talvi and Zaven walked in front of the group. After a couple hours of walking, Annika saw something white lying among the roots. When she walked closer to it, she saw it was the skeleton of a deer.

“Uh, hey, Finn,” she asked. “What’s wrong with this forest? Doesn’t Mesoyadna mean ‘flesh-eating’?”
“Yes, it does. Did I not thoroughly explain the reason why you can’t stop walking?”
“No. Will the trees eat me or something?”
“In a manner of sorts. They’re bloodwoods. But they don’t specifically eat flesh. They tap into the veins of warm-blooded animals with their roots and acquire their sustenance that way. The tendons and bones and organs are left behind to decay and remineralize the soil for when the saplings—"
“Seriously?” Annika stopped and looked at him, but he immediately grabbed her hand and jerked her forward.
“Yes, seriously!” he warned with a severe look. “It’s imperative that you keep moving. If you stand still for even a moment too long, the roots of the bloodwood trees will come searching for you. It’s a good thing we’re all rested up from the voyage, because we can’t stop to make a camp here. If we’re lucky it will only take us a day or so to get through.”
“A whole day?” she exclaimed in shock. “What if I have to pee?” Suddenly there was a snap and then a horrible noise of an animal in pain. Everyone turned around to see Yuri’s grey mare, which had fallen on the ground. The mare had gotten her hoof caught in one of the twisted roots and jumped in fright, which broke her leg. Yuri screamed and went to free her, but it was flailing about too violently for her to safely get close.
“Yuri, come away from there!” Finn yelled at his sister. “Stay calm! Keep walking!”
Sariel bounded over to where Yuri was struggling with the animal, and with a swift motion of her arms she sliced the mare’s neck, silencing her trumpeting cries. Yuri started screaming as Sariel tried to pull her away from her horse.
“You killed her! You killed her! Why did you kill my horse? I could have mended the leg,” she bawled.
“She was already dead, and you will be too if you don’t move!” Sariel shouted right back at her. But it was too late. The roots that had ensnared the mare were already rising out of the ground and working their way into the gaping wound in the mare’s neck. More of the roots had coiled around Yuri’s leg, steadily wrapping themselves up her ankle, then her calf, until they were almost at her knee. Sariel was desperately hacking at the roots, but found herself caught in them as well. Annika looked down and lifted her foot as a root had just barely curled around it. It wasn’t so strong that she couldn’t break it, but she leapt away quickly as it came after her. She saw little roots popping up all around the forest floor, and Zaven lifted Runa onto his back as he kept walking ahead beside his horse, not turning around. Finn looked to be in agony, pacing back and forth in uncertainty.
“Keep moving,” Konstantin growled. “I will take care of them, but you must keep walking forward!” He reached into his long coat and withdrew a curved sword, then walked briskly to where the girls were struggling. Annika was horrified, for now the roots had moved into the mare so deeply that it looked like a giant rust-colored snake was sliding into the gory flesh. Yuri screamed again as the smaller roots began to burrow under her jacket and into her flesh, attracted to the unhealed vampire bites that covered her body.
Konstantin’s sword whipped through the air and came down quickly, making a disgusting squish upon contact. With each blow to the roots, a spray of blood hit them. They writhed and shrank away, but twice as many replaced them. He diligently hacked at
the roots until he had cut the girls free, but it was hopeless. As soon as he freed Yuri, Sariel had been ensnared. The moment he freed Sariel, Yuri was caught again. Annika watched in horror; she could barely see the little mare anymore. It had been encased by a cage of heavy roots absorbing her blood. She started to walk forward and fell to the ground. The roots had her by the ankle, and they were quickly wrapping around both of her legs. Talvi rushed over, cutting with his knife, and suddenly everything went ice cold.

She turned her head to the side and saw Nikola’s hands in the air. A white fog was coming out of them, swirling all around them. Her leg felt very cold as Talvi pulled on the vines, snapping them easily now that they were frozen stiff. The screaming had stopped and the roots had almost completely stopped moving too. As soon as the last vine had been severed, Talvi walked away from her. She looked up and saw why the bloodwoods had ceased their attack. The entire forest looked as though it were made of glass. The branches creaked with the weight of ice, creating a stillness around everyone. Konstantin had lifted Yuri’s shirt and was pulling out the few small roots that had found their way into her skin. Annika walked over to Nikola, where he’d fallen to his knees on the ground.

“What happened? Did you do this?”

“Yes, but it won’t last more than a few hours,” he sighed, rubbing his temple as if he had a migraine. “We best take advantage of it while we can, given that it’s still early in the day. We have far to go before we’re safe from the trees.”

They pressed on through the crystalline woods, and she found herself leading her horse closer to Talvi.

“Hey,” she said. He quickened his pace.

“Hey, Talvi,” she repeated. He looked sideways at her, still walking fast. Ever since their fight, he had worn the same expression. Sullen and almost cruel.

“I just wanted to say thank you for saving me back there.”

Even if they weren’t lovers anymore, and even though they had said horrible things to each other, she didn’t see why they had to despise each other. He clearly cared enough to save Nikola from drowning, and to save her from the bloodwood’s roots. He slowly turned his face towards her, but his reply wasn’t what she was expecting.

“You’re thanking the wrong person.”
Chapter 35

Ohan the green

Finally there came a clearing in sight, a welcome reprieve from the endless carpet of looping roots that threatened to take down anyone who wasn’t carefully watching their step. A bloodwood hadn’t been seen in a good hour or so, much to everyone’s relief. It was growing to be late afternoon and the sun was starting to be stingy with its light. Hilda and Runa swung up onto their deer and took off running, glad to finally be out of the flesh-eating forest. They raced each other out of sight, and no sooner than they had left, Zaven turned to Finn with a wary expression.

“Something’s not right. I don’t know what it is, but I can smell something in the wind…I don’t recognize it.” Finn looked around in every direction, sniffing the air along with his cousin, but he seemed baffled for the first time in his life.

“I don’t know either…I only smell sheep,” Finn replied, but Zaven shook his head.

“It’s not sheep. It’s something else; something I’ve never smelled before.” He and Finn looked around curiously and heard a terrified shriek coming from the direction that Hilda and Runa had disappeared. Everyone immediately raced ahead through the trees until a large shadow crossed their path. All of the animals’ ears swiveled to the front and left simultaneously, and Midas reared so high that Annika was half expecting him to sprout wings and fly away. The wolves were growling as Justinian and Sariel dismounted and drew their swords. Talvi sniffed the air and sneered as he whipped out his bow and held a blue tipped arrow against the sinew.

“I know what it is,” he said, wrinkling his nose. “It’s a troll.”

“What do we do?” Zaven asked nervously. “I’ve never seen one face to face; I’ve only read about them in books. He’ll eat little Runa in two bites!”

Everyone listened again for Runa and Hilda’s cries of fear, but they never came. They neared the massive shadow and were stunned to see a giant green-skinned troll, over eleven feet tall, with huge fanged teeth jutting up from his lower jaw, covered in woolen clothing, with a giant axe lying on the ground next to him. But the most puzzling aspect of the sight before them was that Hilda was sitting in his hands, showing off her green sash. Runa was sitting on his shoulders like a child, listening intently and nodding her head. It didn’t seem she had any fear of being eaten.

“I dyed this with ragweed. There’s a lot of it around here,” Hilda was telling him. “I’m certain it wouldn’t be much trouble for you to gather enough.”

“And you get this brilliant shade of green with that nasty weed?” the troll demanded in his deep growl of a voice. “I’ve only used fiddle fers, but they taste so good, I end up eating them before my wife can prepare a dye.” Runa giggled and looked up, seeing the others had come into their view.

“Zaven, look what we found,” she laughed. Hilda turned around in the troll’s large hands and flashed a smile.

“Ohan, this is everyone. Everyone, this is Ohan. He’s a troll,” Runa announced. “Thank you for making that perfectly clear,” Finn said, still unsure of what to make of her and Runa sitting so calm in the presence of a massive creature.

“His house is in the direction that we’re traveling,” Runa chirped happily. “He invited us for dinner tonight. Can we go, please? I want to meet his wife. I want to see his
little sheep. Won’t it be fun? Please, can we go?” Talvi turned towards his brother and cousin, and mouthed the word ‘no’, but Zaven ignored him and glanced at Runa.

“Come now, Talvi; who could say no to her?” he asked with an affectionate smile.

The decision was made.

They came to a clearing where a large house made of giant stones and a thatched roof stood. There was no grass immediately surrounding the house; it was all trampled down to nothing, only bare dirt showed. It looked like someone had attempted fencing off a large area for a garden, but the fence had been torn apart and built into a flimsy fort instead. Three enormous troll boys darted out from the fort, swashbuckling with wooden swords, screaming like banshees, and then ran to the back of the house. Six large broken chairs lay against the house beside a pile of flagstones that would have made a pretty pathway. A gong hung not too far from the door, with a mallet attached by a rope.

“I’ve been meaning to fix those. Just haven’t had the time,” Ohan said and pushed the heavy door open for the travelers. Annika was shocked by what she saw. After her stay at the impressive and stately Marinossian home, this place was the exact opposite. It was everything that Talvi’s home was not. The words filth and squalor had never jumped into her head as quickly as they did upon entering this home. She’d seen plenty of bachelor pads with their milk crate coffee tables overflowing with beer bottles and take out containers piled on top of pizza boxes, along with the ashtrays crammed full of cigarette butts, not to mention furniture covered in wine and whiskey stains. This place was so much worse.

There were cobwebs on every rafter above, the stone hearth and all of the walls above and around it were thick with soot, and nearly every surface was sticky with the residue left by fourteen grubby troll boy hands. Stacks of dirty dishes surrounded the sink, some with mold growing inside the cups and bowls, and piles of dirty clothing lay nearby on what must have been the dining room table, desperately awaiting their chance to be laundered and mended. There were even a few spots on the wall that held evidence of a food fight or two. Or ten…million.

“Hello my love!” Ohan called to a muscular yet matronly blue troll in a brown wool dress hunched over the sink, washing silverware while a very large green-skinned baby played at her feet. The woman turned around to reveal a pregnant belly.

“This is my wife Aghavni, and our youngest son, Sedem. Aghavni, this is everyone.” The group greeted her and introduced themselves. The woman smiled tiredly, throwing a dark purple braid of hair over her shoulder. She had larger pointed ears and an elegant pointed nose. Her pointed teeth were smaller and only the tips showed over her upper lip. Her horns were the same light blue as her skin, with black tips. For being a troll, she was quite attractive. She didn’t look that old, but she looked exhausted.

“How many extra mouths are we feeding tonight, dearest?” she asked, resting a hand on her belly.

“Oh, let’s see, three, eight, thirteen? And then the boys and you and I, that makes, oh, hmm. Twenty-two it is, my love,” he declared with a grin.

“You won’t have to worry about me,” Konstantin said, trying to be helpful.

“We won’t eat a lot either!” Dardis and Chivanni chimed.

“Alright, so that makes…” He counted on his fingers, and then counted again. “Well, I keep losing count, but it’s a lot.”

Aghavni smiled weakly and began to rummage through the cupboards and pantry,
but Chivanni buzzed over to her in his tiny form, whispering something in her ear. She squinted at him, as if she hadn’t understood what he had asked.

“What do you mean?” she asked him suspiciously. “You honestly want to cook for all of these mouths?” He said something else and she held up her hands, as if to surrender, still not convinced he knew what he was getting himself into. Suddenly he burst into his larger self, and she jumped back.

“Oh, that startled me!” she exclaimed. “I haven’t been around fairies in a long time. My boys unfortunately scare them away with all their noise and roughhousing. What a little fairy magic wouldn’t do for this place…” she said with a sigh.

“Where are the other children?” Hilda asked curiously. Ohan gave an affectionate chuckle.

“It’s best to leave them outside until dinner is on the table,” he said with a wave of his hand.

*Are they children or pets?* Annika wondered. Nikola stifled a laugh, turning it into a cough, while Talvi only rolled his eyes. He wasn’t the biggest fan of children or trolls to begin with, let alone seven combinations of the two.

Aghavni cleared the piles of laundry from the table so that it could be sat at, and those that couldn’t find room on the crude, temporary benches took seats in the huge chairs around the hearth, unoccupied by the children. Annika folded her hands on the table, and then regretted it. She pulled them away but they were already coated with a sticky, somewhat slimy residue. She tried not to look like a snob, but it seemed everyone except Ohan felt some degree of awkwardness. Aghavni didn’t know what to do with herself, so she grabbed a shirt and began to sew up a tear, glancing at Chivanni nervously every now and then as he and Dardis worked in the kitchen. Ohan threw another log onto the fire that was as large as Annika’s leg.

“So you made it across the Sea of Forneus, then? Did you see any sirens?” he asked.

“Yes, you could say so. Some of us saw them better than others though,” Justinian snickered, and Sariel elbowed him in the side. Ohan snorted a laugh.

“So who dove in after them?” he asked, looking around the group carefully. “It was you, wasn’t it?” The troll pointed at Finn, but he shook his head. Ohan frowned and kept glancing around. Nobody said a word. Nikola kept his mouth pursed a little too much, looking just a little too interested in his surroundings than the subject being addressed.

“Oh, you’re the one, eh?” Ohan said to him. “Well, it happens to the best of us. I wouldn’t be that upset about it, being that you’re alive.”

“I’m not upset,” Nikola said a little sharply.

“Did you see any other monsters?” Aghavni asked, delicately changing the subject. “Did you see Forneus himself?”

“Maybe from a distance. It was hard to tell. There was a giant tentacle, but it disappeared right away and gave us no trouble,” Justinian said. “Captain Kovachev told me that only a few days earlier, Forneus had eaten an entire pirate ship. He was probably still digesting while we sailed.”

“How lucky for all of you, that he ate the entire ship,” Aghavni chortled. “And where, pray tell, did you travel from?”

“Srebra Gora, farther south,” Finn informed her, and she set her sewing down in her lap.

“You wouldn’t know Anthea Marinossian, would you?” she asked excitedly. “I
know she was from an elven village in Srebra Gora.” The elves were just as surprised as
she was.

“Anthea is our eldest sister,” Yuri said with curiosity shining in her eyes. “How do
you know her?”

“She’s your sister? Why, you do look very much like her,” Aghavni said with a
smile. “She and I studied healing arts together...oh it was ages ago! She was such a
pleasant creature. She was so kind and compassionate, especially when the other girls in
the class were so rude to me about my size. What has she been up to?”

“She’s got the sweetest little girl and a baby boy now,” Yuri told her. “They’re really
adorable.”

“I’m sure they are,” Aghavni said, smiling at the thought. “Do they look like her or
their father? I met Asbjorn once. He has the bluest eyes I’ve ever seen.”

“Stella looks more like Anthea,” Hilda answered. “But Sloan has his father’s yellow
curls...and his eyes.”

“Asbjorn’s actually part of the reason we’re traveling this direction,” Finn explained.
“He’s trapped somewhere on the other side of the broken portals and we believe it’s the
Pazachi who are responsible. If we can locate them and determine the extent of their
involvement—”

“The Pazachi?” Ohan growled, cutting him off. “I know about them. They’re the
ones that killed half of my sheep earlier this year!”

“Ohan, you don’t know that for certain,” his wife said delicately, but Ohan had
renewed a latent anger buried deep within himself.

“Oh, it was them alright,” he asserted. “If it had been wolves, there wouldn’t have
been much left to discover. When I saw my sheep in the field, they had no visible injuries
whatsoever. They were just lying on the ground, dead as a doornail, but they were
completely intact. That is dark magic if I ever saw it, and such a despicable waste! They
didn’t even take the wool or the meat! I heard a rumor that they thought I was using too
much of the land for my sheep, and they wanted to make a point. Hurrumph! I am a
steward of this land! I plant three trees for every one I fell, I compost the manure, and the
stream is definitely far enough away from the barn to not be a concern.” Ohan’s eyes
twinkled brightly as an idea crossed his path. “What I wouldn’t give to find those Pazachi
and make things square between us!”

“Yes dear, you are very good about planting trees,” Aghavni said. “But you know,
you could do a little better with that garden of ours. Perhaps next harvest, our cellar will
be bursting full instead of looking like it presently does.”

“Oh, you over exaggerate things so,” he chuckled dismissively. “You’re provided
for, aren’t you?”

“Just scraping by and living abundantly are two very different lifestyles, Ohan,” she
said in a voice that exuded practicality. “What if the price of your precious wool goes
down? What will we do then?” Ohan started to get irritated by his wife when an idea
struck him. His toothy jawline curled into a grin.

“Then let’s make a deal, my darling,” he said. “You write up a plan for running our
farm the way you see fit, and if I agree, you will concede to let me take my revenge on
the Pazachi. My axe has grown dull from felling trees...perhaps I should sharpen it for
felling Pazachi heads!”

“What?” his wife replied, as though he had proposed the idea to grow another head.
“Do you honestly think I would agree to your leaving me here with the children while you run off and play in the woods without me? You must be mad! There’s no telling when you will be home! Why, if you’re not here when this child comes…”

“Aghavni, think about it,” he tried to explain diplomatically, but everyone could tell how much he wanted to go with them. “You just asked me what we would do if the price of wool ever went down. The truth is…I don’t know. So you tell me what your expectations are and if I agree, then you must let me go to battle. I will even sign it in my own blood.” He sat back and chuckled to himself, thinking that there was no way Aghavni would know how to run a farm when she wasn’t running a household so well to start off with. But now it was Aghavni’s turn to chuckle.

“I have all these witnesses to what you just said, Ohan. I honestly hope you meant what you just said, because I know how much you’d like to sharpen that axe of yours,” she said merrily. “I only hope we have enough paper for me to list all of my terms.” She gave a wicked laugh and Ohan swallowed hard, like he had severely underestimated her.

“For what it’s worth, this is supposed to be an investigatory expedition, not an all-out battle,” Finn tried to explain.

“But if it comes to that, we’re prepared,” Justinian added, much to his chagrin.

“Well, before you go signing anything in blood, you might want to—” There was a loud crash, and everyone turned towards the kitchen.

“Don’t worry; I have everything in my control!” Chivanni called out, and began humming to himself.

“At least you’re more graceful in the kitchen than you are in the ballroom,” Dardis teased him.

“Whose ballroom?” Aghavni asked.

“Oh, it was for mine and Talvi’s birthday party,” Yuri said. “We had so many attendants. How many do you think it was, anyway Talvi?” She asked her brother.

“Five hundred, I think it was,” he said from his spot in the corner. It was the most he’d said in hours.

“Five hundred and six, actually,” Finn corrected his brother.

“Goodness sake; and I worry about my seven boys! Tell me about your party, so I can at least pretend what it’s like to get out once in a while. I can’t even escape in a book because I’m always disrupted. Tell me, what did you wear? How was your home decorated? Was there music? Was there cake and wine? Describe everything to me, and don’t leave anything out,” Aghavni pleaded with a dreamy look in her eyes. And just as Annika feared, Yuri was more than happy to describe everything, from the perfectly moist chocolate raspberry cake to the very buttons running down the back of her red dress. On and on she went, conveniently leaving out the vampire attack and her drunken displays of affection for Konstantin, until Ohan couldn’t take it anymore and announced he was heading out to the barn to check on his sheep. Following his lead, all the other men jumped up to volunteer; all of them except for Chivanni, who was still humming along in the kitchen.

While Annika and Dardis tried not to gag, Yuri continued describing every little detail of her birthday party. Somewhere in between the flower petals made of frosting that spelled her and Talvi’s name on the cake, and the potentially disastrous decision whether or not to wear a corset with her gown that night, Sariel had pretended to doze off, and even Runa was cringing more than just a little bit.
“It sounds positively marvelous,” Aghavni sighed when Yuri had finished. “I haven’t looked that beautiful since…since the day I married Ohan,” she sighed again. “And then all these boys came along, and bless them all, I love them so much, but it is next to impossible to get Ohan to help me with them. I keep thinking with seven strong sons that I shouldn’t have such mountains of work before me, yet here is my ballroom.” She waved her hand through the air regally. “When Ohan and I were married fifty years ago, I thought we would have a bountiful garden with cold frames and a greenhouse. We both wanted lots of children, but I expected them to help me with the chores when they got older, not create more work for me. Ohan gets the boys all wound up right before dinner, spoiling them rotten, allowing them to bring in the dogs and dirt and slimy creatures they find in the swamp and the riverbank. And then I have to deal with them. It’s so hard to keep up, even with Ohan. Sometimes I think he makes it worse. When we’re almost out of wood, or something needs to be mended, I try to remind him and he calls me a nag. Those chairs outside, guess how long they have been broken?” she asked casually, as if it were a game. No one said a thing.

“Seriously, I want you to guess,” Aghavni asked the girls again.
“A week?” Hilda said.
“No.”
“Two weeks?” Annika guessed.
“Not even close.”
“A month?” Runa squealed.
“No, it’s been a full year,” Aghavni said testily. “I actually have kept track. It was a year three days ago. Can you believe that? It used to bother me, but now I just try to ignore it. I would do it myself if I had the time, but…” She turned to the kitchen, motioning to the pile of clothing and dishes. “I have more immediate things to tend to. When we were just starting our family, I used to literally follow right behind them, cleaning up after the boys and Ohan, but somewhere between Tri and Chetri I just couldn’t deal with it anymore. I wonder how badly he wants to join forces with you. Maybe this is the lucky break I’ve been asking the gods for?” she wondered with a smile. She seemed to be grateful to have other women to talk to for once, instead of trying to reason with a very stubborn husband and her unruly sons.

“Anthea would talk about your family, about how everyone had chores that had to be done, and I always thought I would raise my children like that,” Aghavni said. “I know the boys can do better, it’s just that their father spoils them so.” Annika felt sorry for her, wishing there were something she could do. She excused herself and walked to the kitchen.
“How’s it coming along?” she asked Chivanni.
“Oh, very well…very well indeed,” he boasted. “I’ve made a fine vegetable stew, which will be just scrumptious with taboule and tomato salad, and whole wheat rolls. And for dessert I made pumpkin pie!” He looked so proud of his great effort, but Annika could only look at him with skepticism.

“Chivanni, that sounds great and all, but just one pie? Are you trying to incite a riot?” she asked.
“Oh ye of little faith,” he said, wrinkling his nose at her. “I made two.”
“Okay…whatever,” Annika replied, still unsure how two pies would satisfy everyone, but she just took the heated water from the stove and washed up some plates
Ohan came lumbering back into the house with the other men and was pleased to see that the table had been set and dinner was almost ready. He cracked a few jokes about how he didn’t trust a skinny chef, namely Chivanni. He then told them all about his prize-winning sheep that produced the softest, warmest wool in the land. He seemed just as proud of his sheep as his sons, of whom he had nothing but kind words.

“You should have seen Edno with his axe the other day. Why, he felled a tree with three swings, he did! And Tri and Chetri come up with some creative weapons that they try out on the others. Yes, my sons will be terrific warmongers someday. I almost hope we don’t eradicate all of the Pazachi so that my sons might have some practice.” Aghavni rolled her eyes and shook her head behind Ohan’s back.

Dardis scrubbed the table as best as she could, and Hilda and Runa set the food and dishes on it, waiting for Annika to finish washing enough dishes for everyone.

“We can sit at the table, and the boys can just sit on the floor around the fire. They won’t mind at all,” Ohan said, and stepped outside again. There was a loud metallic sound as he hit the gong with the mallet, and then he returned to sit at the table. Little did anyone know it was the calm before the storm. Suddenly Annika got the impression the house was under siege, as a troupe of solid troll children and barking dogs thundered into the house, making a beeline towards the food.

“Stop right there!” Ohan bellowed, and they froze in their tracks. “Now line up and meet our guests.” The boys did as they were told, forming a line from tallest to shortest.

“This is Edno,” Ohan proudly said and pointed to the tallest boy. They all looked like younger, smaller versions of Ohan, with their father’s dark grey hair and green skin. From there he moved down the line. “And Dve, Tri, Chetri, Pet, Shez, and of course Sedem is the youngest.”

“Okay boys, take a plate and don’t be greedy,” Aghavni warned them. “Save some food for our guests.” The boys descended upon the table with grunts and exclamations and piled their plates high, then sat on the floor, chomping and smacking with no manners whatsoever. None of them bothered to use the silverware that had been provided. A couple of the boys were on their hands and knees, eating like dogs with their heads buried in their bowls. A couple of dogs were sneaking bites of food out of unattended dishes. There were bits of food sticking in their long, shaggy grey hair. They squabbled among themselves about whose dish was larger, how it wasn’t fair, and then pow, someone was punched in the face and bam, someone was punched back in the arm. The oldest five ended up rolling on the floor in a twisted pile of little horns, long matted hair and dirty green skin. The parents didn’t seem to even notice the fight breaking out in the living room. Aghavni went to fix a plate for Shez and Sedem, but was more than just irritated when she looked into the empty bowls.

“I told you to save some for our guests!” cried as a dish of taboule flew through the air. Four of the dogs jumped at once to eat the spilled contents off the floor.

“Now, now, we’ll make do,” Ohan assured his wife. “They’re growing boys. They need to build strong bones and muscles like their father.” He was trying to soothe his poor pregnant wife’s rising blood pressure, but it didn’t exactly work.

“Oh, there is much more where that came from,” Chivanni said, and took the serving dishes back into the kitchen. He returned each one to the table heaping full of food, almost filled to the brims. Aghavni looked puzzled, but they all sat down at the not-quite-
so-sticky table and ate the delicious food. Chivanni looked very pleased with himself.
The adults were halfway done when Tri and Pet came back to the table with bowls that
either they or the dogs must have licked clean.

“Can we have some more? That was so good!” they said, burping and wiping their
mouths on their already filthy sleeves. Aghavni sighed and was about to scold them
again, but Chivanni stood up and filled the dishes once again, letting them heap their
bowls with mountains of food.

“Where exactly is all of this food coming from?” Aghavni asked. “I set out the
vegetables for you, and I know for a fact it was not nearly this much.”

“It’s nothing a little fairy magic couldn’t help along,” he replied casually. “It’s
impossible for anyone to have an empty belly tonight.”

“Say, what happened to your friend? The pale one with the long hair? Is he ill?”
Ohan observed. Annika felt her stomach lurch. They hadn’t told their host and hostess
that a vampire was in their presence.

“Um, he, um…he…” Runa stuttered.

“Yes, about Konstantin,” Finn stumbled. “You see, the thing about him is…”

“He prefers to find his dinner in the forest,” Yuri said quickly.

“Well that’s strange. You’d think a fellow would prefer a hot meal,” Ohan said with
his mouth full, yet he managed to shove in another buttery roll. Runa cupped her hand
over her mouth, trying not to laugh as she was sure Konstantin was having no trouble
finding a hot meal of his own.

Everyone under that roof ate to their heart’s content, and then Dardis brought out the
pies, giving everyone a piece. The boys were so full that only Dve ate two pieces. With
their stomachs ready to burst, the sons were all sedate and calm, lying about the fire like
lazy lions. Aghavni took this perfect opportunity to coax the boys into their beds, leaving
the house quiet. It was a refreshing change from the chaos that had gone on throughout
most of the meal. Even the dogs were sleeping, curled up under the chairs.

Ohan took his pipe from its place on the mantle and Finn filled it with his best
tobacco. When Aghavni returned, she had with her a few sheets of paper, a quill and ink,
a candle, and an inspired smile. Her husband just shook his head and spoke more to his
guests about his wool trade, and the different dyes his wife could make, and the
importance of proper combat training. Even though Annika had no idea what to expect
from the Pazachi, she felt it would be extremely beneficial to have Ohan on her side
when it came time to face him. And she knew she wasn’t the only one with that idea.
Justinian, Sariel and Ohan debated which swords were better for severing limbs or merely
causing flesh wounds, and Aghavni was too busy writing her list to partake in the after
dinner conversation.

When the fire had died down to coals, Annika found herself falling asleep sitting up.
Glancing around, she wasn’t the only one who’d grown paralyzed by the enveloping
coziness of the room.

“We’re going to go set up the tents,” Zaven and Talvi announced, with no
enthusiasm whatsoever. The air outside was very cold, and the coals in the fireplace were
so toasty.

“You will do no such thing,” Ohan yawned. “You are our guests. You shall lay your
blankets in front of the fireplace.”

“Thank you for the offer, Ohan, but it still might be too crowded in here,” Zaven
said. Even though the floor plan was generously designed with eleven-foot tall trolls in mind, accommodating a slumber party of thirteen was pushing it. And there was also the matter of being squashed by troll boys running outside to play the next morning.

“Well, after you have given us such a fine meal and such pleasant company, the very least I can offer you is the hayloft. With all the sheep in for the night, it gets quite warm in the barn.” Everyone looked at each other and agreed. The hayloft sounded like a much cleaner place than the inside of the house. And they were so sleepy; it was that much more inviting than taking the time to set up the tents.

“Thank you Ohan, that is very kind of you,” Finn said. They walked out to the barn and were amazed at the cleanliness within. Clearly Ohan took more pride in his sheep’s living quarters than in his own. They climbed up the ladder to the hayloft, which was indeed very warm from all the body heat of the animals below. Every now and then a soft ‘baa’ was heard, but it was quiet and snug. The hay smelled sweet, like the end of summer, and they threw their cloaks and blankets over to make one giant bed. It was so much softer than the hard ground.

Everyone fell asleep within minutes of literally hitting the hay. The only one still awake was Aghavni, diligently writing the list she’d had in her head for years.
Chapter 36

Aghavni’s terms of negotiation

The next morning Annika and the others awoke to a howl of excitement. Ohan came bursting into the barn, upsetting the sheep.

“She really expects me to do this?” he sputtered in exasperation. “What is she thinking? How could she…when am I going to have time for that?”

Annika sat up to see what all the fuss was about while Finn and Justinian walked over to the opening in the floor where the top of the ladder rested. Ohan only needed to stand on the third rung to reach them. In one humongous green hand, he held a few neatly written pages.

“Would you just look at this? It’s completely unreasonable!” Ohan exclaimed. “I didn’t think she would really do it!” Finn took the list from the troll and skimmed though each handwritten page. The smile on his lips grew wider the more he read.

“Oh, she drew up one hell of a contract,” Finn laughed. “Are you still prepared to sign it in blood?”

“What does it say?” Runa yawned as Zaven pulled a piece of hay out of her tangled hair. Now that everyone was awake, Finn cleared his throat and read just a few selections from the list in his deep voice.

“No shoes in the house. Well, that’s reasonable enough,” he commented before continuing.

“Boys will be in bed by half past eight. Boys will have quiet time from dinner until bedtime. You must fix the chairs and restock the woodpile within one week of signing this contract, and the woodpile shall never be less than halfway stocked; you must also repair the garden fence, and build those cold frames and the greenhouse I’ve wanted by the beginning of spring following the signing of this contract. There will be no use of weaponry larger than a dagger inside the house. The boys will be assigned chores based on their age and ability. The boys will complete chores when asked and must not have excuses made for them by their father. The boys will not be rewarded for completion of chores. The boys must do something extra special for any possibility of a reward. Discipline will be enforced by both parents and not just Mother. If Ohan’s chores are not complete by dinner time, there will be no dinner for him. If the boys’ chores are not completed by dinner time, there will be no dinner for them or for Ohan.”

“Can you believe these terms?” Ohan asked, but most of the travelers could only try their best not to laugh. They were all thinking Aghavni had been extraordinarily lenient.

“Ah, here’s the clincher…she saved it for the very end,” Finn went on with a renewed grin. “You must allow for a romantic evening for the two of us once a month. This will be away from the children and away from the sheep. Outings to livestock shows and selling the wool at market do not count towards this outing. I agree to be responsible for finding someone to tend to the children on said outings. If you agree to these terms by signing this contract along with at least ten witnesses, you may seek retribution from the Pazachi.”

There were quite a few snickers and laughs that were disguised as coughs, and as Ohan pouted, making his teeth jut even more from his bottom jaw.

“There is no way I will be able to get all of these things done,” he complained. “I
want nothing more than to join you, and she won’t let me!”

“Ohan, my friend,” Justinian said cheerfully, “she will let you. Don’t you see? Her terms are not unreasonable. What would be unreasonable is for someone as capable as yourself to not sign this contract. Don’t you know how vital someone of your strength and skill would be to our party?”

“Well of course I know,” Ohan defended. “I’m Ohan the Green.”

“You know, if you signed this contract and really impressed her, she would let you leave with us in a heartbeat,” Yuri encouraged him. “All she wants is some help around the house and with the boys. She doesn’t want you to be unhappy Ohan; she wants everyone to be happy, including herself.”

“Yes, I see what you mean,” he pondered, but he wasn’t quite convinced. “She wants those chairs fixed in a week though, and I’ll never get it done if I have to tend to the sheep and implement all these new rules right away.”

“Well, if you say it can’t be done then I expect it can’t,” said Finn. He handed the contract back to Ohan while shaking his curls in disappointment. “And to think I was going to offer my carpentry expertise to help you with those chairs.”

“You would do that for me?” Ohan asked with a hopeful smile. “Say, if you helped me out a little, certainly I could go with you!”

“We would need to talk it over,” Finn said, glancing at his friends and siblings. “Let’s discuss this with your wife over breakfast. Chivanni makes incredible omelets, so that might help her to be more receptive.” Ohan grinned with rekindled hope and climbed off the ladder, whistling to himself as he left the barn.

“Finn, what a remarkable strategy!” Justinian exclaimed after he was gone. “There was nothing in that contract that said he couldn’t have a little help.” His pale blue eyes lit up even brighter with enthusiasm at having a troll warrior join their party.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” Zaven asked, but he was thinking over the idea with the same enthusiasm as everyone else. “We’ve made good time so far, we could spare a few days.”

“We could totally do it,” Annika piped up. “Maybe he could take his wife on a romantic weekend getaway, and we could have that house sparkling clean when they returned.”

“I don’t know about sparkling, but anything we did would certainly be an improvement,” agreed Hilda.

“It’s going to be a lot of work,” Sariel said, but length of the to-do list didn’t faze her. Instead her eyes were shining at the thought of having Ohan the Green on their side. “But it would be worth it. Did you see the size of his biceps? We would only need a few days to get his tasks completed if all of us pitched in.” There was an air of excitement as everyone talked about what could be done within just a few days, swapping a few household chores for an eleven-foot tall axe-wielding troll.

“There are plenty of dead trees in the forest around the house. We could thin them out and have the woodpile stocked quickly enough, and those chairs can be mended easily,” Finn said.

“Perhaps we can even teach those boys a few manners,” Hilda suggested, and Runa nodded in agreement.

“You really want to be around those troll boys on purpose? They could break you little samodivi in half,” Talvi said in disbelief.
“I’d like to see them try,” Sariel grinned.
“I’m sure I could straighten them out a bit,” Justinian boomed with a laugh.
“Does anyone else think this is a waste of time besides me?” Talvi asked. “It’s not our responsibility to clean up after trolls. They’re so…ugh!” He shivered a little in disgust, to imagining living closely with the seven boys.
“If you can’t handle a family of trolls, what makes you think you can handle the Pazachi?” Nikola asked him innocently. Talvi gave him a long hard stare, but said nothing. Nikola had made an excellent point.
“We could really use Ohan’s help,” Finn persisted, trying to convince his brother of their plan. “If we run into trouble, he could easily take on two or three times more opponents than any of us can. Strategically, he would be such an asset. Furthermore, no one’s asking you to babysit. You can help me restock the woodpile and mend the chairs.”
“I just think we’re getting in way over our heads. You saw the size of that list. We came here with a specific mission to carry out, and now we’re getting sidetracked with training baboons whilst Ohan and Aghavni waltz away on a romantic holiday. I can’t believe we’re even speaking about this! Our first priority is to find the Pazachi and hope that they’re the ones truly responsible for the broken portals so we can fix them and send Annika back home where she belongs.”
“Why are you suddenly in such a hurry to see her leave?” Chivanni asked with a frown.
“Isn’t that right? Or would you rather drop everything and halt our progress so everyone can play house for the next week or more?”
“Honestly, I don’t see how a few more days is going to make a big difference in the grand scheme of things,” she admitted. “And I think Finn’s got the right idea with trying to get Ohan to join us. You guys said at the meeting that the Pazachi don’t negotiate, so I’d feel a lot safer if he was around. Plus, Aghavni could use all the help she can get. She looks like she’s ready to pop.”
“Fine then, do whatever you want,” he scoffed. Then he turned to his brother. “I’ll help restock the woodpile, but I want nothing to do with those blasted demons. I can barely tolerate the larvae at home as it is, let alone seven troll children. This is your project, not mine.”
“Sometimes you’re such a selfish toad!” Dardis cried from her place beside Annika. “What happened to the sweet birthday boy I danced with? You’ve been an unbearable brat ever since we left! Your tantrums are worse now than when you were a baby. Perhaps you would be more comfortable sleeping in the cradle with Sedem tonight!” she spit out angrily.
“Perhaps you would be more comfortable sleeping in the manure pile with the flies, you little insect!” he snapped back at her. She looked as though he’d slapped her in the face, and she burst into tears, buzzing out of the barn through the slightly ajar window. Chivanni was aghast.
“How dare you speak to her like that? What is wrong with you?” he demanded, but he didn’t bother waiting for an answer. Instead, he chased after his dear friend, whose cries had followed her out the window. Talvi looked around at everyone’s shocked faces. The room was silent. Even the sheep below them seemed afraid to make a sound.
“That was a horrendous thing to say to her,” Finn reprimanded, completely abhorred
at his brother’s behavior. “I think you should leave, and don’t come back until you’ve apologized.” Too proud to admit that he’d crossed the boundaries of Dardis’ friendship, Talvi stood up and slung his bow over his shoulder.

“Well then,” he said coolly as he began climbing down the ladder, “it may be some time before I come back.” He climbed down the ladder and left the barn, slamming the door behind him. Annika felt ashamed for his behavior, since he apparently did not. From what thoughts she was able to pick up on, it seemed that he had called Dardis the worst known name for a fairy.

“Is he always so moody?” Justinian asked while Sariel braided his long hair. For the first time since he’d joined the group, his typical jolly humor was gone. “Someone needs to straighten him out. The last thing we need when we find the Pazachi is an unpredictable liability like him.”

“Volatile people do reckless things,” Nikola said with a frown of concern. “I only hope he gets over it by the time we reach the Pazachi, or we’re all going to wind up dead.”
Chapter 37

discipline

Annika filed into the thatched roof house after dressing with the other girls, and together everyone sat down at the table to a simple breakfast of porridge with toast and jam. It was one raucous household, and the energy only grew more heightened when Ohan presented his wife with the contract and signed it in his own blood before all of his witnesses. Now it was only Aghavni who needed convincing.

“Ohan, my dear, as much as I would love a romantic escape with you, if we go away for a few days, how do you expect to uphold your end of the deal?” she asked. “Those chairs must be fixed within a week. I’m surprised you even signed this contract.” But as soon as she looked at Runa’s smile, along with everyone else’s, she understood that another deal had been made under the table while she had been setting it.

“I suppose I can’t argue with you. I had no idea how much you wanted to settle the score with the Pazachi or I would have included a few more tasks on that list,” said Aghavni as she realized her husband might have gotten the best of her. She still wasn’t sure about leaving her brood for so long.

“I’ve never left them with anyone but my parents or Ohan’s family,” she told the group. “Are you certain you’re confident? It’s really quite an undertaking, what you’re offering.”

“As my wise little brother said earlier this morning,” reasoned Justinian. “If we can’t manage to keep your sons out of trouble for a few nights, what business do we have finding the Pazachi?” Aghavni chuckled a little to herself and nodded in agreement.

“And Hilda and Finn are great with children,” Yuri said happily. “They watch my niece and nephew all of the time.” Aghavni sighed as though she had been defeated, but there was a smile twitching at the corner of her mouth.

“I suppose I must pack a few things then, if we are to leave this very morning,” she said. The samodivi and Annika cleared the dishes from the table while Ohan showed Justinian and Nikola all that was required to care for his beloved sheep. When they returned, Ohan rang the gong and the boys ran inside, groaning with disappointment when the table was not laid out with a breakfast feast like the previous night. But Chivanni and Dardis had only just returned, and there hadn’t been time to enchant the porridge pot with fairy magic.

“Now listen here!” Ohan boomed. “Your mother deserves a vacation, and that’s what we’re going to do. We’re leaving them in charge, and if you give any of our guests any trouble, you’ll be sorry!” He turned to his wife, who was giving Hilda last minute tips on how to get baby Sedem to sleep.

“Are you ready, my love?” he said sweetly, as though he hadn’t just been screaming at the top of his lungs.

“As ready as I will ever be,” she replied, looking anxious. “Thank you again for watching the boys. I know I can trust you Marinossians…and your friends.” She gave a grateful wink to Yuri and Hilda and then she left with her husband.

Runa and Annika watched out the broken window as Aghavni and Ohan walked down the dirt path and into the trees, looking back a few times. The moment they’d disappeared, a fight among the eldest boys broke out and a wooden mug hit Annika on
the side of the head.

“Holy shit! What have we gotten ourselves into?” she groaned to Runa as she rubbed her head and looked for the perpetrator. “I don’t even know where to start.”

“Let’s see, what needs to be done first?” Runa said, glancing at the place.

“Oh, I don’t know; everything?” Annika grumbled, still irritated about her head.

“Of course, silly! I thought I could wash the walls, but I need clean rags. And I need water before we can clean laundry or wash dishes.”

“We’re not going to get anything done while these maniacs are in here,” Annika said, trying to recall some tricks she’d used when babysitting army brats. She bravely walked over to the brawling trolls who were taller than her and twice as wide, and whispered something in Edno’s ear. Edno grabbed a pail and ran out the door. The others quickly followed suit, and the silence that followed was golden.


“I told them whoever could find me a sea monkey would get extra pie after supper, but since sea monkeys are so small and only live in the water, I’d need them to bring me a pail at a time for inspection.”

“What’s a sea monkey?” Runa asked innocently.

“It’s a brine shrimp; you send away for them in the mail and then grow them at home in water.” Her explanation produced a few oddball looks, but she was used to those by now. “It’s just something you do where I’m from,” she said with a shrug. “Anyway, we’ll have a ton of water in a little bit.”

“Well, whatever a sea monkey is, that was brilliant,” Hilda said, astonished. Sedem hiccupped and head-butted her gently until she set him on the ground.

“From what I’ve seen so far, these boys have no structure,” Justinian observed. “They clearly don’t help with any chores. We should assign them tasks that put their strong bodies to work. Goodness knows they’ll be less rambunctious if they’re tired. I just don’t know the best way to go about it.”

“You have to make it fun, or they’ll see right through you,” Annika told him. “And if we bribe them with treats all the time, they’re going to expect to be rewarded for something they should be doing already.”

“Edno and Dve could come with me and chop wood,” Finn offered. “I think they’re plenty old enough to be doing that on their own. If I can inspire a little competition between them it might make them keep at it. It always worked for Talvi and I.”

“And Tri and Chetri can help clean the barn while Pet helps me feed the sheep,” Nikola added.

“Sedem’s too little to do anything, but what about the other two?” Hilda asked.

“We’ll have them work around the house with us,” Dardis piped up. She seemed in a much improved mood since her fight with Talvi earlier that morning. “There are a lot of things that my magic can take care of. It’s too bad they run off all the local fairies; they wouldn’t have so much work if they were more welcoming to them.” Runa gave a little snort and the others turned to see what she found so funny.

“Well that’s one way to dust this place,” she giggled, looking up in the rafters at Chivanni.

“Oh this is just disgusting! This will not do at all,” Chivanni huffed as he pulled cobwebs off his wings. The oldest six children had managed to bring twelve pails of water back to the house, spilling only a few drops.
“Do you see the sea monkeys?”
“Who gets the pie?”
“I have more water than you, you idiot!”
“So? I have more sea monkeys than you do, you buffoon!”
“I’m going to win all the pie and not give you any!” they argued amongst each other.
“It’s going to take me some time to find the monkeys; that’s how small they are,”
Annika told them. “So while you’re waiting, I need you to help us with some ch— um, with some stuff.” She pointed Edno and Dve towards Zaven and Finn, while Tri and Chetri were sent along with Nikola and Justinian. Hilda had Pet and Shez gather up all the dirty dishes and clothes while Sariel heated water to wash all the laundry. Yuri stitched socks and shirts and pants all day long, accidentally stabbing her fingers more times than she could remember. When the middle two children returned from the barn, they were put to work laying out the flagstones to make a nice path to the door that didn’t track in so much dirt.

Hours passed, and while Chivanni happily toiled away in the kitchen, the girls made a huge dent in the pile of dirty laundry. The house looked so much better already with its scrubbed walls, cobweb-free rafters, and dusted shelves. Finally it was time for dinner, and rather than ringing the loud gong and scaring away all the birds and wildlife around, Annika took it upon herself to let the others know.

She found Finn and Zaven in the forest with Edno and Dve. After a day of hauling dead and dying trees out of the woods near the home she expected them to be exhausted, but Edno and Dve were clearly enjoying the brotherly competition.

“Dinner’s ready, guys. And if you’ve been really helpful today, I made a peach tart with your name on it.”

“I’m not coming in until I cut this last tree down,” said Dve as he chopped furiously.

“I’m still going to finish before you,” Edno boasted as he chopped even more furiously.

“I tell you what, lads,” Finn said in a kind but firm voice, “Neither of these trees is going anywhere. If you both stop chopping and take the time to eat a proper meal and get a good night’s rest, just imagine how reinvigorated your strength will be in the morning?”

Edno and Dve seemed to like the idea and eyed each other suspiciously, but neither of them wanted to be the first to walk away.

“Well, I suppose I could wait here a bit longer to see who wins,” Zaven grinned.

“Or… I could go back to the house right now and have dinner and a piece of peach tart while the two of you are still out here chopping in the dark.” He started for the house, and within a minute both boys had tossed down their axes and started running after him.

“At least they didn’t make a mad dash with these in their hands,” Finn observed as he stooped down to pick them up. The axes were as long as Annika was tall, and probably just as heavy. “Why don’t you keep me company while I put these away? The sun’s going down, which means Konstantin will be hunting soon. I’d prefer it if I had you by my side.”

“Yeah, I think I’d prefer that, too,” she nodded. A contented hum of agreement came from deep inside his chest, although he didn’t seem in a hurry to get back to the barn. Instead, he smiled softly at her, and then watched as Zaven and the boys raced to the house. All she could hear was the wind rustling through the trees. All she could see was the color of the sky changing, and golden light filtering past the bare branches and wisps.
of his loose curls. All she could feel was the sense that he’d been waiting forever and a
day for this moment.

“Annika,” he said quietly, “I’ve been meaning to speak to you for some time now,
but we’ve never had much privacy and I didn’t want anyone to overhear our
conversation.”

“What do you want to talk to me about?”
With a gentle hand, he touched her shoulder and coaxed her to walk with him.
“It’s about the things you asked me back on the ship. I’ll be the first to tell you that
nearly everything Nikola told you about Talvi is true.” She looked up at him and was
surprised to see such gravity and concern in his normally worry-free face. “My brother
has done some despicable things in his past.”

“Like stealing Zenzi from Nikola?”

“Unfortunately, that example is only one of many,” he acknowledged. Their feet
crunched in the fallen leaves as they slowly made their way to the barn. “I really do know
everything about him, both the bad and the good. When I said the way he treats ladies
was a defense mechanism, I absolutely meant it. And sometimes the best defense is a
good offense.” He looked at the two axes with a thoughtful expression before turning to
face her as they walked through the dusky woods. “Talvi was always terrified of falling
in love, and now that he has, he understands how much it can hurt. But his situation is
incredibly more complicated than it appears. He’s been at the game of fox-and-hare for
so long, I wouldn’t doubt it if he used some of the same tactics on you. I’m certain he
showered you with a healthy dose of that abhorrent charisma which he’s notorious for.”

“He did,” Annika admitted as they came to the barn. “And it worked. I didn’t even
last twelve hours before we were making out.”

“Making what?” Finn asked while he held the door open for her.

“Kissing,” Annika said quickly before stepping inside. “I fell for it just like all the
other girls, but then he got all weird and blew me off like he wasn’t interested. I mean, if
you’ve got the girl hooked, why not reel her in all the way?”

“You mean that day he went out to meet you and the samodivi in the woods?” Finn
asked while he shut the door behind him. “But I thought he told you the reason why. You
mean to tell me that you don’t you know what he saw when he first kissed you?” This
was all news to Annika.

“No, he’s never mentioned it,” she said. Finn appeared as confused as she felt. Then
he seemed annoyed.

“Oh bloody hell, I didn’t think this was how it was going to pan out,” he said,
exasperated, “for the prophecy to be revealed to you in this manner, in a barn full of
sheep. How…how ordinary.”

“I’m sorry—did you just say prophecy?”

“Yes,” he said. He carefully placed the axes in a storage bin off to the side, then
stepped away from her and leaned against the door. He tossed his curls out of his face and
studied hers through the dim light in the barn, then took a deep breath. “When my mother
was carrying the twins, Dragana’s great-grandmother told my parents that their lives were
going to change abruptly when they turned three hundred. They were both going to find
their soul mates at the same time, and Talvi was destined for a girl from a distant land
who was part samodiva. That’s what he saw when he kissed you. That’s probably why he
didn’t—why he wouldn’t—well, you know,” he said awkwardly. “He didn’t want to
believe the prophecy might actually come true. It would set so many things in motion; things that we still don’t understand; things we don’t want to understand.”

“So maybe that’s what he meant back in Sofia when he said he was wondering when he’d meet me,” Annika wondered out loud. “It was like he already knew we would.”

“Of course he knew,” Finn confirmed. “He’s known his entire life. And then you told him you were from America and you bore such a resemblance to Magda, that he knew the moment he met you. When you wrote your name on Sariel’s family tree, that sealed it in certainty. And granite, come to think of it.”

“So why did your dad get so touchy about telling me all this?” she asked as she tried to process this information. “It doesn’t seem like such a bad prophecy. It’s actually kind of awesome.”

“Well, it’s only his half of it,” said Finn, looking melancholic all over again. “Yuri is destined for a very different outcome.”

“Does it have to do with Vladislav and Konstantin?”

“I suspect it does, although there’s little I can do about it right now. However,” he paused to clear his throat, “there is something I can do right now regarding the discord between you and Talvi. I know you care for him very much, or you wouldn’t have had such a terrible argument on the boat.”

“Oh shit…you heard that?”

“I wasn’t eavesdropping, Annika,” he said gently. “The walls were paper thin. What my brother said to you was completely unacceptable, but if Hilda had said the things to me that you said to him, I might be just as difficult to be around. I know he’s told you how deeply he cares for you. I know he’d love little more than to rewrite his history, if only to allow you to see him for who he truly is.” He gave her a knowing nod and Annika felt overcome with guilt. She recalled her cheap shots at how often Talvi washed his sheets, or how lucky she was that he wanted a redhead that month, but she especially regretted the statement she’d made about only keeping him as her sex slave when he’d asked to be so much more to her.

“I don’t know what to do, Finn. I’m so confused,” she said with her head in her hands.

“You needn’t be. That’s only your mind getting in the way of your instincts and your intuition,” he said in his naturally kind and understanding way. “What does your inner voice tell you? What does your heart say?” He put a comforting hand on her shoulder, and she was grateful that he was the one she was talking to. It seemed no matter what the situation, Finn shined a light on the unknown and made everything better. If his brother was really terrible, why did Finn care so much for his happiness? Why did Hilda and Runa adore him almost to a fault? If Talvi was such a rotten creature, how could he have had any friends at the Tortoise and Hare, or had the kind of turnout he did at his birthday party? Those guests weren’t there for the free cake and wine; they spent the night pulling the birthday boy in every direction imaginable because they all wanted him…but he only wanted her. Annika suddenly had a flashback to the look on Talvi’s face during their conversation in the cargo area of the ship, of him asking if she loved him, of him asking her to let him love her. It felt like a test, and it felt like she might’ve failed it. She’d never had her heart broken to pieces, but then again, she’d never been so in love with someone that it was ever at risk of breaking. That’s why she couldn’t marry Danny—because she already knew what every single day of the rest of her life would be like with him. But a
lifetime with Talvi? Every day could be completely different from the last one, and he’d definitely keep her on her toes. Maybe the reason she’d never found the right man was because she wasn’t supposed to settle down with one in the first place. She was meant to have wild adventures with her elven lover, like traveling down one side of the Americas and coming back up the other. She turned to Finn with a bittersweet look in her eyes.

“I know how I feel in my heart, but I don’t know what I can do about it. I have to go home; we all know that.”

“Yes.”

“And there’s no way I can live forever, right?”

“Only with the most powerful magic, and it’s typically of the darkest variety…which I don’t recommend. I would say you had a better chance of lassoing the moons.”

Annika was crestfallen. There seemed no easy answer, no guarantee. It appeared all she could do was live in the moment, and hope for the best.

“You know, Annika, we elves are not truly immortal,” he began. “Nothing is, not even unicorns. Even the mountains are eventually worn down to dust. None of us know the amount of time we have in this life. I could die tomorrow. So could you. Or, we might live a long life without ever having the adventure that is true love, simply because we were afraid to take a chance.” He glanced over at the sheep as if mustering the courage to go on, and when he caught her gaze again, there was a deep, genuine affection in his soft brown eyes. “Don’t let fear of the unknown douse your inner fire. Don’t let it turn you away from what may be the greatest thing in your lifetime. When I see the spark between you and Talvi, I can only hope that I’ll experience it for myself one day.”

“How can you say that when you have Hilda?”

Finn sighed and looked at her for a while longer, studying her face. There seemed to be so much more that he wanted to say. A cool shiver ran through her body and he put his arm around her. She leaned her head against his shoulder and took a deep breath, feeling calm almost immediately. It reminded her of the night when he’d persuaded her not to get in a fight with his cousin. Finn felt safe and warm, an infinite source of comfort.

“Perhaps I’m as protective of my heart as you are of yours,” he confessed. “Now let’s get back to the others, shall we? I believe there’s a peach tart with my name on it.”

Chivanni was the self-appointed head chef, and with his magic he easily multiplied the pie that was leftover from the other night. This way when the boys came in for dinner, they all received their reward for finding sea monkeys. But not without a fight.

“You don’t get any dinner until you wash your hands,” Yuri said. They just looked at her like she was crazy and headed for the set table. Dardis turned her palm up and lifted it in the air, causing everything on the table to levitate out of their reach. They looked at Dardis and Yuri with awe.

“I mean it. No clean hands, no dinner. And you may only eat with a spoon and fork. No more eating with your hands. My twin brother is right in that you are all very disgusting in your manners,” Yuri insisted with her hands on her hips. They grumbled a response, but remarkably, they did know how to use spoons, and sat about the floor devouring their dinner. When someone flung food across the room, Chivanni seized all of their bowls, floating them up to the ceiling.

“If you don’t like the food I cooked for you, you don’t get to eat it,” he told them when the boys began to whine. As soon as they realized that they would indeed like to
finish their supper, and possibly have seconds, they apologized to the fairy.

“That’s more like it,” Chivanni beamed, and down the bowls came, back into their eager hands. Dinner went without further incident as the adults sat at the table and swapped stories of how productive the boys had been all day. But after a while Zaven had to ask what everyone was wondering.

“Say, does anyone know what happened to Talvi?” he asked. “Has anyone even seen him since this morning?” Annika just shook her head ‘no’ along with everyone else.

“I thought surely someone might have spoken to him,” Finn said, filling a bowl with rice and vegetables. “Did anyone see which direction he went?”

“He went East, that’s all I know,” Dardis said, picking at her food.

“Did he at least stop to apologize to you?” Yuri asked. The blue-haired fairy frowned a little, pushing a piece of carrot across her plate.

“No.”

“So, no one knows where he might have gone?” Justinian said irritably.

Right at that moment, the door swung open and Talvi sauntered in with his bow in one hand, and set it in the corner. It fell down as soon as he walked away from it, but he didn’t appear to have heard it hit the floor.

“And where have you been all day?” Finn asked in a patronizing tone.

“Getting warmed up the old-fashioned way, you might say. I neglected to bring my cloak with me, and it’s supposed to snow tonight,” Talvi said, carelessly grabbing a plate from the counter top. “Whass for dinner?” He fell into a seat directly across from Annika.

Zaven wrinkled his nose. His cousin reeked of alcohol.

“Stir fried vegetables with rice, and a beet salad sprinkled with sheep’s cheese,” Hilda informed him.

“I hope to the gods that you weren’t the one who made it,” he groaned. Hilda looked greatly insulted, and at a loss for words, although there were a few stifled laughs from around the table.

“So what did you do to stay warm?” Annika asked him, giving her best smile. But when he looked at her, his malicious expression drained all of her happiness.

“Well,” he began to spoon rice onto his plate, spilling more onto the table than he managed to get on his dish, “I ran into some very old friends.”

“And you didn’t invite them to dinner?” Dardis frowned. “That was rude, but then you’ve been on such a streak lately…”

“Oh, I invited them alright. They said,” his mouth curled upwards into a smug, lecherous grin, “they were coming right after me.” Right then there was a knock at the door, and he rose once again to answer it. Besides the fact that he was loaded, there was something else not quite right with the way he looked, but Annika couldn’t put her finger on it. There was some indecipherable talking as he was greeted with slender arms wrapping around his hips. Two petite and beguiling creatures stepped into the house, all but draping themselves on either side of him. The young women wore leather pants with fringe running down the backs of their calves and a red sash belted around long olive green shirts that laced up both sides. Their long hair was dark brown and their skin quite tan, with small noses and almond shaped eyes. They were absolutely gorgeous.

“Vrazneet elanseel, Finn?” one of them asked in a strange tongue.

“Chabi?” Finn whispered, wide eyed. He looked like he’d seen a ghost. The taller girl let go of Talvi and slinked over to Finn, and climbed right into his lap.
“Oolam nezdroit,” she sighed in his ear, curling her fingers under his jaw the way one might win over a cat. The other girl kept her arm around Talvi as he led her back to the table to sit beside him. Finn looked helpless and flustered with the seductive woman in his lap, an expression that he wasn’t accustomed to wearing.

“This is Chabi and her friend Cherbi, everyone,” he informed quickly, which only made Hilda glare at him even more in disapproval, if that was possible. Not only did Finn have this woman fawning over him, but he knew them both on a first-name basis?

“I know who they are,” Sariel said. She set down her fork and crossed her arms as she scowled at the guests. “They’re the Samodivi of the East.” Chabi said something to Sariel in her language and Runa appeared intrigued. The seductive woman in Finn’s lap stood up and reached into a satchel she was wearing, then pulled out a tall, narrow bottle of dark liquid. Then she pulled out another, and then another, until she had six of them sitting in a row on the large table.

“Is that what I think it is?” Runa cried in delight and clapped her hands merrily. “Is that how you kept warm today?”

“It most certainly is,” Talvi replied, gloating at Annika as he put his arm around Cherbi’s waist. Runa hopped up to find enough glasses for everyone, with Hilda happy to join her.

“I didn’t know they still made this,” said Finn, examining a bottle astutely to keep Chabi from sitting back down in his lap. “Do you even know how rare it is?”

“What is it?” Zaven asked naïvely.

“Only the finest blackberry fairy brandy in existence!” Talvi slurred, yet he still managed to expertly uncork one of the bottles. “Father would just die if he knew I had six bottles given to me, not counting what I’ve already had. It’s not as though we kept track of time” He poured everyone a small glass, taking care to serve Runa and Dardis first, and Annika last. She lifted her glass halfheartedly as Runa made a toast in honor of the bumper blackberry crop that summer, and of running into old friends. Annika wanted desperately to talk to Talvi in private about the advice Finn had given her, so she stared into his bloodshot eyes, trying to convey her urgency.

Talvi, I need to talk to you! I need to talk to you right now!

“Ah...so now you wanna talk?” he slurred again, as he swirled the brandy in his glass. “Issa little late for that, don’t you think?” He tilted his head back and swallowed the rest of the dark liquid in one gulp. Cherbi stood up to give him a refill, and Annika felt her stomach lurch. There on the wood nymph’s little waist, was his belt. Justinian stood up to excuse himself, setting his empty dessert plate beside the sink.

“I’m going to need a few extra hands feeding the sheep,” he said, trying to act casual, but Annika knew for a fact that the sheep had been fed. “In particular, yours, yours, yours...and you three as well.” He had pointed to Nikola, Sariel, Zaven, Finn, Yuri and Annika.

“Oh, I want to help feed the sheep too!” Runa called, but Justinian shook his head.

“Someone needs to help Hilda tuck those boys into bed,” he said as his selected helpers went to join him. “We won’t be long.” He motioned to Hilda, who had already begun ushering the sleepy children twice her size to their bedrooms.

When Annika and the others stepped outside, Justinian only took a few steps away from the house. He clearly had no intention of feeding the sheep a second time, either.

“I don’t wish to have this conversation, but it seems there is no alternative,” he said
with all the leadership of a knight who had survived numerous battles. He turned to Yuri and Finn with a serious expression. “I thought your brother would come back with his head on straight, not pickled with fairy brandy.”

“He’s breaking up the morale,” Nikola pointed out. “I don’t think he has any intention of apologizing to Dardis. He would be better off entertaining wood nymphs at home.”

“How do you know those two, anyway?” Sariel asked Finn suspiciously. “I thought I’d met all of your family’s friends, though I never thought the Marinossians would be the type to associate with the Samodivi of the East.”

“I didn’t think we were the type to associate with them, either,” Yuri said, looking shocked at her brother. “I’ve certainly never met them before.”

“Well,” Finn stammered nervously, avoiding her accusatory stare. “Let’s just say they’re old friends, and I haven’t seen them in ages.”

“All the more reason for me to have met them by now, wouldn’t you agree?” Sariel insisted, but Finn refused to elaborate. It seemed like there was a very long, very juicy story he didn’t want to tell.

“Someone’s got to do something about Talvi,” Zaven said irritably. “How can I trust him to have my back when I can’t trust him to stay sober? He’s not thinking of anyone’s safety…not even his own.”

“It’s not an exaggeration when I say he’s going to get someone killed,” said Nikola, standing beside his brother for solidarity. “This is exactly what we do not need. Our numbers are already at a disadvantage, even with Ohan joining us.”

“I’ve never seen Talvi like this,” Finn said, quite disturbed. “I’m really worried about him, but I can’t seem to reason with him.”

“It doesn’t seem like that’s an option anymore,” Sariel concluded. She was frowning even more than usual.

“If he leaves now, he can probably avoid any major snowstorms,” Nikola suggested.

“You can’t be serious!” Annika said in Talvi’s defense. “You want to send him through the Mesoyadna Forest alone, when winter’s practically here?”

“What are we supposed to do with him? Leave him here?” the druid asked her, siding with the paladin. “He’s volatile, unpredictable, and sullen at best.”

“And,” Sariel added, “have you seen him with children? He wouldn’t last ten minutes if he stayed here with Aghavni until we came back.”

“You’re wrong about that,” muttered Yuri. “He wouldn’t last five.” Finn didn’t look pleased with the consensus, but he looked less pleased with his brother’s antics.

“Don’t forget that he saved Nikola from the sirens,” Annika reminded them, still shocked that they were actually considering such a drastic move. “And he cut me out of the bloodwood’s roots! And he’s a perfect shot with his bow. Doesn’t that count for something?”

“Yes, but I’m concerned that it doesn’t count for enough. He’s becoming a liability,” Justinian said, crossing his arms.

“Let Annika speak with him,” urged Finn. “Please. For the sake of everyone here, just give him another chance. And give her a chance to help him make things right.” Justinian frowned at him before looking at Annika again. “I’d sure like to see how you intend to fix this mess,” he told her. “I’ll give you until Ohan and Aghavni return to change my mind. If he can redeem himself in the next three days, I’ll let him stay. I hope
you’re the miracle worker Finn thinks you are, young lady,” Justinian continued sternly. “I’m a hard fellow to convince once my mind is made up!”

Without knowing what she was going to say or do, Annika walked resolutely to the door of the house, where she heard peals of laughter coming from within. She took a deep breath and stepped inside, where the Samodivi of the East, Runa, and Talvi were uncorking the fourth bottle. The boys had been asleep for a while now, and Hilda and the fairies had just finished washing the dishes.

“Look who decided to join us,” Talvi hooted. Cherbi was hovering in front of him, playing with his messy hair. She turned around and gave Annika a nasty sneer.

“I’m not joining you for cocktail hour,” Annika replied, crossing her arms over her chest. “We need to talk, and I’d rather not embarrass you in front of your friends.”

“Runa,” Hilda said firmly, “Don’t you think we’d better turn in for the night? There’s much more work to be done tomorrow and a case of pixie flu isn’t going to help.” Runa looked like she would have protested if her sister hadn’t taken such a firm tone in her suggestion. She reluctantly got up from the table, pouting the entire way to the door as the fairies floated behind her. Hilda paused only long enough to tell Annika, “I’ll come by in a bit to check on you.” Annika waited until the door had shut before she marched over to Talvi and his old friends.

“Get out,” she said to the nymphs. They looked at her incredulously. “I mean it. Get out. Leave. This isn’t your house and you’re not welcome here!”

“Ooh, I think she’s upset,” Talvi laughed. Annika wanted to slap him, but she knew what would be a more painful blow to both him and his guests. She reached out her arm and knocked the two remaining bottles to the floor, breaking them and spilling their precious contents.

“Sorry. My hand must have slipped,” she said as coolly as he’d said those same words to Nikola back in the cave. Talvi muttered something in a low voice to the Samodivi and they picked up their sashes. Noses in the air, they headed towards the door.

“Not so fast,” Annika said, pointing to Cherbi’s waist. “That can stay here.” The nymph glared at her, unbuckled it, and let it fall to the floor before they walked out, cursing Annika in their native tongue. She locked the door and stepped in front of Talvi. He gave her his most lecherous smile yet.

“Aww, you wanted me all to yourself, is that it?” he smirked. “So did they. You modern wood nymphs really ought to learn to share. It makes things so much more interesting.”

That was it. She let her hand fly across his face so hard that it throbbed from the impact, but pain never felt so good as it did at that moment. She had once asked him if anyone had ever managed to slap the grin off his face, and it appeared that she had done just that.

“They’re sending you home, you asshole! Everyone wants you to leave!”

“Surely you jest, you saucy girl,” he said, while tonguing the blood that had appeared at the corner of his mouth.

“You think I’m kidding? Justinian thinks you’re going to get us all killed! I’m the only one who stuck up for you.”

“Thassa load,” he challenged her. “You would never do such a thing.”

“Oh really?” She stared into his eyes and played back the conversation in her head, where Annika had been the only one to remind the group of Talvi’s merits, and even Finn
had pinned his hopes on her, not on his own flesh and blood. His smug expression faded and his eyes transformed into watery pools of blue and green. He hung his head in shame as she fetched him a glass of water.

“What am I doing?” he said, looking up at her. She put the glass in his hand.

“You’re shitfaced, you don’t know what you’re doing. Now drink this,” she instructed. He gulped the whole glass down and she got him another one. “You’re going to be sorry in the morning if you don’t finish it. And don’t drink it so fast.” She collected the broken bits of brandy bottles onto a plate as he watched from his place on the bench.

“Why are you being so kind to me? Why are you doing this?” he asked. Even though he was horribly drunk, even though he had just said terrible things to her, his moist eyes seemed to plead with the utmost sincerity.

“Because no one else wants to,” she said, feeling cold. She was wondering how far back his friendship went with the Cherbi and Chabi. Then she changed her mind. She didn’t really want to know. She set the plate of broken glass on the table and tossed some towels on the floor to blot up the brandy. When she looked up at him, he was smiling with a dreamy look in his eyes.

“I really didn’t think they made girls like you…I love you, Annika…do you know that? Why, I love you so much it hurts. Especially right here,” he said with a bewildered expression, and touched his bleeding mouth. She flinched hard, trying desperately not to laugh.

“You need some sleep. Come on.” She held out her hand and led him to the massive sofa in the living room near the fireplace. She unbuckled his boots and slid them off before covering him with the warm wool blankets. She sat beside him, hunched over with her chin in her hand, staring at her feet while he settled in under the covers. She was lost in her mind, in her confusion, wondering what to say to make everything better.

“Why are you so sad?” he asked. She thought about everything that Finn had said, and about how not even an hour ago she was finally ready admit that she loved him too. But it didn’t matter anymore, not when he’d spent all day doing who knows what to keep warm, how many different ways, with two beautiful wood nymphs.

“Annika? Why won’t you speak to me? Are we playing that bloody ignoring game again?”

“It’s not like you’re going to remember anything I say, so why should I waste my breath?”

“Tell me anyway,” he begged. “Come on…come on!”

“I just don’t understand how you can be so cruel. I can’t believe you brought those girls here after you…whatever. You have no idea how much it hurts inside, right now.”

“I know,” he sighed. “I’m such an idiot.”

“No you’re not. You’re really smart; that’s why it’s so frustrating to see you do stupid things.”

“I am an idiot,” he insisted, sitting up and trapping her in his arms. “I want you more than anything right now, but I can’t think of a way to make that happen.” Annika’s jaw dropped in revulsion. She tried to push him away, but he held onto her tightly.

“How can you say you love me right after you nailed Cherbi, or Chabi, or whoever?” she asked angrily, still squirming in his grasp.

“That was almost a hundred years ago. But if you think I fell for their tricks again, you’re quite mistaken.”
“So nothing happened today?” Annika asked. She stopped trying to escape him as his words sank in.

“No, but oh, how I thought about it!” he sang playfully in her ear. “Don’t you know the best way to get over a woman is to get under two more?”

“Well why didn’t you? They look like your type,” she said, appalled at his rationale. He snickered again and nuzzled into her neck. Despite herself, she felt shivers run down her arms.

“I told them that I was supposed to be getting married to a little red-haired samodiva in a few days,” he sighed in her ear. Another round of shivers broke out over legs as he went on. “They were so bloody brassed off when they saw I wasn’t lying. They thought they might change my mind with enough fairy brandy, but I think the joke’s on them!”

He was now covering her neck with soft, wet kisses, which made it impossible for Annika to think straight. Then he fell backwards onto the massive cushions of the troll-sized sofa, pulling her down with him.

“You smell so good Annika. I love the way you smell. I love the way you feel. You’re so soft. You’re so sweet,” he said urgently, as he rolled on top of her and pressed himself against her body. “And I love how you taste.” His hand groped between her legs and he moaned in hunger. “Isn’t this how you want me to be? Your personal slave? Isn’t that how you put it?”

“Talvi, don’t.” She tried to push him off of her, but he was too heavy, too powerful. He drove his knee down between hers, forcing them apart.

“It’s not as though you’ll be wearing white on our wedding day, my little bride; you might as well let me have my way with you now,” he sighed while covering her face and neck with blood and alcohol-laced kisses. “Blast, my mouth hurts…why won’t you kiss it better?”

“Talvi, stop!” she tried to shout from under his weight.

“Don’t you want me?”

“Not like this!” she said as he pressed his forehead against hers almost as hard as he was pressing his hips into hers. His eyes were wild and possessed.

“I’ve known about you for my entire life…did you know that?” he confessed. “I used to think about you when I was a young lad, hundreds of years before we met. I wondered if you would be dark or light, short or tall, kind or cruel. And I’ve loved you ever since the day I saw you with that ridiculous book in your hand. Our souls were betrothed before the stars were born. Don’t you know that? Didn’t you even read my letter?”

“If you remember this conversation when you sober up, I’ll look into it,” she agreed, pulling his groping hands away. What the hell was he talking about?

“Mmm hmm. I’ll never forget it. I’ll never…ever…” he lay on his back, gave a content sigh, and promptly passed out.

Half an hour later, just as Annika was dozing off next to him, she heard Hilda slip into the house with Finn. She pretended to be asleep as they put another log on the fire. The sound of their quiet footsteps approaching made her shut her eyes even tighter.

“How do you think it went?” she heard Hilda ask Finn from above.

“Dreadful,” he chuckled. “A total disaster.”
Chapter 38
winter wash day

Talvi stirred in his sleep as Annika left his side and joined Yuri and Hilda for breakfast the next morning. She fixed herself a little meal and sat at the huge kitchen with her friends.

“How did you manage to get rid of Cherbi and Chabi so quickly?” Yuri asked. Annika smiled a little.

“I hit them where it hurt the most.”

“You punched them?” Hilda asked, rather surprised.

“No, I threw their brandy bottles on the floor. Talvi’s the one I smacked. I got him good, too.”

“Ah…so that’s what that purple stain on the floor is,” said Hilda.

“Good on you,” Yuri told her. “I hope you knocked some sense into him. I don’t think he’s ever deserved it more in his life, after the way he’s been lately.”

“I guess time will tell.” She grinned at Yuri and finished her breakfast as the samodivi began another round of laundry. She took the water pitcher and walked back into the living room. Talvi was awake, still curled up in the blankets, staring at nothing in particular. Annika poured him another glass of water and sat down on the large sofa, but his hollow gaze didn’t waver.

“How are you feeling?”

“Wretched,” he mumbled. She smiled sympathetically.

“You’ll get over it. You’re just hung over.”

“Barely. I feel more wretched that no one wants me around. Justinian hates me. Nikola hates me. I don’t even know why you’re here. You should hate me the most of anyone here. You’re so strong. No one else stuck up for me; hell, I wouldn’t have stuck up for me. But you did.”

“You remember that?” Annika was surprised. She hadn’t expecting him to remember anything. “You were pretty bombed last night.”

“How can I forget this?” he said, tonguing the corner of his mouth. “I keep touching it so much, it will never heal at this rate.”

“I didn’t think I hit you that hard.”

“I’m certain I earned it, with flying colors.”

“You don’t remember why I hit you?”

“I only remember bits and pieces. I don’t care to rehash them over in my mind.” He still couldn’t look her in the eye.

“Sooner or later you’ll have to get up and deal with things.”

“Why did you come to my defense? I don’t deserve to have you in my life. I don’t even deserve to breathe the same air as you.” She brushed his hair out of his face, but he just closed his eyes as if her very touch caused him pain.

“Stop being so melodramatic. I did it because I know you’re better than what we’ve seen lately. Now if you want to make it up to me, you’ll prove Justinian wrong.” She picked up her journal from the floor beside the sofa and was about to head towards the kitchen when he stopped her.

“Annika…” She turned around and looked down at him. He looked into her eyes for
the first time that morning, with nothing but regret. “Even if I spent the rest of my life making it up to you, it would never be enough for what I’ve done.”

Annika returned to help with the mountain of housework. Yuri and Hilda were now scrubbing the walls while Runa and Sariel were wringing the piles of rinsed laundry. “So, do you think he’s going to survive?” Hilda joked.

“I think so,” Annika said, putting away clean dishes. “He feels really bad.”

“Who wouldn’t after a blackberry brandy bender like that?” Runa said as her tongue twisted over her choice of words. “I know I would have a terrible pixie flu as well.”

“He thinks he slept with Cherbi and Chabi,” Annika couldn’t help but to smile. “But I’m not about to tell him that he didn’t. Not yet anyway.”

“He certainly gave that impression last night.” Hilda set her cloth into a nearby bucket of water and turned around. “How do you know if he did or not?”

“It’s just a feeling I have,” Annika grinned. “Maybe women’s intuition? The things he said last night, they were too outrageous to be lies. You know what they say…in vino veritas.”

“What did he say?” Runa asked. “Did you talk about his letter?” Annika scrunched up her face.

“He mentioned it. But I didn’t know what the heck he was talking about.”

“He said he gave it to you. He wouldn’t sign it until Finn and I had both read it. He said it had to be perfect. He’s been working on it for a long time; since before we left his house!”

“When the heck was this? I think I’d remember a letter.” She scanned her brain, trying to recall the last letter she had seen.

“It was on the ship, of course,” said Hilda.

“He said you never came to him, and that’s what broke his heart the most,” Runa explained. “He waited and waited for you to come and talk to him, but you never did! He thinks you’d rather be with Nikola. That’s why he rescued him from the sirens that day on the ship. He told me that if it wasn’t for you, he wouldn’t have risked diving after him.” Annika’s jaw fell as she recalled a tiny note he’d put in her hand many weeks ago. When she’d heard the word ‘letter’, she pictured an elaborate envelope with a red wax seal like the ones he’d given to Yuri so long ago. But those letters hadn’t been from Talvi; they were from Konstantin and Pavlo.

She walked to the table and reached out for her journal, which was never far from her side. She felt her stomach twist into an anxious knot as she pulled it out of the leather case and banged the flap hard against the table top. Out fell a dime, a pressed flower, and a small folded up piece of paper with lint stuck along one side.

“That’s it!” Runa cried.

“I never read it.” Annika unfolded the little square until she was looking at a sheet of paper covered in the loveliest handwriting. It looked like it had been folded and refolded a hundred times or more.

_Dear Annika,

I told you I would tell you when the time was right. ‘Mo reis to comp anya vlatzee’ can only be described as something lovely and magical. It’s something true lovers say when they cannot be together. Like flowers on opposite ends of a meadow, they send bees back and forth to one another as messengers of love that are capable of crossing the greatest distances. I promised that I would tell you_
what it meant, but Runa beat me to it. I only hope that she did an outstanding job, because it doesn’t translate very well. It even comes off as sounding a bit vulgar.

I used to think that this type of true, pure love was a lie, or at best, a myth. It was prophesized before my birth that I was destined to marry a girl from a distant land with the blood of a samodiva, but I refused to believe in this type of love. When we first kissed, I was expecting your soft lips, but I wasn’t prepared for the image of me putting a ring on your finger. This is the vision that startled me so. I wonder if you remember that day. I’ll never forget it.

I knew I adored you from the moment we met, but with each passing day I end up loving you more than I did the previous one. There is nothing I can tell you that conveys the thoughts I experience or the way I feel when I’m in your presence. I was so certain that I was immune to this mythic love, and I was so certain that my heart would never be the one to break—only I suddenly find that I have been reduced to a mere shadow of myself because you claim you have nothing to give. I’m not certain if you ever wanted me as much as I want you, but hopefully I am wrong. I have never wanted so desperately to be wrong in three hundred years. I know you’re afraid of something that is more powerful than you are. It scares me too, but I get the impression that the fear only exists because what can be gained is too tremendous for either of us to comprehend.

You said last night that you might marry me if I were human. I cannot change what I am, or what you are, but I will gladly spend the rest of my life trying. We are meant to be together, I just know it. If you feel the same way, come find me as soon as you read this. I certainly won’t be hard to find. This boat is not that big.

Forever and ever and then some,
Talvi

Annika’s heart was racing as she scanned her eyes over the script one more time before folding it and putting it back in the flap of her journal. She felt like an idiot, having this confession literally sitting under her nose every day for all this time, and not even knowing it.

“I had no idea…I…I feel so terrible that I never read this!” Annika stammered.

“Better late than never, in matters of love,” Hilda said with a sympathetic smile. “I learned that lesson the hard way.”

“I should have known,” said Annika, burying her face in her hands, although she didn’t cry. She was more frustrated with herself than anything. “Talvi tried to say things to me and I would shut him up. Even though I liked him, I always thought there was a chance that he was lying to me. I know he does it all the time.”

“Do you want to know a little family secret, Annika?” Yuri whispered with a sly smile. “Do you want to know how to tell when he’s lying, even when he’s pissed on fairy brandy and high on pixie dust?”

“Yes, of course I do.”

“There are only two times when he fusses with his hair. One is when he’s actually fussing with it. The other is when he’s lying.”

“But he’s constantly messing with his hair! Does that mean he’s always lying?” Annika hissed, hoping Talvi couldn’t hear from the other room. Yuri’s smile did not falter.
“You should know by now how vain he can be! When he’s simply fussing with his hair, he does this…” She ran her fingers twice through the same spot in her hair. “And when he’s lying, he does this.” She ran her fingers through it again, but this time they paused in one particular area, catching a lock of hair and playing with it.

“There’s barely any difference at all!” Runa gasped. “How can you notice that?”

“When you’re a twin, you just do,” said Yuri with a bigger smile. They started laughing and looked up. Talvi had just stepped into the kitchen. The girls tried to hush, and returned to their chores.

“Good morning,” Hilda and Runa chirped.

“There’s not much good I can find about it,” he said abruptly, not looking anyone in the eye. He glanced at the table where he’d left his belt the previous night, and looked away quickly.

“Are you hungry at all? Do you want something to drink?” Hilda asked. He shook his head and sat down at the table. Hilda set a cup of tea and some toast in front of him anyway, which he sipped in uncomfortable silence.

“Talvi, what’s got you so down?” Runa asked innocently as she set a basket of clean, wet laundry down next to him.

“You look like your best friend just died,” Sariel commented with a wry smile. He sniffed, blinking back tears.

“I would apologize to all of you for the way I’ve behaved over the past few weeks, but any words that come from my mouth are rubbish.”

“They’re not rubbish,” Hilda said, hugging him against her chest. “But you really need to avoid smoking pixie dust when you drink. Those two substances do not mix well with you. You know that.”

“It wasn’t my intention. You know I try not to indulge in both vices at the same time anymore,” he said, and closed his eyes.

“Do you mean they slipped it to you?” Sariel asked, looking very angry. “Those Samodivi of the East are not to be trusted!”

“Don’t you know they kidnap men?” Hilda told him as she smoothed his hair gently. “You’re lucky you only ran into two of them. Any more than that, and they would have carried you off. You wouldn’t believe the outlandish tales I’ve heard.” Talvi’s face crumpled a little as Hilda held him closer.

“Those outlandish tales are true,” he said, and looked at Annika with deep remorse. Runa stepped close to him and dabbed at the dried blood at the corner of his mouth with a wet cloth. At that moment Finn pushed the door open, whistling a happy tune, but it faded as soon as he saw the girls fussing over his good-for-nothing brother.

“You look comfortable,” he smirked. Talvi turned his head to the side, not looking at him. “Here I’ve been busy all morning mending that fence with Zaven out in the snow.”

“He just needed something to warm him up before he helps me hang the laundry to dry,” Hilda defended. Finn rummaged in a pile of Ohan’s tools, finding a set of chisels. Then he walked very close to Hilda, and leaned down to speak in her ear.

“Perhaps I should go on a drinking binge. I would love for you to warm me up the same way,” he winked at Hilda and walked back outside. The girls all looked at Hilda, and she blushed brightly, releasing Talvi from against her chest immediately.

“What can I do to make Justinian see that I’m serious?” Talvi asked quietly. “I can’t go back home like a coward. Do you really want me to leave?”
“We don’t want you to leave, but no one cares for the version of you that was here last night,” Yuri said, crossing her arms. “I don’t want that person coming back. That’s not my brother. My brother would never call Dardis a fly. He would never say such things to someone he loves so much.” He nodded, and finished his tea.

“I can do that. I’ll tell her I’m sorry. But I don’t know what else to do.”

Sariel put her hands on the basket of wet laundry and looked him square in the eye. “You can start by helping with some chores. Hang this up to dry with Annika. I think you’ll feel a lot better if you do.” Her lips hinted at a smile and he looked at her curiously before stuffing his toast in his mouth and washing it down with the rest of his tea. Then he took the basket and let Annika open the door for him, wincing in the bright light of day. A few inches of snow had fallen overnight and most of it had been trampled upon, but there was a place behind the home where the clothes line hung, and the pristine white ground had been left untouched. There was a nice flagstone path to the door now, and Finn and Zaven were working on one side of the house, fixing the fence that protected a large garden. Justinian and Nikola had led the boys into the woods to chop wood and bring back water. The stillness that the blanket of snow had created was a welcome break from the noise of seven troll sons’ shouting and brawling. Talvi was silent as they walked behind the house. He set the basket down and helped Annika pick up a large sheet.

“I feel like you should be angrier with me,” he told her. “I don’t understand why you even want to be near me.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” she asked innocently. “I don’t know what you’ve done that’s so horrible.” He looked away from her as he picked up another sheet and threw it over the line.

“I know myself well enough to know that I do dreadful things sometimes. I concocted a dangerous potion last night. I haven’t combined pixie dust, fairy brandy, and females in a long time. I thought Ch—Cherbi and I were only going to talk.”

“Did you do more than talk?” she asked. He pursed his lips.

“I honestly don’t remember, but like I said, I know myself well enough,” he replied, looking absolutely devastated before turning away from her. “Old habits really do die hard, don’t they? After I get to a certain point, I just start doing exactly what’s on my mind and blathering like a fool. It’s gotten me into a few unpleasant situations before, but this one is by far the worst. If only I remembered…but then, I don’t want to remember.”

“I remember everything you said last night,” Annika said. “You were very convincing.” He looked at her strangely.

“What do you mean? You were there the whole time?”

“Well, yeah. Didn’t you notice a warm body next to you at all during the night? I woke up maybe a half hour before you did.” She was hanging socks with wooden pins, and he just looked at her in disbelief.

“I thought I dreamt all of that! I thought you broke the bottles and hit me and left. You were angrier than I’d ever seen you. I thought you went to bed, and then I dreamt that we were trying to…you know…reconcile…but we couldn’t,” he faltered, and turned his sheepish face away from her.

“Is that all you remember of your dream?” she asked, hiding behind a sheet as she lifted it up. He made no reply as he grabbed the other end with both hands and draped it over the line. “You said you wanted to sleep with Cherbi and Chabi, but that you couldn’t do it,” she reminded him. From the other side of the sheet, he looked at her as though he
were afraid. “You said you thought about it, but you couldn’t go through with it.” She could see the wheels in his head spinning quickly. She knew he remembered saying these things. The linens blew in the cold air on the lines to their right and their left. The snow underneath them and the grey sky above created a private white world around them. She looked around and smiled mischievously.

“Do you remember why you couldn’t sleep with them?” she finally asked. Sure enough as Yuri had predicted, he reached his hand to his head, tilting it to one side as he twirled a few strands above his ear.

“No. But I’m very glad it didn’t happen.”

Annika gave him a long, hard stare.

“You’re such a liar,” she said under her breath.

“What?”

“You heard me. Oh, you really are bad at it, Talvi!” His cheeks turned scarlet, even as he clutched another cold wet sheet in his bare hands.

“I don’t know why you think that,” he said, not looking at her. He took his time hanging the bedding on the line.

“Just admit it,” she taunted. “You know, so just admit it!” She walked right in front of him, still taunting him.

“Fine!” he hissed as he smoothed the sheet, trying to avoid looking in her direction.

“I admit it. I remember why I didn’t sleep with them, alright? There…I said it. You caught me red-handed.”

“You didn’t tell me why, Talvi,” she said, shaking her finger at him playfully. He fidgeted for a moment, gathering a handful of clothes pins, and then dropped them back into their jar. He reached out and clutched her hands in his, holding them to his mouth. His warm breath chased away the cold as he stalled for time. His eyes were intense. “You said you couldn’t because—” She was cut off mid-sentence.

“Because I was going to marry a little red-haired samodiva,” he said from behind her hands.

“Bad liars aren’t the best at keeping secrets either,” she smiled. “I have a secret too.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah. I’ve realized why Danny wasn’t the right man for me after all that time together.”

“Ah…” He looked crestfallen. “Why is that?”

“Because there is no man for me. There’s only an elf, and he’s standing right in front of me.” His brows arched upwards, and his glassy eyes narrowed as if he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. The sheets billowed on each line between them in slow motion, and time slowed down to a crawl. “And he’s a damn idiot if he doesn’t know how much I love him.” He blinked as if he didn’t believe what he was hearing.

“I read your letter, Talvi,” she sighed, “I read it for the first time just this morning.”

Talvi was stunned.

“Why did you wait so long?”

“Because I’m as stubborn as you are, I suppose. But I read it and I know that I love you. Even if you don’t find some magical cure for my mortality or your lack of, I don’t care anymore.”

“I don’t understand. You used to care. What changed?”

“Your older, wiser brother gave me some good advice,” she grinned. “I knew I
couldn’t turn my back on how I really felt without letting you know.” Talvi looked like he’d just had the wind knocked out of him, and that’s what must have happened, because he sank to his knees.

“You’re serious?”

“As a heart attack.” He furrowed his brow at her in confusion. “I mean, I’m dead serious,” she clarified. He held out his palm and she put her small hand inside of it.

“I don’t know what better way to prove my love to you, Annika,” he said quietly, but his voice was steady. “I can’t sit aside and be content to watch you leave, and I certainly will not walk away from what I feel for you. Your love is too precious to me. I don’t know where, or when, or how it will even work out, but I do know I want you in my life for as long as I live. Be my bride, Annika, and I swear that I will make you happy. All that matters to me is that you say yes. If you do, then it doesn’t matter where, or when, or how it happens, because I’ll always think of today as our wedding day.” She looked at his hopeful face, and nodded.

“Yes.”


Annika was aware of her cold nose pressed into his hot cheek, but she could barely feel her body as their happiest memories collided into one vision. She opened her eyes, and saw snow in his black hair. They were on the ground, clutching each other for dear life as they made up for all their lost time in deep, fervent kisses. She heard a faint squealing coming from somewhere, and when she looked up, she saw the Hilda and Runa grinning through the kitchen window.

One of Aghavni’s white cotton nightgowns blew off the clothesline, landing on her. She started to laugh hard.

“What’s so funny?” he asked in between kisses as he held her close. “How can you laugh at a time like this?”

“I’m just remembering something else you said last night,” she giggled as she peeked from underneath the nightgown. “You said I couldn’t wear white on our wedding day, but look at me!” She threw her head back onto her veil of snow, laughing harder.

“Oh, you find that amusing, do you?” he breathed heavily, pulling the sheet off of her, “When I get done with you, you’ll have to wear black!” He tugged at her pants, pushing her backside against the snowy earth.

“What are you doing?” she gasped as he unbuttoned his own. “We can’t do that here!” But he only smiled at her wickedly.

“Watch me.”

When Annika and Talvi came back to the house with the empty laundry basket, the nymphs tried hard to bite their tongues. But Chivanni was a fairy and he couldn’t help it.

“I hope you saved some of your energy. There is still a lot of work to be done around here!” he hooted, and the girls burst out laughing. Annika felt her face grow warm, but Talvi’s eyes only twinkled brightly as she pulled herself away from his side and helped Chivanni prepare lunch.
“Where’s Dardis?” he asked. “I need to speak with her right away.” The flame-haired fairy pointed through the window towards the hayloft, and Talvi disappeared out the door, holding it open for Nikola, Pet and Shez. They all were carrying an armload of wood which they stacked near the fireplace. Not too long after that, Justinian led the others in with buckets of water.

“It looks like someone was trying to make snow angels out by the clothes line,” he said with a laugh. “Too bad they weren’t very good at it.”

“Oh trust me, they were great!” Runa shrieked, and fell to her knees with laughter. Justinian looked puzzled, but chalked it up to her being a silly wood nymph. He turned to the boys and gave them a stern look.

“Now the best way to show your mother how much you love her is to fetch all the water and chop all the wood for her all the time. Remember what I told you?” he reminded them.

“Yes, that you did the same for your mother before she died,” Edno said. “And then you did it for your grandmother.”

“That’s right. You never know how long you have with each other, so you have to be kind to each other while you are still together. Especially your mother!” he boomed, and the boys all nodded obediently.

Talvi returned with Dardis, Finn, and Zaven a half hour later. Talvi and Dardis had huge smiles and wet eyelashes, as if they’d been crying. It was also apparent that they’d made amends. She flitted over to Chivanni and whispered into his ear. He looked confused, but he dropped everything that he was doing and left with her immediately.

“That’s strange of him to just leave like that. You know how much pride he takes in his cooking,” Zaven observed as he went to check on the pot that was simmering on the stove.

“Didn’t he practically chase Aghavni out of the kitchen the other night?” Yuri wondered. “He wouldn’t even let her pick up a spoon.”

“What do you suppose they’re up to?” Nikola asked with a sly grin as he hung up his cloak and helmet.

“Probably not what you think, my friend,” Talvi snickered, and walked behind Annika, encircling her waist with his hands and nuzzling her neck.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Nikola looked a little irritated at him.


“Why do you think he’s always hiding in your cloak, Nik?” Talvi teased. “He thinks you’re cute.” Nikola’s face turned bright red as the room filled with little snorts and laughs, but he made no more mention of the matter.

After lunch, Talvi collected his bow and quiver, and led Edno, Dve and Tri outside for a lesson in archery. They weren’t gone very long when they came running back to the house, shouting and yelling.

“Hilda! Come quickly! Tri is hurt!” Talvi called.

“What happened?” Hilda asked. But everyone saw soon enough. An arrow was lodged in Tri’s hand, right through the center. He was trying his best not to cry, being the future warmonger that he was.

“He stuck his hand in front of the arrow on a dare. I only turned away for a second,” Talvi said.
“What were you thinking, giving them your lethal arrows when they’ve never picked up a bow in their lives? What is wrong with you?” Nikola glared at Talvi.

“How was I to know that they would dare each other to do something so stupid?” Talvi replied. Nikola looked baffled.

“Well, for one thing, they’re children, and children do stupid things when there aren’t any responsible adults watching them,” Nikola scolded. Justinian snapped the pointed end off and pulled the arrow quickly out of Tri’s hand, giving it to Talvi.

“It’s just a flesh wound, Nik,” his brother said calmly. “Besides…” He took the boy’s hand in his, and a soft warm glow encased both of their hands. When Justinian let go of Tri’s hand, Annika and the others saw that the bleeding had stopped. The wound had completely healed before everyone’s eyes. “Talvi and Hilda could have healed him, and you know there’s nothing to worry about when I’m around.”

“How did you do that?” Hilda gasped in amazement. Justinian smiled to himself.

“It’s a gift of being a paladin. I can’t cover a forest in ice, but I can heal myself and others extremely fast.”

As the boys scattered to go play outside, Annika looked around. Talvi was nowhere to be found. She looked all around the house and eventually wandered up to the hayloft, where she found him brooding.

“What’s wrong?”

“I feel terrible about Tri.”

“But he’s better. Didn’t you see Justinian heal him? That was amazing.”

“Yes, it was.”

“So what’s there to be upset about?”

“I’m supposed to prove myself to Justinian, but what can I do? I tried to teach the boys something useful, and look what happened. Nikola was right. What was I thinking? Trolls don’t use bows and arrows, they use clubs and axes. What am I good at that no one else is working on?”

“Lots of things,” Annika said.

“Well I can’t teach them to drink me under the table, I can’t teach them archery in a day, and playing them a gypsy song won’t do much good in the long term.”

“But you’re so good with your hands,” she said with a coy smile. “I’m sure you can think of something. I’ve seen those paintings in your room, and the murals on the ceiling in your dad’s library. And the greenhouse. With all the skills you have, combined with your artistic eye, I’m sure you’ll come up with something,” she assured with a wink.

For the rest of the afternoon, Zaven and Finn sat with Tri by the fire repairing the chairs that had sat unused outside for the past year. Justinian was glad the daredevil was using his hands for something less risky. The other older boys were tending to the sheep with the samodivi, showing off everything they’d learned from watching their dad, Justinian, and Nikola. Talvi and Annika sat at the table constructing a little house for the purpose of luring fairies back to the troll’s property. They kept stealing kisses when they thought no one was looking, and glancing at each other with stars in their eyes.

“It’s getting close to dinner time. Do you think it’s okay if we start cooking without Chivanni? I certainly don’t want to offend the fellow,” Justinian asked, polishing his armor with his brother. “I know he’s very particular about doing the cooking around here, but I’m getting hungry and I don’t know where he is.”

“Why don’t you ask Nikola to find him?” Talvi suggested. Nikola looked up from
“Perhaps if you stopped playing with your little dollhouse long enough to—”

“It’s not a dollhouse, it’s a fairy house,” Talvi swiftly corrected him as he carefully painted protective magical runes on the outer walls.

“Whatever you call it, you sure are wasting a lot of time on it,” Nikola muttered, wiping grime off of Justinian’s shield. Finn and Zaven glanced over at him, but said nothing.

“Building a fairy house is a highly complex task,” Talvi said softly, still focused on painting. “If you understood their purpose, you wouldn’t call them dollhouses. Annika thought they were birdhouses, but she knows better now,” he said, looking at her and smiling sweetly.

“I did think they were birdhouses at first, but they’re not,” she agreed. “It’s no wonder the fairies love to visit. Ask Finn or Zaven how many of these they have at home.” Nikola glanced at the two, who shrugged.

“Fifty two, I believe,” answered Finn.

“Hmm,” Nikola hummed in his most unimpressed tone and went back to his polishing. The samodivi came back with the boys and the house was bursting with the extra hustle and bustle of fairy-free cooking, as there was no trace of Dardis and Chivanni anywhere. It took much longer than they had expected, and Talvi took the opportunity to explain to the boys why it was so important to be kind to fairies.

“If you put up this house and leave them little gifts and don’t scare them away by being so loud, you might just convince a family to move in. If you do kind things for them and protect them, they’ll do kind things for you, like helping with chores and meals. In fact, it’s possible that you’ll never have to wait this long for your supper again. You’ve seen Chivanni’s fairy magic; you know he can make you a hundred pies if you want.”

“Really? That’s amazing!” The boys’ eyes lit up as though Talvi had just granted the best wish in the world.

“It’s true,” he went on. “But if you’re too noisy around the house or you’re mean to them, or if you trample the yard and don’t leave any green places for them to play and hide in, they’ll go away. That means no more dessert for you.” The boys looked around at each other and nodded. They weren’t about to jeopardize their beloved dessert.

Now that the chairs had been repaired, some of the boys sat at the dinner table. They had taken baths, and washed their hands, and they were back to using spoons and forks. Yuri, Hilda and Sariel looked very content with how things were turning out as Nikola asked everyone how their day went.

“Besides building that doll—I mean, fairy house, what else have you done around here?” he asked Talvi.

“Oh trust me, I’ve accomplished a lot today,” he said with hint of a smile.

“Such as?”

“I hung up the laundry to dry. Oh, and I made one impressive snow angel.”

“Well now, that’s quite something,” Nikola said facetiously. “You hung up laundry, made a snow angel, let one of the boys get shot with an arrow, and built a dollhouse all in one day. I’m impressed.” The group shared a few looks. They didn’t understand why he was being so nitpicky.

“For someone who drank so much last night, it’s a wonder you got anything done all,” Justinian said kindly. “Speaking from experience, I would still be lying in bed with
my head under a pillow.” His brother looked at him sideways, but said nothing.

“Well Nikola, I did do one other thing today,” Talvi said, smiling a little bigger. “But you probably don’t want to hear about it.”

“And what was that?” Nikola asked, folding his arms across his chest. But Talvi just shook his head.

“I really don’t think you would be interested.”

“Try me,” Nikola said, with a slight glare in his pale eyes.

“Come on, Talvi!” Runa cried. “I want to know!”

“Yes, me too. You have us all curious now,” Hilda said. He waited until everyone was begging, and he looked over at Annika, who had buried her face in her hands. She knew what he was going to say.

“Well,” he took a long breath, drawing out the suspense for everyone. “I asked for Annika’s hand, and she said yes.” There were gasps and hoots from everyone except Nikola, who was left wide-eyed and speechless.

“Congratulations!” said Zaven.

“We should have a toast!” cried Runa.

“Oh, please no,” Talvi said, making a wretched face. “Besides, I’m already intoxicated enough.” Justinian looked horrified at this remark.

“What?” he asked, looking surprised. “After last night?” Talvi grabbed Annika close and kissed her on the cheek.

“Don’t worry, I’m only drunk on love,” he assured him and flashed a goofy smile, making Nikola roll his eyes. The girls cooed and sighed, excluding Yuri. She stood abruptly and hurried outside with no explanation. Finn rose to his feet as well.

“Talvi, there’s something we need to discuss,” he said, looking at the door where Yuri had just left. He didn’t have the same smile as everyone else wore.

“Finn, I think he knows what to expect on the wedding night,” Hilda joked, taking his hand. Runa laughed so hard that she started to choke on her dinner.

“Yes, well, it really can’t wait. Come on Talvi, let’s go for a walk.” Finn seemed urgent, and it was obvious that his mind was racing behind those dark eyes as he walked towards the door.

“Can’t I at least finish dinner?” Talvi asked.

“It will be there when we get back. Now come on,” Finn said impatiently. “I just hope there’s enough time…”
Chapter 39
the ring thief

The next day Talvi was restless. He and Finn hadn’t returned until very late the previous night. They got back so late that Annika had only vaguely been aware of him curling next to her under their wool blankets. He was now carving a little table and chair set for the fairy house, but he wasn’t making much progress because he kept getting up and looking outside. Dardis and Chivanni weren’t back yet and he was starting to get worried.

“Why do you need to see Dardis and Chivanni so badly?” Yuri asked him. “They’re probably just looking for nearby fairies to come live in that house you’re making. It’s really nice. It’s one of the nicest that you’ve ever made.”

“Hmm…” was all her brother could respond with. She frowned as her compliment fell on deaf ears, then watched as he looked out the window again.

“That can’t be right,” Hilda yawned, trying to get Sedem to take a nap as she rocked him in the cradle. “The fairies left before you even started making that thing.” Talvi folded his arms across his chest and sighed heavily with concern.

“I know.”

That night Annika felt a hand nudge her awake from her dreams. It was the middle of the night and everyone else was deep in slumber.

“Annika, my little dove, wake up,” An urgent voice hissed. It was Talvi.

“Huh? What time is it? What’s going on?”

“Shhh, don’t wake anyone. Let me see your hands.” She pulled them out from underneath the blankets. He picked up her right hand and tapped her huge diamond ring.

“Aside from what’s wrapped around the ring, is the metal and stone very important to you?” he asked. She shook her head.

“Well, it’s worth a lot of money, but I’m not particularly attached to it. I only wear it because it’s so pretty. Why?”

“I wondered if I could borrow it for a while. I promise I’ll give it back, and I’ll be careful of what’s wrapped around it. I just want to show it to Dardis and Chivanni.”

“Right now? They’re back?” she asked, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

“Yes, they’ve just returned. May I see it?” His eyes were anxious, but he wouldn’t explain himself. She shrugged as she pulled it off. He quickly climbed back down the ladder and walked away with the expensive ring, examining it closely. She was confused as to why the fairies wouldn’t have asked her to see it before three in the morning on this particular day. She cracked open the giant window shutter in the loft and watched Talvi jog back into the house, where Finn was waiting for him at the door. A bright fire lit the main room and blue smoke was puffing furiously outside of the chimney, colored so by the constant moonlight of Badra and Vega. The cold air snuck under her shirtsleeve and chilled her to the bone. She closed the window quickly and went back to her bed, wondering what in the world the brothers were up to in the middle of the night.
Chapter 40
the first sunrise of winter

“Talvi, do you still have my ring?” Annika asked when she came into the kitchen the next day. He was putting the finishing touches on the little fairy house furniture.

“Oh right…I’m having it cleaned for you,” he said as he scratched his head. “I’ll give it back soon, I promise.”

“I know you’re lying. You didn’t lose it, did you? You know it’s not the ring that I’m attached to. It’s what’s wrapped around it that I’m more concerned about,” she frowned. He looked up at her and set down the small paintbrush.

“Sit down, we need to talk,” he said, his tired eyes glancing around. Neither he or Finn had come to bed last night, and it looked like they hadn’t slept a wink either. The boys were playing outside with Justinian and Nikola, and the others were gathered around the fire, too far away to hear what he had to say. Annika sat beside him and waited expectantly for her answer.

“Do you trust me?” he asked finally.

“Yeah.”

“Do you love me?”

(Of course!"

“Do you really want to marry me? What if it’s sooner than you expected?” he asked. Annika wasn’t sure where the conversation was going to end up.

“I haven’t really considered a date yet. I hate planning things. I’m a big procrastinator,” she admitted.

“Really? Hmm.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“Well…um…what if…” He bit his lip and took a deep breath. “How do you feel about getting married at sunrise?” Annika’s face melted. She thought outdoor weddings were so romantic, let alone one at sunrise with an early summer breeze and fresh flowers in bloom all around.

“That sounds so dreamy! When do you want to do it?”

“At sunrise,” he repeated.

“You mean, like tomorrow morning?” she squeaked. He nodded, and Annika felt a panic setting in. “…oh god…that soon? I thought, well, I thought I would have more time!” Her mouth grew very dry as a dim restaurant scene from months and months ago flashed into her head. The entire staff of the restaurant surrounding her table. A blue box from Tiffany’s sitting on that table. Plane tickets to Hawaii that departed in less than a week, sitting next to that blue box on the table. Danny’s expression as he delivered his heartfelt proposal, and then Danny’s face as she delivered her heartbreaking decline. She began to feel nauseous, but Talvi reached up and smoothed her hair to try and calm her nerves. He took a deep breath, and let it out slowly before he spoke.

“Annika, I would give you all the time in the world if I could. I told you I didn’t care when or how we were married,” he said gently. “I know it’s very sudden, but there are other circumstances that put the timing out of my hands.”

“It wouldn’t have anything to do with that walk you took with Finn, would it? Or why neither of you came to bed last night? Or why you’ve been acting so weird about the
“It has everything to do with all of that,” he said with his blue green eyes twinkling, but his confidence wasn’t as pervasive as usual. “I can’t really explain it just yet, but I promise I’ll tell you very soon.”

“Like, tomorrow morning?”

“Yes.”

“So, what am I supposed to do?” she asked. Her nausea had faded a little, but her heart and her thoughts were racing a mile a minute.

“Leave everything to me. All you have to do is trust me and show up. And you might want to dress warmly before you go to sleep tonight, so you don’t have to bother with dressing in the dark tomorrow. But,” he smiled to himself, “you’ll have to borrow a wool skirt from Dardis. You mustn’t wear pants, and especially no knickers,” he instructed, and picked up his paintbrush to finish his project.

That night, Annika couldn’t sleep. Her nerves had been building up all day, and she felt her hand shake more than a few times as she gave the boys haircuts. Luckily, they didn’t seem the type to mind her unsteady hand. When Finn had sat down for a trim, he turned to her, holding her trembling wrist in his large soft hands.

“It’s alright Annika, you can trust us,” he said in his rich, deep voice. “Have I ever let you down?” he asked. She shook her head. “You’re such a strong person; don’t be afraid. If you love him as much as I know you do, you have nothing to fear.” He held her close and she felt her anxiety absorb into him. “Please don’t cut too much off. Hilda is very fond of my curls.”

Now she was lying next to his brother, unable to close her eyes. They had dressed and nestled under their blankets before anyone else had come up for bed, and no one except Finn had a clue what they were up to. Annika was afraid to look in Talvi’s eyes. She didn’t doubt that she loved him, and she didn’t doubt that he loved her just as much. But she couldn’t shake the nervousness completely. It was all happening so fast. She felt Talvi’s hand rest on her face and his thumb stroking her cheek tenderly, then saw his face in front of hers. In the dark, his eyes barely glittered, but she could feel the tip of his nose brush her own as he stared into her soul.

I can’t sleep, can you? she asked him silently.

No, he blinked, replying so no one could hear them. The harder I try, the more elusive it becomes. Are you nervous?

Yeah, a little. I’m sorry. I can’t help it.

Don’t be sorry. I would be much more concerned if you weren’t nervous at all. I am too, but I know everything will be all right in the end.

What will happen in the end? I don’t understand.

All the answers will reveal themselves when the time is right. I promise. You know I keep my word.

She was overwhelmed by a sensation of freedom, as though a great weight had been lifted off of her shoulders. She could feel in that moment how much he truly loved her. She reached out her hand and traced the lines of his eyebrows, down his straight nose, exploring his face with her fingertips. She wanted to know every line, every rise of the cheekbone and hollow of the jaw, along with the delicate angle of his softly pointed ears. She looked at him with wonder, amazed to feel the most spiritually sublime of emotions
wash over her. It left her saturated in the deepest of loves like the wet sand on the edge of
the sea. But the thing that amazed her most was the intense connection, the frequency
they shared which spoke to her, telling her that he indeed, at this very moment was
feeling the exact same thing.

“Annika, get up. It’s time.”

The forest was still dark, but after twenty minutes of riding they came to a little
meadow. There was a large glowing circle on the ground, and as Ghassan came to a halt,
Annika saw it consisted of dozens of burning white candles, with a pile of pillows in the
center. The fairies were waiting for them outside the circle. Talvi and Annika dismounted
and he took her hand as they stepped over the candles and into the center of the circle.
“I’m so nervous,” Dardis said as her periwinkle wings fluttered in excitement. “I’ve
never married anyone before.”

“Is that why you and Chivanni disappeared?” Annika asked. The blue-haired fairy
nodded her head enthusiastically.

“Yes. Right after Talvi apologized to me for calling me that horrible name, he told
me he wanted to marry you,” she said happily. “We had to look all over to find the
nearest fairies to teach us how to do it properly.”

“If those trolls hadn’t scared them all off, it definitely would have made them a lot
easier to find,” Chivanni sighed, and smoothed his long bangs to one side of his face.
“It’s a good thing we found them when we did.” Dardis motioned for them to kneel down
on the pillows facing each other as she had them hold out their left hands. In their right
hands, Chivanni placed a ring that shined brightly. They were identical rings, except for
their size. They were thin and delicate, with intricate silver designs running along the
circumference of the band.

“I promised I would return your ring,” Talvi said with a smile. “I think these are
much prettier, don’t you?”

“This is what you did with it?” she gasped. “Where’s the diamond?”

“The diamond couldn’t be used,” Chivanni said proudly. “It’s too pure and too hard
of a substance for magic to alter. But the platinum melted quite nicely, after we got the
fire hot enough. Do you like your ring?”

“It’s gorgeous…” Annika sighed, examining it closer in the flickering firelight.
Chivanni appeared satisfied with her response and let Dardis step close to them.

“Because this hand is nearest to your hearts, this shall be the hand that will show the
world your love for one another,” she said, sniffling a little. “This shall be the hand that
wears the ring, the hand that sheds the blood, the hand that binds you together as you
consecrate your union with each other.” Annika’s heart thumped wildly as Talvi slipped
her ring onto her finger, and then she did the same to him. She looked into his eyes, and
she realized that this was the very moment he’d seen when they had first kissed. Goose
bumps flashed over her entire body, even though she was dressed warmly enough.

“Annika?” Chivanni said nervously. She looked over at him and saw he was holding
Talvi’s knife, offering it to her on his palms. She’d never looked at it closely before. The
blade was inscribed with strange writing and the handle looked to be carved from ebony.
She picked it up carefully and Talvi turned his palm upwards, holding it out to her.

“Don’t be afraid,” Talvi told her. “But press as deeply as you can. You won’t hurt
me.” She felt her stomach jump about as she pressed hard into his hand. The blade was
razor sharp, and it cut deeper than she had intended. He flinched, but his eyes remained fixated on hers. Blood was gathering in his left palm as he took the knife in his right and quickly cut into her left hand, making her cry out as her blood rushed to the surface. Chivanni collected the knife while Dardis held up their hands and pressed the bleeding wounds together. Talvi’s fingers folded in between Annika’s tightly as Dardis wound a thick white cord around their hands and knotted it again and again. Annika could feel the rings clinking together lightly. Talvi shuddered, and when he blinked, tears fell down his cheeks.

“The reason you and I are here at this day and time is because three hundred years ago my parents received a prophecy. It was Dragana’s great-grandmother who told them that the first male twin to be born to them would be married on the same day as his creation to a girl from a distant land; a very unusual girl, one with the blood of a samodiva running in her veins.

She told mother that we’d been conceived at dawn on the first day of winter, and that I should be called such, so that I never forgot my destiny. Talvi means winter. As for Anatolius,” he smiled softly at her, “I know you think it’s amusing, but it means sunrise. It’s a good thing that Finn is so observant about the solstice and Yule, because I had no idea that it was already so late in the year. Time has flown so quickly since you came into my life, and I honestly think everything happens for a reason, Annika. Everything.

I used to believe that love was trite, that it would make me weak, and I’ve tried to avoid it for so long. If I had been the marrying type, I might’ve ended up with the wrong elf a long time ago. I wouldn’t have known you existed. If you hadn’t come to visit your uncle, I never would have seen you that day in Sofia. If the Pazachi hadn’t altered the portals, you might have returned home without me ever finding you again. And of all the unicorns in the land, why would Nadira have come to you and surrendered an indestructible hair of hers?”

“Nadira?”
“Yes, the only black unicorn known to exist.”
“But Sariel said she was pure white,” Annika replied.
“She used to be,” he said knowingly. “Every other unicorn is as white as the driven snow, but Nadira is black with silver hair. When she rescued your greatest grandmother, she absorbed her darkest pain. It altered her physical appearance forever.”

“Nadira gave me the hair as a gift…and when I asked her how I could repay her, she told me to use it when the time was right,” Annika said with amazement.

“I really cannot think of a better time, Annika. Can you?” He pushed back the hood of his cloak. “Look at our rings.” At that very moment the sun’s first rays of light struck out over the horizon, flooding the sky with an onslaught of orange and bright pink. It seemed the sun had never burned so brightly as it did that morning of the winter solstice. Annika’s eyes were watering from the intense light, but she blinked until she could see the rings closer. She squinted, recognizing the tiniest shapes inside of the band. It was fairy writing.

“Do you recognize what it says?” he whispered.
“Yes!” she gasped. They were the glyphs he had written in the dirt so long ago. They were the words he had said to her the first time they kissed. “Mo reis to comp anya vlatzee.” Talvi nodded and both of the fairies wept out loud.

“This way, even when you’ve gone home, our love can cross any meadow…no
matter how large, no matter how far apart we are. Do you recognize what I had Dardis and Chivanni use to make the characters? It’s that strand of Nadira’s hair. Our rings are one and the same, created from the same metal, from the same strand of hair, forged by the same hands. Everything was used to make them, except the diamond, which was too hard to break. There will never be another ring like ours made.” Annika started to cry and he held her against his chest.

“But I don’t want you to be across the meadow,” she cried into his cloak. “I want you next to me. I want you right here!”

“I will be, I promise,” he replied as his own tears ran down his chin, falling on her face. “No matter where I am or where you are, as long as you’re touching your ring, you’re touching me.” She reached into his hair with her free hand and kissed him with all the love in her heart. She was moved to a higher state of consciousness, elevated by a higher emotion, transcending space and time as they kissed. His soft, warm lips brushed away her tears as he lay her gently down on the pillows, squeezing her left hand tightly in his. Her body immediately responded to his knees nudging hers apart as he carefully rested his chest on hers. His weight on her felt delicious, and erased the fear of him ever leaving her. Their combined blood was still trickling down their elbows, dripping on her clothes. She moved her arm to lick some of it off her arm. It tasted smoky, rich, and magical. She kissed him again and he reached his cold hand into her cloak, warming his fingers against her thighs before sliding them up farther. She could feel his breath warm up her cold nose.

“Alright you two…” Chivanni said in a choked up voice. Dardis was crying softly beside him. “This is the part where you make it official.” Annika’s eyes snapped open in shock.

“What?” She looked at Talvi, whose fingers remained in place.

“Oh, I knew there was something I was neglecting to tell you,” he said, trying his best not to grin.

“Tradition states that there must be two fairies who witness it, but I think we can count on you to consummate your marriage,” Dardis wiped her eyes and winked. “We’ll be on the other side of the hill waiting to untie you. And take all the time you need.” They shrank to their tiny size and disappeared. Annika let out a sigh of relief when Talvi caressed her again, but her emotions had already stimulated her body to the point where his touch would set her on fire at any second.

“Stop,” she whispered. He looked terrified that she might back down after coming so far. “If we’re going to do this, I want it to be perfect.” He looked relieved, but slightly confused.

“Well, if my hand wasn’t tied up, it would be perfect. I’m a bit restricted in what I can do, but I’ll make it up to you on the honeymoon,” he snickered. She shook her head.

“No, I have to feel it at the exact same time that you do,” she insisted. He looked at her apologetically.

“What’s wrong?” she asked as she fumbled with one hand to unbutton his pants. “It’s definitely not the cold.” He smiled in relief.

“No, but I…I don’t know how long I can last. I’m a bit overwhelmed.”

“Me too,” she murmured. She was oblivious to the freezing air that surrounded them, the trees rustling overhead, the piercing bright light of the sunrise, the candles flickering around them. She barely noticed him drape his cloak over their bodies before pushing up
her skirts, until she felt his hot skin come into contact with her own. The love and lust in his eyes was all she could see; their wounds bleeding into each other was all she could feel. It burned and stung, but he only gripped her hand tighter. She gasped with both relief and revived hunger as his body entered hers, driving his hard flesh deep into her over and over.

“Annika…tell me when,” he sighed. She nodded as she felt her climax threatening to strike. “Now?”

“No…wait.”

His hips rocked slower against hers, grinding at an exquisite pace, delaying the inevitable as long as he could.

“How about now?” he breathed heavily. His eyes were almost shut.

“Just a little more,” she begged.

“Like this?” he asked, pushing harder into her.

“Yes! Now!” Her body began to tremble and he thrust even deeper, his cry of relief sounding like music to her. She moaned out at first in her own pleasure, but then it morphed into a scream of terrible pain. A blistering agony filled her that made the original knife wound in her hand seem like a pinprick. At the same time there was a horrible tearing noise that ripped through the sky, and she was blinded by an enormous lavender light. The place where their hands were joined was searing. The excruciating pain was rapidly traveling up her arm, creeping towards her shoulder, towards her heart. Another gut wrenching wave hit her again, originating deep inside her body where he was still nestled against her womb. The two sources of the pain tore through her body until they joined together under her ribcage. She felt as though the very blood in her veins was on fire.

“What have you done to me?” she screamed. She could smell burnt flesh, and even though she tried to pull her left hand away, it was of no use. Dardis had tied so many knots that it was impossible. Talvi couldn’t let her go even as she begged and shrieked in his ear to do so. She fought against him with her other hand, but he held it down. Her cries echoed for miles through the trees with her pain. When they finally faded along with her suffering, she opened her eyes and looked up to see three faces peering over her. Talvi, Dardis, and Chivanni stared down at her with awestruck expressions.

“You were there the whole time?” she gasped, feeling humiliated and violated. Thankfully, Talvi’s cloak still covered them both. She was still trying to catch her breath through her tears.

“Tradition is tradition for a reason,” Dardis said seriously. “We had to stay in case something like this happened.”

“What did you do to me?” she sobbed, glaring at Talvi. The fairies looked at each other with wide eyes.

“I’m sorry Annika…I didn’t know it would hurt you like that,” he apologized. He let her right hand go and brushed her tears away. “Are you still in pain?”

“Get off of me! Get out of me!” she demanded, trying feebly to push him off with her free hand, but he was just too much for her to take on successfully. Her blood was still tingling. Her whole body was filled with the effervescent sensations, like her blood had been infused with white-hot champagne. “What have you done to me?”

“To be honest, we don’t really know yet,” Dardis admitted. “We’ve never combined so much magic before.”
“How can you not know? I thought this was fairy magic!”

“Oh, it was definitely fairy magic,” Chivanni said, putting his hand on his hip. “But it was also elf magic. And samodiva magic. And unicorn magic. And love.”

“You call that love?” she asked, facing up to look Talvi in the eyes. “If you loved me, you wouldn’t have done this to me!” He looked more sorrowful than she could have ever imagined him capable of being.

“It’s because I love you that I did this to you,” he said. “Can’t you see that? Can’t you see what I’ve done? Dardis, free our hands.”

Dardis carefully untied the knots, unwinding the blood-stained cord from their hands. Annika jerked her hand away and managed to pull her skirts down and push Talvi off of her. She wasted no time getting back on her feet, and took off running.

She ran for the longest time, darting in between the trees with the ease of a deer, surprised she wasn’t out of breath yet. She was expecting to be wheezing and coughing by this point, but now her lungs only served to fill themselves with the cold, clean air. The sun had risen high enough to light up the forest, and she was overcome by the intensity of all the colors around her. She felt like she’d been wearing a pair of glasses that made the world dull and muddy her whole life, and suddenly they were gone. The sky had never looked so blue, and the tree trunks weren’t merely brown, but she could see flecks of blue, green, yellow and orange in them, as if they were painted by a billion tiny artist brushes. Her blood pumped through her body, still tingling a little, making every muscle in her body feel electrically charged. The scents in the air were so strong that she could almost taste them. She stopped and turned around, and found herself alone.

There were little sounds of scampering and fluttering all about her, but it was only the noises of small woodland creatures. Birds were singing above her, and the bare branches swaying in the breeze caught her ears. The noise was filling her head, as though it had been amplified a dozen times. A dull pain formed in her chest, in her heart, sending her to her knees, then quickly subsided as it diffused throughout her arteries and veins. She couldn’t make sense of what had just happened. One moment Talvi was making love to her, and the next he had given her such pain. She wiped her tear streaked face with her hands and stared at what she saw. There, on her left palm, ran a bright pink line where it had been cut so deeply less than a half hour earlier.

The scent of a horse caught on the wind and played at her nose, along with fruit trees and cinnamon. She knew that scent. It was Talvi’s scent. She heard the rumble of hooves, and before she could get up, he was standing at her side along with Dardis and Chivanni.

“It worked!” Chivanni gasped as he looked over her shoulder. “I can’t believe it!”

“What worked?” she whispered. Dardis reached for her hand and pointed at the scar, which seemed to be less bright. Annika’s demeanor swiftly changed from angry humiliation to curiosity.

“He gave you his blood, Annika! One quarter of the blood in his veins is human, and it must have reacted upon contact with yours. Here’s the proof!” squeaked Dardis, shaking Annika’s healed hand. Talvi fell to his knees in front of her, clutching her in his arms.

“Ambrose, his father… Talvi’s grandfather…” Annika stumbled, wide eyed.

“He was a human,” Dardis reminded her. “The combination of samodiva, elf, and human blood you both share, along with Nadira’s mysterious power has joined you with him for the rest of your lives.”
“Look at your ring, Annika. Look at mine. Do you see what’s happened?” Talvi sat back on his heels and held his hand up in front of her, and she saw both of the rings glittering brightly, still warm. That was what had burned her skin. There was something strange about the fairy writing inside of it. She tried to twist it around to look underneath, but it only stung and burned her, pulling the skin with it.

“The ring is fused to my finger!” she breathed in amazement. The silver threads had indeed embedded themselves into her flesh. He nodded and looked at her with large eyes. She glanced up at Dardis and Chivanni.

“Is it over then? Is it finished?” she asked, and the fairies nodded. “I don’t mean to be rude at all, but can you give us a few minutes alone? For real, this time.” They nodded again and flew back in the direction they had come from. She turned to Talvi.

“Please, understand I didn’t want to hurt you,” he pleaded. “I was afraid you would change your mind if I told you how much it might hurt. I didn’t know it would be so overwhelming for you. I’m sorry it hurt, but I’m not sorry I did it. I love you, Annika. I thought this is what you wanted…to be with me always. Nothing between us is over or finished; this is merely the beginning of you and I.” She cradled his face in her hand and he placed his hand on top of hers.

“You made me immortal to be with you?” she whispered. He gave a little shrug.

“Well, as much as I’ll ever be,” he said. She looked at her hand again; the scar on her palm was almost white.

“This is going to take some time to get used to,” she said softly, unable to comprehend the new life that lay ahead of her. He laughed and wiped the tears off his face one last time, helping her to her feet.

“I said I would love to give you all the time in the world. I hope you like your wedding present.”
When they rode up to Ohan and Aghavni’s front yard, they were met by everyone, even Konstantin in his long black coat, sunglasses and gloves.

“What was that strange light? Did you see it?” they were all asking, looking perplexed. But Finn’s wise eyes looked relieved.

“So…” he said, grinning wide, “Will we be calling you Annika Marinossian from now on?”

“Is that what that was?” Hilda wondered, looking beyond insulted. “You snuck off and got married, and you didn’t even invite us?” Annika smiled to herself.

“Trust me, you didn’t want to be there,” she said, trying not to blush, but it was too late for that. Hilda, Runa, and the others wrinkled their foreheads in confusion, but Finn stifled a laugh.

“You really got married?” Yuri screeched in disbelief. “But…what, how?” She didn’t look nearly as happy for them as the others did. In fact, she didn’t look happy at all. Finn spoke up quickly before she drew too much attention to herself.

“We can at least have a celebratory feast in their honor,” he suggested. “Now that’s something I don’t think any of us want to miss.”

“I feel really bad that I ran away like that,” Annika told Chivanni while putting away dishes after their midday meal. “I didn’t mean to freak out, but it was really scary.” The red-haired fairy turned to her and gave her a wry little grin.

“I can hardly blame you for it,” he said. “I would have run away too, if he came after me with that monster he keeps locked away under his belt.” She grinned and punched him in the arm, and was shocked to see him go flailing backwards, landing in a chair.

“Owww!” he cried, looking at her with a puzzled expression as he stood up.

“I’m sorry,” she joked. “I must not know my own strength.” She kept waiting for him to start laughing, but he was touching his arm gingerly and frowning at her.

“Apparently you don’t,” his serious face stopped her laughing right away.

“You mean I actually hurt you? But I didn’t even hit you that hard! I was just playing.”

“It doesn’t hurt,” he said, looking a little miffed.

“Annika, come outside, will you?” Justinian asked, having seen the entire episode. He and Sariel stepped outside, holding the door for her to follow them. Sariel disappeared into the barn while Justinian looked at Annika with a strange expression.

“I saw what you just did to that fairy. I know he’s not the most...masculine one in the group, but you really don’t know how hard you hit him. Sariel told me that you know martial arts. Have you any experience with a sword?” he asked.

“I’ve used a practice katana a few times. Why? What are you getting at?” she asked, but oddly enough she already knew. She could read his thoughts like a book, so much easier than before. Her amulet must have been working double-time.

“I want you to fight Sariel,” Justinian said. Annika raised an eyebrow in curiosity and saw Sariel come back from the barn with her sword and the one she’d given Annika in the library the day they left the Marinossian’s home.
“But what if I hurt her? What if she hurts me?” she said, looking at Justinian. Once again, she could hear his thoughts as if he were speaking aloud.

You know she has tasted the blood of a unicorn. I doubt you’ll cause her any harm. And even so, I’m standing right here. There is no cause for concern, as long as no heads are severed.

Sariel tossed the slender sword over to Annika, and she plucked it casually from the air the way one picks an apple from a tree. She looked at the menacing blade which curved to a point at the end. It was the same length as a katana, though wider and heavier. It felt good in her hand. She curled her fingers around the hilt and gave it a swing, cutting the air.

“Are you ready?” Sariel asked with a smile. “I’ll go easy on you while you warm up.” Annika took a long breath and slowly let it out. She turned sideways and rest her weight on her left foot, standing en garde. Bringing the blade to her nose, she reflected for a moment, trying to picture in her mind how to go about her attack. She lifted the sword over her shoulder and leapt forward, swinging hard. Sariel blocked her with ease, pushing her backwards and coming at her left side. She turned the sword at the last second, smacking Annika hard with the flat side of it.

“Oww!”

“You left yourself wide open!” she shouted at Annika, then charged, swinging again. Annika blocked it, but Sariel’s strength was getting the best of her.

“Choke up higher on the crosspiece—it will give you more power to push me away,” she huffed. Their weapons met a dozen more times, but Annika was afraid of hurting her friend, even though Justinian was there.

“Are you certain that you’ve had training? I don’t think you know what you’re doing,” Sariel taunted. “I’m still mad at you for calling me a bitch, by the way! You know, you never did tell anyone exactly what happened that night Vaj died.” She swung at Annika and missed. “But I know all about it!” Annika’s eyes opened wide.

“Shut up, Sariel! Nothing happened!” she yelled back. Sariel stepped back and gloated, which only made Annika’s temper flare.

“You never told me that you actually propositioned Nikola. And what a gentleman he was, turning you down.” Annika’s blood was boiling.

“Sariel, that’s enough!” Justinian shouted. Annika didn’t dare look to see if they had an audience or not, all she cared about was defeating her. She felt her anger roll up from someplace deep in her belly, and rise to her wrists as she lunged at Sariel with a fierce yell.

The sword cut through the air behind her opponent; the tip grazed her back and then a thin line of red spread across Sariel’s back from underneath her blouse. She seemed shocked at this, but recovered quickly and rushed at Annika again, knocking her to the ground, and pressed the steel to her neck. Kneeling over her, she panted hard with a wild look in her eyes. This was what she lived for.

“You aren’t part bloodwood by chance, are you?” Annika sneered. “You’re bloodthirsty enough to be one.” Sariel blinked and smiled victoriously, still panting. She didn’t move her weapon. Without warning she was thrown backwards by the same move that Annika had used on Talvi while practicing near the stables. Her swift feet had gone unnoticed as Sariel had been sidetracked by her comment. Now Annika was on them, and while Sariel was still on her back, Annika pinned her raised weapon to the ground. She
stepped on the blade and raised her arms over her head, bringing her sword straight down with a ferocious growl. It sank deep into the ground only an inch from Sariel’s belly. Her glaring eyes met Annika’s, but only for a moment.

“That’s enough!” Justinian yelled, separating the girls.

“I was just trying to get her to fight harder,” Sariel snapped. “It worked, didn’t it?”

Annika reached behind him and yanked the weapon out of the ground, stomping back towards the house. Nikola was standing under a tree with the wolves, where he’d been observing the practice session. She stepped in front of him and gave him a nasty look.

“I thought we weren’t going to mention that to anyone, and I know that she can’t read minds!” she hissed. “It was you who told her, wasn’t it?” Nikola batted his blue eyes and smiled innocently.

“Perhaps you can recall a rather loud argument back on the ship,” he said. “I have no need to boast of such things, not when you do it so well on your own.”
Chapter 42

Aghavni’s gift

“They’re coming! Quick, everyone get inside!” Zaven said with excitement the next morning, ushering Runa and the others into the house where Hilda and Yuri were serving breakfast. Ohan and Aghavni strolled through the door looking completely refreshed and rejuvenated. But Aghavni was clearly not prepared to experience what had happened while she was gone. The house was spotless, every dish was put away, and every linen was washed and folded. The fairy house had been hung in a tree in the front yard, and a flagstone path led the way to the threshold rather than a shallow and muddy trench. The garden was fenced in well enough to keep out even the most determined rabbit, and was ready for tilling in the following spring. Her six eldest sons were sitting on fixed chairs at the clean table with bathed bodies and trimmed hair and washed hands, eating their breakfast with spoons and using napkins instead of their miraculously clean sleeves to wipe their faces. Baby Sedem was in Hilda’s arms, squealing in delight at seeing his mother, as the other boys got up and ran to her, enveloping her and her round belly in their arms.

“Mother, we missed you!” cried Shez.

“Mother, I’m sorry I never fetched you water before! I’ll do it from now on!” Tri promised.

“No you won’t! I will!” Pet announced.

“No, it’s going to be my job, I’m the oldest!” said Edno.

“Well then I’m going to be in charge of chopping wood!” Chetri squeaked.

“No, I’m going to be in charge of that! I’m the second oldest!” said Dve.

“You two can’t be in charge of gathering water and wood!” Chetri argued.

“I get to fold the laundry then!” Pet piped up.

“That’s not fair!” Shez whined.

“BOYS!” Ohan boomed. For a moment he looked as though he had stepped into the wrong house. But Aghavni didn’t appear that way for a second. Her eyes began to water as she sat down.

“Mother, are you sad?”

“Mother, why are you crying?”

“Mother, do you want me to find you a sea monkey?” Aghavni wrinkled her blue nose and looked at her children.

“What, pray tell, is a sea monkey?” she asked, overcome with emotion.

“Annika said they’re in the water, but they are so small, you need to look in many different buckets to find them,” Edno answered proudly. Aghavni’s blank expression was met with a wink from Annika.

“Well then, I’ll tell you all about it at bedtime,” she said, winking back. “Annika’s right, you know.” Ohan and his wife looked around the house as if it were a museum, inspecting everything very carefully.

“My red chair!” he cried. “I thought you got rid of it!”

“Well, I’ve thought about it more than once,” his wife said with a smile.

“It’s amazing what happens when you wash the cushions,” Sariel grinned. “Did you see the fairy house? I think I saw some fairies looking at it earlier this morning.”
“Did you hear that?” Pet said to Shez. “That means we get pie, if we do our chores!”

The boys started to bicker and argue about who could do the most chores and eat the most pie, when Talvi spoke up.

“Remember what I told you about fairies liking things peaceful and quiet where they live?” He reminded them. They nodded and hushed up.

“We can’t be noisy around the house or we don’t get any pie,” Dve whispered, glancing fiercely at his brothers. Clearly nothing was going to come between a future warmonger and his dessert.

“I am so grateful. You didn’t have to do all this for us,” Aghavni said, still looking around house in wonder. “I never in my wildest dreams thought…well, perhaps in my wildest dreams I did think my boys could act the way they are acting right now.” She wanted to say more, but her proud sons had taken her by the hands and wanted to show her the fairy house, and the mended garden fence, and the well-stocked wood pile. When she was gone, Ohan turned to Finn, Justinian, and all of his other guests. He took a deep breath and sighed contentedly.

“You know, I haven’t seen my wife so happy in years. I don’t know if you realize what you have done for her. I always thought that my sons were fine boys, but what I saw just now only confirms my highest hopes of the fine trolls they will become.”

“They already are good boys. They love their mom, but they really look up to their dad,” said Annika. Ohan’s face turned into a grin as he stood up a little straighter to his full eleven feet, puffing out his chest a little.

“They certainly do, don’t they?” he beamed. When Aghavni came back wearing her impressed smile, she rolled up the long sleeves of her dress and turned to her husband.

“Well, I had better get busy packing your things. Would you like to sharpen that axe of yours before or after lunch?”
Chapter 43

the snow leopards

The group departed early the next morning and traveled lightly over the traces of snow still left on the ground. Everyone except for Ohan, of course, who couldn’t have been in a better mood. His enthusiasm was contagious, as well as his confidence in which direction to travel. When it grew dark they set up their heavy tents around the fire, and Annika greatly missed the soft warmth of the hayloft. The ground was stiff and cold, but at least she was warm, with all the women plus Chivanni in one tent and all the men in another, and Ohan happily on his own.

Every day they rode, every night they set up the tents around the fire, and other than pristine landscapes of mountains and trees surrounding them, they didn’t run into a single soul. There was a sense of foreboding that they were all aware of. They knew they were getting closer to the Pazachi. Nikola and his brother could sense it, and now led the way most of the time, flanked by the two massive wolves, with Ohan and Talvi bringing up the rear.

Almost four days had passed, and Annika realized it was Christmas. She wondered what her family was doing, hoping they weren’t sitting around their decorated tree, crying. She could imagine her stocking hanging empty, and Charlie digging for his apple and orange and countless candies and chocolates. Or maybe it was full, and Charlie was digging in both of them.

“You kids are far too old for stockings. Maybe next year you won’t get one,” she could hear her mother threatening them every year.

“One of these years, you’ll find a lump of coal, just you wait!” She could picture her dad shaking his finger at them as he refilled his cup of spiked eggnog for the umpteenth time. She could remember each other, sniffing the air. Even Nikola appeared concerned, which was an unusual change from his laid-back attitude.

Annika’s eyes darted up to the tree above them and her heart thumped loudly a few times. A long fluffy tail was curling above them.

*Nikola, look up!* She warned him with her mind. Just as he lifted his head, a huge ball of spotted white fur pounced on him, knocking him off his elk and onto the ground.

“Takeshi!” he called out, but he didn’t scream in fear. He wrestled with the animal, a beautiful snow leopard, but no claws were drawn. Fast as lightning, Talvi and Yuri drew their bows as another larger snow leopard jumped out of the trees, swishing its tail back and forth like a dog ready to play.

“Don’t shoot!” Annika cried. Although she didn’t know why, she had the feeling that if the big cats were going to kill anyone, they would have done it by now. The wolves hadn’t even bothered to attack, let alone growl at them. They only cocked their heads
curiously to one side, and then the other. The leopards batted Nikola around with their large paws, knocking off his helmet, and bared their dagger-like fangs, but they weren’t biting. Nikola finally threw his arms around their necks in a big hug as a huge smile crept across his face. The leopards grunted happily as he hugged them close to his body. Finn and Zaven lowered their weapons.

“I guess they’re friendly, aren’t they?” Finn observed with caution.

“They better be friendly! They’re nearly my own flesh and blood,” Nikola laughed, and right at that moment, it was not two snow leopards that stood before them, but a young man and woman. Both of them wore helmets similar to his, except with sleek black antlers. Dark brown almond shaped eyes peered from their round doll-like faces, and their non-threatening smiles mirrored one another. They wore matching jackets made of deer skins with white rabbit fur trim. Leather pants were tucked into their white fur boots, which enabled them to walk with incredible stealth.

“This is Natari,” said Nikola, introducing the girl. “And her brother Takeshi.” The siblings smiled at the others, and Justinian was beaming with happiness.

“How long has it been? Have you been living here all this time?” he asked.

“No, the Pazachi drove us away, and we’ve been living on the edge of the forest all this time,” Takeshi explained. “It’s been about two years now.”

“Two years…” Nikola sighed.

“We’ve been keeping an eye on them ever since…ever since you left,” Natari said. She adjusted her helmet and looked curiously at the men in the group, particularly Ohan and the elves. “There has been a lot of activity in the woods,” she continued after sizing them up. “The animals tell us that the Pazachi have built something strange inside a nearby cave.”

“Have you seen it? What is it?” Justinian asked.

“We can’t get close enough to tell, but there was one swallow who described it like a wheel. The cave is guarded by four Pazachi at all times, and dozens more live inside. We’d never get past them, even with our abilities,” she said with a shrug.

“But you’re shape-shifters,” Hilda said. “Can’t you become a squirrel or a rabbit and see for yourselves?”

“No, I wish we could,” Takeshi sighed. “We can only become a mammal of similar size. The smallest creature I could ever manage was a fox, back when I was still a boy.”

“And a rabbit is still far too small, even for me,” his slender sister said. “Besides…there’s not much I could disguise myself as and get past them. They’d either kill me for being a threat, or kill me for food.”

“Do you have anything to eat?” Takeshi asked. “I’m so tired of hunting animals on all fours. What I wouldn’t give for a couple of buttermilk biscuits and berry compote like Dragana used to make.”

“Eww,” Runa squealed. “You eat raw meat?”

“Desperate times call for desperate measures.”

“I don’t know if I can make berry compote like Dragana used to make, but we could definitely stop and have lunch,” Chivanni said.

“We could set up camp now and get some extra rest,” advised Justinian. “We have a lot of catching up to do, but I’m also very interested to hear what else you’ve learned from watching the Pazachi.” The group dismounted and began building a fire underneath a group of thickly trunked trees, sheltering them from the cold wind.
“How is Dragana?” Takeshi asked. Nikola looked at his brother with sorrowful eyes.
“I think she has passed already. I can feel her spirit in the air now.”
“I’m sorry to hear that. I would have liked to tell her goodbye.”
“You knew her as well?” Yuri asked.
“Yes, she raised us all together when our parents were killed by the Pazachi,” Natari informed her. She took off her helmet and ran her fingers through her hair. It was short, and it stuck out in every direction, similar to Talvi’s, though his hair was much thicker than hers.
“I’m sorry to hear your parents died,” Talvi said to her. She shook her head.
“We were so young, I don’t remember much at all. I remember crying a lot, but I didn’t know why. Justinian was around fourteen when it happened. I think because he remembers his anger and pain, this is why he swore his vengeance to return when he was powerful enough and kill Draganos and Zagora. He would rather strike with the sword than his mind.”

“Who are they?” Hilda asked.
“The leaders of the Pazachi.”

“Justinian’s been training his whole life just to kill one bloke and one woman? That ought to be easy enough,” Talvi said, sounding a little arrogant. He had his quiver beside him and was marking the ends of his arrows with blue paint leftover from the fairy house to keep track of how many Pazachi he could hit. Natari frowned and stuck her fingertips into the ground. There was a mild vibration coming from below them, and suddenly Talvi found his legs and hands bound to the forest floor by roots.

“Not bloodwoods!” he yelped, and the others glanced around in fear. They had not planned on more of the flesh-eating trees to contend with. But Natari was laughing. They weren’t bloodwoods at all, just the roots of one of the nearby oak trees. She drew a small white knife from her belt similar to the one Nikola had used to gouge out Vaj’s eyes, and held it against his neck with a limp wrist, clearly not intending to use it.

“Don’t underestimate what one woman can do to you,” she grinned. “Take it back, and I’ll free you.”

“I think I’d take her advice, Talvi,” Hilda said with a laugh. He gave one last jerk of his arms, but he finally surrendered.

“Fine, I take it back, just let me go,” he insisted. She returned her knife to its sheath and waved her hand slowly above his knees. The roots loosened their grip and disappeared back into the ground. She gave him a very smug look as she turned towards Hilda and the others as though nothing had happened.

“Anyway, as I was saying earlier, the Pazachi have built a strange wheel in the cave,” Natari continued. “Takeshi and I would have been recognized very quickly, and killed just as swiftly as our parents were if we came too close to it.”

“So there’s no chance of negotiating with them?” Finn asked. No sooner had the words come out of his mouth than Takeshi shook his head with a grim expression.

“Our friends already tried that, and they lost their heads over it,” Takeshi replied as he took an empty spot near the fire. He watched with interest as the fairies busied themselves with lunch.

“We don’t have time to go back for reinforcements,” Konstantin declared. “If they realize they’ve been discovered, they will be gone before we know which direction they went. If they have entrenched themselves underground for the winter, we will sustain
fewer casualties with a surprise attack. I say we eradicate them now and be done with it.”

“I don’t disagree with you,” said Natari. “We’ve been collecting information by using the animals as spies. We know that there’s only one entrance. We guessed that there are about fifty of them living in there, but I’m uncertain how many children there are.”

“Fifty?” Zaven said, looking sick.

“That’s not so bad. We can take fifty, if each of us takes down three of them,” Justinian said, trying to sound optimistic.

“You’ll have to recalculate your math,” Finn reasoned. “Even if the fairies and Annika were able to commit such a heinous act, I think expecting them to slay nine Pazachi between them is asking a bit much.”

“Oh, right,” Justinian said, noticing Annika’s wide eyes. “Well, if Ohan and Sariel are the warriors I think they are, we can certainly do it.”

“I’m not killing children,” Sariel said coldly. “I refuse.”

“Sariel, dear, anyone old enough to use a weapon for ill intent must be treated as an adult,” Justinian said, putting his arm around her. “And if their parents have any sense at all, they’ll keep the young ones somewhere safe.” She nodded silently, but didn’t seem any more comforted by his logic.

“Can’t we just tie them up?” Hilda asked. “Do we really have to kill or be killed? This sounds like you’re expecting a bloodbath if we confront them! There must be some other way.” Takeshi and his sister shared a sober glance.

“We’ve been strategizing about this ever since we located them and started monitoring their activities from this distance,” Takeshi explained. “I’m not looking forward to bloodshed any more than you are. What we’ve learned is that the Pazachi have been training for years to fight to the death for their beliefs. There will be no simple taking of prisoners...on their side or on ours. Those that are capable of fighting would rather kill themselves than be captured. That we know for certain.”

“Are we close?” Annika asked. “I feel like we are.” She felt more nervous and scared than ever, between the prospect of using her sword for killing and Pesha’s prophecy that someone close to her would die on their journey.

“As a matter of fact, we are,” Takeshi said. “The Pazachi are a day’s ride northeast.” The others tensed up at learning how close they were.

“Well then, let’s rest up,” Justinian said with authority, but his cheerful demeanor was gone. “Every one of us will need to be as sharp as the edge of Sariel’s sword tomorrow.”
Chapter 44

chaos theory

After a solemn morning meal, they packed up camp and armed themselves in silence, riding behind Takeshi and Natari for hours, until Natari signaled that they were getting close. Annika wanted to run away and hide, but she knew she couldn’t back down and put all of her friends at risk just because she was scared. They all were, to some degree. Even Konstantin seemed on edge. Only a fool would have no fear, knowing what magic the Pazachi druids possessed, and how brainwashed they’d become over time.

They left the horses, deer, and elk far behind and crept up as close to the cave as they dared, lying in stealth on their stomachs. Ohan was lucky to be able to have some large trees and boulders to hide behind. Hilda, Konstantin, Yuri, and Talvi drew their bows and silently released an arrow into the heart of each guard. The four men fell immediately in a pile of grey robes, fur cloaks, and horned helmets.

“That wasn’t so difficult,” Talvi said, looking a little disappointed. “I thought there would be more to it than that.”

“Oh there is,” Justinian said as everyone’s eyes opened wide. Another man dressed like the guards had come out of the cave and discovered the bodies and looked around anxiously before running back inside.

Then all hell broke loose.

The mouth of the cave was now filling with more robed men and women. The elves and nymphs released another round of arrows and three more Pazachi went down. Annika had only managed to hit one in the leg, but an arrow from Sariel found his chest before he could conjure one last spell against her. Cries went up into the air, and the Pazachi fighters began raising their arms, manifesting streams of fire and sharp daggers of ice from their hands before sending them flying towards their assailants. Annika screamed and ducked as a bolt of lightning zoomed past her face and exploded into a boulder not far behind her. The odor of burned canvas told her it had burned a hole right through her backpack, nearly taking off her head. A steady stream of fire, ice daggers, and lightning was slamming against the rocks with relentless force.

“Keep it up!” Nikola shouted as he cast a shield in front of himself and the others so they could advance. “Make them use up their strength!” One of the larger trees burst into flames and made a horrible groaning sound as it came crashing to the forest floor. It sent Finn, Yuri, Konstantin, and Zaven running from its path and into the crossfire. Zaven hunched over and landed on the ground on his hands and knees behind one of the smaller boulders. An array of the ice daggers had hit him in the back. The ground ripped open between them and the mouth of the cave, separating the Pazachi from their attackers. Something steamy hit Annika in the face, along with a pungent odor of sulphur she recognized from the time Vaj had been killed. She saw the bright orange glow of hot lava rising up through the crevice, threatening to spill all over everyone’s feet. Natari lifted her hands, coaxing a soft rain to combat the hot burning ground, rendering it into a steaming mass of rock that Sariel bounded forward over, her sword thirsty for blood. Ohan was beside her in a few short strides, swinging his huge axe over his shoulder, ready to release it any second. The Pazachi were clearly startled to see such a massive fighter, but nevertheless had drawn out swords of their own.
“Gather around me!” Justinian yelled, as he bravely walked forward to join Sariel and Ohan. Talvi, Zaven, Finn, Hilda, and Runa stayed farther back, shooting arrow after arrow while the druids took turns protecting them with their own magical powers. Something strange was happening to the air around Justinian. There was a giant dome of golden light covering him and Sariel, as though it were reflecting the metal of his armor. Konstantin, Yuri, and Annika joined them. She yelped as a woman ran straight for her, but Annika only took a deep breath and blocked her swing, then retaliated with a stab through her belly. It felt familiar, yet so wrong, like cutting through meat, but it was another person. The woman fell to the earth, writhing in pain. Annika froze in disbelief at what she had just done, but before she could get swept away by moral anguish, a man attacked her, hitting her sword so hard that he nearly knocked it out of her hands. He was able to get a few good swings at her, cutting her left arm. Their weapons engaged, she raised a leg and kicked him as hard as she could in the stomach. It knocked the wind out of him until Justinian’s mighty arm swung down, piercing the man through the chest with his broad sword. Another woman tried to tackle Annika, and she grabbed her with one hand, sending her flying over her back. Another man did the same thing, and was met with the same compromising position, on his back, on the wrong end of Annika’s plunging sword. His eyes rolled back into his head as shouts and cries bombarded her ears. She was shaking slightly, trembling with the adrenaline.

She could see that Sariel was reveling in the bloodbath, covered with red spatters and an insane grin as she slashed and stabbed and blocked and repeated. Annika had been in a cat fight or two, but she’d never killed anyone. Now she’d taken two lives in less time than it took her to lace up her shoes. But there wasn’t time to examine her thoughts on the matter. Under Justinian’s strange light, it was almost too easy as the Pazachi came at them. But as mysteriously as it had appeared, the light faded, and Justinian looked exhausted. There was chaos around them once again, along with the mud and steam, fire, lightning, rain and blood. Another man was running straight for Annika, larger than any of her other assailants. He winced and fell to his knees, only two feet away from her. She could see a blue-tipped arrow in his side. The wolves had taken down a few of the fallen Pazachi fighters and were ripping one of them apart. Intestines and internal organs were being dragged across the dirty snow, and Annika felt sick as she turned away from the gory sight. She heard a familiar voice shout in horrible pain and saw Finn struggling with one of the armed men. The end of the man’s sword had been sunken deep into his shoulder as his bow lay useless on the ground beside him. Zaven kicked the man upside the head and Konstantin grabbed him by his hair, slicing open his neck and gulping thirstily from the gushing wound.

“I will guard Finn,” he snarled to Zaven, his mouth still on the man’s neck. “You go help the others.” A woman screeched in horror at the sight of a vampire gulping mouthfuls of blood. She cast a multitude of icy daggers at him, to which he only made a flourish of his sword, stopping them all with moves too quick for the human eye to see, but Annika saw it clear as day. The woman was shot down by Hilda as a man charged at Konstantin next. He threw the body he’d been feeding on to the ground and ran so quickly that Annika was startled to see the man go flying backward, and then the vampire appeared right in front of him. He was so fast, she barely saw him slice the man’s neck before he began to swallow the elusive red elixir he’d gone months without. There was nothing romantic and swoony about his technique. He was as vicious and violent as either
of his wolves. Hilda had come to aid Finn, pulling the sword out of his shoulder before applying pressure to the terrible wound. His blood was spurting onto the snowy leaves while he writhed in pain, but Konstantin held his ground beside them. His mouth and chin were dripping with deep, bright red blood, and his sword was ready for more.

Zaven now stood beside Talvi, dodging swings from three men. The combat was too close for them to draw their bows, but Talvi delivered an uppercut that sent one of them reeling back into the other. He reached down to his boot and grabbed his black-handled knife, jamming it into the man’s gut and twisting without a shred of mercy. Zaven took the dying man’s sword and ran after the third one. Slowly but surely, they were defeating the Pazachi, for all their magical capabilities couldn’t make up for the fact that they were only human.

Justinian found himself face to face with a man and a woman guarding the cave’s entrance, dressed in purple robes, not like the others who were lying dead or dying on the ground.

Zagora and Draganos! But which one do I choose? Annika heard in the paladin’s mind. They were both of equal distance to him. Zagora lifted her arm and a ball of fire grew under her hand. Draganos lifted his hand and blue and white sparks of electricity began to amass in his palm. Annika knew even if Justinian killed one, the other would send him to the afterworld. Justinian raised his sword and sliced through Zagora’s neck, sending her head rolling across the leaves before she could release her ball of fire at him or anyone else. He turned around to face his fate like an honorable knight, but was shocked to see Draganos gasping for air as he fell backwards onto the ground with his arm outstretched. His heart had been pierced by a blue-tipped arrow. Talvi lowered his bow, wearing a relieved expression, but it immediately transformed as he screamed in horror,

“Yuri, look out!”

Annika saw Yuri turn around towards her brother just in time to get hit in the chest by a bright white lightning bolt. It had come from Draganos’ hand; as he breathed his last taste of life, he’d taken Yuri’s with him. The tall elf dropped her weapon and hit the muddy earth hard, landing in an awkward heap as everyone rushed over to her. Hilda ripped open her jacket, putting her head against Yuri’s chest as Konstantin knelt beside her in disbelief.

“Her heart has stopped!” Hilda cried, pushing at Yuri’s chest and trying to resuscitate her friend. Yuri’s open eyes stared at nothing as her head wobbled in reaction to Hilda’s lifesaving efforts.

“Even I cannot bring back the dead,” Justinian said with tears in his eyes. A horrible sound came out of Talvi, as he crawled to his twin sister’s side.

“Why did it have to be now?” he screamed into her unhearing ears. “Why did you have to get the curse of that damned prophecy?” Hilda looked up at him as she kept pushing at Yuri’s chest.

“What prophecy?”

“The one that our parents received when we were born,” he sobbed. “No one outside the family besides Sariel was ever told the last part…”

“What other part are you talking about?” Hilda choked, looking at her mother in disbelief.

“When the twins were born,” Sariel began, “Dragana’s great-grandmother told
Ambrose and Althea that when they turned three-hundred, they would both fall in love. That’s when they would split apart, and the first twin born would die shortly after this birthday, ruling the Underworld with her lover. Yuri was marked for an early death all along.” Annika glanced over to Konstantin, and then to Finn, who ran to his sister’s side before falling on his hands and knees. He felt sick, and guilty, and shocked all at once. It was just too much for him. There were wails and sobs around them, disbelief that the elves and Sariel could ever have kept such a secret, and shock that Yuri was dead. Annika remembered her last tarot card from Yuri’s birthday party…Pesha had said that death would strike someone close to her. Striking the twin sister of her husband was someone very close to her indeed. Talvi curled up next to his sister, cradling her head in his hands, as he tried to talk sense into her limp body.

“I tried so hard, Yuri,” he pleaded with her vacant eyes. “I tried so hard not to love anyone more than you.”

“Stop doing that. It is of no use,” Konstantin said quietly to Hilda, who ceased her futile attempts at bringing Yuri back to life. The vampire sat beside the brothers and gathered Yuri in his arms, unconcerned with the last light of the sunset hitting his skin. The fresh blood of two men had made him strong, but the loss of Yuri had made him too weak to stand. He held her against his chest and bowed his head in silent anguish while the others stood nearby. Konstantin hadn’t revealed much about himself to anyone, but now he bore his soul in front of them all.

“Come back to me Yuri, my love,” he said as he looked down at her. “Come away from the light. Come back to me.” His shoulders shook violently as he cried in silence, sending red rivers of fresh tears down his bloody chin. They collected and dripped to her face, some landing on her cheeks and some landing onto her parted lips. He bit his tongue and bent down to kiss her passionately one last time, making sure to make it count.

Finn gasped. At first Annika and Hilda thought it was from the injury in his shoulder, but then they saw what he was seeing. Yuri’s limp hand had lifted from its place on the ground and was slowly reaching up Konstantin’s body as she kissed him back. He lifted his mouth away from hers and Annika saw past his long blond hair that Yuri’s eyes were still open, but she was looking around in a drugged daze. The vampire bit his wrist and pressed it to her mouth, while slowly sinking his teeth into an old wound on her neck. At first, Talvi jumped forward as though to stop this, but the memory of a conversation he’d shared with Yuri stopped him. They had agreed to let each other choose who they loved, and now it was Talvi’s turn to honor that agreement.

Konstantin rocked back and forth ever so slightly, and Annika realized that they were exchanging blood. He took Yuri’s elven blood into his body and transformed it, giving her all his vampiric qualities. He took one last mouthful before pulling away, letting her nurse from his wrist for a moment longer. He wiped his red tear-stained face as she took her first few breaths as a vampire. She blinked her eyes, which had changed from dark brown to a deep shade of purple.

“What happened?” she whispered faintly. “Why am I so thirsty?”

There were more sobs and cries from the group as everyone gathered even closer around her.

“You died! You died and you came back, Yuri!” Runa wailed. Talvi was overwhelmed and at a loss for words. He hadn’t cared much for vampires at all, until this very moment.
“Konstantin brought you back from the dead!” Runa went on, helping him to raise her friend to a sitting position. Yuri seemed confused, but she had noticed that all the bite wounds on her own arms were completely gone. She looked up at Konstantin, and he gazed at her softly.

“Did you know that I kept every letter you ever sent me?” he asked, and a smile spread across both of their faces. “I have them all with me in my saddlebag. I read them every chance I get.”

“I kept yours too,” Yuri said, still looking delirious. “I read them every day.”

“My love for you must have brought you back from the dead. Nothing else could have done such a thing,” he murmured. This time he kissed her so passionately that the others respectfully turned around, towards the menacing cave. A teenage girl was kneeling over Draganos and his decapitated wife, with Talvi’s arrow still in the chest that she was crouched over. Loud wails came from behind her long brown hair.

“Which one of you did this?” she shrieked hysterically, covered in their blood. “Which one of you murdered my mother and father?” Hilda and Justinian helped Finn up to his feet while Takeshi and Natari led them over to the girl with his sword still in his hand. She didn’t try to run away from them, although she fought with Talvi bitterly as he caught her thin arms.

“You’ll be our little tour guide,” he said, immune to her attempts at escape. “If you’re the daughter of Draganos and Zagora, then you definitely know what we’re here for.”
Chapter 45

the Pazachi’s invention

The girl struggled as Talvi began tying her hands behind her back, but his strength was too much for her. She glared at him with her icy blue eyes and dug her heels into the ground, but he only pushed her ahead. Annika tried not to cry as she saw a few women holding their sobbing children tightly, and they backed away from the group as they filed through. Sariel seemed incredibly disturbed as well, but she kept her sword ready in her hand as they delved deeper into the cave, leaving Natari and Takeshi to guard the survivors.

“Well, which way?” Justinian asked. The girl said nothing. Talvi jerked her around to face him, his eyes piercing hers. Annika knew that he was reading her mind, but for having just killed her father, he didn’t act very sympathetic. The girl glanced at his quiver of blue-tipped arrows strapped to his back.

“You’re the one who killed my parents!” she hissed. “I’ll have my revenge, mark my words!”

“Do you really expect me to be afraid of a naïve little thing like you?” he said without a shred of remorse. “Why, you’re just a little girl with a big mouth. You’re not even a woman yet, so I doubt there’s much you’re capable of.” The girl’s eyes opened wide as if she were ready to scream, but she said nothing. He pointed the opposite direction they had been walking.

“She was leading us the wrong way,” he announced. “It’s down the way we came, to the right.”

They wandered into a large bare room. The only things inside of it were the eerie looking mineral deposits that Finn had been so knowledgeable about at the vampire’s cave. Dardis and Chivanni flitted high above their heads, lighting the room with their blue and orange lights. There was indeed a strange wheel made of glittering red and blue stones, spinning quickly with an elaborate series of blue and red gears turning on both sides. In the center of the wheel was nothing, but as Annika and the others drew near, she saw that there was definitely something inside of it. The only thing she could compare it to was the swirl of soapy water when she used to blow giant bubbles with the children she baby sat on the army bases. The circle had a shiny, wet look to it, with swirls of color passing across the strange frame in which it was held. On either side of the bizarre wheel were twenty stones on their own pillar, with elaborate writing next to each of them. Healed by Justinian’s magic powers, Finn stepped close to read them.

“Dardis, come close, will you? I think I can read what this says,” he said. The blue-haired fairy zipped down and hovered near the stone, giving him plenty of light to read by.

“These say…these stones represent all of the gates that have been shut down. I think…” He wandered to the stones on the other side of the wheel and Dardis followed him. “I think…ah, yes. Here is the one from your cave,” he said to Hilda as he pointed to a stone near the back. “This was the last one to be closed.”

“Then what is this big wheel for?” Zaven asked. “Does it say anything about what it is?”

Finn scratched his head, reading the inscriptions next to each stone.
“It says this is the gate that leads to all gates. But it doesn’t say how to operate it.”

Justinian took possession of Talvi’s young prisoner.

“Your father built it, didn’t he? Surely you know how it works,” he demanded, trying his best to look intimidating. But the angry girl just sneered boldly at the large knight, completely unafraid.

“He never showed me,” she spat, glaring at Talvi. Her eyes glanced over to Annika’s left hand before resuming her hateful stare at him. But something had changed; now there was a gleam in her expression that shone just as bright as the platinum rings they wore.

“She’s not lying, not this time,” Talvi said. “She doesn’t know how to operate it. She knows that it’s made of gold and sapphire and ruby, if that helps you at all.” Finn held his chin in his hand, perplexed at the strange riddle of the wheel before them. Annika touched her wedding band, and had a thought.

“Chivanni, do you know where the diamond from my old ring is?” she asked him. He jammed his hand into a bag he was wearing over his shoulder and pulled it out, proudly holding it in front of him in his little hands. He was still hovering over the wheel with Dardis, lighting the room for everyone. The diamond looked even larger, being held in his tiny hands.

“I kept it because it’s so beautiful,” he breathed. “Look at it sparkle! It’s so pretty.” Annika ignored his remark, having just had been struck by a thought that made total sense to her.

“I just remembered something you told me at our wedding. You said magic couldn’t alter a diamond.”

“Yes, I’m afraid I can’t make it larger or smaller. It’s a pity. I would like to make dozens more of them,” Chivanni lamented while he gazed at the enchanting stone.

“But,” Annika said slowly. “If magic can’t alter a diamond, could a diamond alter magic?” Chivanni’s eyes grew wide and before she could ask him any more questions, Dardis spoke up.

“Give it back to Annika! It’s not yours to keep!” she demanded, holding out her little hand authoritatively. Chivanni backed away, fluttering his wings. Dardis reached her own little hands around the glittering stone and struggled with him. Chivanni whined while she argued with him, until they bumped into a stalactite, where it fell into the precious stone gears and was crushed to dust instantly.

“Stop playing around, you two, and just give it back!” Nikola said angrily, wincing as they bumped into a few more stalactites. They too fell into the gears and were crushed to nothing. The fairies were battling it out with each other, zigging and zagging back and forth in the air over everyone’s heads. They finally broke apart, looking at each other with confused expressions before noticing their empty hands. Neither of them had been victorious.

“Oh no!” Chivanni cried as he and everyone else watched the diamond fall right for the gears. Annika gasped, fearing that it would meet the same fate as the stalactites had. The whirring gears made a horrible crunch and jammed in place. The clear, soapy circle began to grow cloudy and dark at once.

“What did you do?” Zaven huffed angrily. “You two broke the machine, and now we’ll never know how to make it work!” Finn was frowning, but not in anger or irritation. The cloudy circle grew even darker, like a thick grey fog was lying behind it.

“They did break it…” he said slowly. “Diamonds are harder than sapphire or ruby.
It’s harder and stronger than anything in existence. Perhaps Annika is right. Perhaps a diamond can alter magic!"

Annika gasped as a woman flew out of the giant murky circle, followed by another woman, and then at least a dozen other people before a tall man with curly blond hair fell through. He crawled to his hands and knees as a deer bounded over him, nearly landing on his back. He rolled off to one side and Yuri and Talvi’s eyes grew wide.

“Asbjorn! Are you alright?” the twins asked as they rushed over to help him up. The tall blond had barely enough time to stand before a shorter, dark-haired man was thrown out of the wheel.

“Pavlo, is it really you?” Konstantin cried. All the people that had been trapped on the other sides of the portals were now being spewed out in the order in which they went missing. More animals and even a few birds fell on the floor of the cave, scampering and flying away quickly towards the forest in a flurry of feathers and tails. Everyone scrambled about, trying to pull every person out of the way as more and more people were thrown from the void. At last it seemed the jewel-encrusted gate had emptied itself of all who had gone missing. Then Annika felt her ears plug up as the air pressure changed. The natural balance of the portals that had existed for all eternity was beginning to rectify itself.

“Annika!” called Talvi, while he desperately clutched her against his chest, but it was of no use. She was being pulled by a giant vacuum into the dark circle. She frantically looked to Talvi for help, but his terrified face was being encased in blackness. She reached out for him, and then suddenly there was no sound at all. She couldn’t even scream for help. It felt as though she’d dived too deep under water; her inner ears threatened to explode, and she was aware of something faint in the distance, but no clear sounds reached her ears. She hit her shoulder on something very, very hard before landing on her side. There was a foul, sour smell polluting the air, like cat piss and old garbage. There were strange noises bombarding her, sounds that struggled to identify their familiarity. She opened her eyes.

She was lying on concrete.
Chapter 46
the girl who fell to Earth

Annika cautiously wiggled each of her fingers and toes, making sure she hadn’t broken any bones, and slowly rose to her feet. There was blood trickling from a gash on her left shoulder, but it wasn’t life-threatening. Looking around, she found herself in an alley beside a vacant lot in the coldest hours of the early morning. There was a dumpster just a few steps away; it was probably what she’d cut her shoulder on. As she stumbled around the corner, the signs labeling the buildings came as a relief to her. They were all in French.

*Of the few languages I can understand, thank goodness this is one of them!* she thought in relief. She wasn’t even halfway down the block when she found a small café. She ducked inside and headed straight for the bathroom, trying to act as normal as she possibly could, but she still got some startling looks along the way. When she glanced at her reflection in the mirror, she knew why immediately. Her left sleeve was half covered in blood, and there were mud and blood spatters all over her face. Her amulet from Dragana was covered as well as most of her body. Her shoes were caked in mud and grass, and she was still wearing the sword at her hip, though it was hidden from view by her cloak. She locked the door and carefully removed her sword, cloak, and backpack, then took out her Fairy Poppins box and tucked them inside. She was half expecting it not to work on this side of the portal, but they disappeared without any trouble. When she inspected her shoulder, she saw that the wound had stopped bleeding and was now beginning to close up. She stripped down to her underwear, turned on the water, and splashed it up onto her face and her shoulder as best as she could. The gash was healing, but still painful. She took off her necklace and rinsed it under the faucet until the water ran clear. The garnet and sapphire looked dead under the fluorescent lights, as if their power had been used up.

Her hands rummaged through her bag in search of a clean pair of pants and a black t-shirt that was way too big to be her own. Her eyes began to water as she slipped it over her head and inhaled deeply of cinnamon and sweat. Talvi’s scent had stayed with the fabric, and now it triggered all of the thoughts that she’d pushed to the side for too long. The white letters on the front of the shirt caught her attention in the mirror, and she smiled for a moment as she read, *I’m huge in Japan.* It dissolved with the hot tears that immediately began to overflow. She knew she’d never again be the same person that she was just days ago, just hours ago, even ten minutes ago. She had a lover, in some realm. She had friends and a family history in that place. She’d developed a strange ability to heal herself, and her five senses were more acute than ever before. But she’d also killed in the name of battle, and being from a military family didn’t make it as easy to accept as she used to think it would. She wished she could erase the sight of those that had died in front of her, but they kept ambushing her thoughts.

She finally ventured back out to the café, where she dug around her pocket for one of Finn’s tiny rings to buy a cup of coffee. She asked the clerk where the nearest place to exchange silver and gold might be. The man behind the counter wouldn’t take the strange currency, and probably served her out of pity. She sat at a little table in the corner with her hot coffee and stared at the ring on her left finger.
Did this just really happen to me? she thought. I’m always having dreams that I bring something back with me, and each time I wake up, it’s gone. But it can’t be a dream, not when I have this.

She tugged at the ring a little, but like before, it only pulled her skin painfully. It hadn’t even been a quarter of an hour since she was standing beside Talvi and her other friends. Annika finished her coffee and began walking down the sidewalk, arriving at the small coin shop right as it opened for the day.

The sleepy clerk at the counter didn’t ask many questions, much to her relief, and eventually gave her two thousand Euros before sending her on her way. She was grateful for so much cash, but it would only get her so far. She could easily visualize her passport sitting on the nightstand in the second bedroom of Vince’s house. Stopping by a small sidewalk vendor’s booth, she bought a calling card and asked where the nearest hotel was.

Around the corner and nine blocks later, she was standing in the lobby of a posh hotel, the kind of place where everything was polished and immaculate and real, right down to the marble tiles. She shook her head as she realized she’d asked for the nearest hotel, not the cheapest. When she walked up to the front desk to get a room, the hotel manager himself appeared out of nowhere to inquire what she needed with no hospitality whatsoever. She glanced in a full-length mirror at herself, and understood why she’d received such prejudice. She looked like a broke Euro-trash hitchhiker, wearing the wrong thing and not fitting in at all. Just as the front desk manager was about to escort her out, she came up with an excuse about grabbing the wrong bag at the airport. Without hesitation the manager took care of her arrangements himself. In the meantime she dialed her parents’ phone number from the front desk; she was in too much of a hurry to make the call from her room.

“Uhh?” A deep voice groaned. “Whoisit?”
“Dad? Dad? It’s me, Annika?”
“What the…Annika? Is that really you, honey? Are you alright? Where are you?” she heard her mother growing hysterical in the background.

“Don’t worry dad, I’m okay!” she assured him. “I swear I’m fine. I haven’t been near a phone in months.”
“Where are you?” her mother screeched, having taken the phone from her husband. “I’m in Paris,” she said, looking around the hotel until she found the name embossed on the doors.

“Paris?” the hysterical voice cried. “What happened? Where have you been? Are you safe?”
“Yeah mom, I’m fine, I need you to call Vince and tell him that I’m okay, but I need my passport to get out of here,” she said, trying to comfort them.
“Where have you been?”
“…I can’t really explain over the phone, Mom. I don’t think I have that many minutes on this card.”
“I don’t care! How did you end up in Paris? Stay right there, and I’ll come get you!”
“I’m at l’hotel de Regent on rue Dauphine. I’ll be waiting for you here.”
“I don’t want you to hang up! Oh please tell me that you’re safe and sound!” her mother said while choking back tears.
“I promise Mom, nothing bad happened to me. I’ll tell you everything when I see
you. I promise!” She hung up, feeling bad that she couldn’t talk longer. She didn’t know what she would say when she saw her family as it was, not to mention the possibility of upsetting them more to know their missing daughter was reportedly running around Paris, out of her mind on hallucinogenic drugs. **Hello Mom and Dad…I fell into a broken portal and I’ve been hanging out with nymphs and elves and trolls and vampires for the past two months in a parallel universe. Sorry I haven’t called. They don’t have phones. No, that wouldn’t do at all. They would show up with a team of emergency personnel brandishing syringes and straightjackets.**

Still carrying her backpack, Annika followed the hotel manager to her room. He opened the doors to reveal the elegant quarters, with the windows letting in bright sunshine. There was a vase of fresh flowers on a little table, where a room service menu was set on the linen tablecloth.

“A bath has been drawn for you, mademoiselle,” he said. “And if there is anything you would like during your stay, please do not hesitate to ask.” With no hesitation whatsoever, she ordered a bottle of red wine, roast duck with boiled potatoes, asparagus, and cheesecake for dessert to be brought up in an hour. He nodded and left quickly, and she tossed her bag onto the bed, anxious for that bath.

She sank into the water, exhausted. It stung her shoulder, which was starting to heal at an expedient rate, and she was barely aware of her rich surroundings. The puffy down comforter and pillows on the queen sized bed didn’t really matter, as long as it was clean and warm. Lying in the soothing heat of the water, she tried to relax, but she kept seeing lightning bolts flying through the sky as weapons, and then turning the sky purple as her body was flooded with pain. She saw horned helmets sprayed in blood, and a girl crying over her parents’ warm bodies. It was the most unpleasant and non-relaxing bath she’d ever experienced in her life, and therefore it wasn’t that long before she got out and wrapped herself up in a soft robe provided by the hotel. There was a knock at the door. It was her dinner, carried in on a silver platter and laid carefully upon the table beside the window that overlooked the city. That must have been one hell of a tip she’d given the manager.

She sat down to eat, but couldn’t stand the silence. It allowed her imagination to run too wild, replaying the past few months over and over. She couldn’t stop seeing those green eyes with blue centers, or feeling her sword plunge into the body of a crazy Pazachi man and woman. She drank a full glass of wine before trying any of her dinner, desperate to numb the painful memories. She finished most of the bottle while she devoured the potatoes and asparagus, but after a couple bites of the perfectly roasted duck, she felt ill. Seriously ill. The rest of the night was spent watching television and throwing up, and it was definitely not the wine.

Early the next morning there was a knock at her door. She still felt nauseous, despite all the sleep she’d gotten.

“Mademoiselle, I am so sorry to disturb you at such an hour, but there are some people here to see you; they say it’s most urgent,” the voice said from outside the door. When she opened it, there stood her mom, dad and Uncle Vince. Her family hugged her tight, crying profusely. She started to cry too. She couldn’t even begin to imagine what they had gone through, wondering if she’d been kidnapped or killed, or joined a cult in Croatia.
“Where have you been for the past two months?” her father asked.
“Were you kidnapped?” her mother asked.
“Did you run away?” Vince asked.

She took a deep breath. She hadn’t thought up that perfect little lie that could excuse her absence, so she proceeded to tell them that yes, she’d fallen into a broken portal and had been hanging out with wood nymphs, fairies, elves and vampires for the past two months in a parallel universe. She conveniently left out the bit about killing a few demented nature-nut extremists, but she did say she was married, and showed them how her ring wouldn’t come off her finger.

“Annika...” her mother began, but she couldn’t finish her sentence. Instead, she sank into a chair with a distressed expression consuming her. Annika glanced at her uncle, expecting him to be wearing his typical lackadaisical grin now that he knew his niece was safe, but he only looked concerned.

“I think what your mother is trying to say, is that this is a bit much for us to handle right now,” her dad said. “The important thing is that you’re not hurt.”

“But I can prove it. I took pictures,” she said, and went to get her camera out of her backpack, which was sitting near the bed at the other end of the room. She dug around for a few moments, unable to find it, and then resorted to dumping out the entire contents on the down comforter. She unzipped every compartment, but the only thing she discovered was that her little music player was absent as well. She glanced at the ring on her left hand and immediately knew who had them.

“That has got to be the most elaborate story I think have ever heard,” her dad said in a bewildered voice, but he didn’t accuse her of lying. He was examining a few of the gold rings that she hadn’t given to the coin shop. They were the only proof that she had, besides the Fairy Poppins box and its contents, which had left her family speechless when Annika gave them a demonstration of how it worked.

“This really happened, Dad. I would never just take off like that and not tell you!”

“Annika,” he paused, baffled at her excuse, “I think maybe we should keep this just between us.”

“Well I can’t lie to my own brother or my friends!”

“Just don’t tell the whole world, okay kiddo?” Her father smiled softly at her, but he still wasn’t convinced that she was mentally sound. After seeing the Fairy Poppins box in action, he wasn’t sure he was mentally sound, either.

“We’re all leaving tomorrow evening,” her mother interrupted before Annika could respond. “We bought you a plane ticket and Vince was thoughtful enough to bring all of your things with him.” Annika’s stomach dropped. “That was a terrible scare you gave us. I know it’s not your fault. I really don’t know what to think about it yet, but it’s time for you to come home.”

“But what about Talvi?” she asked. “He won’t know where I am.”

“I think that’s for the best,” her father said. He looked deeply upset. She started to explain that Talvi had protected her from the blood-drinking trees, and saved her from Vaj’s first attack during the birthday party, but the skepticism on her family’s faces made her give up as an uncomfortable sensation of reality struck her.

She’d somehow thought that she could simply go back to Vince’s cottage and wait for Talvi to come find her, or even go hiking again and try to find him, but that was hopeless. She was lost when she accidentally found the samodivi cave and crossed
through the portal. And even if she went back to Europe, it would take Talvi weeks to return. He still had to cross the Sea of Forneus and get through the Mesoyadna Forest without getting killed. And if he did pass safely through the flesh-eating trees and the sirens and monster that lived deep in the sea, they’d met each other in the oldest part of Sofia. He didn’t know that Vince lived in a cottage outside the city. Tracking her down would take an eternity.

_I suppose I should be glad we have time on our side_, she thought miserably, recalling his wedding gift to her. _I’ll need it_.

Annika’s family took her out to breakfast, but she didn’t enjoy any of it. Most of it came back up, and the entire time she could hear their thoughts wondering what was wrong with her, wondering what she’d endured that she needed to make up such an outlandish story. When they returned to the hotel she fell into a fitful sleep, where every time she caught a glimpse of her dark-haired elf, he was covered in those thick, blood drinking roots, or pulled under water by the beguiling sirens. She felt Talvi’s hand smoothing her hair, and she began to cry. He felt so real, as if he were there right beside her. She could even feel him sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Talvi, is that you?” she asked. She wasn’t sure if she was awake or dreaming.

“Sweetie, you need to get up. We have to get to the airport extra early for the international flight,” her mother said, patting her back. Annika rolled over and wiped the tears from her eyes. She got up and reluctantly packed the rest of her things, fitting everything into the Fairy Poppins box and sticking it in her backpack that bore the burnt hole from the lightning bolt attack. They were getting ready to part with her uncle when she had a last minute idea. It called for a pen and a sheet of the hotel stationary, and she motioned for her uncle after her parents left the room with their luggage.

“Vince, do you think you could do me a favor?” she asked. She scrawled across the paper, then crumpled it up and started over.

_Mais oui bien sûr._ Anything for my favorite niece,” he said, watching her with an unlit cigarette hanging in his mouth. He’d already become thin and gaunt again as a result from his terrible cooking, and probably from worrying himself sick for the past two months.

“Can you give this to the owner of the used bookstore that I went to in Sofia?” she said as she handed him the paper, and then a few of the golden and silver rings. “I’m sure that’s the first place Talvi would go. I just know it. And on the back of the paper, put your address next to mine, so he can find us.”

“Annika,” his cigarette bobbed as he spoke, “Don’t you think your family has suffered enough?”

“I know you all think I’m nuts,” she stammered, trying not to cry, but she couldn’t help it. “I just wish I could count on someone to believe me, even just a little bit. I’m back safe, aren’t I? If Talvi wanted to kidnap me, I never would have come home that day I met him in Sofia.” Vince took the rings and the paper from his niece. “So that is his name, _oui_?” he smiled, and put his arm around her as they left the room. “The young man from the bookstore who called you a ‘saucy girl’? I suppose he can’t be all that bad.”
Chapter 47

long time passing

Annika touched her ring for the millionth time that day, deep in her thoughts. She hadn’t been home more than forty-eight hours, and she still couldn’t escape the haunting images of her sword covered in blood, plunging into numerous bodies, and of those blue-green eyes being the last thing she saw. It was New Year’s Eve and everyone was getting ready for the big countdown. She felt so alienated, even though she was surrounded by her friends and her brother, whom she had missed so much in the nearly three months she had been gone. She hadn’t left the house since she walked in from the airport.

“Five…four…three…two…one!” everyone shouted. She felt tears form in her eyes, and a well-manicured hand took hers, holding it gently.

“Happy new year, Annika.” It was James. He planted a kiss on her cheek and smiled sympathetically. She smiled and abruptly pulled him close, hugging him tight.

“Happy new year, James.” She could barely get the words out, her throat had swollen shut so fast.

“Are you doing okay?” he asked, trying to be comforting.

“Yeah…” she gasped before letting him go and taking another big gulp from her plastic cup. She’d told her brother and James all of the highlights from her trip, and gotten the same reaction as her parents had given her.

The holiday festivities never really ended for Annika, with the sedation they offered. The pain in her heart and the trauma of battle were watered down right along with the melted ice cubes in her vodka. It was also uncanny how many things besides eggnog could be jazzed up with a splash of top-shelf rum. Orange juice, fruit smoothies, coffee… And then of course, it was so sophisticated to drink wine at dinner, and it was so European to drink wine at lunch, and it was just plain fabulously to drink Bloody Mary’s at breakfast. With the leftover money from Finn, she was maintaining quite the well-stocked bar in the fridge, right next to Charlie’s organic orange juice and James’s gourmet coffee.

As the weeks went by, little changed. She only left the house if she was out of booze, mixers, or guitar strings. Everything reminded her of Talvi or his world in some way, of Runa and her other friends there, of her whole experience, even though she was surrounded by familiar things like cars, concrete sidewalks and roads. When she bothered to do her laundry, or used the microwave, she caught herself thinking of the appliances as micro boxes. She could hear Runa’s laughter, and Finn’s deep voice singing along with hers when she had band practice with James and Charlie out in the guesthouse. It hadn’t lasted very long or been very productive, the few times that they made the effort. It just wasn’t the same as before.

She lay on the couch watching zombie movies for hours on end, with one hand on the remote and one hand holding a drink. With her bad luck at getting food poisoning more than once a week, it seemed only rational to take in calories that were triple distilled.

“You know, Annika,” James pointed out one evening just as Charlie came home from work. “My couch has a permanent dent where your ass has been. If you don’t get off of it once in a while, I’m making you buy me a new one.” Normally he would be tapping his foot impatiently if he was irritated with her. This time he wasn’t. Something
was off.

“Put it on my tab,” she replied, taking a sip from her glass.

“As if you’re ever going to pay it,” he snipped, but then he grew serious. “I’m worried about you. I’ve never seen you this depressed.” James looked at Charlie for support.

“What is this, an intervention?” she asked, frowning at her roommates. They looked at each other before looking back at her. Maybe it was.

“You weren’t even this bummed when you and Danny split up,” her brother pointed out. “Maybe you should go talk to someone. You know, like a therapist.”

“And we’re never going to get the new album recorded if you don’t cut back on the booze. The songs you wrote at your uncle’s place are good, but you can’t keep rhythm during practice. Besides, do you realize how many calories are in vodka?” James said.

“I know,” she sighed, knowing her playing had been sub-par over the past couple months. But it wasn’t his comment about the calories in vodka that bothered her. It was the one about her less than stellar performance during the few band practices they’d had. James wouldn’t over-exaggerate about something like that, not when it came to her music.

“Why don’t you get a job or volunteer or do something just to get out of the house for a while?” Charlie urged. “I’m sure the restaurant would hire you back, at the very least. Plus our friends are always asking about you, and I’m tired of telling them that you have a really contagious case of mono. I thought you’d snap out of it, but now I’m not so sure. I wish you’d try channeling your feelings into your music, instead of drinking it away. You know that doesn’t work. It just makes you sound like shit.”

“Fine,” Annika mumbled and set her drink down on the table. She curled back up on the couch and ignored them, the signal that their conversation was over. But the fact that she didn’t argue was the signal that they had made their point.

“James, are you sure you’re playing in D minor? I think you’re a little off,” Annika said a week later, tossing her hair out of her face before taking a drink of her soda.

“No, I think you’re the one that’s a little off,” her friend kidded from behind the keyboards. “Speaking of which, our power’s going to be shut off if we don’t pay the damn electric bill soon. You’re over two months late. Shit…it’s almost three.”

Annika choked on her drink as he said this, and her drink went up her nose, burning her sinuses. She felt slightly sick as she recalled how many times she’d had ‘food poisoning’ over the past few months. Her portion of the electric bill was not the only thing almost three months late. No, there was something else much more important to her that was long overdue.

“I’ll take care of it tomorrow,” she said quickly, her pulse racing. “But only if you try it in D minor!”

“Actually, she’s right James,” Charlie said, laughing at his roommate. “You’re the one who’s off.” James plunked the keys differently, and he and Annika nodded, and tore into a dark and angry song that Charlie complimented with piercing polyrhythms. It was the most productive practice session they’d had since Annika had returned.

“Hey,” James shouted above the noise. “I think someone’s knocking at the door!”

“Well you heard it, you go get it,” Charlie yelled from behind the drum set. “I’m not expecting anyone!”
“What if it’s the cops again?” James argued. “I don’t need another noise complaint.” He rolled his eyes as the knocking came once again, and he went down the steps to check on their visitor. He came back a moment later with a bewildered expression.

“Hey, Annika, it’s for you.” James was trying his best to keep a straight face, but his best was not good enough. “He says…he says he’s…”

“Who the hell is it?” demanded Annika.

“He says he’s…your little bumble bee.”

Annika jumped down the stairs and ran to the entrance of the guest house, where a tall, slim figure stood at the door, wearing a blue winter coat. He pulled down the hood and his wild black hair gave him away immediately.

“You’re a hard girl to find, Annika Marinossian,” he said with a twinkle in his blue-green eyes. “That was by far the largest meadow I’ve ever crossed.”
to be continued…

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After bouncing around from Paris to Portland, Emigh Cannaday now lives in Wisconsin with her husband and a pack of Pembroke Welsh Corgis. She grew up drawing, painting, and writing down her elaborate daydreams that focus on nature, intuition, and a bit of magic. She spends her free time testing out new recipes in the kitchen and playing with houseplants and horses. She also co-hosts the Wine Wars podcast, a show dedicated to all things wine and Star Wars. Find her on Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and Twitter to connect with other fans. Join the mailing list at www.emighcannaday.com for the latest author updates & exclusive content.

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