

The Road to Amber

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Like one that on a lonesome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And having once turned round walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.
The Ancient Mariner
Samuel Coleridge

In all the endless road you tread
There's nothing but the night.
A.E. Housman

Across the margin of the world I fled,
And troubled the gold gateways of the stars.
Francis Thompson

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
The Hound of Heaven
Francis Thompson

Dedication

Peg Halpin for all that you do for me and for kicking me in the butt when I needed it. Which truth be told, is very often. For my brothers and sister, I love you guys. You're the greatest fans any author could wish for.

Chapter 1

My earliest memories were of my baby fat legs walking down a cobblestone road; cobblestones that were each individually different, unique and shimmering as if coated in crystal and gold, where the sky was a blue so perfect I could never imagine it so pure and consummate. Where the trees were the epitome of what a tree should be and were just not quite as perfect as what I now saw around me.

My hand was held in a woman's palm, soft, scented and trembling as the woman hurried down this enchanted roadway. My baby legs could not quite keep up so she hoisted me in her arms and tucked me against her silk covered breast. I smelled flower scented hair and a sharp tang of ozone yet no thunder or lightning accompanied us. I smelled fear and her skin was damp as sweat stained her clothing.

Fireflies winked around us, burst against my skin with tiny stings that made me cry out in distress that something so delicate could hurt so much.

Darkness swept in around us and something wrenched me from her hands. I heard her howl of anger and vile curses before my next memories coalesced to become the rocking sensation of side to side motion that made me nauseous. I was carried in arms that were decidedly odd, hairless, scaled but no less welcoming. Past skies that burned orange and jets of blue flame burst around us as the thing that carried me traveled down a road made of flaming black bricks. Day turned to night, night became twilight and days twisted until my memories fragmented and I could recall only wisps and traces of those early years.

A birthday one my caretaker called a sixth, in a place that resembled a hobbit's cave. A long journey after in a boat that sailed across an emerald sea where two moons vied for the surge of tides and great storms made me wonder if I would dwell below the breakers with the mer-folk I saw from the railings. The motion made me so sick, I couldn't remember much except the constant puking.

Years went by where survival was my only concern, my goal and mental focus. Each stay a bead in a chain that remained unbroken, each gem totally unlike the one before or after until I accepted each berth as normal in my crazy existence, the only facet remaining the same was the odd creature I took to be my caretaker. Sometimes, it was a man, sometimes a demon and sometimes an animal but always the same personality and character traits---a thing that kept me fed, clothed and safe until it was time to move on.

When I turned fifteen by its reckoning, we were in the City with a million occupants and it told me that this day was my birthday.

I looked around at the dirty streets, the corner where a score of us homeless were huddled around a metal drum housing a fire that glowed on our faces and turned us all into golden statues.

My companion was an older man with gray hair, gray skin and eerie gray eyes that no darkness could dim. He stood over me by a hands-breadth with broad shoulders and wide arms, a fierce man with enough danger in him to scare off most of the predators we might encounter on these mean streets.

He smiled at me, his teeth white, very sharp and strangely inhuman but I was unaffected by his outlandishness as I had been subject to it for many years. He held out a small cake covered in chocolate frosting with a tiny candle in its center. It burned without smoke.

“Happy Birthday, Corbin,” he whispered calling me by my old name. Raven. It meant Raven, dark of hair and yellow eyed like the famed Corbel of Ireland or so the legends stated. I knew my name was Raven, as I knew my birthplace was Ireland and my mother had brought me here to the city from the Emerald isle, dying in the process but not before placing me in the care of the thing now masquerading as the gray man.

We haunted the shadows, the street corners, the old abandoned and deserted places. We stole, begged or borrowed what we needed to survive and so far, had not been discovered by what purported to hunt us. Although, I had never seen what supposedly hunted us, only had his word for it that we were relentlessly pursued.

The thing I called the gray man called itself a morph, neither explaining or naming itself so I gave it a name years before as Murphy in mockery to its Irish beginnings. In truth, I didn't know what it was other than my mother, my nursemaid, my bodyguard and my mentor. Without its protection and care, I would be dead, raped, starved or insane. It was my jailer and my benediction, my survival and my prison.

I took the cake and pulled out the candle sucking the frosting off the wax end. Carefully, I peeled the cake into pieces and shared it around the fire with the rest of the street people who shared the warmth of the blazing oil drum.

Murphy knew all their names only minutes after meeting them whereas it took me longer to memorize people's names and faces. I was better at remembering places. Within a moment's glance at a scene or room, I could describe it down to the number of tiles on the floor or cabs parked on sidewalks, to the color of the sky and how far the clouds covered the horizon.

The cake was enough for everyone to have a bite and all of them sang Happy Birthday to me. Next, Murphy gave me a present wrapped in brown paper, a box the size of a paperback book and from its shape, I assumed it was one. I held it awkwardly and he gestured for me to open it.

It was a box, cardboard and inside was a hard piece of metal wrapped in leather. When I unrolled it, I held in my hands a dagger---eight inches long shaped like a leaf and made of a blue metal that gleamed in the firelight. The hilt was like that of a small sword, the grip made of gold wrapped ivory with a pigeon egg ruby on the end. It was beautiful and deadly, sharp as a shaving razor and balanced in my palm. I looked in his gray eyes. He nodded. “You will need a longer blade when you take to the road, Corbin.”

“We're leaving again?” I asked. Not that I was attached to this oh so elegant neighborhood but I knew its every hidey-hole and nooks and crannies. I was comfortable here and knew how to stay safe and anonymous.

“They will find us sooner or later,” he warned.

“Who? Who will find us? For years we have hidden and skulked like rats in the shadows. Not once, have I seen anyone after us,” I complained. “Just once, I'd like to settle in one place. Rent a room, go to school, live a normal life. I know you have money, I've seen you spend it when we had to. Why can't we stay and live like normal people?”

His blue eyes flared like unholy demon fire and I swallowed. He could still incite fear in my stomach and wasn't above corporal punishment. Twice, we'd left towns and villages

for just that reason---the state didn't like to see children beaten. Funny, I'd never thought about running away from him---what followed us was far worse than anything he could do to or had done to me.

I shut up and pretended to look at my present, the ornate dagger. Dojo, the old man who was sharing the corner with us admired it and said, "looks like old Italian or maybe Spanish. Fine steel in the blade."

"It's Celtic," Pretty-boy added and Murphy shook his head to all three guesses.

"It's Krillian," he named and no one asked what that was. Even I didn't know its origins.

"The blade will never rust, break or dull," he told me. "It belonged to one of your ancestors."

That peaked my interest, he had never mentioned any of my family before. I'd asked if the woman I'd remembered had been my mother but his answer puzzled me, he'd said he had always been with me.

Subtly, he steered me away from the barrel and down the street towards the mission where we'd spent the last week sleeping among a hundred faces. Some I knew and others were always changing as new people moved in from other states or their circumstances worsened. Only last weekend, I'd met a woman and her three little kids kicked out of their apartment and forced to live in their beat up old car. Then, it had been towed leaving them homeless and with only the clothes on their backs.

I'd given her my last ten bucks and she'd nearly hugged me hard enough to break a rib. I'd offered to watch her kids so she could go spend it.

All three were quiet, watchful little ones, two girls and a boy all under the age of four. They huddled together at my feet while I told them fairy tales about a wondrous land of marble skies, deer-like creatures that shimmered in silver, had hands for hooves and antlers of gold.

Murphy said, "Chessaria. It's called Chessaria."

I snorted. "I made the place up, Murph, it's whatever I want to call it."

The little boy said, "Sezaria."

"Fine. Chessaria it is," I agreed and when Mom came back, she had bags of clothes and her little ones were asleep.

Lights went out at 10 pm. By then, I was tucked under the thin blanket and in my coat but I was wide awake. I never once saw Murphy sleep, his eyes were always open and glowed at night like my own personal night light which made it nearly impossible to sneak out from under his watchful eye.

Mostly, I waited until I was in the restroom before I sneaked out. I never went far, just a few blocks to explore a park or stare into a shop window. Once, I made it all the way inside a museum. I think it was in Dallas, there were horses, cowboys and bulls.

He'd whipped me for that and the promised treat of a week on the beach at Padre Island was taken back. We spent it in some little coal mining town in West Virginia instead. In a shack in the woods, no electricity, no running water and we ate only what I could trap or hunt.

"You're such a dick," I mumbled under my breath remembering the awful conditions.

"Go to sleep, Corbin," he said calmly. "Tomorrow, we leave for upstate."

I leaned up on one elbow "Upstate! What's upstate but more snow, more cold and smaller cities?"

“Albany. The Director of this place is too interested in you. I’ve seen her staring at you when she thinks no one is looking.”

“The really pretty lady with the blue eyes and long hair?”

“Flora. Her name is Flora.”

“She likes flowers,” I said drowsily, laying back down. In a few minutes, my eyes closed and I was lost in a place where the flowers had faces; I was in the center of a meadow dancing with her and all the flower faces followed us around. The grass was blue, the sky green and Flora wore a dress that floated around her changing colors from the deepest emerald to the most cerulean blue and her hair matched the colors of her dress. Her hand was ice cold in my own and I could not let go of hers.

“Beware the Trump, young Raven,” she warned and her grin became a Cheshire cat with saber teeth. I woke before the morning came. I woke to the presence of a warm scented hand on my mouth and another under my neck. To two lashed eyes beneath a flowered scarf framing a face as lovely as a flower. I wasn’t sure if I was still dreaming.

She brought my head and shoulders up, sliding me off the cot without disturbing my neighbors or my guardian. When I tried to turn my head to check on his whereabouts, she tugged me forward gliding like a soft shoe salesman through the quilted checkerboard of cots. Not until we were outside and aimed towards an open and waiting stretch limo did I voice a protest.

Once inside, she leaned over me to snap my seat-belt and the scent from her skin and hair made me dizzy. I swallowed the words I had wanted to utter and melted into the plush upholstery. Her long manicured nails stroked my face and she tapped the dimple in my chin. “Your name, boy. What is your name?”

“Corbin,” I whispered.

“Your surname?”

“Murphy-Sines.”

“Murphy-Sines. Surely not.” She laughed then, a high tinkle of a laugh. “Ah, a joke on the morph. Morph---Morphy, Murphy.” She leaned forward and told the driver to head for her home. I don’t remember where we went save that it was long enough for me to pass out with no recollection of any part of the journey.

Chapter 2

Warm breath on my face woke me. I opened my eyes to see three unknown faces staring at me from a distance of inches making them a myopic jigsaw. I backed up and hit a wall not a bed. I wasn’t in bed but on the floor of a small room that looked like a closet. The walls were paneled with bead-board and had pegs above my head.

“Who the hell are you people? Where am I?” I shouted and pushed the faces away to be grabbed and hauled up off the floor as if I weighed nothing. All three of these men looked enough alike to be brothers or from the same tribe. They looked human but not quite human enough if you studied them close, their fingers were one too many, an extra joint between the arm and elbow, necks shorter than most so that their heads looked like they grew right out of their shoulders. Short, squat, built more like a hairless ape with dark brown eyes and

bald skulls. Six fingered and their tongues were forked like a reptile. All three flicked my face and swallowed. I shuddered and struggled, couldn't break their grip on me.

"Gross!" I yelled. "Get your...fucking tongue off me!" I saw her behind them and in a language I'd never heard before, she snapped at them and they dropped me. I landed on my feet but bounced into the wall denting the paneling.

"Where am I?" I demanded and she laughed at me.

"You're in my home, little boy. Be good and I might let you live."

"What do you want? You don't want to piss off Murphy, he's an...animal," I threatened.

"What is your lineage, Little Raven? Your mother's name? Your father? On what shadow were you born?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

Her hand shot out and she grabbed my throat. Instantly, I couldn't breathe, her touch froze the air in my lungs, my entire body became a solid block of ice.

"Humph," she said slowly. "You are human. Disgustingly so. I thought she said he had the blood of the courts and would be easy to control. As he is, he is useless." She threw me to the floor and I bounced against the wall skinning my elbows and palms. I still couldn't breathe or move. She watched me for a moment and then left me, throwing words over her shoulder to the three...men or whatever they were. "Get rid of him. He's not who or what I thought."

"Alive or dead, Mistress?" they asked and she shrugged.

"Whatever. I don't care. You can play with him if you chose just don't leave the mess in the house. Take him to some shadow and leave the remains there. Preferably where his grand-mere can find him."

One of the three grabbed my cuffs and dragged me out of the closet and down the hallway. Dark, painted black and with bare wooden floors, I slid without any effort or resistance. Before we reached the end of the hall, I could see the door; a great, big thing of bronze with angels and demons moving across its panels as if it were a video screen. I was able to breathe but not scream, I wanted to yell for Murphy but couldn't form the syllables to call his name. My coat was still on me and as they dragged me, it billowed up under my armpits until I felt the hard lump of the dagger at my neckline.

I managed to fling my arms out and catch an open doorway making myself a cork in a bottle. The one holding my ankles pulled and I swear I stretched a few inches taller but didn't let go.

The other one tried to peel my fingers off as the third creature kicked me in the stomach. Once again, I struggled to take a breath, felt my body go limp as dark patches filled my vision and sound became a buzzing in my ears.

I woke as they tugged off my clothes. I was lying in a small copse surrounded by trees, on top of rounded black gravel that was curiously warm. Behind them was an altar carved of obsidian and piled around its base were white rocks and sticks. As my eyes focused, I saw that they were bones, skulls and thigh bones, arms and ribs. Rivulets of darker bronze coated the sides of the altar. In the dank sky overhead, the moon in its crescent stage made everything seem greenish, the air smelled like vomit and seaweed. I gagged and kicked but two of them held my ankles and wrists down while the third stripped me naked. I screamed for Murphy and my voice echoed, came back to me in mockery as they hoisted me into the air to smack me onto the flat stone and fasten chains to my wrists and ankles.

“Blood or meat?” the first one asked, exposing teeth that no human male ever wore in his mouth. I flopped around like a gaffed flounder and begged them not to hurt me.

“Oh God! Oh God! Murphy, help me!” I cried out and only heard the thunder of my own pounding heart.

I pissed myself, I was so terrified and didn’t care. Nor did it deter them. He flung out his hand and a claw the size of a dagger slid out from his thumb. Slowly, he stuck it into my belly and ripped down. Blood burst out in a fine spray as white hot agony exploded through my gut. The three of them sucked it out of the air and moaned, eyes closing in ecstasy.

“Royal blood,” he whispered. “More than human.”

The thunder of my heart became louder than the sound of them feasting on my blood, I could feel my guts pushing their way through the tear in my belly wall and it freaked me out enough to dampen the pain until he ripped into my stomach with all six talons at once. I shrieked, a dying wail and he went flying backwards as a giant shadow blocked the wan moonlight.

Something slashed at the chains on my wrists and ankles while a mounted beast leaped over me, altar and all.

Murphy scooped me under his arms and bolted for the tree line, I saw a massive black horse-like creature bearing a caped rider chasing the three into the woods wielding a saber the size of a broadsword before the branches slapped at my face and cut off my view.

Murphy ran for miles with me tucked into his chest. Surefooted, strong, he never faltered or took a misstep. The trees grew close with little underbrush, no loam or needles under foot just that rounded gravel so that I heard his feet pushing aside the stones as he ran.

My blood ran down my belly and into his clothes. I shivered as the cold reached into the deeply buried core of warmth that was my life. He smelled the blood and cursed, laying me down under the bole of a fallen tree while his hands tore at his shirt. He tucked his coat around my shoulders and probed the tear and holes in my guts. His murmured curses were soft and in a language I did not often hear him use except in dire straits and his tone made me all too aware of its interpretation.

“I’m dying, Murphy?” I whispered.

“No, Corbin, master,” he said swiftly, wrapping the bundled shirt on my belly.

“Why, Murphy? Why did she do this to me? I don’t even know her.” I shuddered and felt him stiffen as the ground shook. He pulled at his coat and eased me down to stand in front of me holding a thin blade that glowed almost as bright as his eyes. I could see the dark shape of the horseman by the moon’s shade and the blade’s fire.

The creature stood at least 18 hands high, black as the inside of a well with feathered heels and cloven hooves. Its eyes were red in the moonlight, its head roman nosed and heavy, its forelock split by a horn nearly the length of Murphy’s blade. Spiraled and dark as obsidian, it tossed the point about so that I saw the blood tipped nearly to its halfway point.

The rider tossed its hood back and I saw the man’s face. High-brow, green-eyes and black haired, the face of a pirate; no humor in the flat eyes and grim lips. He barked a question to Murphy and Murph answered equally as terse. Both raised their blades and I saw murder there until Murphy spoke my name and named the rider.

“Julian,” he said. “This is Corbin, Raven. Your nephew. Grandson of Corwin, great grandson of Oberon but more importantly, he is the son of Merlin of the Courts of Chaos and a human woman. Harm the son of the King at your peril. I claim Sanctuary for him in

King Merlin's name."

The nearly seven foot tall Julian dropped to the ground, removed his gauntlets and peered under the wadded up shirt before his eyes devoured my face. His words faded into the background as my hold on consciousness slipped away.

Chapter 3

I opened my eyes slowly, truly astonished that I was still alive. The pain in my stomach seemed a distant monster that promised to make itself known and soon. I was in someone's bed in a tent with IVs hanging near my right side. Sunlight streamed in through netted screens and an open door flap. Quiet murmuring voices penetrated just outside beyond my vision. I swallowed past dry lips and an equally parched throat. There must have been a cool breeze, I saw the sides of the tent billowing yet I was hot, dripping with sweat and still shivering with chills.

I could hear birds and the crunching of a horse chewing on hay, its hooves rustling the bedding. I could smell horse, sawdust and blood, antiseptic and fever sweat. I tried to sit up and the effort left me faint-headed and gasping, brought people into the tent to hover over me. One was the giant I'd seen on the horse and another was Murphy, the third was a man between the two's height and must have been a doctor. He picked up my wrist and felt for my pulse, checked my eyes and at my waist. He had dark orange eyes, orange tinted skin and copper red hair set back like an Elizabethan hair line.

The giant rumbled deep in his throat clearly asking a question and Murphy answered before turning to me.

"Corbin, how do you feel?"

"Don't make him talk, sir," the orange man returned. "He needs to rest. I'm going to put you on oxygen so your lungs are under less stress."

"Murphy?" I managed. "What happened? Why did that chick do this to me? Who is she? Am I gonna die, Murphy?"

The doctor stuck a mask over my nose and mouth cutting me off. "No, you're not allowed to die under my care," he said. He looked off to the side and spoke to someone else. "His liver was pierced in two places, his intestines perforated, bowels ruptured, one kidney nicked. Blood loss of a significant amount which I've replaced in volume, stopped the bleeding and sutured the laceration in his stomach wall. He is on massive infusions of antibiotics to prevent infection but as you can see, he is running a high fever. His fractures have been reduced and pain medication administered. His survival rate depends on his mortal makeup and constitution. Is he one of yours, Sir Julian?"

"Morph?" the one called Julian asked Murphy and I saw his image waver as if I was looking through the rain's downpour. He changed to a creature more like a demon or gargoyle than a man. I heard him say the woman's name, Flora and then, my own. Julian turned and studied me, his eyes devouring my face.

"He looks like a young Corwin," he mused. "Has he any Chaos blood in him, morph?"

"He is a human child," Murphy denied. "I am bound to his service by a witch woman in Ireland. Bound by her shed blood and dying curse to protect him."

“Her name? What was her name?” Julian demanded again.

“Amber Murphy-Sines.”

“Was she human?”

“Completely human,” Murphy nodded.

“And you say Flora did this? Why? I know she had no love for Corwin but why take it out on a child?”

“Why did you intervene and save him?” Murphy asked instead. “Even if you suspected Royal blood, no familial feeling do you bear for Corwin or Corwin’s kin.”

“No one dare to spill the blood of Amber within my protection, my demesnes,” he retorted. “If he is not of Amber descent, why would you protect him?”

“He is a son of Amber,” Murphy agreed. “Whether he has enough of that blood to walk the Pattern, I do not know. He also has the blood of Merlin’s mother, Dara, Lady of the Courts of Chaos. Has he shown any sign of either Logus power? No, not that I have seen yet the woman Flora seemed to recognize him.”

“Does Merlin know about him?”

The doctor clucked in hissing annoyance. “Will you please take your conversation out so he can rest? He should be in a hospital under 24 hour care.”

“Who or what are after you?” Julian asked, his voice moving away from my hearing.

I lifted the plastic cup off my face and called out, “Murphy? Don’t leave me.”

He came swiftly to my side and his hands were once again human, horny and callused as he stroked the side of my face. “I am here, my master. I will never leave you.”

“Am I dying, Murphy?” I felt such sadness overwhelm me, a hollow feeling deep in my gut and it made my breath quicken. I panted in shallow breaths, my chest barely lifting.

“No, Raven,” he returned swiftly.

“My guts feel like they’re burning, Murph. Like they’d fall out if I stood up.”

“Your guts are back where they belong, master. Sewed and tidy as this doctor could make them. There is a spark inside you. Do you feel it? A warm core that is the center of your life. Cradle it, feed it, blow on it as if you were to feed a tiny blaze into a bonfire. Do you see it?”

“I see it, Murphy,” I said drowsily, warm and tingly.

“Good. Feed it pieces of fuel, Raven. One by one until it blazes like a forest fire.”

“There’s no more firewood, Murph,” I protested.

“I will give you some. Here, Raven. A log from a Heart oak from the Silver Forest of Arden. Look, your Uncle Julian is giving you a splendid chunk of ironwood from his favorite copse in the wood. He is the Steward of Arden, Raven. Feel the flames brighten and leap as they consume the wood.”

“I feel it, Murph. I’m warming up now. Too bad we don’t have any marshmallows. We could make smores,” I mumbled.

“Can you sleep now, master?”

I snorted very near to that state of slumber. “You never called me master before, Murph. I must be worrying you.”

“I’ll beat you when you wake, Corbin. For leaving without telling me you were going. Go to sleep.”

I closed my eyes and obeyed him.

Chapter 4

The tent was blowing briskly when I opened my eyes and Murphy was seated on a stump carved into the likeness of a chair. He was curiously still, his eyes unblinking as he watched my face.

I felt less pain, cooler and definitely hungry. My IVs were still going but the blood had been removed from the pole. I felt lighter and fragile, as if one solid cough would send me spiraling away. When I lifted my arm off the cot, it felt as if I was moving an 80 lb. bag of cement.

My fingers rubbed at the covers over me, they were a soft fabric like wool but not itchy. The cot was wooden, the mattress crinkly as if stuffed with rushes. The tent walls were oiled canvas with a stove, metal chimney. Nowhere did I see anything that worked off electricity or was a synthetic. Except for the medical lines and bags. Those were plastic.

“Where are we?” It was an effort to breathe, my lungs were filled with water and gurgled. I hawked up a mouthful and spat green phlegm. It hurt, my ribs and belly protested.

“I can call the doctor, Corbin,” he said. “He will give you something for the pain.”

“Where are we, Murphy? This place is like...what I remember from the dreams. From years ago when I was a baby.”

“Arden. The Forest of Arden. Your uncle brought you here from a shadow world.”

“Shadow world? This isn't New York?”

“No, Corbin. This is a place near to your home, called Amber. The one true world.”

I stared at him, decided he was crazier than me. “I want to go home,” I said. “To New York.”

“She will be there, looking for you.”

“She? You mean that bitch, Flora?”

“The Lady Florabel and others. She will have contacted others and told them about you,” he said and his teeth grew into fangs. “A long time ago, a man named Dworkin found Chaos and learned how to harness its power. He used it to create a...loci of power using his blood and the jewel he called the Jewel of Judgment. He created the Pattern, called it the Primal Pattern and when any of his blood walk its entire length reaching the center, it bestows upon that individual, the power to go anywhere your heart desires---you make a...shadow world that becomes real. The further away from the Pattern you travel, the more changes you will see until they are truly bizarre.

“Strangest of all are the Courts of Chaos, the Realm where demons and creatures dwell with their masters and lords. Your father grew up in those Courts and mastered them. He is Merlin, son of Dara, and Corwin, Prince of Amber. He rules the Courts as King, he lived on Shadow Earth for many years.”

“Does he know about me?” I asked. Murphy shook his head.

“He does not. The woman who was your mother was only a fleeting episode in his younger years, he never knew she conceived and she never tried to find him to tell him so. She believed in fact, that he was a Fae spirit, not a mortal man at all. You were conceived on Midsummer's Day and born on the Feast of St. Michael's. She held you until you were three and died in a fall running from hunters who were after you. She died protecting you and conjured me with her dying curse.”

“What was her name?”

“Amber Murphy-Sines. She named you Raven because of your black hair and yellow eyes. She said the ravens sang when you were born.”

“I wish I could remember her,” I said and moved my hands along my belly. I felt a bulk of bandages and a drain coming from the left side. Tenderness and pain but it was manageable. “I’m hungry.”

“Truly? I will see if Doctor Ooly will allow it.” He rose, all angles and power contained in an ill-fitting suit akin to a medieval peasant costume.

“Murphy, what is your true form?” I asked and he grinned, sharp-toothed like a ferret.

“Picture a cross between a shark and a gargoyle,” he said and slipped from my sight. Moments later, he returned with the orange haired doctor who seemed pleased that I was awake and coherent. He checked my belly, heart, lungs and the pulse at my wrist before studying my face and the IV bags.

“How do you feel, young sir? No more fever or chills? Are you warm enough? Any pain?”

“It hurts but not too bad,” I muttered. I stared at his eyes, he was minus eyelashes and his hairline resembled the portraits of Queen Elizabeth the 1st. Smooth, rounded dome with no wrinkles.

“I’m hungry. Thirsty, too.”

He handed me a glass half full of blue liquid that shimmered and moved like viscous oil. It smelled horrible and I wrinkled my nose. “I had more in mind a glass of chocolate milk and a burger.”

“This is a dye and will tell me if your viscera are leaking. I just cleaned up a nasty infection in your abdominal cavity. You can’t eat or drink until I’m sure your...guts are sealed.”

“Oh.” I grimaced and swallowed the contents as he held the cup to my lips. It actually didn’t taste too awful, sort of like mango and kiwi. It did warm up my insides as it went down, a nugget of heat in my belly and radiated slowly out to my arms and legs. It helped with my thirst, too. He held a flat metallic plate shaped like a cookie tray over my gut and moved it side to side, back and forth staring into its shiny surface. After some fifteen minutes, he grunted and pronounced me clean and safe. “Clear liquids to start,” he ordered and told someone just out of my sight what my new menu was supposed to be and any foods I should avoid. Which seemed to be most everything I liked.

I yawned, suddenly sleepy and he pulled the sheets up to my chin. Murphy made some noise and I barely heard the doctor’s reply.

“He’ll sleep. Part of the dye was a sedative to relax his muscles. We must move him soon. Julian fears we have been discovered.”

Murphy’s voice rumbled in a deep basso. “He cannot protect the boy here in Arden?”

“He will not. He has been fair and impartial because he detests Flora, not because he feels anything for Corwin or Merlin. I told Lord Julian it would be safe to transport him by plane-car in two days.”

“Where will we go?” Murph asked and it was almost a wail.

“Back to where you came from,” he paused. “If he is only mortal, how did you reach this shadow realm without power from the Pattern? Did someone trump you into Arden?”

Murphy shrugged. “I never said he was only mortal. He has the blood of Kings in his veins and the power of both the Logus and the Pattern.”

I went back to sleep wondering where this realm resided.

I grumbled, spit, growled and turned over to the amusement of both my entire retinue and the owner of this place. I grumbled because I was literally ravenous and would eat Murph if I thought I could digest him. There wasn't one of those nurse call buttons near to hand so I opted for yelling. My voice surprised me, it was barely a squeak. Murph must have been just outside the tent, he came in too quickly to have heard my feeble complaint unless he was just outside the flap. Best of all, he carried a tray from which steam and delicious smells emanated.

"Gimme," I said and attempted to sit up. My belly and ribs complained nastily and he set the tray down on a table and helped me sit up. Hands under my shoulder blades and he slowly inched me up, propping my back with pillows.

"Okay?" he asked anxiously. I raised my hand to my forehead and wiped at sweat.

"Holy Christmas," I mumbled. "I feel like a 90 year old man."

"Corbin, you nearly died," he said. "Your liver was punctured, your intestines slashed, ribs broke and your kidneys torn. If Julian hadn't gotten you a doctor, you would have died in my arms."

"Those things were going to...eat me," I shuddered. "Alive. With me watching." Suddenly, I wasn't hungry anymore.

"You should eat. Dr. Ooly has had you on liquid nutrition but you need real food for the injuries to heal." He coaxed me until I finished a bowl of clear meat soup, pudding that tasted like vegetables and hot tea. After a few bites, I was full and pushed the rest away. All I wanted was to sleep. He had other ideas, though. He swung my legs over, sat me up and dressed me in the same ridiculous costumes as he wore. I was grateful for the looseness of trousers and blouse against my bandages. I couldn't do much to help him, I was as useless as a retarded noodle.

"Where are we going, Murph? If you're getting me up, I have to go to the bathroom. Where is it? Oww, you're hurting me, take it easy."

My feet hit the floor, it was indoor/outdoor carpeting over forest dirt. I could feel lumps beneath my bare feet. Murphy didn't answer me but his serious and rapid urging to move was making me nervous.

"They're coming, aren't they? They've found us?" I pushed at his hands and yelled, "Alright! Just tell me what to do, Murphy and I'll hurry!"

"Raven, the whole bloody cavalry is after us. From Flora, from the Courts and from Amber. All headed right for this tent. So bloody move your arse!"

I pulled on my sneakers and pulled out the IV lines, wrapped the blanket around me like a cape and picked up my dagger. The back wall of the tent was easy to slit open and we exited there to stand facing the tree line. It was nearly dusk and shadows abounded. I didn't see any guards or any other tents set up nor was the big black horse in sight.

My first steps were tentative and I needed Murph's arm to hold me up. Once in the deep trees, he led the way leaving very little trace behind. I didn't have the breath to ask questions, I needed all my energy to keep up with him

Chapter 5

I didn't see any wildlife in this forest. Most of the trees were hardwoods and Dutch Elm disease had obviously never made it through these stands nor had the trees been forested. It was clearly an old growth forest with 90% of the trunks over six foot wide and a hundred feet high. The only time I'd ever seen anything that rivaled this forest were the giant redwoods in California.

"We have to hurry," Murph said. "Morgenstern can track us."

"Who or what is Morgenstern?" I panted trying to keep up. He hauled me onto my toes by my elbows as I started to fall.

"Julian's mount. It's not really any kind of horse but a demon. He breeds them."

We splashed across a creek and the water was icy numb on my ankles. I nearly slipped on mossy rocks and he complained, grumbling under his breath.

"Can't change too much too quickly this close to Amber," he muttered. "We should go back to New York." He looked up at the sky and said, "more green in the sky and a haze." Through the patches in the crown of trees I saw the sky shift slightly towards green.

We climbed the muddy bank and the stones changed from quartz to a whitish gray and the soil to a sandy loam. Next, the trees shifted to oaks and maples, smaller second growth with underbrush. I detoured around poison ivy and squirrels chattered noisily at our running feet. The air smelled different and the sky lightened even more so that it looked vaguely familiar. Murphy grunted and stopped. "Are you doing that?" he demanded.

"What?" I said defensively.

"Changing the sky. It looks like this is Chessaria." He set me down on a stump and ran forward a few feet into the underbrush to disappear into a thicket. I could see bright sunlight through the trunks but nothing of him and realized the end of the forest was ahead.

It took an effort but I managed to get to my feet and bull my way through the dense brush and emerge onto the banks of a road bumping into Murphy. We stared down a cobblestone lane that was being used by men that resembled farmers the world over only these men were driving carts pulled by a goat-like creature. Goats with huge horns and spotted, solid colored and dappled. They bleated as they passed us and stared with those eerie devilish eyes that freaked me out. And I hated those beards, these things pissed on them too from the smell.

One little man in red leather apron and blue denim stopped and asked if we wanted a ride into town. He looked so much like Gollum I almost glanced around for Gandulf and the rest of the gang.

Murphy nodded and literally threw me into the back of the cart telling the driver he'd pay him triple if he made the goat run. Before I could say anything, we were galloping down the lane at a good clip, bypassing the other drivers with a shout of 'ware!' I held on for dear life, this thing had no springs or roll bar and the only padding under me was my own fat. I had been told before I had no 'ass-it-all.'

After a few yards, I was ready to get out and walk, complaining bitterly but was ignored by both Murphy and our Kamikaze driver.

"What village is it ahead?" Murphy asked.

Gollum snorted. "Village? Pence is more of a spit hole on the road. Nearest city is Inac, two days down the highway. My name is Znc."

“Bless you,” I said to the sneezing sound and Murphy slapped me.

“His name is Zinc, spelled Znnc. I am a morph.”

The sneezer stared at us. Turning his head in a move that more closely resembled an owl than a human. “I can see that,” he sneered. “We’re not provincials, we’ve seen your kind before. Him, that’s another tale. What is he?” He pointed to me with his whip, made of what looked like stiff pig tail bristles.

“What does he look like?” Murphy asked curious.

“Amberite. Or...something more.”

“Does that concern you?”

“Their last war spilled over here. We don’t need or want any of your messes. We lost enough of our youngsters to your King Eric,” Zinc snapped.

“We are returning home,” Murphy said. “As fast and as straight as the Road can take us. Not to Amber but his shadow world.” He gestured to me.

“Fork up ahead. Take the right and it’ll cut off a hundred leagues and the changes are simpler.”

“To where?”

“You’re looking for blue skies and green grass, oak and maples, blue lakes and silver birds that fly among the clouds?”

“Yes,” my guardian said.

“Go that way, there are no safeguards on that route.”

“But what are the dangers we may find there?” Murphy snarled.

“No dangers for a morph,” the gnome snapped and dumped us both out the back before galloping off. Murphy changed into a hairy beast before my eyes and attacked the ground with claws and horns leaving parallel gouges in the dirt. He turned his gargoyled head towards me and his eyes were blazing red.

“Way cool, dude,” I admired.

“Climb on my back, master,” he growled in a deep basso. Hesitantly, I slid my leg around his waist and felt cold stone, hard muscles that I couldn’t dent with any force. From his shoulder blades, wings emerged and those felt wiry, tough as leather hide with pulsing veins between the membranes, more like the wings of a bat than a bird.

“This doesn’t mean we’re dating,” I said nervously as I gripped his waist with both thighs.

He leaped into the air and tucked his clawed hands around my calves as his wings beat in slow, measured thrusts. We were airborne, within seconds high above the road and I saw the little weasel galloping away from us.

“You breathe fire or anything?” I asked, thinking it would serve the righteous goat herder if we toasted his buns. Murphy didn’t reply but flapped on. Back down the road where we’d exited the woods, a squad of soldiers burst out. I didn’t recognize the uniforms but they weren’t the same species as the hobbit. They saw us and pointed, I tried to tell Murphy we’d been spotted in a panic as they leveled weapons on us. Murphy’s answer to the barrage of arrows was to bank and spiral higher, well out of their range.

His style of flight was more like that of a condor, soaring on thermals and not actively beating wing strokes like that of a hawk.

“Now would be a good time to leave this shade, Raven,” he growled and the sky burned yellow, the ground under us turned sere and dusty. I found it hard to breathe as smoke from active volcanoes puffed bilious smoke below us. “Where is this, Raven?” he

shouted and ducked a fireball of ash and steam.

I concentrated and changed the sand below to black, fine grained and shiny. Added a beach and green palm trees and red leilani flowers to the side of the mountain. Turquoise seas with white breakers and dolphins leaping below our shadows. Fat goats climbing the slopes---enough with the goats already! I shouted and thought of long-tailed birds of Paradise, parrots and monkeys. Murphy landed on one of a set of islands in the Hawaiian chain and dumped me on my ass in warm black sand inches from the surf line. I whacked a crab away from me and dug my fingers deep until water tickled my palms.

“Will they follow us?” I asked, digging at my belly which felt wet. I peeked under the bandage and blanched. What I thought was wet from ocean was red and sticky. Blood. Seeing my own blood was almost as bad as seeing my insides come out. Nausea assailed me.

“Murph--.”

“I know, Raven,” he said morphing back into the gray man I thought I knew so well. “I can smell you.”

“That’s kinda gross. Is it bad?” He squatted next to me and inspected the holes in my gut.

“Not too bad. You tore a stitch or two open. Couple of band-aids and you’ll be good as new. Where are we?”

I looked around, recognized the beach, the shape of the coastline and the volcano spewing lava. “Hawaii. Island of Oahu. We’re on Koanaloa Beach, smack dab between two active moving rivers of lava. I always wanted to surf here.”

“Any homes nearby we can reach for help?”

“Not that we can walk to.” I pointed straight ahead. “Out there is nothing but the Pacific ocean, back up is the Volcano crater. To the right is a half mile wide stream of lava, to the left a quarter mile river. We’re stuck between a rock and a hot plate.”

He didn’t laugh at my lame pun nor ask if I could tread water. Swimming out to sea and around the exiting lava flows wasn’t an option either. Since neither of us carried a cell phone, we couldn’t call for a helicopter extraction, either. “Why don’t you just fly me out of here, Murph? You can just change back to the gargoyle thing, right?”

“No,” he said. “It requires energy to morph and I used much carrying you and shifting through shadows so they cannot track us. Also, if I morph again here, they can home in on the energy signature and find me.”

“Well, then. I’ll just change the scenery to somewhere else on the island,” I said. As I attempted to alter the ground under my butt to sandy loam, it rose up and smacked me in the face. I vaguely heard Murphy’s cry of surprise and then nothing.

Chapter 6

I woke in the dirt. Flat on my back in dirt and leaves, in filthy clothes. Not on a sandy beach nor a hospital bed or surrounded by beautiful nurses administering to my every whim.

It was dark so I couldn’t even tell where I was, all I knew was that it smelled different

and that Murphy wasn't near me. Nor did he come when I whispered for him. In my head, it was a shout.

I rolled over onto my side and immediately, my belly hurt. Raw, blinding pain like when that thing had stuck his claws in it and tore. My hand explored and found both my shirt and bandage sodden with more blood and fluid. I curled my legs into my stomach and rested, taking shallow breaths that didn't raise or move my lower half much. While I did that, the sky gradually lightened to let me know that the sun was coming up. It shadowed a forest of trees manicured like a parkland and a stairwell descending from a cliff over my head. Atop the cliff was a genuine castle with five towers from which pennants of a white unicorn were flying.

Somehow, I had managed to climb down that stairwell in the dark, unconscious and wounded. I know I did it by the bloodied drag marks I had left on the white marble treads.

I heard a rustling in the wood and looked up at an image I had dreamed of but never imagined I would ever really see. A white unicorn stood before me, a creature too beautiful to be called anything but a force of magic. Snow white with a spiraled golden horn, silver fetlocks with cloven hooves and a tail like a lion, not a horse. It was clearly not a horse with a horn. A wisp of a beard hung from the delicate jaw and her eyes were the gas blue of a flame. She was too awe-inspiring to stare at so I lowered my gaze in respect and missed it when she floated close to touch that horn to my flesh. In a flash, she knelt beside me and using her horn, rolled me over until I was astride her. Only then, did she climb to her feet with me as a passenger.

Weaving her way through the forest, she forged her own path to emerge on a flat plain guarded by soldiers in blue and gold who made no attempt to stop us as she walked out upon a pattern carved in the solid stones of the earth. I knew this place. Deep in my bones and my blood, I knew this place.

She dropped to her knees and I slid off to stand on wobbly legs at the very beginning of the Pattern. Without her body holding me up, I would have fallen face first onto the first step. I could just see the First Veil and knew that once stepping foot on it, I must follow it through to the end or die trying. To leave the Pattern in any place other than the end was to suffer annihilation. Or, I might die anyway if my blood was not strong enough to proclaim me a son of Amber.

I took that first step and she hit me in the chest with her horn, barring me from moving ahead. My blood dripped between my clenched hands down to my feet and hissed as the drops hit the ground, fog rising up around us until I was lost in the thick of it. When it slowly dissipated, I was leaning against the postern of a tavern on a street corner in a pretty little town straight out of Old England. In front of me was the open door to the tavern called The Blue Pig and it bustled with customers. Next door was a farmer's market selling all kinds of goods.

The people were dressed in comfortable blouses, trousers and capes, the women in old fashioned dresses and aprons. Horses, mules stood at hitching posts alongside buggies and wagons. I saw no cars, neon or electric lights.

Above the town on a cliff sat the castle with flags flying from its turrets.

Two men approached and walked up to the bar, standing out because both of them were in business suits yet seemed perfectly at ease amongst all the other less formally dressed clientele. One of the pair was tall, dark haired and blue eyed, the other short with brown hair and brown eyes. He carried a briefcase in his right hand that he laid on the bar.

I took a step forward and felt the ground moving away from both my head and my feet as reality stretched thin my awareness.

Inside was cool and dim. A long bar of carved maple with blue glass mugs sliding down its forty foot length. A big picture window behind the comfortably fat bartender in a white apron. Wooden tables with golden tablecloths and buxom barmaids in heavy skirts and white aprons, low cut blouses that would surely earn them big tips. Big white smiles at me. I held my arm against my stomach as I approached the shorter man to touch his sleeve. He was in his forties and looked like a banker or a lawyer. He looked normal.

"Can I help you?" he asked politely, putting down his mug of beer. It too, was blue although that could have been the glass of the colored mug. His eyes widened as he studied my face.

"Help me," I managed and my hand came up. The other man grabbed it, turned it over to stare at the blood covering my palm. I reached for the dimple in the tall man's chin and then a swooping sensation filled me as I was whisked away.

Voices speaking in low murmurs over my head.

Cory, who is he?

I don't know, Bill I've never seen him before.

He looks like you. Or at least, like you when I first met you years ago. Is he one of Oberon's bastards?

No. He doesn't have that same look or smell to him. And those wounds---they're like those goons Flora and Eric used years ago---they liked to gut, disembowel and eat their victims alive.

How could he have run into Flora?

I don't know. Random wants to speak to him when he wakes up. So do I. He sounded grim.

Why did he approach us?

I think...because of our suits.

You think he's from my shadow? Even though he was in local wear?

He didn't go to the barkeep or the local Healer. He picked you, Bill. Ah, his eyes are fluttering.

I dragged my eyes open. This time, I was in a bed, in a spacious room that was clearly inside the castle. Tapestries, rich rugs, fancy furniture. Both men were standing next to the bed wearing designer jeans, denim shirts and comfortable boots. The taller man had a long sword at his waist in a scabbard. He wore a silver rose on his collar that held back a light cape. Dark haired with blue eyes and a dimpled chin, he was easy on the eyes and I knew I couldn't piss him off and get away with it.

"What's your name?" he interrogated me and there was an implied threat in the tone.

"Corbin. Raven," I whispered. "I'm thirsty."

"I can't give you anything until the doctor okays it," he said. "You have a gut wound. He'll be up in a few minutes."

"Where am I?"

"Amber. The castle. What are you doing here? From whence did you come?"

My answer was interrupted by a medical doctor, a red-haired dude with a beard and a green skinned woman who was lovely. I rubbed my eyes. Wow. I'm really hallucinating some weird shit, I thought. Did I lose so much blood my brain's starving for oxygen?

No one answered me but the doc stuck a thermometer in my mouth. It tasted real. A BP cuff on my arm and poked at my belly under the covers. It hurt. Felt real not a fantasy.

In two minutes, he had everyone out of the room and was cutting my clothes off to my feeble protests. Seconds later, he stuck me in the hand with a needle, he and the room faded away before I could say 'wait.'

Someone's soft singing woke me. A song about a lonely maid under the waves who pined for a lover to rescue her from some unnamed disaster. I listened drowsily to the gentle melancholy of the song and when it was finished, asked for another.

Soft fingers brushed my forehead and the voice asked my name.

"Corbin. Raven." I was happy to tell her. "What's yours?"

"Vialle."

"You sing pretty, Vialle," I told her. "You should try out for The Voice."

"The voice?"

"You know, the TV show." I sighed and stretched. My arm hurt and it would only move so much but I was too tired to care.

"Ah, yes, I doubt that would please my husband."

I heard the implied laughter. "So do it and don't tell him."

"He has his own musical band," she added.

"Yeah? Maybe I've heard of him. What is it called?"

"Random Hearts."

I thought. Slowly, my thoughts were processing so slowly. "Nope. Guess he hasn't made it big yet. Where am I?" I opened my eyes and roamed the room, saw a hot chick dressed in silk with long hair held back by a crown. She wore jewels that complimented her greenish skin, emerald hair and lovely neck. I blinked but she stayed green. Her hands were delicate, her nails the same deep green as her hair. There was something odd about her eyes and she held her long fingers in her lap. They were stained with what I later learned was clay. She sculpted.

"I am Vialle, we met earlier but I do not believe you remember. I am Queen of Amber, wife to King Random whom you also met," she smiled softly. "You will come to no harm here if your intentions are peaceful. Are they peaceful, young Corbin?"

"Call me Raven, please. Yes, ma'am."

"Who injured you?"

I looked around at the IV set up. I was on fluids, antibiotics and whole blood. A BP, TPR machine stood next to the bed along with a table and bed tray. On the tray were 4X4 gauze, tape, pill bottles and other medical paraphernalia and debris.

My belly was newly bandaged completely around my middle and a drain led to a bag on the floor. I recognized the feeling of lethargy as a hefty dose of morphine in my system.

"You know a lady name of Flora?" I felt and saw her stiffen. She nodded. "She kidnapped me. Gave me to her goons and told them to kill me. They wanted to eat me alive." I shuddered at the memory of them ripping my guts open.

"Why?"

"She thought I was somebody's son."

"Whose?"

"My mother was mortal, a human. Amber Murphy Sines of the US. She died in Ireland, never told me who my dad was. When she died, she bound a morph to me, to

protect me. I don't know who my father was. I never met him." I wouldn't tell what I did know, I would lie to protect myself and Murph and not trust anyone else.

"I know who he is, Vialle," said the second taller man from the tavern. He entered the room with the doctor. He checked my vitals again and seemed pleased.

"How do you feel, Corbin? Any pain?"

"Not yet," I answered. "There's enough morphine in me to sedate a horse."

"Vialle, he's not one of mine although he looks enough like a younger me to be a brother, save I know all of Oberon's get. No, I'd wager he's one of Merlin's."

"One of? There are more?" she sounded upset and he laughed.

"I'm surprised there aren't dozens. We do have a family tradition to uphold."

"If I catch Random straying, I'll cut off his---," she threatened.

I laughed and stifled it as pain bloomed in my gut.

"Tell me, boy. Have you come from the Courts of Chaos? Who is your mother? Your father? How did you get hurt?" He asked a million questions while I was held a helpless captive. The morphine in me made me so stoned I didn't care. Didn't answer his questions, either. I looked around. Asked one question only.

"Where's Murphy?"

"Murphy? Who is Murphy?" he charged.

"My...bodyguard. Nursemaid. Wolfman." To my horror, I giggled.

"He's high," the dark man said in amusement.

"Well yes. If your stomach looked like his, Corwin, you'd be screaming for pain relief. If he was pure human, he'd be dead," the doctor said. "How old are you, kid?"

"Fifteen. I just turned fifteen," I giggled. "And I guess I won't live to see 16."

"Let's leave him to rest, Corwin, Bill, Random. He'll be in less pain and more coherent in the morning," the doctor added.

"Hey, bones," I said. "I'm hungry and thirsty. Can I have a big old glass of Pepsi? You know I saw a unicorn and she carried me to the base of the cliff?"

There was dead silence, and then the man named Corwin asked, "You saw the Unicorn?"

"She was beautiful," I mused remembering. "I wanted to walk the Pattern but she wouldn't let me. My blood was running, you see and it'd burn it."

"Who told you that, Corbin?"

"I dunno. Murph, maybe. Or maybe the unicorn did." My face twisted as the pain crept back into my awareness. It was as if a fire had been lit inside my guts and nothing would put it out. My face must have shown distress because the doc shooed them all out and did something to the IV line in my arm. Everything floated away.

Chapter 7

I woke up starving, my stomach so empty it thought it was ready to do battle with my throat for something to put down in it. I was chewing on the pillow case when the green lady came in the darkened doorway with a tray. I could smell food and was more interested in that than her.

She set the tray next to the bed, raised my shoulders and tucked a napkin under my chin. "I see you're awake, Raven. Or do you prefer Corbin?"

A bowl of something yellow that steamed---some kind of soup. Toast spread thick with jam or marmalade. Stewed apples. Thin slices of white flesh that looked like poached fish. A dozen small tarts. My mouth filled with saliva and she smiled at the goofy expression on my face.

"Raven, are you the tiniest bit hungry?"

"Oh yes, ma'am. Are those fruit tarts?"

"Passionberry. Your grandfather's favorite. Would you like one?"

"Yes, please." I watched her gently pick one up and hover it in front of my mouth.

"Where were you born, Raven? Your mother's name?"

"Ireland, near Derry. On St. Michael Day. Conceived on Midsummer's Day." She placed the tart in my mouth and it tasted so heavenly I ached for more.

"Slowly," she cautioned. "Your tummy isn't quite up to solid food yet. How would you like to try some soup?"

I nodded, quite aware of how this game was played. "My mom's name was Amber. Amber Murphy-Sines. She was an American exchange student in Ireland studying dolmens and henges for her Masters. That's all I know, all Murphy told me. She died when I was three years old. I don't remember much about her."

She spooned the soup down my throat. Rich with meat juices, it hit my belly with a pleasant warmth and I felt it sending tingles of energy to my toes. She was careful, spilled nary a drop or missed my mouth. With a start, I realized she was blind.

"How can you--?" I shut my mouth as I considered my rudeness.

"See what I'm doing? You just noticed, dear boy? Years of practice and a sixth sense, young Raven. More?"

"No, thanks. I'm full." I was and the food churned in my gut making me sleepy. I asked for a drink and she held an ornate flask to my lips, I tasted what seemed to be fermented fruit juice with a slightly bitter/sweet aftertaste.

"Good?" she smiled and I knew she was amused that I had nodded. "It is from my city, called Rebma, the City under the Sea."

"Rebma is Amber spelled backwards," I said, leaning forward. She seemed to sense me doing it and did not move away when my fingers traced the line of her cheek, nose and lips. She did the same to me, seeing my face through her delicate finger tips. "Rebma can only be seen and accessed when the moon is aloft and full, Raven. Not everyone is allowed to visit the mirror City of Amber. When you come to see it, you will find that it is a perfect mirror image of Amber. My sister, the Queen, will make you welcome."

Today, she wore a pale lemony gown that trailed the flagstones and pearls glimmered softly at her neck, ears and forehead. The gems had that unmistakable essence of true uncultured pearls and were the palest green, no less magnificent than her skin.

"You live under the water?"

"I live here in the Palace with my husband, your great-uncle, the King. King Random. He is your father's Uncle, more closely related than any of your other uncles and aunts."

"He's a lucky man to have you, Your Majesty, ma'am," I bowed my head, my British upbringing kicking in after Murphy's stringent lessons on Royal etiquette.

"We're among family, dear. No need to bow and scrape. After all, I can't see it. Besides, your father is King of the Courts of Chaos. which makes you a royal Prince."

I snorted. As if that would buy me a cup of coffee or slack from Murph. “Do you have any children, ma’am?”

She sighed. “None, yet. The Realm is still too unsettled to risk children.”

“War, here?”

“A bloody civil war between brother, sister and father, Raven. In which your grandfather nearly lost his life and unspeakable horrors were done to him. So be patient with him. I will send a young man to be your valet. You may trust him to do your bidding.”

“I don’t need anybody to help me, I have Murphy,” I protested.

“Murphy?”

“My...morph.”

“And where is this morph?”

“I lost him somewhere between Hawaii and here,” I said slowly. “He’ll find me. He’s bound to me somehow,” I realized it was true, no matter how far I’d gotten from Murphy, he always found me. “I think he sent me here so the dudes who hurt me would chase him instead. When he’s lost them, he’ll join me.”

“You said Flora sent them?”

“Yes. Who is she?”

“Corwin and Random’s elder sister. Different mother than both Random and Corwin.”

“Nice family you belong to,” I said sourly.

“You should meet Luke, or Brand and Eric. Thankfully, Luke remains on Earth and the other two are dead.” She took her hands off my face and laid them on her lap. The silk of her gown rustled crisply. “You have a remarkable face, Raven. I see your father and grandfather in you and also, the blood of Dara. Very little of your mother. Was she blonde, brunette or redhead?”

“Dark-haired with green eyes.”

“What color are yours?”

“Yellow.”

“Surely not yellow? Perhaps golden brown or blue?”

“Golden yellow. Murphy says my eyes are like my grandmother’s. Like a wild cat.”

“Your grandmother was not human,” she said softly. I heard a bell chime in the hallway and she rose lithely to her feet. Leaned over me and kissed my cheek. She smelled of lilies and sharp ocean breezes. “I must go, duties await me. Eat what you can, when you can. Liam will be here to help you. Rest. I will stop in later this evening and read to you.”

“Thank you, I would like that,” I said sincerely and watched her glide smoothly across the room, out the door into a hallway, catching a glimpse of an armed guard standing at attention. He had a sword at his hip and two daggers at his waist from the quick glimpse I caught before the door closed. Not someone I wanted to tangle with in any condition.

The room I looked at for the first time with clear eyes. There weren’t any windows and even though I’d heard this was a castle, I’d still expected windows even if they were only arrow slits. No bathroom, either. I wondered if I was supposed to use a chamber pot. I’d never actually had to resort to those, even in the cabin in West Virginia, we’d had an outhouse.

I could move. Barely. Since I was already sitting up, I scooted further onto my butt and slid my legs over the bed edge. My feet didn’t reach the floor. Not until I slid my hips totally off the mattress did they hit the floor. I shivered as my toes touched cold stone. I bet it sucked to get out of bed in the winter here.

I was in a nightgown, made of thin wool that was soft as cotton, a buttery yellow and had crests on the breast pocket and collar. Long sleeves with rolled up cuffs at my wrists that fell back to reveal two IV lines in my hand and elbow. The IV pole was tucked behind the headboard and I pushed it ahead of me. My first steps were mere inches, movement of any kind was a pain, pulled at my belly and made my head swim. I was in danger of blacking out and falling flat on my face.

Whining and cursing, I made it to the end of the bed in stubborn anger by using the pole and the bed to hold me up. Past the bed and to my right was a short half wall and beyond that, an alcove with an overstuffed chair. A thick upholstered recliner, couch and a table with a brace of candles that glittered on a bowl of shiny red and green apples. A closet I couldn't open and an armoire with a classical guitar in the corner. A hand carved shelf on the wall which held several busts of men that I recognized as Corwin, Random and the man named Bill. An exquisite sculpture of two cavorting unicorns, another of dolphins leaping out of the sea. I knew without anyone telling me, that they had been created by Vialle. She was truly talented.

I sank into the recliner and put the footrest up, shaking from total exhaustion that my little jaunt had induced. It wasn't in me to return and I would have given my left nut for another drink. Unless the glass managed to walk over on its own, I would have to wait for assistance.

Just about when I had almost fallen asleep in the chair, I heard a knock and the tread of booted feet entering the room.

"Holy hell," Corwin exclaimed. "He's gone!"

"Not so fast, Cory," the lawyer man said. "He's too hurt to have escaped past bruiser out there and Doc said the pain meds would keep him too sedated to do much mental hi-jinks. He can't have gone far."

I closed my eyes before they found me in the chair and pretended to snore.

"Looks like an innocent babe, doesn't he?" Corwin snickered.

"Frankly, I'm surprised he made it that far. The Queen's been here with lunch. He ate a little and I don't see any puke, he's kept it down. You awake, kid?"

"I am now," I said grumpily. "Make yourself useful and hand me a drink. Please." I watched him poke about on the tray and bring me the flask with the juice. He smelled it.

"Cuke wine. From Rebma," he held it out and I took it.

"Cuke wine? Like from cucumbers?" I asked staring at my...grandfather's face. He looked no older than 35 or maybe 40, tops. Today, he was in black jeans and silver blouse, with long sleeves and darker embroidery on the collar and cuffs. Black leather belt, boots and a scabbard. I saw the hilt of a sword, the handle was a silver rose and he wore another at his throat. He looked every inch a demon Lord or King. His eyes twinkled. It was like looking into a mirror twenty years down the road.

"Your mother?"

"Amber Murphy-Sines. Murph says she met my father in a pub in Ireland doing a tour of folk singers," I answered before taking a deep drink. I could get used to this stuff, even if it was vegetables.

"Was she into computers?"

"I don't know. I was only three when she died."

"What did she die from?"

"Murphy wouldn't tell me but that was the start of us running. We ran across the ocean

to America. From cities to towns to villages staying no more than a year, sometimes only weeks before we moved again. Mostly, we lived on the streets. Homeless.”

“How old are you, Raven? What kind of schooling do you have? Have you had any health care, shots, a birth certificate?” Bill questioned.

“Who are you?” I stared at his round, bland face. His dark brown hair and eyes were so comfortably normal.

Corwin said, “This is Bill Taylor, my friend and lawyer from your Shadow. He’s known me for thirty years.”

“Murphy said Tuesday was my 15th birthday. He gave me a Krillian dagger,” I said sadly. “I lost it.”

Corwin started. “I gave Merlin a dagger like that when I met him. Tuesday, we found you on Friday. You must mean Tuesday two weeks ago,” he mused. “Doc said your wounds looked older when he treated you, and that was a week ago.”

“Two weeks! I’ve been here two weeks?”

“Have you seen the hole in your belly? You’re lucky you’re alive. If it weren’t for your Amber blood, you’d be dead. Those things gutted you. He said someone treated you first and saved your life. Who would that be?”

“Some doctor named Ooly. Julian’s doc,” I answered.

He jumped at that. “You met Julian?”

“Great brother you have there,” I complained bitterly. “If he didn’t hate those goons more, he would have left me to die. As it was, he told her to come get me.”

“Her?”

“Flora. Your sister.”

“My Father, Oberon had many wives,” he said mildly. “And there were nine of us Princes in Amber. We’re actually half brother and sisters. Made for a tangled mess of succession when Oberon died. Eric led the war and we won. Wait until you meet Dworkin.”

“Dworkin? Sounds like a dwarf,” I said suspiciously.

“Dworkin is one of a kind,” he grinned and he held out a pack of cards. Gestured for me to pick them up. As soon as my hands touched them, I felt incredible cold come off the surface of the cards. I dropped them, stared at him as if he had tried to poison me.

“I don’t play cards,” I stated flatly.

“The cards felt weird?”

“Not weird. Ice cold.”

“Perhaps just one, then,” He handed me a single card and I took it gingerly by the corner tip, flipped it over to stare at an image of a young man that I knew was his son and possibly, my father. It was almost like looking into a mirror save that his eyes were greenish brown and mine golden yellow. He wore his hair slicked back and short, mine was longer and had the same tendency to curl at the temples and stick out over my ears.

His eyes were mine, same shape, same tilt but where his were greenish brown, mine were the yellow of a cat and clearly unique. My pupils were black and made the yellow even more feline.

“Who is he?” I asked pushing the card back into his hands. I wanted no part of them, they burned like ice fire.

“Merlin, my son. King of the Courts of Chaos,” Corwin replied. He studied me. “The cards are the Tarot of Major Arcana, a communication device that allows each one of us to

contact the others. They can be blocked as well.” He shuffled them through his palms and showed me all of them, naming the whole lot from Dworkin to Oberon and down to Merlin’s. I saw Vialle and Flora’s, Julian’s and from my sharp intake of breath, he knew who I’d met. Last, he showed me the Unicorn, the Pattern, a ruby necklace and a strange wheel that shimmered. “This one only Merlin and I have the Trump for,” he said. “Did you find Julian in a... giving mood?”

“Yeah. He was giving me back to the creeps that hurt me. He’s a big asshole,” I retorted. “He wasn’t going to help us until Murphy shamed him into it.”

“Julian has no shame. If he helped you, it was because it was beneficial to him. Where is your morph?”

“I dunno. I thought he’d find me by now.”

“How do you feel? Up to a tour of the castle?”

I looked at them, at my night dress. Raised an eyebrow. “Not going out in a dress, man. So not cool.”

“We can spare you a robe and a wheelchair,” he grinned. “The Doc doesn’t want you straining his repair job.” He called over his shoulder and the guard came in pushing the mentioned articles. My IV bag and pole was added to the chair, I was carefully covered in a plush floor length velvet robe in royal purple that said Gucci on the pocket (I asked about the weird spelling but was told it was correct for Amber) and deposited in the chair before I could voice a protest. Besides, I really wanted out of that room.

The guard introduced himself as Devlin, he was from the Capitol, the city that lay down the road from the castle. He was young, fit and on a first name terms with both Corwin and Bill. The Doctor’s name was Henry Flauvel, and he OK’d our expedition as long as I was in the chair and escorted by the Prince.

Chapter 8

There were seven floors to the Castle, the top most guarded by five towers, the building in the shape of a pentagram. The rooms I occupied were Corwin’s old chambers in the East Wing. The guards barracks were one floor below.

The lowest levels were the dungeons and I opted not to visit those. In fact, Corwin wasn’t too keen on re-visiting them, he told me he had spent over four years there as a guest of King Eric. I was told that the floor plan didn’t always remain the same down there, it changed on some arcane whim leaving people stranded and lost, some never to be found again.

A stairway led to another entrance to the Pattern but it was heavily guarded by both Palace Guards and unnatural beings, seek it at your peril, they told me. The throne room was last on the tour and was unoccupied, the Throne a massive chair built of gold, ivory with a Unicorn carved into the headrest and peacock feathers laid out in gems. A bit gaudy and Corwin agreed with me. Random, the King, my tour guide said, liked to be out and about on the Kingdom’s business, not stuck in the Royal Chair with Ministers and syncopates fawning over him. I could care less about the ballroom. The Armory was cool and the Treasury. Talk about dreams of diving into Aladin’s Cave. Of course, they only

pointed that room out and wouldn't let me go in it whereas they made a point of showing me the Guards Barracks and weapons store. I asked why there were swords but no guns and was told that gun powder would not explode in Amber. By the time we hit the massive kitchens, busy chefs and Banquet Hall, I was drooping. Every person who spotted us gave cheery greetings to Corwin and Bill, and stared curiously at me.

Bill made a comment about my white face and whisked me back to the sick room where the doc was already pacing and in a tizzy. He bitched at them as he took my vitals and I felt so bad, I didn't argue or complain as Corwin gently placed me back on the bed.

"Please," I murmured brokenly. "It hurts. On fire." To my disgust, I started crying and plucked at his hands, thrashing my legs under the thin covers, unable to keep still and the doc stuck something in my hand. A warm tide rushed through me, crawled up and hit my chest and took away the burning growing beast that was clawing its way out of my belly leaving a bloody cavity behind.

I sank into the mattress. Drool slid from my lips onto the pillow. I blinked lids heavy as a tombstone. He lifted them and shone a light in my pupils. "Morphine will keep him sedated for six hours. I'm worried about peritonitis, his bowels were torn and bacteria reached the abdominal cavity. I'd really like him in a trauma suite in a big medical center, Cory. He needs an ICU. I've never seen so much damage and the patient survive."

"He's safer here than on the Shadow earth. Flora would have access to him and she'd know as soon as we brought him back. Just tell me what you need and I'll bring it back here."

"What he needs is round the clock ICU care and a miracle," the doctor returned. "Pray to your gods or your damn Unicorn. His temp is rising again."

I floated in a pool of lava, riding a raft down a river of flames seeking out the Devil in his hell.

I wasn't aware of much around me for the next 48 hours. I was lost in a nightmare of hell and flames, demons, monsters and being eaten alive. I heard screaming in the background, someone calling for his mama and fire engine sirens that nearly blasted my eardrums. Sometimes, I was asleep in the snow with my limbs stuck deep in a snowbank, so cold I couldn't feel my hands or feet. Sometimes, I was roasting on a spit turned by evil dwarves as they basted me with barbecue sauce fighting over what part of me they would eat first. I wanted Murphy and called incessantly for him. Demanded his presence until my voice became so hoarse I couldn't speak. I couldn't understand why he wasn't there, I remember trying to get up and go look for him, falling out of bed in the dark and attempting to crawl down a hallway. Soldiers stopped me and a mermaid brought me back under the waves but I didn't drown. She sat with me and poured water all over and in me until she put out the fire. She tied me to my bed and I didn't like her after that.

I had brief lucid periods when I knew who I was and where I was. That I was seriously ill and missing Murphy. One of the faces that stayed with me promised to look for him and bring him home to my side. If I promised to wait and not do something foolish like die.

I promised.

The doctor named Henry was underfoot. Whenever I opened an eye, tried to turn, he was there. They didn't leave me alone for one minute. On the evening of the third day, I opened my eyes briefly to feel a shift in the pressure of the room, a drop in temperature so sharp that it roused me.

Glowing in the air just above my eyes was a wheel, spinning and hovering at the same

time. I thought it another hallucination especially when it spoke to me, without causing the watchers in my room to react. I watched it stoically, incurious. The glow it produced washed over me, almost as if it were scanning my vital signs. Coming closer, it extended a thin probe and pricked me, drawing up a bead of blood.

I didn't flinch, I barely felt it, the doc had given me another dose of morphine earlier in the afternoon.

"What are you?" I whispered.

"Call me Ghost, or Ghostwheel," it replied. "I am an artificial intelligence created by my father, Merlin. A sentient computing, analyzing and data gathering device. You are the child Corbin Sines of Shadow earth and Raven Murphy-Sines of Amber?"

"I guess. Yes." I answered listless. Talking hallucinations went with the tactile ones. Hell, I was raised by a stone gargoyle, slipped between parallel worlds and seen a Unicorn. What was a talking wheel?

"I bring you salutations from the King. An offer to visit the Courts and become acquainted with Dad."

"Dad? You call your programmer Dad?"

"He created me, nurtured and protected me. Allowed me to grow and evolve. I have a sense of self and self protection, I am alive. He is my father."

"Well, he didn't do much for me. Anyway, I'm dying. If he wants to see what else he made, he'd better come see me and tell him to hurry, I don't know how long I have or how long I'll be here." I closed my eyes on the thing and turned my head away. I didn't care if I never saw it again or opened my eyes. Both actions seemed too much of an effort. I sank back into delirium, lost in the heart of a volcano and made mud pies with lava rocks.

I screamed out my complaints one minute and in the next was stoic and quiet, preferring to suffer in silence which worried the strangers who treated me. I woke up once on the cold floor, attempting to crawl for the doorway and escape. Escape to God knows where; in my fever dreams I had no memories of where I was. At one point, I was in a rowboat on a sea of wheat jousting against ears of corn. One speared me in the side and I fell overboard to wake up on the floor. I lay there on cold flagstones, a puddle of drool under my cheek and a torn IV pitter-pattering under my wrist.

That brought a crowd in, worried lords and ladies who hovered anxiously over my prostrate body while they discussed options above my head before I was carried back into the bed.

A man who looked like me ordered me to remain in the bed while a green lady soaked me with cold rags and alcohol. I didn't care that I was naked or that the cloth stung on the incision over my belly, I only cared about closing my eyes and sinking into oblivion where nothing hurt, burned or stank.

"Corbin, can you understand me?" his mellow voice broke my delirium.

"Can't you let me die in peace?" I asked peevishly.

"No. I'm going to Shadow earth and bring back your morph. Flora found him and hurt him grievously, Raven. You have to get well so you can save him. If you die, so does he."

"Murphy," I mumbled. "That bitch has him?"

"Yes, Raven. She caught him in his stone demon form and tore off his wings. She chained him to a dog house and has him tethered by the neck. Throws him cow bones to eat off once a week. He's going mad with worry over you and can't morph to escape her. She's told him she killed you and he's afraid she's telling the truth."

“Murphy,” I mourned. “Save him and I’ll do anything for you.”

“Raven, I don’t want anything from you but a relationship,” he returned gently. “You’re my grandson.”

“What I have is yours, Gramps,” I promised. “If you save Murph.”

“You hold on, then, Raven. You promise to wait until Murph is safe and back at your side?”

I crossed my fingers. Swore on my mother’s name and watched curiously as he thumbed out one of those cold cards, stared at the person’s image and reached his hand forward to disappear from my sight. That left me with the green lady and a doctor in everyday blue jeans without the white coat. He made me sleep with his magic needle and washed out my insides. I know, because he told me sometime the next day when I woke up to see my friend’s worried face at my bedside. Murphy looked thin, grayer than ever with dark circles under sunken eyes. His smile was broad and blinding as he ran his work-roughened hand across my face.

“Master, my master,” he choked with great emotion. He was almost weeping and he looked ill and gravely mistreated.

“Murphy, are you alright?” I frowned at the livid scars on his face and arms. I wondered what others he was hiding from me.

“I am recovering, master,” he said softly. “Your...grand sire rescued me from the witch woman’s keep. Here on the one true realm, the magic of Amber will put me right.”

I furrowed my brow. “Just where are you from, Murph, that you know about this place?”

“Eire, master. The land of green magic and stone monsters. All of us magic creatures know of the Realm of Amber. Your mother drew on me from her blood and Eire’s soul, stone and magic. And your blood of Amber. If you live, so do I.”

I felt a strange chill in the air and lost the rhythm of my breathing. The doctor pushed Murph aside to check my pulse and listen to my heart but the chill wasn’t in me. It came from a spot near the doorway where a glow grew into a circle the size of the door and from it emerged that strange flying wheel I vaguely remembered from a dream. Then, a young dude in a three piece suit with slicked back hair, dark eyes, dimpled chin slipped in behind the wheel. He wore a hooded cape and came with an entourage as he studied the room, the occupants and finally, me.

“Dad,” he greeted Corwin. “Ghostwheel. Vialle, King Random. Bill, Dr. Flauvel, Devlin. Hi, kid. I’m Merle, you are?” he asked of Murphy.

“Murphy,” my bodyguard answered, blocking his view of me. Some of the...people with him didn’t look quite...human.

“Murphy? A morph named Murphy?” He moved so he could see me. “Dad? Who is this? Ghost said I needed to show up in Amber urgently without the usual protocol.”

Corwin made a hole in the circle of bodies around me. We stared at each other. I saw a six foot, dark haired, greenish brown-eyed handsome dude in a fancy designer suit; he saw a fifteen year old kid in a nightgown that looked enough like him to be his younger twin.

Corwin said, “Merlin, meet Corbin called Raven Murphy-Sines, son of Amber Sines of Ireland. Your son.”

His mouth dropped open. “Amber? Amber had a kid? My kid? Holy crap! Why didn’t she tell me?” He paused. “What’s wrong with him?”

In dry, clinical terms, Dr. Flauvel and his Ghostwheel described my condition, that I

was dying from peritonitis, courtesy of Flora and her gut eating goons. On that note, I closed my eyes and drifted into a troubled sleep

Chapter 9

In one of my more lucid periods, I was aware of a charming domestic scene of father and son playing chess in a corner of my bedroom while the green lady sang softly under her breath as she turned a potter's wheel. The scent of clay hung in my nose and the back of my throat. I wasn't hungry anymore and although my lips were chapped, I didn't want anything to drink. What I wanted was for this appalling feeling of utter helplessness to go away. I knew I couldn't move a finger to save my life. Didn't want to, I wanted to die and just get it over with.

"He's awake," the younger man said and stood up to move gracefully over to my bedside. I expected him to be dressed as a king in fancy robes or his three piece designer pinstripe but he was wearing black denim jeans and a long sleeved t-shirt with Madonna on the front.

"Vintage," I murmured and raised my eyes to my older face. A few years older, leaner, more chiseled but if I wanted to see what I would have looked like in my late twenties, it was standing before me.

"Ghost, is he---?" he asked and a silver ring on his finger pulsed, slid off and expanded to the size of a dinner plate. Hovering over me, it scanned me head to toe with a blue laser. In its wake, I felt tingles of electricity.

"Like you, Dad, he has inherent power of both the Logus and the Pattern. He hasn't walked the Pattern yet but there are undertones that he has had some kind of contact with it. As for his body scans, his temp is 102.4°, BP is 95/54, pulse is 88 and thready. I suspect he is on the verge of septic shock, there is a pocket of gas gangrene in his abdominal cavity behind his right kidney that needs to be treated or he is going to...expire."

"What are you, robo-doc?" I asked and let my body sink into the mattress.

"I am an artificial intelligence in the process of becoming sentient," it returned.

"Sort of like a super smart phone. I'm going back to sleep now. Nice to finally meet you...Dad. I guess that makes me the older bro?" My voice trailed off but not before I heard them all leap to their feet as a pack of people started ordering each other around. Angry voices shouting words like hospital, surgery, death. Flora, the city and armed escorts. Doctors, critical care and damn all. Sirens and lights and me floating.

Murphy gripped my shoulders with his stone cold gargoyle arms and spoke into my ear so loudly I couldn't help but hear him. "Master," he spoke calmly. "Your father will take you to safety where I dare not go. Trust him." He hugged me, gathered me into his arms and suddenly, we were airborne above the castle with that Ghostwheel at our side.

"Follow me," Ghost said and led us to the top of the cliff into a copse where Murphy set me down next to a fancy marble cenotaph with Gothic carving proclaiming Corwin, Prince of Amber's birth and death date. Seconds later, Merlin stepped out of nothing and took me from Murphy's hold. He smiled down at me.

"Ready, Bro? Murphy, he's in good hands."

Murphy nodded and swallowed as if he had a lump in his throat. "Bring him back to me, Master Merlin," he begged.

"I promise. Word of a...Father," Merlin returned. He looked at the wheel and we were gone in a flash.

I remember an emergency room in a huge hospital and a hurried ride down a long, brilliantly lit corridor, bouncing against walls and elevator doors on a shaky gurney with Merlin close to my side until my feet hit the big double doors and green masked faces leaned over me with serious eyes and deep smile lines at the corners. They called my name and told me to count to ten; I never reached higher than four.

"Raven? Raven, honey. Open your eyes. Wake up, Raven. Your Dad is here and your grandfather. Wake up, Raven." I didn't know the woman's voice, my ears tuned out the sounds of dishes banging, the hiss and thump of a machine. Sirens and beeping, alarms and the ticking of a loud, annoying clock. I yawned, more of an attempt to get extra oxygen than because I was tired.

I took an assessment of my body. A tiny pain in my hand and another in my elbow. Numbness from my waist down and a heaviness in my bladder, dry mouth and something stuck in my nose. I tried to move and my hands only went so far before I felt restrained. I struggled against the constriction, crying out in confusion.

"Easy, Raven," the woman soothed. "It's just some gauze tied so you didn't pull out your IV lines. Hold still and I'll cut you loose." I felt her fingers on my wrists and was loose. "Open your eyes, honey," she urged and stuck a thermometer in my mouth.

Huge brown blob that gradually formed into a round face in Christmas scrubs. Dark skin, deep black eyes and long, curly hair tied in a ponytail. Around her neck, she wore a lanyard with her ID. I couldn't see her name but I could read the Hospital's. I was in California, San Francisco.

"How do you feel?" she asked, removing the thermometer, an old fashioned kind. "99.2° Much better." She shook the mercury down.

I opened my mouth. It felt as if I had gargled with gravel, it hurt and what came out was a whisper. "Water."

"You can suck on ice chips," she smiled. "You had surgery two days ago and the doctor has you on NPO till Sunday night. After he does the dye test." At my confused look, she added, "this is Saturday morning, sweetie and we want to make sure your bowels aren't leaking into your tummy. I'm Peg Moore, I'm the ICU nurse who'll be taking care of you today. You ready for some company?"

I nodded and touched the thing in my nose, felt plastic prongs and tubing.

"Oxygen. The doctor will probably d/c that later today. Your poor lungs were having a hard time breathing with the infection. Want to try and sit up a little?"

She didn't wait for my answer but fiddled with the bed controls, raising my head and shoulders as well as my legs. I could see other beds in the ICU unit and bustling nurses in cheerful scrubs working between other beds with kids in them.

"Kids?" I said hoarsely and she understood me.

"This is the PEDS ICU, honey."

The walls were painted blue with cartoon characters like Spiderman and Transformers, big windows looking out over the city skyline and the bay. Puffy clouds broke the soft haze, it looked warmer outside than New York. Other towers stood nearby, part of the

hospital complex.

“Where am I?”

“San Francisco. University Hospital,” she said and went to the end of the bed, peered around the curtain that separated me from the other beds. “I’ll bring your family in, Raven. They can visit with you for a little bit. They’ve been here since Friday.”

“Ice chips,” I reminded her and she said okay, left me to stare at the checkered drapes and my knees under a light blue blanket and green cotton sheets.

Corwin and Merlin were escorted in on the heels of a surgeon wearing a white lab coat over scrubs and one of those funny little hats they wear to keep control of their hair.

My...Dad and Grandfather were both in gray pinstripes, holding woolen overcoats which they folded over the backs of the chairs an orderly brought in. The doctor closed the curtain and shook hands with them.

“Mr. Corey,” he said to Corwin. “Mr. Merle, nice to see you again. Your son is doing much better now that he has woken up. Raven, I did the surgery on you. As you know, he was admitted with a fever over 105° and suffering from a pretty severe infection in the abdominal cavity. We opened him up, irrigated, drained a pocket of gas gangrene and have antibiotics running through both his IVs and flushing the surgical site. I’m afraid we had to remove his right kidney and part of his upper bowel. His temp has come down and he’s responding well to the treatment. If all goes well, he should be able to return home in a week, ten days.” He paused. “He will need to return in two weeks to repack the wound and make an appointment to suture the incision closed. Right now, the surgical site is open with a drain and covered by a sterile mesh. We’ve given him a nerve block so the pain is manageable and when that wears off, he’ll be on morphine. Any questions? By the way, the police want to talk to both of you, the injury is obviously a knife wound and they want to know how Raven was injured.”

They had several questions but I was paying more attention to the nurse and the promised cup of ice. Slowly, she spooned a few tiny chips in my mouth and the sensation of cold soothing my parched and abused membranes was...awesome.

“Raven, how are you doing, buddy?” the doctor asked, hands under the covers and on my belly. I could see but not feel, didn’t really want to look at my insides. That’s why they were inside and supposed to stay inside.

“Okay,” I whispered. “Doesn’t hurt. Just fell really weak. Tired.”

“Your body has suffered a major trauma, Raven, so you will be very weak for a while. You’re young and you’ll bounce back quickly. In a day or so, we’ll take you off the intravenous feedings and try some solid food, see how your tummy and bowels progress. I expect you’ll be eating burgers and fries by Friday. Okay? Let me know when the nerve block wears off and the nurse will see you’re comfortable with some morphine. Don’t suffer in silence, it’s bad for your healing. I’ll stop in this evening to see how you’re doing. It was nice to see you again, Mr. Corey, Mr. Merle Raven.” He was gone in a rush.

“Can I get you gentlemen anything?” Peg offered. “Coffee, soda?”

“We’re fine, thank you, Peg,” Corwin smiled and stared at her until she got the hint and left us alone. Then, it was my turn. Luckily, my throat was sore enough that speaking was difficult and Merlin took it upon himself to spoon ice chips down me until the cup was empty. Of course, the nurse had only filled it with two chopped up cubes to start with.

“More,” I said hoarsely and he shook his head.

“Nope. The nurse said only what was in the cup. You’re on a restricted diet.”

“Come on, Dad,” I wheedled and Corwin snickered.

“He’s playing you, Merlin. Don’t give in.”

I closed my eyes, suddenly tired beyond belief. “What happens when I need to pee?” I whispered.

“I think you’ve got one of those catheters up your...” He peeked and nodded. “Yup. You’re good to go.”

Corwin sat, I heard him grunt as he folded into the chair and another scrape as Merlin dragged his closer to the bedside.

“Put my head down, please,” I asked and he leaned over to work the controls. He smelled of expensive aftershave and coconut shampoo. My body went flat and I sighed in relief. “Thanks.”

“Did Flora say why she was interested in you, Raven?” my grandfather asked.

“No. Just that she thought I had the blood of Amber or the Court place in me. When she assumed I was only human, she lost interest. Told those things to play with me. Eat me.”

“We taught them a lesson they’ll not soon forget. Not to touch one of our people,” Corwin growled. “Especially the royal family of Amber and Chaos. As for Flora, she was conveniently missing.” He stared over my head at his son. I could feel it even with my eyes closed.

I opened one eye on my...dad. “Tell me what my mom was like. I don’t remember her.”

“She was pretty. Tall. Athletic,” he mused. “I met her at a computer convention in England. She invited me to a Celtic Music Festival in Ireland. We explored the Henges. She liked red wine and adored gargoyles, was forever picking up stray dogs and cats, finding them homes instead of taking them to shelters. She believed in magic, had a lovely singing voice and could paint.

“She had long black hair and green eyes, as green as Irish grass, could dance in the moonlight like a Fae spirit and couldn’t tell a lie to save her soul. She giggled and was ticklish, liked to run barefoot in the surf. I loved her madly.”

“Why did you leave her?” I burst out defensively. “You ruined our lives!”

“I didn’t. She left me, I went home because my uncle, the King was dying. When I came back after to look for her, years had passed here. Time flows differently from Shadow to Shadow and in Amber. What is a year home could be twenty or even a hundred on the shadow worlds. How did she die?”

“You’ll have to ask Murphy. I don’t know all the details, all he would ever say was that she died in a fall trying to save me,” I mumbled. “I’m tired.”

They were quiet and in mere minutes, I was falling asleep and not even a thunderstorm would rouse me.

Chapter 10

“Goddamn,” I hissed. “That hurts!” The nurse, her name today was Angie although I would have called her Satan, put her hand to her mouth in mock horror.

“Language, Raven. There are kids here.” Her blue eyes crinkled in amusement as she

held me by the gait belt tucked up near my armpits because it couldn't be cinched lower on my belly.

I was in pajamas, the pair had gone on a shopping spree and bought me an entire wardrobe. Somehow, one of them had let it slip I was of royal blood. Ya think they'd want to keep my identity quiet in case Flora or her goons caught wind of my whereabouts.

Anyway, the day after I woke up, physical therapy came in and made me get up to walk the halls. Ten feet left me pale and shaking. That nerve block had worn off in pins and needles, then full sensation came back and that was a bitch. Made me cry into my pillow and when Nurse Peg came in my cubicle with the needle, I almost kissed her. She scolded me, told me not to wait till it got bad but to call her.

Now, Angie was bitching because I complained I was hurting. "Don't be a baby," she said. "All you did was stand up. Come on, you can walk, can't you? Just to the end of the hallway."

I looked. It was like a quarter mile. The end wavered. I wanted to wipe sweat off my forehead but was afraid to let go of her arms. Earlier that morning, I'd suffered through the packing procedure where the doctor had removed yards of soiled gauze from my belly and repacked with fresh antibiotic infused sponges, replacing the mesh that held my intestines in. Wrapped me with gauze and an ace bandage that was more like a back brace. After that, I rested. I'd kept my eyes closed the entire time, I had no desire to see what my insides looked like and only opened them when the doc told me he was finished. He had a soft voice and strong hands yet a delicate touch.

"You into sports, Raven?" he'd asked.

"No. I'm homeless," I'd answered. He'd looked shocked.

"You don't go to school, either?"

"I'm not illiterate," I defended. "I study. Ask me anything."

The next ten minutes he quizzed me on American History, Politics, Math and English and I only missed one answer, what year was the treaty signed by the Seminoles and the US Government. It was a trick question, the Seminoles to this date had never signed a treaty. Technically, they're still at war with the US.

Murphy was a stickler for me keeping up with my lessons and was a font of trivial information.

Before I knew it, we were at the end of the corridor and on our way back where Corwin and Merlin waited with the wheelchair. The nurse had followed discretely behind chatting perkily with both of them, flirting even. I noticed that every female in the vicinity were interested in both men.

"Ready to go back to bed, Raven?" Merlin asked.

"Yeah," I heaved a sigh. "Look, I don't feel right calling you Dad. Or Gramps. Can I just call you Corey and Merle, like your friends? And where is that Ghost thing?"

"You call us whatever you're comfortable with, Raven. Bill has been busy getting your birth certificate, passport, ID so you can be legal on this Shadow if you make that choice," Corey said as he pushed me into my new room, still on the PEDS floor but out of the ICU.

Carefully, I kicked the leg rest out, stood up and transferred to the bed. Both of them helped me lift my legs up onto the mattress. I still had that line in my dick so peeing wasn't a problem, I wore a bag on my leg so I could go places. At night, one of the nurses switched it over to the bigger one that hung underneath. Talk about embarrassed, nothing like having an older woman messing with your junk. They were really anal about how much was going

in and coming out. Except for crapping, I still wasn't on solid food so I didn't have to use the bedpan.

"When can I have a shower?" I mumbled.

"Not until your belly's closed up. I'm sure one of the nurses would love to give you a bed bath," Merle grinned.

I gave him a dirty look and lowered the head. Closed my eyes and rested my hands on my chest.

"Looks like he's laid out in a funeral home, doesn't he, Dad?" Merle snickered. "Oh, Ghost is here, on my finger till I need him."

"Aren't you the King of the Courts?" I asked grumpily. "So, who's minding your throne while you're gone?"

"Ministers. I like to delegate," he turned to his father. "Dad, where is Raven going to recuperate? I don't think the Courts is the safest place for him, he doesn't seem to have an...alter ego."

"Alter ego?" I questioned.

"Murphy has another form, the gargoyle. Well, so do the people who live in the Courts, a demon form, sort of," Merle explained.

I opened one eye. That was interesting. "Can you show me?"

"Not here. It's a bit large for these surrounding, not to mention scary."

"Cool. Can you change too, Corey?"

"Only my underwear," he said and I laughed.

"Will you bring me something to read? Maybe some crosswords or a chess set?" I asked sleepily.

The nurse knocked and stuck her head in. "Mind if I hook him back up to his feeding? Then, I'll be back to take him to his dye test. You can wait here or come with," she offered. "It takes about 15 minutes. If it's good, you can have beef soup and tea, Raven. Interesting name, that."

"Whoopee," I said. Closed my eye and before I knew it, I was sound asleep. She had to wake me up for dinner, the results of the contrast test were good, nothing was leaking and the pictures showed the dye streaking for the finish line.

I drank the whole cup of unsweetened tea and half a cup of beef consommé. I hated to admit it but it tasted a lot better than I expected and filled me up faster, too. I went right back to sleep after and didn't notice when both of them left.

I woke twice during the night when the nurses came in to check on me. Once she popped me with a pain shot and my head got all floaty. The next time it was the new shift changing and the nurse was so fine, a redhead with freckles and blue eyes only a few years older than me. Her name was Penny and she was from Australia, her accent was just one more point to lust after.

Breakfast was more broth, chicken this time. I found it really salty but she let me have crackers in it, I managed to finish the whole bowl and two cups of hot tea.

Joy, joy. The head nurse said the doc had okayed the removal of the catheter and wanted me to start using the toilet. Still, I was supposed to keep track of how much pee I was making, they had one of those 'hats' in the bowl. These people were freakishly interested in my body fluids.

Just my luck, it wasn't the cute nurse that took the damn thing out but some guy. I know he was a nurse and all but it creeped me out that a guy was touching me there.

Blood suckers were next and then the dude that looked at my stomach, poked around and read my chart. They had one of those dry-erase boards with my name, room number, diet and vitals, the nurse's name, my aides, techs and doctor on duty written in plain view. The date I saw, with astonishment indicated that Christmas was only a week away.

"Is there a tree?" I asked and the doc nodded.

"Real pretty blue spruce in the lobby and another artificial tree at the nurse's station. Want to see?"

He wasn't the surgeon who had cut me open but a student trailing the doctor, he looked like a big farm kid from a corn state. Slowly, I emptied myself from the bed into the chair and we made an early morning detour to the nurses station where an improbable neon blue tree was dressed in three different garlands, glass balls, bows, lights and candles with candy canes and an Angel at the very top. It was tacky and beautiful, something I had seen only once before and wished for these last thirteen years. Had never had being homeless and poor. No one had ever given me a Christmas present and only Murphy had ever celebrated my birthday.

"I've never had a Christmas," I said wistfully.

He studied me curiously. "Your dad and grandfather didn't raise you?" I knew he was seeing their designer suits, expensive outerwear and gold watches. They certainly didn't appear deprived.

"No, I was...I only found them a few weeks ago. My mom died when I was three. My...uncle raised me."

"Where is he? How did you get hurt?" He pointed to my stomach.

"My aunt did it. Feud with the rest of the family," I explained. "Her...pit bull caught me with it's claws."

"Huh. Doesn't look like a dog tear. Was it tested for rabies?"

"I dunno. I guess so. I want to go back to my room."

He brought me back and I spent the next couple of hours playing with the cable TV. TV wasn't something I had much use for. There were sets in the shelter but mostly, they were programmed on religious channels and my knowledge of series was nearly nil. Although I had seen some episodes of The Voice and the Sci-Fi hit Dominion.

Murphy would let me use the local libraries and I'd watched videos on their computers seeing some episodes of Game of Thrones and Homeland. Been hooked but it's real hard to follow a series when you're homeless. I read, though. Every book I could get my hands on and Murphy didn't censor anything. If it was in print, I could read it and I did. From Voltaire to the Iliad, to Koontz and Child, Lee, Sandford, Faust, Dickens and Montaigne. He asked me to tell him the gist of each novel and asked questions on the contents. We discussed each book and made me defend my opinions so that I learned both the broad view and the narrow. I was amazed at the depth and breadth of Murphy's knowledge.

Needless to say, I was in hog heaven watching the cable channels although my attention span was only about twenty minutes before I fell asleep.

Chapter 11

Dinner was a bowl of tomato soup, saltines and a cup of cottage cheese. Normally, I wouldn't eat cottage cheese but I was so hungry for real food, I ate half of it. I was just finishing the cup when Corwin and Merlin entered with several packages wrapped in bright Christmas paper and laid them at my feet atop the covers. I pushed the tray back.

"What's this?"

"Late birthday present, Rave. Open them."

I didn't need to be told twice. I tore the paper and tossed it towards the rubbish bin, opened up boxes from high end stores. New jeans, underwear, sneakers and boots. T-shirts, and dress shirts. Polos and Abercrombie and Fitch hoodies. I wouldn't be walking out of here naked or in my old recycles. A tablet and a mini laptop, a smart phone and a wallet with both ID and credit cards. I was speechless. The ID said Raven Sines-Merle and I had an address in San Francisco near the Hill.

"It's a real place," Corwin shrugged. "Bill bought it for me when I lived here back in the 80s and has managed it since. You can stay there or in Amber."

"Will I be safe there?" I was troubled.

"As safe as you'd be in Amber," he shrugged. "Any one of us can go anywhere, get in almost any place via the Trumps. Remember I showed you the cards? The Tower, the Pattern, the Lighthouse of Cabra, Dworkin's study? Those are all real places the cards can take you to. Such is the power once you walk the Pattern." He stared at me. "Do you want to walk the Pattern, Raven?"

I hesitated. Looked at Merlin. He watched me as carefully as his father. "I don't know," I whispered. "The unicorn wouldn't let me. I don't know if I'm more Amber or Courts. All I know is that if I choose, I have to walk either all the way or perish." I looked at my grandfather. "You walked the Pattern, what can you tell me?"

"I've walked it many times and in Rebma, too. It never becomes easier, each time it's a test of courage and endurance. But to live without its power is worse."

"And your pattern?" I hesitated and said the more formal word. "Father. What is yours like?"

"It is called the Logus and I suspect it is the...Big Bang that created everything, even Amber. I believe Amber is the Shadow of the Courts at the other end of the road. It's a...strange place, physical rules don't work there. Do you want to see it?"

I looked at Corwin and felt tugged in both directions, felt the touch of a cold horn poke me on the shoulder but that was impossible because I was in bed and only a mattress behind me.

"Both," I whispered, my eyes wide and unseeing. "I must travel both."

Merlin shook his head. "You can't. It would be like mixing matter and anti-matter. It'd destroy everything around you. And probably the Universe." He looked troubled. "Besides, I'm not sure the governing infrastructure of the Courts would allow you to. My world is not a...comfortable place. My mother schemed and murdered from my very conception to put me on the throne and even attempted to...brainwash me as her puppet. My half-brother whom I held as a close friend and confederate was complicit in the same scheme."

Gramps named him and showed me the trump. He was wild looking with long white hair, pointed chin, freakishly long fingers with silver balls playing between all ten digits. Dressed all in black velvet, he looked wizardly and weirding. I wouldn't like to meet him in a dark place. "Scary," I said, pushing the card back.

"I thought he was my friend," Merlin grimaced. "But he was just another one of

Mom's obstacles to me finding out I was a pawn. No, the Courts isn't the place for you. At least, not until you have power of your own to protect you. You know Murphy can never enter there, it would destroy him in an instant." He paused. "I talked to Dr. Alban, on Wednesday, they are going to take you to surgery and close you up. Once they do that, you'll be home a day or two later."

"Home to the apartment?"

"It's a house, actually," Corwin said. "Gated and guarded by a security service for the rich and famous. Raven, do you have any self defense skills? Did Murphy teach you how to protect yourself?"

"Like Karate or Kung-fu?" I asked. "No. I didn't need to, he was always with me and besides, we ran. I did some of that Parkour. He was good at that, especially in his gargoyle form. I could keep up with him."

"That's something," Corwin admitted. "Gargoyles are experts on climbing buildings. Do you know how your mother conjured him? Was she a witch or wizard?"

"She was a student," I said flatly. "An American student of Irish Mythology."

Corwin handed me one last box, a beautifully made wooden chest that had the unmistakable patina of age, a genuine antique. I knew instantly what it was from the light and dark squares on the cover. When I opened the lid, an exotic wood glowed dark amber and the other suit was carved of genuine amber stone. The faces of the Kings and Queens looked like real people as did all the others. The pawns wore the livery of the castle. I knew that the set was worth a fortune and was probably a state relic and a family heirloom. I lifted shocked eyes to my grandfather. "I can't accept this," I stuttered. "It's way too valuable!"

"It is mine to give," Corwin shrugged. "And I want you to have it. How about a game?"

Speechless, I nodded and we spent the next few hours playing with Merlin egging me on, both of them making bold, aggressive moves where he wasn't afraid to risk all for a foothold.

One minute I was contemplating a check move and the next, someone was tucking my blanket under my chin. I rolled over in bed and hugged my pillow, gently drawing my knees up into my belly. I slept like a shrimp, closed and defensive.

I didn't see either of them leave. Around two a.m., I heard the door open and a nurse slipped into my room. I rolled over and watched as she checked out the board with my name on it, read my chart and vitals. She wore plain blue scrubs not Christmas ones, her hair was dark and I saw the gleam of her eyes in the darkened room. They were odd, strange and it took me a while to figure out it was because they were predator yellow.

"Raven," she spoke in a low voice and came over to stand next to my bed. She intimidated me without any effort. Tall, handsome and older with a cold sheen to her face as if she were more Goddess than human. I didn't recognize her from any of the hospital shifts and thought she was perhaps from one of the other units or floors. Her name tag was missing from her lanyard.

"What do you want?" I asked sleepily. I'd already had my blood and vitals taken, pain meds given and urine bag emptied.

"Just came in to see you, Raven," she said and laid a hand on my chest. "Came to see my grandson, my handiwork." Instantly, I felt something slither over my skin, travel up to my nose and mouth, worm its way inside my ears, eyes, nostrils and down my throat. I

couldn't gag or spit, it felt as if fingers of ice wrapped themselves around my heart and guts. My tongue froze, my lungs squeezed, taking away my conscious and unconscious control.

"Raven, do you hear me?" she asked and I could nod. "Do you understand me?" Again, I could only nod my understanding. "Good. I am your Grandmother. Dara, Queen Mother of the Courts of Chaos. What you feel is the power of the Logus that I command. I have put a Summoning Spell on you. You will act like your normal self but you will obey only my commands. You will not speak of this to anyone, not your...father, grandfather, morph, human friends or Amber residents, enemies or kin to what has occurred. Only to me will you converse with in regards to this matter. You will walk the Pattern when you are able and bring your knowledge to me. You will make every attempt to understand the Ghostwheel and how to destroy or subjugate the device to my control. When I command it so, you will murder Corwin and Merlin, Random and Vialle and anyone else who stands in your way. You will not attempt to destroy yourself or seek death to avoid these commands."

I struggled to move, to breathe but whatever she had done to me had given her control of my body and will. Spots hovered at the edge of my vision as the lack of oxygen shut down my level of awareness. She waved her hand and air rushed into my lungs.

I could see a phantom form around her, the top of her remained a queenly woman, the bottom half was that of a monster akin to a Minotaur. Her cloven hooves danced a frenetic tattoo on the tiled floor leaving the scent of brimstone.

A real nurse entered, saw me and glanced curiously at her and then shouted as she observed my stiff, frozen state. By the time she had brought others into my room, Dara was gone and I was rushed into a Trauma Suite examined by confused doctors.

Morning came and whatever she had done to me had worn off so that I could move, speak and swallow. I just couldn't say or write what had happened. The strange constriction was still in my mind and insides. The doctors had me set up for a whole new round of tests and I spent the entire day in one lab or another. My medical records were growing to the size of the New York phone-book.

Breakfast came and went. Lunch and dinner too, I saw neither of my family before 9 p.m. Our chess game sat where we'd left off and I had no interest in continuing. It's hard to play a game when you know you're just a pawn. When Corwin and Merlin finally were able to see me, their first concern was for my state of health.

"What happened?" they demanded. I shrugged.

"Don't know. Some kind of spell early this morning." It had left me exhausted and all I wanted was to sleep. "I'm really tired. Mind if I just go to sleep?" My eyes were closing even as I asked.

"No game?" he asked.

"No, bro. Maybe tomorrow. Too wasted." I rolled over and winced as my heart felt a cold chill. Quietly, I heard them leave but not before Merlin suggested arranging for a bodyguard outside my room.

"Raven," he called from the door. "Tomorrow is your surgery day," my father reminded. "Try to get some rest. We'll be here early to see you off to the OR."

"Sure. Right. Okay," I mumbled. "Whatever. See you, morning." I shut out all the memories and went walking the road in my mind to a better place. My hand was in a woman's and I thought it might be Mom's.

Chapter 12

“Hi there, Raven,” the anonymous face in the surgeon’s mask said to me. “Wake up. You came through the surgery with flying colors. The nurse will take you to recovery and your family will go with you after to your room.”

I tried to say whatever and my mouth wouldn’t work right. He squeezed my hands. “I’ll see you later, Raven. Ammie, he can have morphine when the anesthesia wears off. Keep an eye on his blood pressure, it bottomed out twice on us.”

“Yes, Doctor,” The woman’s face was almost as androgynous as the doctor’s behind the masks but I thought I recognized the voice, it sounded a lot like my day nurse.

“Peg?”

She patted my face. “Don’t try to talk, honey. You’re not making much sense.” She wheeled my gurney over to another bed and three of them slid me off one onto another as if I were a frozen carcass. All three of them were busy hooking me up to the new station of and my vitals were taken again. I drifted, not quite sure what world I was in or what I was doing. The rest of that day came in puzzled fragments, a jigsaw I was missing the important pieces from.

Late afternoon brought a sudden clarity. I knew who I was and where I was; my hand explored my belly and found heavy bandages; soreness but a comforting solidness that hadn’t been there before. I lifted my sheets and saw the hospital gown and my bare knees. Bony and whiter than usual, I had no access to tanning. I pulled up the gown and saw gauze, tape and a drain. Aggh. They’d shaved me bald as a baby’s butt. I pulled the hem down, embarrassed even though nobody was there to see it.

The Amberites came in and my eyes were drawn immediately to the bag of fast food Corwin was carrying. He opened the sack and laid out fries, cheeseburger and a chocolate shake.

“Can I eat this?” I asked hands wrapped around the papered bun.

“Try it. The worst that can happen is you throw it up,” he grinned. I took a small bite and chewed, swallowed and the meat hit my stomach like a brass band at the State Fair. I sucked so hard at the shake, I gave myself brain freeze. A handful of fries and half the patty and I was done. Merlin finished what I couldn’t and tossed the garbage into the can.

“Well?” he asked, eyebrow raised. I tried to imitate him and felt my eyebrows lift to my hairline.

I burped. “That was...epic,” I sighed. “Thanks, Merle, Corey. Murphy never let me eat at MacDonalDs.” I sat back in satisfied gluttony.

“What’s your agenda for the rest of the afternoon, Rave?”

“Dunno. Want to finish the game?” I offered.

“How about we go for a walk?” he asked instead.

“Walk? Where?”

“Gift shop, cafeteria, lobby, atrium,” he suggested.

“Naw. I just want to vegetate. I feel like I ate a big turkey dinner,” I said and lounged

against my pillows.

I looked out the window at big puffy clouds that raced by. Looked like rain somewhere over the bay.

“The Doctor said you can come home tomorrow if you’re up and mobile,” Gramps said slyly. “The house has a game room and satellite TV.”

“Interesting,” I returned. “You know, I’ve never had access to either.”

“All the more reason to hurry up your healing. If you have Amber blood, you’ll heal fast,” Corwin gibed.

Slowly, I eased the covers back and put my feet on the floor. The sutures pulled and made me hobble bent over like an old man.

Merlin pulled out my new clothes and opened the package of colored jockeys, ankle socks, jeans and loose Polo in sober blue. The labels were all name brand not from places like K-Mart or Wally World.

“You need help, Raven?” Merlin asked and I nodded, red-faced as I put my hand on his shoulder to balance as I lifted my leg into the shorts, the jeans and stood still when he threaded the leather belt through the loops. He was quick and subtle as he pulled up my socks and tied the laces on my running shoes.

“Desitin works well when the hair starts growing back,” he said carefully. “Otherwise, the itching will drive you crazy.”

I flushed knowing exactly what he was referring to. I was able to pull my shirt over my head even though it stretched my belly muscles and hurt.

Heading out of the room, I was stopped by a nurse with the wheelchair and a gait-belt.

“It’s for when you get tired, Raven,” she said. I walked from my room down the hallway around the Nurses Station and to the Atrium before I needed to use it. They steered me towards the fountain and the Solarium filled with trees and plants. Trees as big as any growing outdoors yet these were inside the hospital, growing up towards the light of the Cathedral ceiling. I watched the ebb and flow of the people around us, more interested in them than the magazines laid out on the tables. I could smell the coffee and the remnants of the lunch room, caught the glances of the women as they eyed both men. Merlin leaned close and murmured in my ear. “You’re garnering your share of feminine interest yourself, young Raven.”

Not having had much interaction with girls, I blushed with total awkwardness.

“No girlfriends?” he teased.

“Hard to meet girls and make friends when you don’t stay in one place long. Or you’re afraid to let anyone get close cuz they could be boogeyman,” I returned bitterly. “All my friends are literary.”

The nurse interrupted, “Ready to go back, Raven? It’s time for your meds and vitals check.”

I agreed and we traipsed back, walking most of the way without help from the chair. Dinner was from the cafeteria, both of them brought trays up and ate with me. I felt comfortable around them and only missed Murphy occasionally. Which surprised me, I’d thought only that I’d be glad to be out from under his constant eye. We didn’t talk much and I wasn’t really interested in the TV. I scrolled my way through the Kindle Fire downloading a mess of free books from the Smashwords site. Even that didn’t hold my attention long, I was restless and didn’t know why.

Visiting hours were over and both of them gave me a pat before wishing me a good

night and good luck. Sleep was long in coming, I finally asked for a pill to put me out and the nurse brought me one which left me groggy, grumpy and complaining when I finally did wake up all the way late in the morning.

I didn't eat breakfast and pushed the tray away, got up and visited the bathroom where a hot washcloth helped. I peed, brushed my teeth, scrubbed under my armpits and crotch and felt 50% better. By the time I was done with all that, my bed linens had been stripped, changed and made up fresh. I eyed it with distrust, it was implied I was staying another day. "I thought I was going home today," I growled. The nurse's aide said as far as she knew, I was. Corwin and Merlin came in with a fresh set of clothes and a heavy down coat in purple and red from Columbia. I eyed it, I thought southern California was tropical. I would have bet they didn't find that coat in the local mall. But then again, maybe they had, skiing at Tahoe and the Northern part of the state was big business. After all, the Donner party had nearly frozen to death in the pass named after their ill-fated party and that was in California. Dressed and with heavy duty instructions on my care, Merlin signed for all my papers and I rode down in a wheelchair curious as to what kind of car my ride would turn out to be. It was a shock, a beautiful dark blue Audi A5 with leather interior. What was more of a surprise was that it was Corey's ride. I would have expected Merlin to be the sports car type.

"I don't need a car in the Courts," he explained. "I'm rarely here on Shadow earth anymore."

The drive didn't do the sweet ride any justice, California roads were even worse than reported. It took an hour and a half to go less than ten miles. I got to go up the most famous hill in San Francisco and guessed which one of the fancy three story mansions was Corwin's.

I was wrong, his wasn't the biggest or the fanciest, just the nicest kept, gated and guarded behind steel bars with security cameras and armed men all retired police. They greeted Corwin by name, knew Merlin's and even mine.

The house came with its own driveway, garage and parking space on the street. We pulled up, the gate opened and we were checked out by the Security Men before we drove inside.

It was a three car garage and Corey pulled into the middle bay. Inside, a man in a black suit opened the doors and pulled out the suitcases. He spoke quietly to Corey and stacked the bags near a small door on the inner wall of the spotless garage.

"Service elevator," he smiled at me. "I'm George, Master Raven. I take care of Master Corwin's home while he is in residence."

"How do you do?" I offered my hand and his eyebrows went up. He looked at Corey.

"Old world manners?"

"You'll find young Raven has had a...singular upbringing, George," Corwin returned. He turned to me. "You think you can walk up the stairs, Rave? We can put you in the wheelchair and use the elevator but it's a bit small if you're claustrophobic."

"I can carry you," Merlin offered.

"No way. I'll walk," I said and slid out of the car and tried to stand, kept my face blank as my belly made its standard complaint of torn and sutured muscles. It was a bore.

Merlin put his hand on my back and gently pushed me forward. "Chair, Dad," he said calmly. "We can carry it and him up the stairs."

So, that's what they did. I didn't pay much attention to the inside save that it was

superbly decorated and comfortable; filled with antiques and exquisite art yet without that feeling of being in a museum where one was afraid to touch anything or sit for fear of damaging something.

My room was on the first floor with big windows that looked out over the bay. The curtains were white and gauzy letting in great gusts of sunshine. They opened onto a small iron balcony.

The room was huge, big enough for a double bed, mahogany sleigh bed with matching dresser, highboy, mirror, twin end tables with a desk and a top of the line Asus computer, tilt screen monitor and the works.

Flat screen 42" TV on the wall with a built in Blu-Ray DVD player. Twin walk in closets loaded with my new clothes and my own private bathroom with walk in shower and a deep tub with whirlpool jets. The bathroom was in pale cream with Italian marble tile and big enough that I could live in it. If only it had a fridge.

I kept the 'wow' off my face and pointed to the bed. Merlin put me atop the covers and pushed the chair into the corner, folded and out of the way. George waited in the doorway with the suitcases.

"Dinner at seven, Master Corey? Mr. Merle?" he inquired.

"I'd like to go over Raven's med schedule and care, George. His dos and don'ts. Being a teenager, he's apt to push his limits and my rules. Raven, are you going to lay there awhile?"

"I sincerely doubt I'll be running off to join the Circus anytime soon, Corey," I sighed. A long nap sounded just the thing I needed. I kicked off my sneakers and curled up as tight as I could get without hurting anything.

"When you get a chance, can I have a pain pill?" I spoke into my arms.

"I'll bring it up as soon as I dig it out of your bags, Raven," he promised. "Any preferences as for dinner?"

"Not hungry," I mumbled. The ride had taken more out of me than I'd imagined. It was the wrong thing to say, a teenager not eating is a sign of disaster and the history of my wound made it doubly distressing. Strangely, no one said anything as he left me alone in the bedroom.

It was Merle that returned alone and with a glass of foaming something pink, a plate of dry toast and a pill cup with two Oxycontin. I sat up slowly, wincing as everything complained, reaching for the pills first. He set the tray down on the end table.

"If you take the pain pills without food, they'll make you really nauseous," he said mildly. "You have a choice, dry toast or a pomegranate and peach smoothie."

That explained the pretty rose color. I took a small sip and was surprised at the explosion of sweet and tart, cold and smooth, a fresh richness that filled my mouth and warmed my stomach. I drank half before swallowing the pills.

Ten minutes later, I was leaning back into the pillows, head floating as he and George stripped me for bed. Put me in my new pajamas and slid my boneless body under the covers. I heard their muffled conversation over my head but it didn't follow me down into drugged slumber.

Chapter 13

A week went by. A week of doing nothing but eating, resting and being pampered by Corey's well trained staff. I thought I'd be bored but wasn't, there was George to take care of my slightest whim and Mrs. Feeney, the Cook. Angel and some big black dude called The Saint. Angel and The Saint were part of the security team, kick ass bad dudes in black wraparounds who delighted in sneaking up behind me and scaring the be-jesus out of me. I believe they had a competition going to see who could make me jump the highest and maybe piss my pants.

Slowly, my belly healed with occasional bouts of nausea and diarrhea. Corey actually had a doctor who made house calls, he called it Concierge Medicine. Whatever. The first sight of my gut made him whiten but after that, he was cool. I spent a lot of time sleeping or just laying on the sleigh bed staring at the ceiling, and a lot of time with the Percocet bottle. The one time I'd tried exploring the house had resulted in walking in on Merle, Corey and Bill in some strategy session that ended abruptly as my presence was absorbed.

I didn't have access to that Ghost thing, not even when I'd called it out to appear while I was inside my closet.

My appetite picked up some but not for anything exotic although Mrs. Feeney tried to tempt me; I stuck to ground beef, roast chicken and baked fish. We usually ate meals together in the dining room and mostly with Bill.

I asked if either of them had a significant other or even just a girlfriend but both denied it with Bill the only one who was married. To an upper class noblewoman from Amber.

Merlin told me he had to go back home, to leave the Courts too long so soon after his Coronation was to invite disaster. I could see he didn't like the idea of leaving me and truth be told, I would also miss him. "You'll be safe with Dad, Raven," he said and sounded like he was trying to convince himself. He gave me a set of Trumps.

"You can use these to call for help, Raven. Dad will go over who's safe and who to avoid. I can leave Ghost with you, too."

I thumbed through the deck and the cards didn't burn with that same coldness, there were significant differences in the portraits; many I had not seen before. "Really? That would be cool!" I enthused.

"It's not really him, sort of a part of him you can access and use, like a cloned smart phone we can both tap into."

"Where is he? Besides on your finger? I mean, is he a micro-processing unit or a mainframe somewhere? What's his operating capacity, his memory storage? Can I see his tower?"

Merlin rolled his eyes. "I'm sure he'll be glad to explain himself to you, Raven but he's a tad bit paranoid. Where he is presents a multi-level challenge for any mere mortal to visit. He's in his own self constructed Faraday cage in its own created dimension. I've gotta go. Take care, listen to Dad and Bill and we'll talk when I get back." He offered his hand and I took it, hugged him awkwardly and gingerly as I stepped back. I could tell he liked it.

"Thanks," I murmured, keeping my head down. I felt a slight pinch of cold at my wrist and looked at a silver bracelet of chunky links at my right wrist and heard Ghost's tiny voice.

"Safe trip, Dad. I'll keep an eye on Raven here and one eye on you back home,"

Ghostwheel said.

“You can be in two places at once?” I was intrigued. That was an awesome ability to own.

“I can be in multiple realities at the same time, bro,” the computer said. Uh oh, that was more than I needed to know.

“Like, you don’t watch me when I’m in the bathroom, dude?” I snapped. “That’s fricking gross!”

Merlin laughed, pulled out a Trump and walked forward into a room I had a visceral reaction to---it scared the hell out of me, it looked like a fun-house gone mad, designed by a Vegas Wedding Chapel owner on a Boris Karloff scale. Merle seemed to regard it as normal and waved as he disappeared.

“Where was that?” I shuddered.

“Shade called Styx,” Ghost answered. “A way station guarded by both Dad’s spells and me so no one knows where he pops off to.”

“Spells? So what, he’s like a wizard or something?” I tried to pull off the bracelet but it wouldn’t slide over my wrist bone.

“Chill out, bro. I can do some cool tricks while you’re wearing me,” Ghost said calmly. “As of now, you have a two inch barrier around your body that nothing but air can penetrate.”

“I hope air can penetrate,” I retorted. “Or I’ll suffocate. What happens when I need to pee or whatever?”

Corwin laughed. “I’ll leave you two to get acquainted. When you’re done Raven, come downstairs. I want to see where you’re at academically and physically. Ghost, don’t annoy him too much. He’s still medically fragile.”

“Sure, Corwin,” Ghost said near the vicinity of my head. I rushed to the bathroom and stuck the bracelet under the faucet but the water split in two streams over my wrist and didn’t even wet my sleeve.

“You can’t drown me, or short me out,” it said. I searched for a clasp or connection to open it but couldn’t find one.

“Before you try anything as stupid as cutting off your wrist, bro, I can’t be cut, broken, burned, frozen, scratched, stretched or removed except by a direct command from Dad or one of his appointed agents.”

“Don’t call me bro. I’m not your brother,” I said furiously, staring at my hand.

“Uh-oh,” it said. “You’re one of those---you’re crazy enough to hurt yourself to prove a point. You would cut off your hand to get free!”

I felt a prick on my wrist and a warmth that traveled up my arm. I fell slowly to the carpeted floor of the bathroom, barely registering the Ghostwheel’s words. “Sorry, bro. I’m knocking you out. When you wake up, I’ll be in a new place, new form and you won’t know what or where. Stubborn hothead, just like Dad.”

I closed my eyes on a tide of darkness thinking ‘how odd that the carpet smells like coconut’.

I woke up in bed, laid out like a corpse minus the lilies in my folded hands. It took me a few minutes to remember what had happened and when I did, I leaped out of bed, furious and yelling.

Bill was sitting in my recliner with an open book on his chest in mid-snore when I woke him. “Have a bad dream, Raven?” he asked calmly, closing the hardcover and

placing it on the table.

I stood there, chest heaving and speechless. Finally, shut my mouth, cursed, sighed and stripped down to my Jockeys before I dressed in clean stone-washed jeans, long-sleeved Polo and soft boots. He watched me curiously, only standing when I went to the window/balcony and opened the French doors.

“Raven, what are you doing?” he asked nervously as I reached up for the overhead railing and the window frame. Before he could stop me, I was climbing up the wall to the roof via the balconies and windows. I had to go slow, the strain on my belly muscles translated to pain if I was too fast or abrupt.

“Raven!” he called. I ignored him and sat on the edge of the roof staring at the next over mansion. Had I been physically fit minus a half healed hole in my gut, I could have jumped down and across without any effort. In the condition I was in now, I’d fall and kill myself.

Surprisingly, I didn’t hear anything from Ghost and it was just as well, I would have done something stupid just to prove I could. Sometimes, I really missed Murphy’s common sense and know-it-all attitude.

Chapter 14

Boy, did I get in trouble for the roof incident. Bill found Corwin and both of them herded me down to the third floor balcony where I was grabbed by both elbows, hauled to the study kicking and screaming. Neither one of them laid a hand on me nor beat me like Murphy would have.

“Stop acting like a baby,” Bill snapped. I stopped because frankly, I ran out of gas. They plopped me down in a chair and tongue lashed me for the next ten minutes which I tuned out by conjugating Latin verbs into French, a favorite trick I’d used when Murphy lectured me on my wrong doings. Of course, he usually retaliated by slapping my face red.

Corwin said mildly, “Bill, stop. He’s not listening to either of us. Raven? Raven, why did you climb up on the roof? You weren’t going to jump off, I know that so tell me what was on your mind?”

“I miss Murphy,” I said softly. “I don’t wanna bodyguard stuck to me 24/7 attached like a...rubber rain coat. I don’t want a...brother that’s a fricking machine. I used to think that being homeless and an orphan was the worst thing that could happen to me. Now, I’d settle for that. I wish I’d never heard of Amber, Dara and the Courts of Chaos!”

“Who told you about Dara?” he asked and the Ghostwheel piped up.

“His heart rate just doubled, Corwin. Respirations and blood pressure elevated, your question just triggered a fear response.”

I looked at my hands and feet, no jewelry of any kind on me, no earrings, studs, nose clip, rings, bracelet or necklaces anywhere on me.

“Where are you?” I demanded and it chuckled.

“Told you, you couldn’t find me.”

“If you’re inside me, I’ll dig you out!” I threatened.

“Now that’s just gross. If I went inside you, I’d have to come out. Yuck,” Ghostwheel

complained. "That wouldn't be any more fun for me than it would for you."

"Where are you, then?" I looked around the room.

"Tell you what, if you can find me, I'll leave you alone. Deal?"

I was busy looking at cuts or scrapes where an insert could have been planted under my skin. Or, I poked my fingers up my nose, in my ears and other orifices that could be explored in polite company. Like my belly button. My stomach was bare except for the raised welts where a row of staples had been removed. It looked angry and red, the muscles underneath a sickening shade of green and yellow but closed, no open areas, no pus.

Just then, the inside of my stomach decided it didn't like what was in it or what I'd been doing and complained. My face got really hot as if it were burning and I bolted for the bathroom, roughly pushing Bill out of my way.

George and the Saint were in the hallway and moved to stop me but Corwin called out and both stepped out of the way. I ran into the main bathroom and dropped to my knees around the cold porcelain bowl. Heaved out my insides.

It's strange how it hurts your ribs puking. I'd read somewhere that you can actually upchuck hard enough to break your own ribs. It certainly felt as if I were doing that. And the acid that runs down the back of your throat burns. Worse than...well, acid. I felt as if my own body hated me and wanted to expel me. After the last heave of nothing but pink tinged foam, I laid my face on the seat and breathed through my nose groaning in quiet misery. I felt someone lean over me and flush the toilet, Corwin picked me up by my waist as if I weighed no more than a six pack of beer. He carried me into the hallway of oak paneled walls towards what I assumed was his bedroom. His entourage followed. Bill, his bland face twisted with concern and worry, George, the Saint and Angel, all making suggestions on my treatment, drugs, doctors and the causes of my present condition.

"Bill," Corwin said and pointed with his chin at the solid wooden door that wouldn't have raised an eyebrow on a dungeon cell. The door swung open, I halfway saw what looked like a face on the wooden surface and then, we were inside a straightforward bedroom. A big four poster of red cherry, matching dresser, highboy, and mirror. Computer desk, small table with a chess set and a game playing. I saw checkmate in six moves on the white side.

The bedspread was a deep maroon quilt with black and turquoise, a spiral design that dragged your vision in. Heavy brocaded curtains in wine that pulled back to show white voile liners. Sunlight breathed in delicately as Bill shut the door, the air in the room thickened, became heavier and richer.

Corwin placed me on the duvet and stared down at me. "Why are you afraid, Raven, when I asked about the Queen Mother?"

I didn't answer, I couldn't answer without direct defiance of Dara's orders. I didn't have to, Ghost stepped in and did it for me.

"Corwin, she's been here," he sounded alarmed as if a machine could do so. "There's a spell on him, wrapped around his heart and brain."

Corwin snapped to Bill, "Tell George to lock up the house and take a vacation. Bill, pack a bag, we're going to Amber."

Five minutes later, my grandfather scooped me up wrapped inside the fancy quilt and concentrated on the Trump that represented Random. I saw the King's lips move.

"Corwin," he sounded surprised and the faces of several bearded and be-jeweled men echoed him. "I'm in a Council meeting with Braedon and Moravia. Can it wait?"

“No. Bring me through,” Corwin said not asking. He grasped Random’s hand and all three of us stepped foot in the Council Chambers of the Palace. The guards snapped to attention and didn’t relax until Random waved them down. “What gives?” the King stared at me and then led us away towards a doorway covered by a tapestry of the Unicorn and a bearded man playing cards with a gray haired dwarf. A small ante-chamber, big enough for a futon, a recliner, table with a lamp was in the nook. Candles lit a warm glow around the entire room.

Back on the bed again. Good thing I wasn’t prone to motion sickness what with all the world jumping. “I hope the toilet’s close by,” Bill grumbled. “I don’t do puke.”

I rolled over and presented my back to them, protocol be damned.

“You don’t look well, Raven,” Random observed and Corwin explained. The King barked out commands, the ministers, councilors or whatever bowed their regrets and disappeared as a host of palace servants appeared.

There were maidservants, footmen, menservants, cooks, guards, Captains, a wizard and a doctor. All crowded around the entrance to the small chamber.

“Make ‘em go away,” I spoke through the quilt, my voice muffled. I felt awful. Besides the fire in my gut, a cold chill held my heart and head even though I had not said or done anything to reveal Dara’s tricks.

Ghostwheel materialized over my head, I could see him without even opening my eyes.

“His vitals are falling back to normal, Corwin,” it said. “Temp is a bit elevated and he’s dehydrated from the emesis but no significant damage to stomach or intestines. He’ll sleep, now. I recommend a diet of hamburger and rice, water with electrolytes. I’m ordering it from the kitchens.”

“Go fuck yourself,” I said and reached for sleep, desperately desired the escape from all those bodies and commands.

“What’s going on, Corwin?” Random’s question was the last thing I heard before diving into the breakers of a tidal dreamscape.

Vialle was at my bedside when I surfaced from my impromptu nap. She helped me sit up and before I could utter a word, was pouring green foamy stuff down my throat. Whatever it was, it tasted both good and soothing. As it hit my stomach, the nagging ache and burning went away. I eagerly finished the rest.

“Raven, you know that you almost died, correct?” she asked, her hands on mine. I nodded licking foam off my lips. She sure was pretty, green skin and all. Today, she was in palest green, filmy stuff that looked like...lingerie. I blushed, realized she couldn’t see me yet somehow, she knew.

“I can feel your heart rate change,” she smiled. “Listen, Raven. This is serious. What the Thrid did to you would have killed anyone from the shadows. The only reason you survived is because of your Amber bloodlines. Still, it left you with residual damage, weakness and occasional relapses. You’ll always have a...touchy gut. It’s like living with Irritable Bowel or Krohn’s disease.”

“Vialle,” I said in protest spreading my hands. “I’m just a 15 year old kid! I’m not ready for any of this!”

“Raven Corbin Murphy-Sines, you are dealt the cards you hold and you have to deal with it.

“Luckily, you have us. Family to help you. Tell me what the Witch Queen did to you?”

“What witch queen?” I returned. “I don’t know any witches.”

“I can see her footprints all over you, Prince of the Courts,” she returned. “A Summoning Spell, I believe and a strong one.” She raised her voice. “Roelle, please come in.”

A really pretty girl with blonde hair coiled up on her neck wearing a pristine white lacy apron over a minty green dress dipped a curtsy to the Queen. A sign of respect since the Queen was blind and wouldn’t know if she curtsied or made faces.

“Majesty,” she spoke clearly, firmly in a voice that rang out crystal in the small room. Her eyes were a pansy purple, lashes dark as soot with a wide generous smile. She studied me without staring and dropped her gaze after one swift perusal.

“Roelle, this is Prince Raven, son of King Merlin of the Courts of Chaos. I’d like for you to examine him and see if you can unravel the spell on him.”

“Yes, ma’am. My Lord,” she moved forward and put her hand on my chest. Her fingers were long and slender, her nails short and unpolished. She had calluses on her palms, she obviously worked hard with her hands.

Her touch was firm, her hands warm and tingles of electricity pulsed through them to me. It felt good and was embarrassing as I could feel my face redden and my prick stiffen.

Neither lady said anything. the cold spot on my heart melted as her eyes turned silver. “A major Summoning Spell, Queen Vialle, tuned to his heart and mind. He knows but cannot speak of it nor write or make it known to any of his kin or family,” she announced in an eerie whisper.

“Can you remove it, Roelle? Without harming him?”

“He is a spy, my Queen. Would you suffer a spy in the Royal Household?”

“He is Merlin’s son and Corwin’s grandson. Random’s nephew. Moreover, he is only a 15 year old child who needs our help,” the Queen reiterated. “So yes, I would suffer his presence. It is up to you to make him an ally and not our enemy.”

“I will try, my Queen.” Her eyes glowed silver white and I disappeared into them as she fought a battle for possession of my will and my soul.

Chapter 15

She stood in front of me with her hair loose and swirling like dragon tails. Her eyes glowed silver, mercury vapor lights that split the darkness all around us shot with firefly sparks. Forming shadows about us that emulated mythic creatures that I knew were real. After all, wasn’t my guardian a Gargoyle?

Rearing up behind her was a female form, a giant cloaked in mist with cloven hooves and goat’s legs. I cried out and warned her, this child-maid, warned her to be afraid of the Demon Queen.

She giggled and pulled at a string near my breast pocket, unraveling it, turning me widder-shins as she wound it around her wrist and unwound me. The woman/beast roared and tightened her hold on me from her end. I was a cross-cut bow, resonating between opposite forces.

“Corbin Murphy!” Dara screeched. “I hold you spell bound.” Her eyes swiveled to the

girl and her face twisted in hatred, making her look more demonic than ever. "Little bitch!" she roared. "He's my play toy, not yours! Let him go!"

I clenched my fists. Didn't I have any say in this matter? Taking a step forward into the taut stretch of her winding, I watched it go slack and drop. I ran closer to her, pushing the girl out of my way as she held the unwinding line I took to be the unraveling of the Witch's spell. What I thought to do beyond that action, I didn't know. I was just tired of standing around doing nothing while things were being done to me.

My shoulder hit my grandma mid-waist and bowled her over onto her ass even though she outweighed me and stood head and heels above me. I think it was more a case of sheer surprise than any tackling prowess or ability on my part. I sat on her, held her hands staring into her face. She was solid, no longer a formless shadow or mist and her expression softened.

"You remind me of Corwin, long ago when I was young and foolish," she sighed and smiled. Her teeth were sharp and decidedly not human. "I was wrong about you, Raven, Dark Bird of my Desire. You are definitely a node of Power. Whether it be Pattern or Logus, I cannot tell. Let me up. I release my spell."

I felt the thing loosen and unravel, a weight lifted off me. The second I let my grip weaken, she pushed me aside and stood, a tall graceful woman. Beautiful and queenly. "Don't call me Grandma," she said and disappeared.

The girl came over and helped me to my feet. I looked around. We were in a formless void, a circle within the grayness sort of like being in a pitch black room inside the perimeter of a candle's glow.

"Where are we?" I asked and her eyes lightened back to that incredible purple color.

"You pushed me out of the way," she started.

"Yeah, well, sorry about that. She was my granny. I couldn't let her hurt you."

"It was more likely she'd kill you, Prince Raven. What you did was brave. And incredibly stupid." With that, she tapped my chest and forehead and we were back in the tiny bed chamber with Vialle waiting patiently in the small chair. "It's done," the girl reported. "Although I didn't have much to do with it, my Queen. Our young hero got his...granny to release her spell by himself." She bowed and departed the room leaving me with the Queen and the explanations.

My stomach growled and grumbled so loud that she heard it, ordering lunch to be brought as soon as it was convenient. Which was a polite way of saying, now, please and thank you.

It was brown rice and chicken, bland and filling. It didn't irritate anything. Both us ate slowly, she finishing with more of that green Cuke wine and a pale brown fruit that smelled of coconuts but tasted bitter to me. It was, she said, a fruit grown in Rebma and an acquired taste.

"Murphy is waiting to see you, Raven. Are you up to a visit?"

I nodded. My stomach felt okay and with his help, I thought I could go to my rooms and rest. "Is my room still available? Or whosoever that was?"

"It is Corwin's when he is in Amber. Would you want to share with him or have your own? The Castle is certainly large enough for another Royal Suite if you so choose."

My own room. Something I'd wanted since ...forever. Something that wasn't a cardboard box or a dormitory with a hundred other bodies. Or an abandoned shack in the woods. "I'll stay in his room. If it's okay with...Corey."

“Murphy will bring you up,” she said and rose to her feet as if she were sighted. She paused in the doorway to call over her shoulder. “Roelle will take you out and show you the Gardens and the town when you are able to move about more comfortably.”

“Great,” I muttered under my breath. “Now I have two babysitters.”

Still, when Murphy barreled into my room all grin and teeth, his eyes suspiciously bright, I was really glad to see him. “Don’t try to hug me, Murph,” I warned. “I just ate.” Instead, he slapped me on the back of the head which stung like a bitch.

“OWW!” I yelped. “What was that for?” I demanded, peeved.

“The roof, not listening, not telling your father you were spell bound to name a few,” he came back, shifting his wings so that they lay flat on his back. His skin was gray but not stone and he looked more human than gargoyle or monster. In a weird way, he looked beautiful. Like a stature carved by Michelangelo or Cellini. “I am to return you to your room, Master,” he said and gathered me into his embrace although I stiffened and struggled.

“Put me down, please. I can walk,” I ordered but he ignored me exiting the room as he marched through the entire Palace under everyone’s gaze. I was absolutely mortified being carried like a helpless baby, finally hiding my red cheeks into his shirt so I could pretend no one saw me or my humiliation. Didn’t look until he rolled me onto a bed that smelled of fresh lavender and sunshine, scratchy sheets that spoke of hours stretched on a line to catch the day’s breezes. “You are to stay put and rest at least 12 hours a day, Master Raven,” Murph told me. “These orders are from your doctor, Grandfather and the King. They will be enforced if necessary. By me.”

He picked up my feet and pulled off my shoes, socks and tugged at my jeans and then, fumbled with my arms over my head trying to strip my shirt. “Leave me alone, Murph. You know I don’t like PJ’s,” I mumbled and stiffened when a hand skimmed my belly. That was too warm a flesh for the morph and when I peeked, it was her.

She slowly winked her violet eyes and pulled off my shirt, handing me the blue nightwear I’d worn before. I held it in front of my near naked body, hiding my equipment and new undies, looking everywhere but at her grinning face. Silently, I threatened killing Murphy. She gave me a pat on the head like a good dog, said good night, spoke what I took to be a spell and the room darkened immediately. She set herself down on the divan and started singing what could only be a lullaby. Despite my indignation, I found myself fighting the urge to sleep. Before I knew it, I was deep in slumber and dreaming.

Walking through a fabulous forest. Trees as old, huge and majestic as the Redwoods. I walked scuffing my ankles in deep red needles as soft as carpeting, the air smelled like Christmas, vanilla and apple pie. I could hear the murmuring of a brook somewhere off to my left behind a thick carpet of knee high ferns. Nodding flowers of brilliant orange and striped bluebells trembled with the slightest wind of my passage.

I wore only a thin nightgown, a deep blue and the bottom was wet from dew. My feet were bare yet the ground was soft enough not to bruise them. Above me in the branches of the firs, some creature like a squirrel chattered at me yet I’d never seen a squirrel attired in a black and white suit like a tuxedo. Colored flying lizards circled my head and pulled at my hair with five fingered claws. I traveled in an easterly direction although how I knew or judged was beyond my scope. The pines and firs began to mix with royal Oaks, elms and

lindens. Great spreading Chestnuts showed me a diversity of hardwoods the US hadn't seen since the Mayflower's axes had rampaged through her forests. Above the crown of living tree, I heard the piercing cry of a hawk or falcon and the flying lizards scattered like rainbow flashes of light. Even the tuxedo squirrels were quiet and I, too stepped beneath a heavy skirted hemlock to hide.

Blue backed, gray tailed with white barred chest, a falcon the size of an eagle swept through the forest searching. I saw its eye, yellow with a black iris, not unlike my own. It pivoted on one wing and circled, its wingspan equal to the length of both my outstretched arms. I feared this noble bird and stayed hidden as it banked once more before flitting off as silently as it had appeared.

It took an hour before the creatures returned and only then did I venture out from under the shelter of the fragrant giant. A few more feet brought me to the banks of the brook; the water danced over rocks that glittered like quartz shot with gold and gemstones.

Frogs and minnows skittered out of the way as I stuck my feet in and gasped. It was icy cold yet pleasant and when I dipped my hand in and drank, it was the sweetest, purest water I had ever tasted. Across the banks parting the underbrush stood a statue, carved of ivory of living flesh. The Unicorn snorted through her nose and dipped her horn into the stream. I nodded. I knew of the legend of the beast's horn purifying water and negating poisons and toxins.

With a lithe bound, she jumped the creek to stand next to me, her deadly horn pointed straight at my chest. Lightly, she tapped me once on the forehead, twice on the chest, the second time her horn passing through my flesh as if it were ephemeral. It didn't hurt, not even when I saw it sink nearly halfway up to its base. She pushed me with her head and I stumbled backwards, shocked to find no trace of blood or wound in me. Her tail twitched and she lifted her lip in a snort of derision.

"Sorry," I spread my hands behind me on the pine needles from my graceless fall. "I've never been speared before. By a Unicorn. Does this make us friends? Or enemies?"

She poked me again and this time it was a definite shove; it hurt. "Alright, I get it," I grumbled and stood up. She turned her side to me and looked over her shoulder, dropped to her knees and flicked her tail. I got the message and climbed on gingerly.

If you've never sat a horse bareback and in a nightgown, I don't recommend it. First of all, the skirts pull up on your thighs and pinch, leaving nothing under your ass and the hair rubs galls on your butt bones. Not to mention it's bloody uncomfortable on your nuts. I tucked everything out of the way, glad I was wearing tight briefs and not boxers. Gripping with my calves and winding my hands into her mane, she bounded off in a gait totally unlike that of a horse. Some of her leaps were airborne and not remotely touching the ground at all. I had no idea where she was taking me, no way to guide her. I was along for the ride, merely a passenger even though it was my dream. I knew it was a dream, it was too real to be anything but a fantasy.

Her flight through the forest took mere minutes and emerged onto the flat plain that held the Pattern. I saw it from above, its every pathway laid out although it wasn't a maze but a challenge of endurance and fortitude. This time, she didn't stop and set me down on the first step but put herself on the path with me still on her back. I rode the Pattern with her and whatever effort was involved did not apply to her and by association did not affect me. As she passed the First Veil, sparks flew off her legs yet she seemed little hampered either by it or my weight.

I saw the history of Amber as we pushed our way past the second Veil and the Waterfall, the Glory that was Oberon and Dworkin as they created a world torn from the blood of the Courts of Chaos and created both Amber and the Pattern. I witnessed the marriages and births of all Nine Princes and saw those that died meet their ends. I mourned them even though they were enemies and had seen what Eric had done to my Grandfather, Corwin.

I witnessed my own conception and birth and by then, we stood before the last Veil of the Pattern. I, at the Unicorn's side somehow dismounted without knowing how or when, and she laid her head on my shoulder. Her eyes were the blue of the night sky and filled with both love and compassion. I rubbed the sides of her horn and cupped her bearded chin, kissed her, this nobly created, divinely beautiful symbol of both Magic and Power. Knew who she was and was both awed and amazed.

"Does Merlin know who you are?" I asked and she pushed me with her nose, out of the Pattern where we stood in a courtyard of faerie like beauty. Here, was the Unicorn's bower and she took me around showing me the unearthly beauty of her abode. I felt no pain, nor hunger. Lifted my gown to stare at my chest and belly. Not only was there nothing wrong with my bare chest but the scar on my stomach was a thin white line, an injury that looked as if it had occurred years before. It no longer bothered me. I heard her laughing whinny, a high tinkle like chiming bells. Threw my arms around her neck and cried for all those years I had never known my mum. How would I have coped knowing she was no more mortal or human than Murphy?

"Why did you leave me?" I asked, my heart both broken and overfilled with joy. Into my head came the images of the Hunters from the Courts during the War searching for her, searching for the one weapon that would destroy the Pattern and remake another in a new image. A weapon that both sides could and would use if the one Dara had wound in her clutches would not work out. How ironic that I would be the weapon used against their weapon, Merlin. Son against father. And yet, Merlin broke free of her machinations and kept the Courts from destroying Amber. I vowed to keep that balance. I woke up with her assurance that I would see her again.

Chapter 16

In the morning, I woke Roelle up. She'd fallen asleep on the couch curled in a ball under her heavy skirts and I watched her sleeping like a baby before I touched her shoulder and shook her. She slept hard, I was easier to wake than she was. Her eyes opened in confusion, inches away from my face. I looked at her cherry rose lips and softly kissed them, not sure if I was doing it right as it was my first official kiss. Her lips parted in surprise and she kissed me back with a lot more confidence than I'd started with. I didn't care that she was older than me, I figured that was a plus anyway, she was sure to have more experience and could show me if I got it wrong. I didn't know what to do with my hands so kept them on the couch arms to hold me up.

"You're not taking liberties with a young, foolish maid, are you, my Prince?" she whispered against my cheek.

I pushed back, aghast at my daring and stuttered, "Of c-c-course not, my Lady. It was just...your lips were so soft and so close...my first k-k-ki!"

I shut my mouth and she giggled, laughed and that caused me to bolt out of the room, running smack into Murphy and the guard and the valet Vialle had promised me. I slid around all of them and ran down the hallway aiming for the Grand Staircase which I took in a spectacular Parkour leap and across to the opposite side of the Minstrel's Gallery and up towards the Castle's roof. Voices hollered at me to stop but all I could see was the laughter she had mocked me with and I wanted to hide and wallow in my shame and trampled confidence.

I could just hear the rumors running through the whole castle, the town and even the Realm, the Son of the Great Merlin, King of the Courts of Chaos not only couldn't kiss but was probably a certified virgin.

I mean, I wasn't a total idiot, I knew how the thing worked, I'd lived on farms and been around nature, even seen the homeless do it, right out in full view. I'd watched from hidden perches how our neighbors had expressed love for their chosen partners be it male or female and in any combination. I'd also seen the darker side where what was often freely given just for the asking was taken violently and with hate. I reached the roof and raced along the crenelations, dancing recklessly across the narrow walkway just inside the wall where archers would stand to guard against invaders. If I leaned over the edge, I could just see the barrels where hot oil would be poured down on the poor souls dumb enough to get that close. From the scorch marks, it was obvious the pots had been used for that purpose and recently.

I headed for the fifth Tower, the point of the Castle that made it shaped like a crown. It overlooked the cliff of Kolvan and was a sheer drop of over 800 feet. I skidded to a stop on the very edge and teetered until I caught my balance. To the crowd running behind me, it looked as if I was either falling to my death or getting ready to jump.

Murphy's scream was the loudest, plum full of horror and rage. He threatened to kill me and I laughed hysterically, astonished that he would think that a deterrent.

Roelle was the cause of a major disturbance in the crowd as she bullied her way through to the front, turned to face them and spoke in a low murmur that I couldn't hear. I did hear Murph's denial, Corwin's rebuttal and King Random's soothing tones ordering them all to obey him then, if not her. The crowd turned round and marched off. She stood there waiting and shouted, "I don't hear the door slamming!"

There came the distinct solid boom as an irate foot kicked the heavy oaken guard door closed. Roelle spun and faced me, her expression rueful and embarrassed. "Raven, may I explain?"

"What's to explain?" I returned stiffly, keeping my back to her.

She came closer. "It wasn't what you thought, Raven."

"What was it then? Did it tickle? Did I do it all wrong? Was it so obvious I've never done it before?" I snapped.

"How would I know?" she answered. "It was my first kiss, too."

I turned to face her, my mouth hanging open. "But---you're way older than me! And you're beautiful! No one's ever tried to kiss you before?"

"Oh, they've tried," she snickered. "But, I grew up with seven older brothers and no one messes with me that get by them. So, nobody tries anymore. Besides, I'm not much older than you, anyway. I'm 17. Worse though, Raven, is that I'm not your social equal."

“What do you mean?”

“You’re the son of a King, Raven,” she said kindly. “I’m just the daughter of a minor Baron. I caught the eye of the King and he asked if I would mind helping out as a healer learning under Queen Vialle. I love working with her.”

“Why did you laugh, Roelle?” I asked timidly.

“All I could think of was what would my seven brothers do when they heard my first kiss was by the handsome young Prince of the Shadow Courts.” She giggled again. “They daren’t lay a hand on you. Besides, I wanted you to kiss me.” She came close, tilted her head and put her hand on the back of my neck pulling my lips down to hers. “Let’s practice, Raven,” she whispered and pressed her soft honeyed cupid’s bow into mine and all thought and intellect deserted me as I drowned in sweetness. Tingles of delight rippled through my abdomen and I felt lighter than air. Our noses lay next to the other, pressed tightly so that I couldn’t breathe through it nor my mouth. I grew dizzy and wasn’t sure if it was because I wasn’t breathing or that was the effect her kiss had on me.

She tasted of peaches and vanilla, her breath had a faint minty aftertaste. I wondered if she’d brushed them before searching me out. Pushed her away in dismay, wondering what my own morning breath must taste like.

“It’s fine, Raven. Your mouth tastes...good.”

I grimaced. “I usually wake up feeling like the entire 7th Cavalry has ridden through it. Murphy says I could choke a buzzard.”

“Murphy is a...morph,” she laughed. “Your guardian. He’s supposed to teach you to be kind, honorable, brave and brush your teeth.” She looked. “You have all your teeth. Pearly white, too.”

“You called me handsome,” I said, finally as it sank into my head.

“Oh, duh,” she looked at me as if I were an idiot. “Haven’t you seen yourself in a mirror? You look like Prince Corwin and King Merlin, both absolutely gorgeous men.”

“Oh yeah? Who’s prettier? You or me?”

She hit me in the stomach and paled as I hunched over. “Oh my gods!” she cried out. “Oh, Raven! I’m so sorry! Did I hurt you?” Her hands tore at my jeans and opened them, her fingers delving under my briefs touching my bare skin. I felt my prick stir, standing at attention almost instantly, just inches from her grasp.

“Oh,” she said and smiled. “Your wound is healed. Almost gone.” Those fingers dropped lower and softly encircled me, gently squeezing as she felt the surge in the flesh. Pulling me closer to her by the tiniest tug, she used her other hand to capture mine, placing them on her breasts so that I felt the instant hardening of her nipples. I swallowed a huge lump in my throat.

“Now, kiss me, Raven,” she whispered and I did. She played as skillfully on my tongue as her fingers did below and when I thought I could take no more, she made a mewl with her mouth that made me explode, she followed and we held ourselves up together.

“Oh my god, oh my god, ohmigod,” I whimpered as she tucked me back in, pulled up my zipper and smoothed her bodice. I smelled myself on her hands.

“Where did you learn how to do that?” I gasped. She wiggled her eyebrows.

“I told you. Seven brothers. I watched them all. Learned a few things. Come on, you ready for some lessons?”

“More lessons?” I groaned, tired already.

“Not those kinds, Raven. Riding lessons. Fencing, how to get around the Castle. The

Gardens. The best places to hide.”

“After breakfast,” I said firmly. “Besides, I have to change. I’m...messy. And you’re in the same clothes you slept in.”

“True. I’ll meet you in the Great Hall after breakfast. Wear riding pants and boots. Better yet, I’ll tell Liam and he’ll set out the right attire for the day’s activities. See you later.” She threw me a kiss and bounced off. I watched her plump rear end sashay the entire length of the roof before I took the short way back to Corwin’s bedroom.

Chapter 17

The next week went by so quickly, between lessons on Fencing, riding, hawking and other nearly medieval practices, I was tutored on Royal protocol, the Realms, provinces, ministers, ambassadors and noble families. I didn’t have a chance to get bored. I wasn’t left alone with Roelle anymore, either Murph, Liam or another footman was always underfoot. I even had a pair of guardsmen named Dunn and Denn with me when Murph was occupied elsewhere. He did spend a lot of time flying around the countryside on the King’s request. Some sort of mission but his lips were sealed stone even to me, and I was sort of glad to be out from under his eternal stare.

Surprisingly, we had a visit from Julian. He rode up on that enormous demon creature and I swear its eyes gleamed redder when it spotted me. Steam poured from its nostrils and I felt my eyes burn in response as if flames would shoot from the m. My fingers and palms itched and tiny sparks squeezed between my clenched digits.

We were standing in the Great Hall, the dude who ran the castle’s daily workings and the guards after just finishing an archery lesson in the bailey when he was announced. Before I had time to think about it, I’d found myself confronting him in the yard.

He looked down at me, dusty, sweaty and dressed in clothing appropriate for a schoolyard, not a Castle. “I see you survived, boy,” he drawled, resting his huge gauntleted hands on the high pommel of a war saddle.

“Yes. Thank you for that,” I said dryly. “As for you turning me over to Flora---.”

“I merely mentioned I had you as a guest, a supposed commoner claiming kinship with brother Corwin,” he said mildly as he looked at the growing crowd of armed men. “May I dismount and seek comfort for my men and animals?”

“What is your purpose here, Julian?” Corwin asked, hand on his blade as he appeared out of the darkness behind me. His body gently pushed me behind Liam and my bodyguards.

Julian’s face scowled as he compared the family likeness between my grandfather and me. “I have no quarrels with anyone here, Corwin,” Julian returned. “Least of all, King Random’s nephew and King Merlin’s son. My Lord. I come to offer my apologies and my allegiance.”

“Merlin’s not here,” Corwin said. “And your apologies are dust.”

“He can still make one,” I interrupted and my voice echoed in the small courtyard. Echoed with a power and a threat that resonated in the air with heavy thunder. Eyes widened as they all felt the shift in pressure. Julian rocked back in the saddle.

“You’ve walked the Pattern!” he exclaimed in horror.

“Part of it,” I replied from behind my grandfather. The crowd parted as King Random strode forward, dressed in jeans and Metallica T-shirt.

“Cool shirt, dude,” I murmured and he threw me an annoyed glance.

“Julian,” he said flatly. “You’ve left the Forest of Arden in capable hands, I trust. Or is there some fleet off shore I need to know about?”

“Your borders are secure, Majesty.”

“What do you mean, ‘part of the way’?” Random asked, indicating he had been there long enough to have heard me.

“I rode most of the way on the... Unicorn. Only walked the Final Veil on my own,” I answered. Julian, Corwin and Random faced me.

“How is that possible?” they asked and I shrugged.

“I don’t know. You’d have to ask her.”

“Her? It’s female?” Random demanded.

“You didn’t look for exterior plumbing? How could you not know, she’s too beautiful to be anything but feminine!” I protested.

“I’ve never seen the Unicorn. Only Corwin had,” Random returned almost ashamedly.

“For centuries no one believed it was real,” Corwin added.

“She’s real,” I smiled with secret knowledge. “Real, powerful and my protector. I accept your apologies, Sir Julian. After all, you did take Murphy and me in, sent your doctor to me and save me from dying outright. I am grateful. Thank you. As for Flora, she’s no longer a threat to me.”

“What do you mean?” All three rounded on me. “Is she dead?”

“No. But she’s taken herself as far away from Amber as she can where no Trump can contact her,” I explained. “Besides, she wasn’t attempting a coup, she was only satisfying her curiosity and trying to curry favor with someone in the Courts.”

“The Courts of Chaos?” Corwin asked. “Dara? Is she behind this?”

“My grandmother.”

“She’s plotting against Merlin?”

“Merlin was the plot. She created him just for the purpose of a puppet king of the Courts, Grandfather,” I said carefully. “Only he had too much Amber blood and influence to fall victim to her wiles. He broke free of her yoke and besides, he has Ghostwheel. She wants it more than almost anything. She thought to use me to get it or Dad under her thumb. Or get me to kill all of you and then put me on the Throne as her straw soldier.”

“Why didn’t it work?” Random questioned.

“Because Ghost sensed I was bound, Vialle sent Roelle to break the spell and the Unicorn gave me the power of the Pattern filtered so that I could adapt it to my hybrid blood. I’m just as much Chaos bred as Amber.”

Julian turned to Random. “Do you trust him here among the Castle, the Pattern and the Realm, Random? Corwin?”

Random’s answer was prompt as was my grandfather’s. Both a resounding ‘YES’. They escorted him into the castle with a discrete guard detail, to his rooms and set up an impromptu dinner welcoming another brother to the Realm.

Being under adult age, I was relegated to the lesser banquet hall which I preferred anyway. That’s where all the other youngsters of the castle ate. I’d met all of them and had found a few that quickly became cohorts. Roelle, of course, her brother Liam, my valet,

two of the guards younger kin and the cook's son, Marcus. He was particularly enjoyable, he brought treats for a growing, ever hungry batch of teenagers and knew every inch of the castle. No one knew the secret passages like Corey and he'd shown me a few, one originating in the off room of my study. One led to the library, the other to the spiral stair that reached the Pattern via the dungeons.

I hadn't seen or heard from Merlin since he'd left and Murphy was busy, it seemed on endless missions for Random. I hadn't heard from Ghostwheel, either.

A chunk of bread hit me in the chest and I looked up from roast beef, a sort of Yorkshire pudding, sweet peas, turnips and cake to follow the trajectory of the missile back to Marcus as he aimed another chunk, this one covered in gravy. "What?" I growled and he stopped.

"What did Sir Julian want?" He was taller than I, red haired with dimples, twinkling green eyes and had a major crush on Roelle but was afraid of her seven brothers. I swallowed a spoonful of turnips. With brown sugar, butter and whipped, they were delicious.

"Came to apologize," I mumbled, my mouth full.

"Mumphy?" he mocked.

I swallowed. "I can turn you into a toad, Marcus," I waved my spoon at him and he sputtered. Roelle nearly choked on her potatoes.

"He cannot!" she laughed. "He doesn't do offensive magic. You're safe, Marcus. At least from him. What are we doing tomorrow?"

"Dunno." I eyed my plate. It was empty. One of the servers came around and I refilled it with desserts, pie, tarts and a trifle I was sure came straight from heaven. A cross between pound cake and strawberry shortcakes, clotted cream and nuts. Pudding and sugared berries.

"How about we go check out the town?" I asked after polishing off half in three bites. "I hear a new tavern opened up near the Market. A trade delegation is coming in from Tissarette."

Roelle's eyes widened in delight. That Shadow was close to Amber and known for its beautiful fabrics and stunning jewelry. She had long wanted to open trade with Amber but had been vehemently opposed to Eric and his policies. The rape of the former Ambassador's daughter by one of Eric's generals hadn't helped either.

I had heard, too, that a traveling caravan from Pleiades was en-route, they were known for their marvelous arms and weaponry, a clan of miners that were a formidable Guild. Random was upgrading the Castle's stock and wanted me to outfit myself with a new blade, knives or whatever. I'd asked why I couldn't have a Sig or a Glock and was told that gunpowder would not explode in Amber or anywhere close to its shadows.

Those lessons attended with Roelle were coming along. I might never be the swordsman like my grandfather but I was good enough to save my life until help came. At archery, I was the equal of any in the ranks, with a compound or crossbow. I didn't care for the English longbow, I preferred the short version that could be used on horseback.

Riding lessons were fun. I'd had chances to ride while running with Murphy, especially those years we lived in Ireland and England. I loved the feel of a good mount between my legs and felt half centaur.

Random and Corey both took me out on gallops and let me choose a horse from the extensive and impressive stables. I admired Star, Corey's favorite. He told me many stories

of his adventures and Hell Rides on the still handsome, though aged gelding.

I picked out a 16.2hh dark bay mare with TB lines yet built more like Morgan. She had a star striped into a feather on her forehead, a snip on her nose and three white heel markings. A trifle hot, she could go all day and yet was smart enough to stand and rest where it was needed. Her name was Turbot and I left it that way. She was the last thing I saw every night before I climbed into bed. Roelle said she refused to be jealous of a horse.

I was carefully kept from being alone in her presence, both of us remained frustrated and she tormented my dreams. I woke up every morning with a hard-on and more embarrassing, had many nocturnal emissions. I'd taken to stripping my own bed and carting the linens to the laundry where the entire household staff nudged each other when I appeared at the washrooms. They didn't tease me, though. They seemed almost...proud of me. What the hell, I wasn't getting much sleep anyhow.

We waited for each other to finish eating. As usual, Marcus was done first and Roelle last. She ate so slow, chewed each bite deliberately and ate in an order that made me want to shove it down her throat in one go. We were always waiting up for her. Finally, she licked the last spoonful and set her fork down, signaling she was done. I was up in one bound, thanked the servers, the cooks and on the way to the Hall in a hurry. Liam caught hold of my t-shirt and stopped me. "Prince Raven."

No matter how much I protested, no one would drop the title and just call me by my first name. It was Prince this and Prince that. I was sick of it.

"What?" I removed his hand, it was an Ozzy Osborne shirt and I didn't want it ripped.

"The King requested you bathe, get an early rest and meet him at 5 a.m. tomorrow morning for the Trade Delegation."

"5 a.m.!" I protested. "Why me?"

"I don't question the King's commands, my Lord Prince. I merely obey. I will be up in 15 minutes to attend you and at 4 a.m. tomorrow to dress you." I shuddered. Getting up at 4 a.m. sounded like medieval torture. I told him so. Still, I knew better than to disobey the King's order or face Liam's wrath. He could and would do things like have my underwear too starched or my boots a half size too small.

"Okay," I grunted, resigned to a day of boring, diplomatic crap. Wouldn't be the first time and I'm sure not the last. We traipsed up to my bedroom, most of the group splitting off to their own rooms leaving me, Liam and the two bodyguards in my group. They entered first to inspect the room and then allowed us entry. Shortly after that, a copper hip tub was carted in, filled with steaming hot water. I was ordered to disrobe, climb in and scrub.

Maids came in and I covered everything with soapsuds. They scrubbed my back and my hair, did my nails, trimmed my neckline and checked for stray hairs on my chin. As yet, I hadn't started spouting any whiskers.

Just about when the girls were becoming bolder, Liam shooed them out and told me to get up, dried me off and dressed me in my nightwear. I'd given up on trying to do it myself, it pissed him off; he kept telling me it was his job so get used to it. It'd be a lot worse, he told me, when I was the King's Heir.

I drew the line at him tucking me in; he closed my door, extinguished the lamps and pattered about for an hour getting clothes ready for the morning before his lights went out. I lay there awake until I felt a subtle spell drift in that made my eyelids heavy. I slipped into a quiet slumber and didn't fight it.

Chapter 18

I eyed the fancy dark blue and black tunic with gold braiding, the long trousers, gilt belt and high boots. It looked suspiciously like a military uniform. "I haven't been drafted, have I?" I asked of Liam and he laughed.

"No, my Lord. You're too old to go into military training. Most cadets start out at ten, you'd never catch up. Besides, I don't think King Random or Merlin will allow you out of sight of the Kingdom. Military cadets are fostered out on other Shadows. No, this is accepted formal court attire for important trade delegations."

He helped me put them on from clean underwear, the loose white blouse, tunic, pants. He commented on my wound but didn't seem too surprised at its advanced healing rate. "All you Amber folk heal fast if it doesn't kill you outright," he muttered pulling up my boots. They were the best part of the outfit.

"What am I supposed to do at this shindig?"

"Just sit there, look regal and don't answer any questions unless the King specifically asks you," he answered. "I'll be underfoot, too. If I catch you making a faux pas, I'll kick you under the table."

He shrugged. "You're a King's son, there's not much you can do and not get away with it."

I laughed. "Fine thing to tell a teenager. Open license."

The look he gave me made my balls shrivel. "So, where is this party going to be held?"

"Ceremonial Room. It needs to be large enough to entertain the Duke, his family and retinue. The Gold Merchants and Cavers Association of Tissarette. Wine and dine and hammer out the trade details, mostly boring stuff but the King is a stickler for details and has a real flair for running a kingdom. He surprised all of us when he was granted the crown. We thought it would be Corwin."

"I hear he has a band, too," I said running my fingers through my newly trimmed hair.

Liam shuddered. "Acid rock, he calls it. I call it the Devil's torment. It's loud enough to crack the castle's foundations."

"Oh, yeah? I'd like to listen in on his next jam session. When is it?"

"When hell freezes over, I hope. I'll find out for you. I suggest you eat something before the affair, the food is usually late and you'll be starving long before then. I have had the kitchen staff bring you ham and eggs."

"Thanks, Liam." I sat down on my couch and kicked my feet back and forth while he straightened up my room. "Where's Murphy?"

"He's overseeing the Duchy of Rhys near the Smoking Mountains. We've heard rumors of harpies attacking the farmers."

"Harpies," I muttered. "What next, hippogriffs and wyverns?"

"We've had them and worse, my Lord Raven," he picked up my sneakers and threw them under the bed. Along with several other pairs of footwear. I'd dig 'em out when I ran out of something to put on my feet.

Someone knocked on my door and Liam opened it to reveal some of the high

muckety-mucks who handled all the social functions. I received deep bows and both guards fell in behind as I followed the officials through the Palace to the fancy governmental section.

Talk about gilt and pomp. It looked as if every tapestry, portrait, suit of armor, weaponry and centuries of hoarding stuff had been dragged out of retirement to impress the locals. There was a protocol to entering the Chambers, I was allowed to come in before the rest of the delegates but after the King. To my surprise, he had me seated next to him. I looked for Corey but he was absent. Random was dressed soberly in a Royal manner and looked every inch a King. He leaned over and whispered, “you look very nice, Raven. Very Princely.”

I snickered and reddened, he squeezed my knee under the table and looked stern as the rest of the crowd came in. Bowing and scraping except for the Miners, they looked like folk who didn't take crap from anyone.

As a people, the Tissarette were tall, willowy and blonde. Sort of like Danes or Vikings but softer. They were merchants and renown for striking hard bargains in their favor. It was said that after making a deal with one, check your underwear to see if you'd given them up your balls in the deal. Because they could clean you out without you realizing it.

The miners looked like Welshmen, short, stocky with incredible shoulders and arm muscles. Dark red skin, redder than an Indian and with curly hair in various shades of orange and red. Their eyes were a startling green like emeralds with dark brown pupils that were slotted like a cat's. They were quick to laugh and slow to ire, were fond of drink and gambling. Dressed in fancy gowns with lots of gold wire and gemstones. They didn't bring any weapons in but I'd heard about their marvelous smithy skills.

There was a lot of drinking, eating and reminiscing before the tables were cleared and the treaties came out. I was relegated to a back table not able to read their languages so I wandered around, checking out the confines of the room and spotted Marcus lurking behind one of the room dividers to the kitchen staff.

“Hey,” he hissed and held it aside. I threw a quick scan and saw no one glancing in my direction so I scooted out.

“Boooooor---ing,” I said.

“What's up?”

“Some dumb-ass treaty, policy thing. I don't know why I had to be there, I'm just a bump on a log. What are you doing?”

“A few of us are headed for town. Want to come? There's a new boxer opening up at the Ringside. If you can last eight minutes, there's a purse of ten Guilden. Against Two-Fisted Twohey.”

He was the local champion and he hadn't yet been dethroned. I figured it would be at least mid afternoon before anyone noticed I was gone.

“Roelle around?” I questioned and he shook his head.

“She's getting ready for the Dinner Party tonight. The Duke's family is here and the other Nobles. It's a meet and greet.”

“A what?”

“Meet and greet. Introductions to eligible sons and daughters, Raven.” He looked at me oddly. As if I should know this stuff. We ducked into the corner as a brace of armed guards patrolled the hallway, only moving out once they had turned the corner with no chance of them spotting us.

“How do we get out without anyone seeing us?” He grabbed my arm and pulled me into the laundry, busy girls and women washing tablecloths and linens, ignoring us. We danced between vats of boiling water out into the yard, through the presses and into the paddock area empty of horses but not bales of hay and bags of oats. A delivery had just been made and the feed dealer was in the process of leaving. It was a simple matter to climb aboard his wagon and hide in the back. Marcus had grabbed two cloaks and threw one over my fancy uniform hiding my identity. His, he folded in his lap so that we resembled bags of goods. The dealer must have been in a hurry to get home, he kept his dray horses at a spanking trot and didn't pull them in until their hooves barreled over the bridge into town.

As he slowed the team for the turn, Marcus nudged me and we dropped off the boards to land on the street cobblestones in the city outskirts near the markets. Expressly the area we were forbidden to venture forth towards. Lots of taverns, back alleys and unsavory places to hang out, just the thing for two adventurous boys with more guts than brains.

Men in dark cloaks went inside and came out, men wearing swords and other weapons. We saw women, too. Ladies dressed in clothes that spoke of their profession as clearly as if written in neon.

“Want a beer?” I asked and dug through my pockets for coins. I had a few, everything I needed was provided for me, no one had thought to actually give me any money so I'd had to...acquire some by other means. I was a fair pickpocket but I didn't like to use such skills.

“The Blue Parrot is known for its ales,” Marcus grinned. “The proprietor brews a great stout.”

I made a face. I didn't like dark beers. Hell, I didn't like any beer but fruit of the forbidden tree---

I pushed the door open, my hood back and walked into a typical country bar. Long wooden bar with the inevitable mirror and a magnificent painting of a lady covered in blue feathers and nothing else. Mugs and tankards, wine glasses hanging from racks overhead. Barrels of beer and hogsheads of wine stacked against the walls. A staircase that went up and down to our right in the taproom filled with tables and patrons. To the left was the kitchen and the smell of roast pork and sweet potatoes made me drool. I could almost taste the fresh rolls cooking.

The clientele were farmers, some soldiers and a great many foreigners from their dress and skin coloration. We saw no one we knew, or at least, no one addressed Marcus.

A heavy woman approached and led us to a small table near the stairwell. “Ale? Stout? Milk?” she asked wiping her sweating face with the corner of her apron.

“Cuke wine?” I ordered and wasn't prepared for the snort of derision.

“Sure and I'll go out and order you a 12 course meal to go with it, boy. We have Sinterra Red or Delsoian White, Rose or Merlot from Camdora. You have the blunt to pay for it?”

I threw a silver coin at her and she caught it out of the air. “This'll get you a bottle or two. And you, sir?”

“Blue Brews Best,” he said. She was back in minutes with two bottles and one glass. Opened his beer and my wine, poured me a flute full with a practiced twist and left change in copper pennies. I sniffed and was pleasantly surprised. It was a sweet wine full of fruity undertones, crisp and delightful. Cherries, blackberries, sunshine and peat. It hit my stomach in a nugget of warmth and made my face flush.

I threw off the cloak and opened my tunic buttons to let the lace of my shirt hang free.

The tone of the conversation inside dropped and whispers ran quickly through the crowded room. I was halfway to being drunk, halfway through the bottle when Marcus kicked me under the table.

“Raven,” he hissed.

“Whahh?”

“They’re watching us.”

“So?”

“We’re not supposed to be here.”

Two men approached, dark haired, dressed in black with leather vests and work swords strapped to their belts. Daggers at their sides. Three day old beards and none too clean as if they had come off the road after a long trip. “What’s your name, boy?” the taller with the dark brown eyes asked me.

“Corbin,” I answered my own hand reaching for my blade but I hadn’t worn it when I’d been seated at the Delegation. I’d removed it and handed it over to Liam. He eyed my suit and fingered the material.

“You from the Palace? Some noble born brat?”

“What makes you think that?” I returned, my hand gripping the neck of the bottle.

“Oh, just the fact that the material of your suit alone is enough to feed a family of four for a year.” He grabbed me by the throat and jerked me off the ground as I swung the wine bottle into his head. It cracked and booze went flying as he fell with me on top of him. His companion charged in, dagger drawn and Marcus popped him over the head with his beer bottle. I rolled out from underneath, unsteady on my feet and my throat sore from the man’s squeezing.

“Raven!” Marcus shouted heading for the door. “This way!” We bolted, dodging other bodies. Once outside, I skittered to a stop, unsure of which way to run until Marcus grabbed my shirt sleeves and dragged me down the lane into the darkness.

Chapter 19

We ran giggling and laughing until just out of sight of the tavern’s glow of lights only to re-enter the next establishment’s which of course was another beer hall. Both sides of the street were lined with them, bodies moving back and forth, women stumbling over drunken men in the gutters.

A pretty blonde stepped out from the lit doorway to throw a pan of soapy water and just missed me. Her blue eyes widened in surprise. “Oh, excuse me, sir! Sorry!”

“S’okay,” I slurred, realizing I still held the neck of the bottle in my hand. I looked around for where to dump it and finally, tossed it out in the middle of the street.

“What’s the name?”

“Penny, sir,” she replied, smiling at me.

“No, no. The bar. What’s the bar’s name?”

“The Coaquinn.”

“Whazzit?” I was finding it difficult to command both my feet and my mouth at the same time. Marcus tried to tug me away but I resisted him. She was really pretty and older,

more experienced. And I was feeling horny. Hell, it seemed like I was always horny.

I headed for the doorway in just as Marcus took hold of my shirt and tugged resulting in my blouse ripping with a sound like shattered silk.

“Raven, no. Not here. This is not a place young boys should be seen in,” he hissed and before I could ask why, the two men from the other place were standing behind us with daggers at our throats. Blood trickled down the tall man’s forehead and his eyes had the feral gleam of a rabid wolf.

Marcus shouted, stamped and ducked out from under like a greased eel. I attempted the same but the man punched me in the side of the neck. All I saw was a white flash, heard a burst of white noise and then the cobblestones hit me on the chin making me bite my tongue. I tasted the copper metallic of blood.

I was being dragged along an alleyway, thrown over a barrel where the splinters dug into my belly while someone cut my clothes off me. The air was cold on my backside. It felt like a dream, a really bad one but I couldn’t muster the energy to fight. Something was wrong with my head.

I gasped. Sobbed. Felt someone’s hands and fingers pawing at the most private places of my body and I couldn’t do anything to stop them.

“I’m going to fuck your ass and then cut your skinny throat, boy,” the tall man promised with a growl. I heard him drop his sword belt and fumble at his pants. He jammed his spit covered fingers in my butt and I screamed as he tore at thin membranes. Blood burned, made me slick. I heard a thunk, the hands holding me over the wooden barrel slid off and I fell onto the curb, curling in on myself crying in terrified horror for what was to come next.

Seven whirling balls of light. Bobbing, rotating in front of my eyes until I opened them. A man stood there. Incredibly tall, thin, slender made with an ethereal grace. White skin and long white hair pulled severely back from his face. He played with the silver spheres for a moment and then threw two at the rapists. As they collided with their bodies, the men simply melted away without leaving a trace of evidence.

He regarded me with pale silver eyes and there was no compassion or feeling in them as he stepped forward lightly, gesturing with another sphere. It floated towards me, touched me on the forehead and it was as if something huge had slapped my brains with a mallet. It hurt. I couldn’t breathe. Or move. Or see. Or anything. He took me.

Eyes open. I think. It was so dark I wasn’t sure if they were open or if I was blind. I was very cold. My fingers and toes ached. My butt felt raw and whatever I was laying on had my skin frozen to it. I tried to reach around and feel for clothes but all I could find were the remains of my blouse and tunic. My boots were gone, my underwear and my socks.

Slowly, I climbed to my feet and stretched my hands up. No ceiling within my reach. I could barely walk, a slow shuffle to decipher the size and confines of this hole I was in. I was terrified I might fall in a deeper hole if I was in a cave. I couldn’t think of a worse fate than to be lost in the dark underground with no knowledge of how to get out. Of wandering lost forever.

I cried for Murphy to come save me. For Ghostwheel to find me. I cursed God and even Marcus for tempting me to explore the city. I blamed everyone but myself for my own stupidity and because I didn’t even have the Trumps to call for help.

Gradually, the air brightened. An overall light that filtered through making the area a

sort of twilight gray revealing a large chamber carved in rock with a ceiling ten feet over my head. Featureless, no tunnels, no holes, no windows or doors, just a squarish box in the ground in which I was entombed. I breathed through my mouth and saw my breath, it was cold enough to puff plainly and hurt my chest less than when I tried through my nose.

My fingers and toes were blue, my dick and balls tucked up as close as they could get without crawling inside. I took off the tunic top and wrapped it around my waist like a loin cloth and even that little bit of material was enough to provide some warmth so I didn't feel like my nuts would crack into ice cubes.

A second perusal of the cave's dimensions brought no new surprises, there wasn't even a bucket to piss in. I doubted if any would stay liquid long; it would freeze as soon as it hit the floor. The walls looked like stone, not ice although they were covered with a hoar frost like ice. I was thirsty enough to try licking it and no, my tongue did not stick to the surface. It melted in my mouth, slightly metallic but quenching all the same.

I found a spot near one wall and sat, huddled around myself trying to conserve heat, trying to make sense of what had happened, trying to make a plan to help me escape. Somewhere in all my useless thinking, I fell asleep. Short ten minute snatches that exhausted me further and lowered my core body temp until I knew I was dangerously close to hypothermia but just couldn't summon the energy to care.

That's when the monsters came. Big, hulking ogres that drooled with green snot hanging from over-sized nostrils. Skin that seeped pus and smelled worse than three day old liver left out to rot. Warts with hairs growing out of them on lips and eyelids. Hunchbacked twisted demons with yellow skin and breasts that hung past their waistlines. Nipples the size of pencil erasers and split with rings and chains. Penises that would have made a stud horse green with envy and ball sacks as ugly as a wart hog. Not a one of them wore clothing nor seemed perturbed by the cold chill. All of them poked at me with claw and talon, fingers, bones and horns. Poking, pinching but none drew blood or actually hurt me.

Eventually, I fell over, my breathing slowed as a delicious warmth filled me. I floated in it and everything receded. Even the alarmed voices were a mere noise in the background. Screeching commenced. Interrupted my slide into coma and death. I was hauled up by one arm to dangle four feet off the ground in the grip of some horrific monster that looked like a cousin of Mothra and Sasquatch. The heat rose in the chamber and I was suddenly aware that I had ceased shivering and was cold.

My body went into spasms so violent I was afraid I would break bones and if the creature holding me had let go, I would have shaken to pieces. Instead, it kept me spread-eagled so that none of my limbs could move. I was on a rack and it breathed fire over me until I was finally sweating. That's when the white-haired dude came back. He brought his furniture with him, a fancy chaise lounge on which he reclined, playing with those silver balls. Naked girls attended him, feeding him small pieces of meat and sweets while others danced around marble columns. I wasn't sure if they were real or human, occasionally, an arm or a leg slipped into a massive limb with hair or feathers, or scales. I lay on the ground in a puddle of sweat, watching the rest of the room freeze beyond my circle.

"Who are you?"

He raised a finger and my throat closed up. I struggled, ripped at my lips and drew blood yet couldn't open my mouth. I howled, a muffled yelp of pain.

“Speak only when you are told, mortal,” he whispered. “You live by my whim. What are you called?”

“Raven,” I gasped as my mouth unzipped. I cursed him and saw the spell splat against his chin. He wiped it off with an elf-like finger and stared slowly and dangerously at me.

Threw those silver balls at me. Instinctively, I blocked them with my hands. Some popped around me and did nothing, several others hit me on the chest, face, arms and legs throwing me to the far wall and slamming me into the very matrix of the rock. Bones cracked and organs crushed just before the lights went out in my head.

You can't keep him here much longer, Mandor. The woman's voice denied. He's not Chaos bred enough to survive, he's broken and damaged. He will die if you linger. The King will strip you muscle by muscle, tendon by bone, limb from limb if he finds out you have done this. Send him back to the Shadow world he came from or to Amber and let the humans find him.

I have plans for this mortal toy, the white-haired man denied. When he is broken, he will serve me, serve my dear brother up on a platter. He won't die, his Amber blood will save him.

His heart is failing even now. He is only a child, not fully grown or mature. He was grievously wounded before, their forms are not as strong as our demons, he cannot take the damage that our demon flesh can, she insisted.

I felt something take hold of my heart and squeeze it. The rhythm faltered, skipped. I floated inside a cocoon where pain could not reach me. Saw the Unicorn and moved towards it only to find her fading away.

Cold steel wrapped my insides. A powerful spell worked its magic on my body, took over the very rhythms that kept me alive. Put chains on my blood and muscles, my flesh and my will, made me a puppet to his orders. He took back my death and sent me out to be his slave.

Chapter 20

The slave pens were empty save for me. I sat in the corner nearest the trough where food was the warmest and newest or at least, where it stank the least. I wasn't sure what it was except that it quieted the gnawing monster in my belly. Didn't know how I'd gotten here, I just woke up from dreams of dying, in this pen with its slotted rails, matted rush floors and back of the throat gagging stench. Watched with dull eyes the parade of people, creatures and things that stared at me through the bars, inspecting the merchandise and understood finally, that I was the merchandise. The same gray twilight was here, along with a trough carved out of some yellow rock as hard as concrete that started near the gate and ran the length of the room. It was more like a feedlot alley and sometimes, I could hear what sounded like other animals eating at the other end of the trough. It was warmer here, but still cold. I shivered constantly, just couldn't seem to get warm enough, not even the warmed up food could melt the ice inside me.

I had no way to tell night from day or how many days had passed. My thoughts

wandered aimlessly, there were blank periods in my recollections when I didn't even know who I was, where I was or what I was. I didn't see anyone. Or anything. I think if I could have found something sharp, I would have cut my wrists for the boredom.

Gorillas came. They looked like gorillas. Short, squat hairy men wearing boxer shorts of leather and a harness from which hung a short black stick reminiscent of a cop's baton and a hammer made of wood and shaped like a short club. A leather whip lay curled on their right hip. Their skin was gray and wrinkled giving their faces the appearance of a sad basset hound, oozing an oily substance that smelled bitter but didn't stink. The hair on their body was concentrated on their arms, belly, back and none on their heads. Their eyebrows were one solid line, lips were ashy purple and moist, deep-set chocolate brown eyes under a prominent ridge. When they smiled, their teeth looked human enough except for four large canines. The tongue was short, shaped more like a Down's syndrome child. They were ugly.

The language they spoke, I could not understand, the language of the stick was universal, the leader stuck it into my chest and pushed me back from the gate. It felt like heartburn first and then escalated to a fire in my chest so that I thought I was having a heart attack.

I scooted back from them, my hands pushing at the stick but that earned me another poke from the second one. In the balls. I flopped in agony, unable to breath and could only make noises like a dying kitten. They laughed and bent down to flip me over, dragging me back and forth by my ankles and shoving the stick into me until I was a twitching thing on the floor half insane and begging for death.

Lying on the bottom of a cage buried in old straw. Musty and rank. It hurt to breathe, hurt worse to cough but I couldn't keep them in. I coughed. Sparks flickered across my vision. I tried to sit up and my body flopped, pushed off with one arm and shoulder. Could not straighten up all the way, something wasn't right with the left side of my ribs. I could only take shallow sips of air.

Dully, I held onto the bars of the cage and watched the scenery roll by. My hands held hollow reeds that kept me in, and I thought if I tried really hard, I should be able to break what was essentially bamboo. As soon as I shook the pole, the stick came down on my hands smacking hard enough to break fingers.

People rode by on strange animals and in wagons glancing curiously back at me. I saw gorillas riding giant black dogs with red points above their eyes and ears, driving carts pulled by creatures like oxen only colored blood purple on a road straight out of a violent video game.

I shivered. Even here, under a blazing red sun that burned down on the travelers, I was cold. I looked down at myself. Saw skin that was pock-marked black, blue, green and yellow, red with sores and bloody scrapes. Welts and swollen flesh covered with mud, dirt and filth so that I was no longer skin colored but a road map of torture. My last clothes were gone, not even a rag covered me. Laboriously, I climbed onto my knees to my feet and smacked my head on the cage roof bringing a snort of laughter from one of the outriders. He leaned over and stuck me with the wooden baton, hitting me to the right side of my belly, just below a scar. I screamed as pain filled me, knocked me off my feet to bounce against the green bars and into the mats below me. He stuck me again and again until I vomited blood and passed out.

I could barely stand. The slavers wrapped white linen around my wrists and to the top of the stanchion so that I was stretched to tiptoes, every muscle, bone, scrape and sore exposed to the crowd's pleasure and view. I could not see, my face was smashed against my arms and I was struggling to breathe, with my chest so extended, it was nearly impossible to lift it for exhalations.

There was a weird buzzing in my ears, I wasn't sure if I heard or imagined it. I blinked, rubbed my face against my arms and swiveled to try and take in some slice of view as to where I was.

A row of stakes led away from me and other figures were tied or chained to them. Some were female and naked, customers explored the flesh with hands and paws, sticks and whips, checked teeth for age and experience. Currency and gold exchanged hands and the purchases were carted off to be replaced by the next body. Through it all, I watched dully, sagging lower until all that held me up were the ties at my wrists. The arrival of the last customer brought an excited murmur to the crowds. A palanquin entered the marketplace to disgorge a man dressed in dark robes of silk that glimmered as if lit from within. Tall and broad shouldered, he moved like a warrior. When he threw back the hood of his cape, the entire crowded assembly sucked in their breath in an audible gasp. He was nearly human, save for a strange distortion of his face and clearly someone or something of which the merchants were afraid. No one bid against him and he merely pointed to those he wanted to purchase.

He came to stand before me, lifted an ebony cane and placed it under my chin to shove my head up off my chest. Extending his arm, he reached out a finger tipped with a filed nail covered with a silver tip. Stuck it into my neck and drew a bead of blood to the auctioneer's protests. The tiny pinch roused me and I stared back defiantly into his gray eyes. He smiled.

"Serve me and I will let you live, boy," he said. "You're dying. Without my aid, you will be gone in another day or two."

"I'm already dead," I mumbled. "This is hell."

"You think so. You're a slave, serve me willingly and I can free you from pain."

"I am a free man," I sobbed. "I serve no one!" He cut me loose and I fell to my knees, bowing my head to the floor before him.

"You are a slave, mine to do what I will, mine to break, to use, to abuse, to maim, torture or kill. How painful your life will be depends on how well you obey me," he repeated gently.

I raised my arms, stiff from hanging overhead for hours and tried to hit him. He took the whip from the slaver and introduced me to ten of his more gentle reasonings. He called his whippings that. He could flay the skin off your back or just raise the faintest welt.

Ten could cause you great anguish and fifteen could kill. I took twenty-five before he broke me, twenty kisses of respect and five lashes of death before I called him Master and never looked up at his face again. He said I spent months hovering between life and death and only his healing skills kept me from dying.

He renamed me, calling me Corbel, the Blackbird, dressed me all in shadow and smoke. Made me sleep at the foot of his bed on the floor. I was his slave, his pet and plaything, sent out to kill those he disliked, steal for him, rape, torture, whatever he commanded, I did and obeyed. Yet, he never touched me other than with the whip or cane.

His name was Lucian Webster, a Magister and merchant, a dealer in death and wars.

His influence ran through several shadows and he was forever entertaining visitors from other realms. On those instances, he kept me close but had me wear a mask over my face that resembled a black crow. Once he placed it on my flesh, it melted into it so that it could not be removed until he removed it. It felt weird, as if a veil was between me and the rest of the world.

The gorilla guards were his, hired from a distant shade and regularly brought exotic merchandise. I, he told me once, was a special order he had been asked to purchase and keep safe for an old friend and acquaintance.

I coughed and shifted on the floor, rubbed at my chest surreptitiously. If I showed too much discomfort, it irritated my master and brought out another training session. Still, I could hardly hold them back, my lungs were weak and gave me much trouble, especially in damp, smoky conditions.

He made an annoyed sound. Said, "Corbel, come here, Blackbird."

I leapt to my feet, crawled forward towards him and knelt before his countenance.

"Master," I whispered, choking back another cough.

"Open your mouth," he demanded. I shivered and did so. Screamed once and cut it off as he stuck his cane down my throat. It burned as it hit my lungs and I flopped like a gaffed fish until he stepped on me and held me still. "You have pneumonia and scarred lungs," he grunted. "Hmm. Unless I do something, you'll be no use to me. You'll be dead." He pulled the thing out. Gagging, I fell over and scrambled up but he fluttered his hand to push me away. Went to his desk and pulled out a silver tube that he unrolled revealing a small vial of clear liquid in a syringe. This, he placed against my neck and pushed. It stung and a rush of heat went up into my face and down my chest. I remained still, afraid of what he had done, but knew better than to question him. "Go to your corner and rest, Blackbird," he ordered. "The treatment will make you very ill and I prefer not to have you puking all over me. Be quiet and do not lay on your back lest you vomit and aspirate, drowning yourself in your own puke."

"Master," I whispered and retreated. Before I could reach my corner, I was violently ill. Trying to puke and make no noise was nearly as bad as the act itself. I threw up so many times during the night that my ribs and stomach muscles cramped in agony. I got no sleep nor comfort and in the morning was required to perform my duties as if nothing had afflicted me.

Chapter 21

My Master was in his study when he called me forth. I hurried after his manservant shoving the last piece of bread into my mouth from breakfast. He met me at the door and slapped the mask on me so I knew I would be present for a meeting with men he did not want recognizing me. Today, he wore blue denim pants and a long-sleeved shirt underneath what looked like body armor. His robe that swirled around his legs and twisted the eyes. He held the door and pointed, I went to his high-backed chair and stood silently behind it. The room was small, held a large square table and enough chairs to seat a dozen. High-backed, carved of a spiral wood, and with comfortable cushions, they were beautiful. The table held

accents that indicated it was a matched set, a spiraling on the edges and feet. The wood was warm to the touch and I stroked it when I thought he was not watching. The walls were white-washed and painted with spells so that nothing could enter without the Master's permission, no spells, no thoughts and once inside, no one could spy on the occupants. Under our feet, bare polished wood shone with a gleam of hand rubbing. On one wall were bookcases filled with volumes both large and mysterious. I had touched one once and woke up bent over the whipping post to find the Master seriously pissed. It was the last time I touched anything of his without express permission. He called it his Star Chamber, the equivalent of a safe house.

Within the next ten minutes, four more people entered and took up seats around the work table. Several eyed me but made no comments. Hours went by as the group discussed a plan to disrupt a trade affair and an assassination. I heard the name General Gracchus several times and had the opportunities to study the conspirators.

Mostly human, average height with the look of sleek, well-fed merchants. Two had dark hair and blue eyes, the build of a swordsman or warrior. My Master allowed no weapons inside his study save for what I wore. He had armed me with a tiny dagger shaped like a leaf and held between my middle four fingers. It could bite deeper than it looked and was designed for ripping out major veins and arteries so that its victims bled out silently, internally and swiftly.

"The party of Telemachus and Tissarette are meeting at the Anniversary Celebration," my Master spoke. "The Minister of War, General Gracchus will be there to celebrate the second anniversary of the War's end. There will be delegates, Ministers, and Diplomats from all over the Realm and the important Shadows. There is even a rumor that the King of the Courts will be there."

A murmur ran through the small room and all of them shuddered. They knew of the magic and power of the Demon King, Merlin. He ruled firmly, disposing of his enemies swiftly and mercilessly, was a staunch ally of Random. It was said he had even put to death his own mother or so the rumors had it. She had certainly not been seen or heard from in the last few years. Not since a certain incident involving a child from a shadow Prince Corwin called home.

"My spies have determined the agenda and itinerary of the General, the King and his personal Guards. He will attend something called a Rockfest on the second morning of the week-long event. In the Park that borders the hills above the city. It is heavily forested and not easily guarded; we have a way in. The General will be there as a participant, not as security. He is a...band member. I believe he plays the...drums."

My Master gestured and reached behind his chair to draw me out. I stood at his right hand dressed in smoky garments that deflected the eyes so that to them I was a shifting pillar of smoke topped by a sinister bird's face of black metal. "My Blackbird will flit in and take first, Gracchus, his life blood and then mark the King," he said fondly, stroking his hand on the top of my head. I laid my lips on his palm. Felt the cool rush of blood through his wrist. "So cold, Corbel," he seemed surprised. "You are so cold."

"Why not kill Random while he has the chance?" the man nearest the door asked. I had seen him before, he was a frequent visitor, a powerful lord on the border between Amber and Laoli, his barony had backed Eric's takeover and not fared well after Eric's defeat. He had come back by trading in slaves and grave robbing both sides. He was not welcome in Amber, although trade was now open between his shade and theirs. His name was Baron

Resonant.

“To take the King of Amber’s life is not our plan,” my Master shrugged. “It is the death of the entire Realm we seek and to put our own bloodline atop the Shadow Kingdoms.”

“The bloodlines of Amber are imbued with the power of the Pattern,” Resonant said. “Not a one of us could walk the Pattern and survive.”

My Master laughed. Stood up and dragged me with him. Shoved me forward and pulled off the mask I had worn these two or more years. “Not even could I walk the Pattern,” he agreed. “But this broken, enslaved, docile toy that I have painstakingly recreated can. He is of the blood of Amber, he has and can walk the Pattern. He can slip into the Castle and put a knife blade where I tell him.”

“Who is he, Lucian?” they demanded and he answered.

“He was once called Prince Raven, son of Merlin, grandson of Corwin of Amber. Now, he is the Blackbird of my desire and will do anything I ask.”

“Bullshit.” Resonant spoke a word he should not know. I stared at him in confusion. It was an English word and came to me from a place long and far away, from the place where I had died.

“Corbel?” I returned my attention to my Master, lest I be punished.

“Master,” I said in the barely audible tone he preferred.

“Cut your throat and show these painted warriors how you will die to please me.”

“Master.” I pulled the leaf blade from my wrist sheath and thrust it into my throat. Blood spurted, thick and rich in time with the beat of my heart to splash against the wall. My mouth filled with blood.

“Blackbird, you are staining my clothes,” he said calmly so I moved aside. Blood pooled at my feet, I shivered as the cold crept up my legs. My vision sparkled and it was harder to remain upright. I sagged, put out a hand to hold myself up but let it fall when I touched the arm of his chair. Next, I was on the floor at his feet, his eyes locked on mine.

“Corbel?”

“Master?” My voice was lower than a whisper. I could barely hear it.

“Are you dying?”

“Yes, Master.” I wanted to close my eyes but even in death, I was afraid of his whip and tortures.

“Do you think I will let you die, Blackbird?”

“You...do...what will...Master.” It was a sigh, a mere whistle of a breath.

He grabbed me by the throat and pulled me off the floor, held me all six foot as if I weighed nothing. He recited a spell and a burning sensation filled my throat, the blood on the boards glittered, rose up and was absorbed back inside me. Carefully, he pulled the leaf dagger from my neck and held me just on my tiptoes. Breathed into my mouth with a foul corruption that I wanted to gag on but was afraid to. I swallowed.

He turned to face the conspirators. “Can you command such obedience, such loyalty? I own his soul.” He set me down, placed the mask back on my face and sent me to my hole to recover.

I lay in the corner of his bedroom, shivering in terror with tears covering my face feeling the sensation of my blood draining out of me while I could do nothing.

His servants brought food and left it. I could not eat. Not even the delicacies of real meat and fresh fruit instead of the bread, cheese and water that was my daily fare. It was late when he came to bed; he ignored me as his valet Steen removed his robes, light body

armor and helped him into nightwear. He read for an hour by the light of a lantern powered by a spell before he sighed, dog-eared and closed the book, only then calling me.

On my knees, I crawled as I had been taught. "You did not eat, my men told me. You have been crying. I thought I had taken all your tears." His cold gray eyes devoured my face. "Do you wish to be punished for disobeying my orders, Corbel?"

"No, Master." He could barely hear me.

"Why are you crying?"

"Because you did not want me anymore. You threw me away."

He laughed. "Oh, Blackbird, my Crow, my Raven. I want you in more ways than you can imagine. You are a lovely, shivering piece of meat. But, if I use you that way, I corrupt my magic and cannot work the difficult spells. Your value would be null. I thought your experiences in the brothels I gave you would have tempered those urges. Do you lust after young men, women? Girls? Rape? Or do you prefer to masturbate with a knife? I can arrange such diversions for you if you need release."

I stared at him in confusion and then dropped my eyes. "Corbel, you are still such an innocent. Bring me my whip."

"Master," I pleaded hopelessly and went to fetch it. Outside his room at the end of the servants hall so that all within his household knew of my punishment. He was kind, though, he only kissed me ten times with a whisper, not one a kiss of death. I lay on the floor with my cloak ripped into shreds, my blouse a rag but only thin stripes of raised welts on my back. As he finished, he groaned in pleasure and I sobbed myself to sleep.

Chapter 22

It was strange to be above him, looking down at his feet. He stood in the courtyard of his estate with his hands on the bridle of a horse. A real horse colored smoky gray like the coat of a mouse. Saddled and bridled in the manner of man. among the normal dog and oxen-like creatures that were native to this Shadow, a real horse was an oddity. The gelding stamped a foot on the smooth flagstones.

"You have your currency, your maps and your travel supplies, Corbel," he said. "It will take you a week to ride to Amber by regular routes." He studied me. "Do you Hell Ride?"

"Hell Ride, Master?" There was a huge lump in my throat. I had lived with fear so long, I no longer recognized its symptoms.

"Never mind. You know what to do. Do not get captured, do not get killed. Come back as soon as you have accomplished your task. If you can bring back a hostage or pawn of political value, you know which target I prefer. Your mask will appear only when you have need of it, no sense drawing attention to your face or identity."

"Yes, Master."

"Will you miss our lessons, Corbel? The dance of the lash where she kisses you lightly with the Kiss of Death or the whisper of pain?"

"No, Master."

"Go, Corbel." I put my heels to the gelding's ribs and cantered out of the yard onto the tollway. I drew a crowd. The gorilla men called Thrids by the Master patrolled the toll road

and his borders, kept the traffic moving. Because I rode a horse, I attracted quite a bit of attention. I was also known as the Master's Assassin and was a curiosity to the locals. It wasn't until we'd gone several hours along the route entering the forest that we'd finally found ourselves alone.

The trees were old, gnarled and diseased. Not many leaves on them. The gray twilight that was the normal sky of this shade precluded much of anything growing. The road was dark gray gravel with scrubby brown grass withered into broom straws.

There wasn't a sound under the trees except for the scuff of the horse's hooves on the rocks. I pushed until the moons came up. These provided a wan light that barely penetrated the darkness under the thicket of branches.

It was enough to see by and make camp. I stepped down, tied the horse and fed him from the nosebag. My own meal was a heel of bread and a small piece of hard cheese, a flask of vinegary wine. I curled up under my cloak and waited to sleep. In my sleep, I dreamed. I dreamed of flying through the air like a bird, but not a blackbird tethered by the legs. No, I was an eagle soaring free above a beautiful blue ocean in a vast blue sky. I was alone, and best of all, not cold or afraid. When I awoke from this dream, there were always tears on my cheeks although I never remembered why I was crying or what I had dreamed.

I stayed in the hollow of my own warmth until the weak sun rose. The horse nickered at me until I fed him from the nosebag. It must have had a minor spell on it from the Master, it was once again full when I knew the horse had emptied it the night before. My meal bag, however, yielded only a handful of crumbs, a dried fig and a flask of water. I shrugged, it wouldn't be the first or last time I had gone without food. Once, the Master had held me for three weeks without a single morsel, just a pint of water once a day. I had dared to steal a tart from his breakfast tray. My mouth watered, I thought I remembered the taste of Passionberry tart.

Once back up on the horse, I found the trail and continued on. By mid-afternoon, the forest opened up into a grass land, knee-high with golden tipped heads of seeds that brushed against my legs heavy enough to be felt, as if small pebbles were hitting me. The horse tried one mouthful and spat it out. The sun was up and had turned a golden brown making clear cut shadows of us on the trail.

Hoof prints had beaten down a track of sorts, I saw the distinct marks of the dog beasts called Weilers, huge pads of something akin to a dromedary and cat claws that made me nervous as they were as large as a horse. No other prints close to what I recognized but plenty of a cloven footed creatures. A scattering of dung among the tracks so that I knew something had come this way earlier.

We trotted for awhile and I took off my cloak, warm for the first time in ages. My black leather vest crisscrossed my chest and held an assortment of blades. I wore a short scabbard down my back and in it was a sword built like a Japanese Katana but smaller. My Master said it came from a Shadow world very like Japan. Sometimes, I almost knew the meaning of such words but they were an ephemeral trace through my mind.

I looked up and saw birds flying, the first since I'd left his estate. A blue backed kestrel circled me, its yellow eyes intent on my face. She landed on my outstretched arm and dug her talons into my flesh. Blood trickled onto the saddle bow; she screeched and spoke.

"Blackbird."

"Master?" I was alarmed, I'd thought I was separated from his influence.

"Did you think I would leave you on your own, without contact, my lovely Black

Crow? Be assured, my eyes will always be on you. You have come far. Already, you are in Prosteria. Watch for the Grass Lions, they lay in wait near the water ways and take down unwary travelers. When you reach the town of Anthis, I have arranged for Captain Ancet of The Mercat to take you and the horse across the Rainbow Sea to Desket. From there, ride east to Tissarette and pick up the caravan to Amber. They will hire you as a mercenary guard.”

“My face, Master? Will they recognize my face without the mask? Will they not know of the mask?”

“Do you question me, Corbel?” the bird pecked me, a slash across the cheek that ripped skin and drew blood.

“No, Master,” I said humbly.

“You do possess looks that are unique and striking, my beautiful bird. However, I have long had a spell on you since the day you were broken. Your eyes, your hair and skin are no longer seen as your own.”

He held up an image of my face and I did not recognize the black skinned, pointed eared, white blonde and silver eyed creature that he showed me. “You look like one of the Dark Elves of Nifleheim, my Blackbird. And I have given you the fighting skills of one of their greatest warriors. He was called Iowin. His magic is now mine, his soul one of many I have taken.”

“Thank you, Master.” I watched as the kestrel flew off to be hit mid-air by a larger eagle and explode into a puff of feathers.

Anthis was larger than I expected, a warren of streets that the horse and I ambled down. I followed the scent of salt water and was astonished at the vast expanse of ocean before me. The harbor was packed with boats and ships. Everything from dories to vast cargo containers with dozens of sails. High activity ran the place, men yelling, animals shrieking, the whine and groaning of cranes and ropes stretching. Feet echoing on hollow planks into the holds as the tars loaded bins and crates of fruit, grain, metal and even women slaves.

There was a plethora of different races, men, elves, monsters all merging together amiably in the world of commerce. I looked for and found an Inn, the sign painted out front had the picture of a two-tailed rooster. When I dismounted, a short child scurried out of the door and took the reins from my hand. He was a dwarf, his eyes were pupil-less and black.

“Room for the night and stabling, Sir Elf?” he asked.

“No. Directions to The Mercat and an ale to go,” I returned just above a whisper.

“The Mercat is at berth 407, West Harbor, leaves tomorrow on the second tide,” he said. “Go in, have your ale and your...” he looked at the horse. “Your horse will be ready to leave when you are.”

“Tomorrow, you say? I will take the room.”

“Number 6 is empty, large and clean. Do you have a saddlebag you want brought up? Perhaps a dinner plate, a lively woman?” He studied me. “Or, perhaps a boy? Fresh and willing?”

“Nothing but the ale and the room.” I pulled my saddle roll off, threw it over my shoulder and entered the tap room.

Chapter 23

No one paid me any attention save to show me to a table and ask my preference for drink and food. I ordered a Blue Brew and was not surprised when the barmaid handed me the open bottle and a mug.

“Room?” she asked. At my nod, she told me the same number as the boy, gave me directions and left me to drink. The table was barely big enough for the mug so I wasn’t going to share my space with anyone else. The room was packed, noisy and smelled of unwashed sweaty males.

The captains were easy to spot, they all wore those funny pointed caps with gold braid and every one of them carried swords and knives. I saw one or three battle axes on figures straight out of Viking sagas. Several of them eyed me, one approached, a disreputable man with gold hooks in his ears and pale lavender eyes. He was taller than I and with long arms and scarred hands.

“You’re a Dark Elf,” he said and smiled slowly. “Far from your home, aren’t you?”

“This is your business because?” I asked quietly.

“Because there are a few local lords who’ve put a standing bounty on Dark Elves, sirrah.”

“And you think you are the one to collect on it?” I eased my leaf dagger out of its sheath.

“Hell no,” he grinned. “I sail ships, not fight for slaves. I could use a ...man like you on board my ship.”

“No.” I finished my ale and stood up, the dagger still hidden in my palm.

“No? Not even curious? About what the job is?”

For the first time in years, I felt something besides fear, terror and pain. I was so amazed that I took it out and examined it. Yup, it was annoyance. I debated with myself whether that was sufficient cause to kill him and decided it was not. I turned my back on him and went up the stairs to the room. His eyes remained on my back until I was out of sight.

The room was second from the end of the hallway and on the left. There were two ways out; either end of the hall led to staircases and the room had several windows with easy access to the roof should I need it.

It was a box with a bed, dresser, dry sink, pump spigot, water closet and nothing else. Clean, the bed was thick, piled with comforters and a plump pillow. I put my bedroll on the floor by the windows and unrolled it, that would be my sleeping area. My body and bones had not known softness since the day my Master had re-birthed me. Since I had died, I could not tolerate anything else but hard floors or dirt.

Slowly, in almost a ritual, I took off my clothing and stood in the water closet to wash. What I saw of my body was what I remembered of it, tall, cleanly made with long arms and legs. Fine, graceful hands, muscles hard and as tough as bull-hide. Scarred with whip marks on my back, shoulders buttocks and belly, knots where muscles and tendons had been stretched to the limit and beyond. Craters and knots on the bones where his cane had left its message. I touched my cheek where the hawk had torn it and gently scrubbed the blood off to reveal a shallow rip that would heal without much of a scar. The Master generally never hit me in the face, he said he did not like to look at ugly things and my eyes were so uniquely beautiful in an animal way.

The scar on my belly was white, raised and sometimes, still hurt. I closed my hands and squeezed the water from the washrag. My fingers protested, they too had been broken and healed by the Master.

I looked into the mirror. Saw the face of a man in his late teens, early twenties. He had dark eyebrows over deep-set yellow eyes like a wolf, a still, quiet face that was dangerous and dark hair kept short so that it would not curl. Small neat ears laid close to his skull and grim lips, clearly not meant for smiling. A dimpled chin that hinted at weakness for being too pretty. I did not smile, not even when I was alone, it was as if my face had forgotten how. I felt frozen most of the time, anyway. In my eyes, I saw a broken abused creature, a tortured soul without hope, memories or a past.

As I stared, my image wavered and the Master's appeared. He looked back at me, studied my body and I covered myself with the washcloth and then dropped my hand to my side. I had no longer any secrets from my Master, he knew every inch of this body and what parts of it were the most vulnerable to pain. I dropped my eyes to the sink.

"Admiring yourself, Corbel?" he smiled and his hand exited the mirror. It touched me and I kept my instant shiver inside.

"No, Master. Washing off the road dust."

"You are very beautiful, Corbel. Many a man or woman would pay to do things to this body."

"Master---."

"What are you doing here? You were to take passage on The Mercat," he snapped and instantly, I felt him seize my guts and twist them. I dropped to my knees and hit my chin on the sink. Tasted blood and gasped.

"The tide, Master, she sails on tomorrow's tide!" The pain eased up and hesitantly, I drew my knees under me.

"Oh get up, for God's sake," he said. "The tide. I forgot about sails and tides and winds. Oh, for electric motors and jets."

"Master?"

"Put some clothes on and go about your business, Corbel," he snapped. "Eat, drink, sleep. Whatever. Just make sure you're on that ship tomorrow or you'll wish I had let you bleed to death in my study."

"Yes, Master." I crawled out of the washroom so as to not irritate him further. Laid on my cloak and saddle roll but could not sleep. Stayed awake almost the whole night listening to the noises in the taproom and drunken revelers on the street below.

Dawn brought tea with cream, piping hot. Fluffy eggs, meat strips and scones with butter. Fresh fruit and some kind of poached fish. I was overwhelmed with so much food.

I ate a roll and a spoonful of eggs. Anything else would cause me stomach upset and I would hate to have died because I was caught with my britches down in a bout of diarrhea or vomiting. I did drink the tea and enjoyed the strong taste of the leaves mixed with the rich cream. Master liked tea but complained bitterly over the lack of good coffee, he said it tasted like day old mud.

When I came downstairs, dressed, cloaked and packed, the boy was waiting with my gelding saddled and bridled. I paid him with one of the Master's coin and his eyes widened as he saw the gold stamped with Amber's Unicorn.

"Royal gold," he whispered. "That's as rare as bloody white moons," he whispered. "I'll have to get my dad to make change." He looked around but the tavern was empty of

patrons this early in the morning. "Don't let anyone see your purse, sir Elf. There are those about here would murder you for half a copper, let alone a purse such as yours."

He put the reins in my hands and disappeared into the kitchens to have the bartender come out. His father had the look of a blacksmith from the Iron Anvil Range---built like a bull with blonde hair and those strange black eyes with no pupils. The nostrils of his nose marked him as less than pure human, they were slanted like a bull's. When he spoke, it was in Elvish and I understood only a word or two, mostly curses.

"I don't speak Elvish, especially those of the Bright Elves," I returned. Mortal enemies of the Dark Elves.

"You know the language of men?"

"I am half human and was raised close to Amber."

"You'd best leave as quickly as you can, sir. I have your change and a warning. There are those that will attempt to kidnap you on the way out of town."

"A certain Captain?" I asked. Perhaps I should have let my annoyance run its course to full blown anger. Master did not care how many I killed or for what reason although I generally did it on his orders and to secure my own safety.

"He sold your whereabouts to others." He handed me a small purse plumply filled with coins. I looked. A good handful of silvers and a few coppers. "If you take the back alley, it will bypass most of the places of easy ambush. My son said you are for The Mercat?"

"Aye."

"She sails in twenty minutes. It will take you that long to reach West Harbor." I mounted and tossed the purse back. He caught it nimbly.

"Thanks." I left them standing with their mouths hanging.

The horse did not like the back alley, it was dark, close and cats yowled eerily from the rooftops, barrels stacked haphazardly, from the gutters over our heads. The water was close and lapped at the edges of the wharves; it was slippery and the boards under our feet shivered as we passed on them as if the ground would fall away beneath us. If the gelding had to run, I doubted he would keep his hooves under him.

I drew my cape and in the shadows, it shifted to make us nearly invisible. In the darkness, my eyes lightened and became super acute so that I could see almost as well as a wolf.

Four blocks from the Inn, a group of skulkers met me at the corner of the main thoroughfare and the entrance to the harbor. Six men, two city guards and a Bright Elf. His hackles raised as he saw me, his voice loud in Elvish, spitting curses.

I slid my knives from my arm sheaths, dropping the reins onto the saddle pommel, tightened my knees into the knee-rolls. Didn't wait for them to speak or make the first move, simply kicked the horse into a gallop. As we lunged, the elf bent impossibly fast and tore at my cape snagging the hem. The rest of them I knocked over like a bowling strike. Those left standing, I filleted with double strikes of my blades and then, I was flying through the air on the end of the bullwhip the elf had made of me and my cloak.

I hit the ground rolling as the clasp at my throat tore and left me gagging from the stricture and sudden release. The elf was on me before I was up all the way and slapped the air in front of his hands. I heard a thunderclap and was picked up off my feet and flung, face first into the side of the nearest building. Which happened to be a brick shithouse. I hit with my shoulder, bounced off and came up on the tips of my toes and one hand. The elf ran lightly forward and pulled out a blade much like my own leaf dagger.

We dueled. A dance of death, a ballet of blades that was explosive, deadly and nearly invisible to others watching. He thought we were evenly matched but I was enjoying the dance of death too much to end it with the hundred possible openings he was showing me. He had several shallow cuts that I had teased him with and I had none. After the first spell he had used against me, he was too busy defending himself to try another.

"I have an appointment and I'm going to be late," I said. "Excuse me, I have to leave." I ran him through the heart and watched his eyes widen in both pain and despair. Pulled my blade free and leapt over his head to whistle for the horse.

Felt rage take over when I saw him lying on his side, his throat cut and hind legs still quivering. I slaughtered them all and stalked ferociously to the ship, arriving just as they were raising the anchor. The Captain knew who I was and brought me aboard personally as the tide was turning. Showed me to a cabin and asked about my mount, said nothing as I cleaned the blood and gore off my blades.

Chapter 24

The Captain himself showed me to a cabin, a small hammock hung from the ship's timbers. There was a chest for my clothes and a wash basin, a privy bucket and not much else. It smelled like fish and brine. As a cabin, it was scarcely larger than a coffin but he said I would be in it no longer than a week, weather permitting.

Captain Ancet was a Coastal Theron, a tribe of men from the far west called Eldara, renown for their sailing skills. It was rare that one of their captains lost a ship to a storm and rarer still to pirates.

"My passage?" I asked laying my things in the hammock. Wasn't much, it consisted of a change of clothes, my scabbard, cloak and bedroll. All else I had abandoned on the dead horse although I did have my maps, purse and weapons. I idly wondered what my punishment would be for losing the horse but I knew it would be ten times worse if I didn't tell the Master.

"Your passage was paid by my Lord, Merchant Lucian. For you and his horse," he returned, looking for my mount. I pulled out my pockets to show him I wasn't hiding him in there. He didn't laugh.

"No refunds," he grunted. I raised an eyebrow. Cheating the Master was not a healthy idea.

"I'll be sure to tell the Master you said so," I answered mildly.

He threw me a silver ingot. "Meals are between watches. Isn't much, we're not a passenger ship. Hardtack biscuits and salt beef once we're out of sight of land. Fresh fish when caught. If you're used to a special diet, I hope you brought your own. What do elves eat anyway? Leaves and twigs?"

I bared my teeth knowing he saw the long fangs of the Black Elf not my own. "Meat, Captain. We eat meat, the fresher killed the better."

He paled and retreated leaving me to my own thoughts. By first moon rise, we could no longer see land and the constant up and down motion of the waves made me sea-sick. I

puked until blood came up and spent the first day and night rolling around on the cabin floor awash in my own vomit. The smell was offensive. I expected the Master to contact me and waited in dread for his message yet he was strangely silent.

Still sick on the second day, I wandered in and out of delirium, my stomach empty but still spastic and ridding itself of its contents. Even water would not stay down and dehydration made me hallucinate.

I heard voices at my door, gagging curses and fresh salt air blew in and wiped out the smell of puke. Hands roamed over my body and hoisted me up by the armpits. Dragged me out under a starry sky and poured a funnel full of saltwater down my throat. It came back up, burned my insides, even coming out my nose with eye burning pain. I fought with everything I had in me but an ugly witch doctor stuffed my mouth full of prickly burrs and held my nose shut. I tried to breathe and swallow at the same time, choked instead. No air, spots in my entire vision and the Sailor's Beacon Star was the last thing I saw.

Voices murmured over my head. I licked dry lips and snuggled deeper into a warm cocoon. I was sweating, I could feel it dripping down my balls and it tickled. I scratched and sighed, turning over in the too tight shelf I was on. Opened my eyes to a gentle rocking and saw the walls of a cabin, richly appointed with a real bed, sea chest, stove and built in cupboards. A gleaming copper hip bath, twin portholes, charts and art work on the painted walls. This was the Captain's cabin.

The boat was rocking gently and blue sky was visible through the portholes. Two men were busy in the room; one was the cabin boy, the other was a healer of sorts, even though I had named him a witch doctor.

"He's awake, Doc Fletcher," the boy said and offered me a cup of water. I took a sip and made a face, it was tepid, flat, metallic and salty. The healer told me to finish it. He was short, well made with brown hair and eyes dressed in a uniform of blue long coat and knee breeches with hose and boots. Like a British sailor from the 19th century.

"How do you feel?" his voice had an accent unlike any I'd heard before.

"How many days?" I rasped.

"Worst case of mal de mer I've ever seen, elf. I bet you puked up half your stomach lining and given that you've had gut surgery, not good. Finish the water, it tastes vile but it's filled with electrolytes and your body needs them. You were severely dehydrated when Pete found you. Another day and even I couldn't have saved you."

I sat up, pushed the covers off and swung my legs over catching them on the rail that kept a body from falling out in rough seas. He shoved me back with one hand.

"Not kidding," he said. "You're as weak as a newborn glivet. Maybe in a couple of days of rest and food, you might be able to get up without passing out."

I bulled my way up and stood on coltish legs, wobbling. Their eyes rounded at the network of scars, welts, dents and bone lumps on my flesh. Stepped back out of my way as I searched for my clothes leaving drawers open and clothing scattered on the floor until the boy handed me the leather pants, blouse and vest that was my normal day wear. It took me an hour to dress completely, they did not help nor would I let them.

"The Master did not call?" I asked anxiously. Both men shook their heads.

"Not here or in your cabin. Captain Ancet had us hose it down with sea water," the boy gagged. "It smells worse than the hold of a slave ship."

"How far are we from journey's end?"

“Three days. Will you eat?” the doctor asked.

I shuddered. I didn't want anything in my belly until I was off this heaving monster. “No food. Please. I don't think I can take anymore puking,” I begged. “Just let me die in peace.”

“Master Lucian would not be pleased with either of us if I let that happen, Corbel,” he said. I was surprised he knew my name. “Drink, it will settle your belly and keep you functioning.”

I headed for the door and the upper deck, fighting the sway of the floor. The two followed me, the doc kept his hand on the small of my back as if to hold me up. I reached the top deck and ducked from under the arch to observe the vast expanse of water and understood why it was called the Rainbow Sea. Sunlight struck the surface waves and bounced off causing the water spray to refract the light and turn it into the sparkling kaleidoscope of an opal more than the rainbow arch. It was truly amazing, an endless palette of colors, ever shifting in patterns and hues. I understood the lure that a beautiful gemstone had, compared to the ocean waters, the finest diamond was a dull piece of glass.

Birds followed the ship and settled on the sails and rigging. Dolphin-like creatures played ahead of the bows and the boy said they heralded good weather and better luck. They told me their names, Nate Fletcher and Pete Kidd, the doctor was one of those who had turned a corner one day in London and walked into another Shadow. Sought out a ship, figured out he wasn't insane but had somehow traveled across worlds or times or perhaps both. I had been correct in my guess, he came from Victoria's Navy in the 1800s and had been here nearly 15 years. He'd been hired by the Master to oversee the health of his sailors and me for this trip. I wanted to ask if the Master had come from the same Shadow world but curiosity was a commodity that had been beaten out of me.

I put my back against the cabin wall and sank down on my haunches as I watched the sailors hustle on the fore-deck. Some trimmed sails, others washed down the boards and shouted good natured profanity to the ones scurrying about on the masts and lines.

It was noisy. Birds shrieked, timbers creaked, the ship rolled and groaned like a woman in labor. Even the waves had sounds, the lap and slurp as the waves hit the side of the ship, the plunk and hiss as the bow cut through the water, the gurgle as the rudder sliced through the wake. Men shouted and sang ditties, orders were announced and repeated down the line, and bells rung on the quarter hour. The air smelled of seaweed and salt, creosote, turpentine and men's musk. We pressed on, to me it seemed an endless voyage and my flesh burned away from the inside out.

Chapter 25

Never was a human so glad as I to step foot back on dry land even if it was with the help of the doctor and boy. They half carried, half dragged me down the gangplank, procured a ride in a carriage and brought me to the Mayor's mansion. I had expected a mere Inn somewhere on the docks. He put me to bed with a sleeping draft which I had no strength to fight. Had my life depended on my reflexes and skills, a five year old girl could have ended me.

In the morning when I woke, there was a trio of faces awaiting me. As I rolled over and turned, the three rose from the bench at bedside and went to the door. I looked at my surroundings, a comfortable room in a well appointed, rich manor with tapestries, glass windows, hand woven rugs on wooden plank floors, not flagstones or bricks. A fireplace was to my right burning hotly with great logs of oak and maple.

Fletcher was the first one in followed by what could only be the Mayor. Fat and dressed like a king, he wore his riches well. He looked like one of the burgers from Amber. I would learn he was a displaced noble who had backed Eric. He brought his servants and the doctor had them help me sit up as he took my vitals.

“My lord Lucian is awaiting your report,” he said and I trembled. I feared his punishment would leave me unable to continue. Fletcher put his hand on my shoulder and felt me shake. “Fear not, lad. I told him you were ill, near to death through no fault of your own. Who would dream that a Black Elf would be so sick of the sea waves that he could not bear it? I told him that to punish you would not be half so severe as what you had already gone through. He said the value of a weapon is diminished when its owner takes it for granted.”

I bowed my head. They moved me from the king-sized bed, dressed me in soft linen underthings, leather breeches, blouse, tunic and covered with a lightly padded vest that would stop a knife thrust. Brought me to the dining room where the family ate and placed food in front of me. I was like a wax doll that they dressed and moved as if on strings.

Looking down at my plate of expensive china, I saw bread, the white bread of the rich, not coarse wheat, cheese and a bowl of clear soup and felt the faintest trace of interest as my belly grumbled. Fletcher smiled.

“You have two days before the Caravan leaves for Tissarette and Amber, Corbel,” the mayor said. “You must be ready to hire on as a Mercenary.” He looked doubtful as he observed me or that I would succeed.

My hand picked up the white as snow bread, chewed stolidly. The cheese was soft, mild and flavored with chives, the soup beef with thin strips of carrots and ginger. I ate all of it, drank the goblet that I thought was wine; it was some kind of tonic and sat like a nugget of heated coal in my belly warming me from the inside out. My eyes brightened. I felt awake and alive, almost normal.

“Bring me a mirror and leave me,” I spoke for the first time in days and they hurried to obey. The Mayor himself handed me the round silver disk used exclusively for communications and as I held it out before me, muttered the words that activated the spell. The Master’s face filled the silver surface and he did not look happy. He cursed me, my hand trembled and his image shook.

“Still, Corbel,” he regarded me and I held my hand as steady as I could.

“Master,” even my voice shook and his eyes ate my fear and it soothed him.

“I suppose I can’t blame you for not remembering that you get sea-sick,” he sighed. “As I have taken all your memories. You no longer wear the visage of a Black Elf, I have given you back your mortal form save of your eyes and chin. You have blue eyes and no more dimple but beware, those that once knew you might still recognize you. Wear the mask when you are in the Palace. Are you all recovered?”

“Yes, Master.” I opened my mouth to ask why he had not known I was sick while aboard the ship and why he had not contacted me at sea.

“What, my Blackbird?”

“You did not contact me on the ship.”

He was still and then seized my throat in his grip. I did not look at him, nor breathe, held myself still.

“Corbel, have you not learned yet to not question me?” he said softly, dangerously. My Adams apple pulsed against his grip as I tried to swallow, no moisture in my mouth. He let go and forced me to the floor on my belly, fire bloomed on my back and I smelled flesh burning. I shrieked and his image wavered, disappeared as he forced my hands to drop the mirror.

The others ran into the room and stood around me while my flesh burned before their eyes. As it ended, the doctor knelt beside me and touched me. “Corbel, what ails you? I see nothing wrong.”

“The fire? My back on fire,” I looked over my shoulder expecting to see burnt and charred cloth, blistered and blackened skin. All I observed was the broad expanse of my leather covered back, not even warm to the touch. The floor was cold and suddenly, I was chilled to the bone.

“Master, oh, Master,” I whimpered and buried my head into my arms. It was then that I began to hate him, the warm core of rage dispelling the cold that lived within me.

I remained on the floor until moon rise and only then did I rise and stalk the city streets. I found the caravan and their guards. Wearing my cloak of shadows and my mask, I slipped into their ranks and murdered three of them before departing from the camps to prowl the rooftops and the underbelly of the town. I went mad that night, I think. I cut down any I found in my wanderings. Did not care if they were thief, murderer or victim. My thirst called for blood and blood it drank in gallons.

In the morning, I presented myself to the front door of the mansion and was admitted even though covered in blood, wild eyed and nearly incoherent.

Fletcher dragged me to the baths, washed me as if I were a child, fed and sent me to bed. I went. Woke me a few hours later when I was more human and less insane. “Ah, your eyes are calmer,” he said satisfied. “What has that man done to you, boy? For you are no more than a boy, not a man, yet. How old are you? Sixteen, seventeen?”

I gave him a look that made him drop his stare. “I must go to the Caravan Master and be hired.”

“Mayor Peacock has a letter of recommendation but I fear you will have to do some fancy talking and blade work to get hired. Tatterselle hired the last one he needed yesterday afternoon.”

“I believe there will be several vacancies,” I returned and made my way out to the courtyard. I had vague memories of walking up the broad marble steps in the early morning. There were bloody footprints staining the risers.

Found my way into the stables at the side of the mansion and picked out a mount. They weren't horses but close, the same size but their hooves were padded and cloven, necks longer and more slender that could reach around and bite the rider. They had eyes like a cat with a third eyelid and could close their nostrils under water or in dust storms. Strangest of all, they sat down on their rear ends like a cow to lie down. Were able to run all day, their lung capacity more like a whale's. When they heated up, they exhaled sparks instead of sweat.

In colors they were gray or mouse brown, dun and red with black bristly manes and tails. No white on them at all and on the savanna, they would be nearly invisible. In speed,

they could gait as fast as a cycling man, faster than a horse and they ate brush, not grass, meat and anything a man could eat. Weren't opposed to taking a bite out of their rider, either.

The stableman came up behind me and offered to outfit both of us. I nodded as he brushed the mount, saddled and bridled it and last, threw a pair of saddlebags on the back of the seat.

"Gear? Do you have any? Her name is Singe-i, it means Tiger's Eye."

Her color was that of a tiger and the wicked gleam in her eye gave credence to her temper. "I did. Don't know where it is now," I replied and my escort arrived to answer him.

"His things are being packed and brought down, Avery. Corbel, please come in and let me check you before you leave," Fletcher pleaded.

"I'm grateful for your care, Dr. Fletcher, and I'm sure the Master will suitably reward you but I am leaving soon as my things arrive. What are these creatures called and what do they prefer to eat?" I asked the stableman.

"They can survive on whatever you would eat, need at least 1/10th of their body weight in food, daily. Break it up into three or four meals. Treat them like horses but they are tougher, are called glivets and are native to the plains near the Blood Range. Don't offer them your back and watch their front legs, they'll strike if they're upset or you beat on them. If you treat them fairly, they will run themselves to a frazzle but unlike a horse, they know when to quit. Run them that far and they'll stop, like a mule you won't get another step out of them."

"I thank you for the information," I said, took the reins and mounted. From my elevated position, I said my farewells. The pack came and he loaded it on the saddle for me.

"Do you know where the caravan is camping?" Fletcher asked.

"Yes, doctor." I nudged the glivet and we were gone.

As I expected, the caravan master was in a royal upset as some crazed demon had invaded the campsite during the night and slaughtered his best guards. I snorted when I heard that, if they were so good why were they taken so easily? I was hired on the spot, he gave the letter of reference only a quick scan. Asked my name and told me to report to the Guard Captain, a dark haired, green eyed blonde that made easily two of me. He favored an ax and a broadsword, sneered at my knives and short blade. His name was Erc and he might have had Viking blood. Showed me the tent set up for the guards and introduced me to them. I told him I preferred to camp outside their perimeter and in the trees.

"It's your neck," he grumbled. "If you get killed, it leaves us seriously short of men."

"I will not be seen or heard unless I will it."

He shrugged. Told me the pay rate and work schedule. We would leave the next morning after he attempted to hire two more men I rode back outside the camp and made my own in a thicket of brambles, turning the glivet loose to graze as she willed, a spell on her to make her appear to be a harmless skunk and another spell to prevent her from leaving me. Since I had slept so much the day before, I was wide awake and spent the night patrolling the caravan's outer boundaries knowing that the night would be safe as I was now inside their guard ranks. Erc sent men to find me and it was easy to avoid being spotted until I came up behind them and startled them.

Come morning, I reported in and made my way to the guards tents to partake of breakfast. There, I met the Caravan Master, a Tissarette native named Jazeera Tatterselle who knew the road to Amber well. He told me what they were hauling and when I saw the

number of wagons, beasts of burden and drivers, I was in awe. It would take the better part of the day to harness all and get them moving. We would manage four leagues a day, an amazing amount of mileage but then, the wagons would be pulled by glivets and camels, not horses.

I met the entire caravan's personnel as we rode in groups of four around the train. The captain of the guards placed us at the forefront, rear and sides so that the entire train was enclosed within a phalanx of experienced swordsmen, some twenty in all. Along with the drivers, teamsters, cooks, workers and train master, we were forty-eight bodies. All of us carried blades and weapons of their own choosing. Many had bows and even crossbows. Anyone who attacked this train did so at great peril.

Being the newest hired, Tatterselle had no luck hiring more, I was stuck riding drag. This entailed eating the considerable dust that the train stirred up. It wasn't so bad in the forest but once on the plains, the shit coated every inch of your skin, got between your wrinkles, cracks, up your nose, in your eyes and even between your teeth. When we stopped to water the animals, I dismounted and beat at myself raising a great cloud of dust. The other guards in my squad warned me I would be covered again in minutes when we started up.

I cursed, pulled out my cloak and tossed it over my shoulders. Besides being able to deflect eyes, it could also repel water, dust and blades. Once on me, the others saw only a shimmering shadow and were full of questions as to where I had gained an elven cloak. They also knew how I remained invisible on patrol when they were searching for me.

I did not answer, took my flask of water and drank, refilled it from the water barrel on the water wagon and remounted Singe-i who stood patiently. Resumed my place in the rear with the other guards.

Chapter 26

There was really no difference between on duty or off. I rode constantly, day or night. Some nights I was on horseback patrolling, others on foot. I slept when I was not patrolling or eating. The shifts equaled about four on eight off. The caravan paused at first starlight and started again at moonset. This was nearly eighteen hours of travel out of twenty-six. In those other eight hours, we slept, cooked, fed the stock and ourselves.

We lost two animals, one from a broken leg when it fell in a gopher hole, another when the glivet took a chunk out of its teammate's neck and it bled to death in gory seconds. We roasted and ate meat that night, it tasted sweet like veal and did not bother my belly.

No one talked to or asked questions about me. I drifted through camp like a ghost and eavesdropped on conversations ranging from love lives to the goings on in the palace. The main thrust of the trip was to re-open trade routes from this shadow to Amber and to re-establish relations with King Random. The wagons were carrying the finest fabrics, clothing and jewels as well as seedlings and fresh fruits for the Armistice Day, the second year celebration of the end of Eric's war. I was curious how they could bring perishable items on such a lengthy trip without them rotting and when asked, was told the cargo had a preservation spell put on them.

Tatterselle gave me a sample. I took the ugly, fuzzy globe of purple fruit and looked at it. “No, no,” he laughed. “Cut and peel it. Eat the insides.”

I took out my leaf dagger, missed the widening of his eyes as I did as he suggested. Cut a slice and placed the chunk in my mouth. Indescribable. Sweet. Tart, a burst of flavor that overwhelmed me and intoxicated my taste buds. Tasted better than the incredible delight of chocolate that Master had once rewarded me with. I sucked the last drop of juice off my fingers.

“You should see your eyes,” he laughed. “Big as saucers.” He paused. “Who gave you that blade, Corbel?”

“I earned it.”

“I’m sure you did.” His hand rested on his own belt sword.

“You would not live to pull it free, Master Tatterselle,” I said evenly.

“I know it. It is the blade of the master assassin of the Lord of the Gray Realm.”

The Master had been called such before. If he knew the Master by that title, he was privy to his inner circle. “Are you not happy that your caravan is guarded by so skilled a man?”

He swallowed. “It is not for me to question the Lord of the Gray Realm. Besides, half of the goods on this train are his, or commissioned by him.”

“Then, half of this train will be sure to arrive at its destination,” I stated.

“Are you the one he calls his Blackbird?”

“Curiosity brought me these, Master Tatterselle.” I raised my shirt and vest to expose my chest and belly. He stared at the raised scars of whips and chains. Swallowed, suddenly dry-mouthed with horror.

“You took that and survived?” he was aghast.

“That, and more. I took forty-five kisses of death,” I shivered, remembering and added, truthfully, “not all at once. The Master doled them out five at a time. I was a slow learner.”

His eyes held a sad respect. “Whatever I can do to please him, say so.”

“Then say nothing lest I take that ability away from you. It is my mission to see that this caravan arrives safe in Amber, not necessarily that you arrive with it.”

“I obey the Lord of the Gray Realm, Corbel. I will not speak of this or you.”

“Good. Treat me as you would any of the other guards.” I looked around his neat little trailer on wheels, it was a cozy home he could bring with him and even had a cooking stove inside. “I saw one in a book once and had the master carpenters build it for me,” he said proudly. “Where do you live?”

Bleakly, I answered him as I stepped out the door and on the three steps, “at the foot of the Master’s bed and in the corner of his room, wherever he tells me to lay my head.”

“You’re no more than a slave,” he whispered. I saw pity in his face and the rage blossomed in my belly. I growled, flew down the steps and ran for the nearest section of open grassland that was empty of anyone or thing.

I ran through the waist high grasses towards the distant mountains jumping the narrow streams and pounding the earth as if I weighed as much as a monocerous. I ran until I was gasping for breath, up and down small rises and gullies that could not be seen until you were on them. I ran until my thighs burned from fatigue and the weight of the grasses pulling at me slowed my headlong sprint.

I stopped, bent over and held my sides where cramps pulled me into a ‘C’ shape. Heaved for air that burned as I drew it into my lungs. Sweat chilled on me, seed heads and

chaff stuck to my wet exposed flesh and itched. I slapped at the swarm of tiny bugs that hovered over my head, invaded my ears and bit at the back of my neck.

All around me, I saw the endless field of golden grass, heads swaying in the gentle breeze. Behind me, I could see the path my flying feet had made through the stalks. At least I could find my way back. There was nothing out here, nothing as far as the eye could see. No way for anything to sneak up on the caravan even though it was the prize of a lifetime.

I screamed. A roar from deep in my gut and somehow, found myself on my knees in the dirt with my face buried in the grass. I pulled up handfuls of roots and sliced my fingers as I tore the razor sharp stems of grass up from the soil. My blood mingled with the dirt and the emotions that I had bottled up for two years broke and threatened to destroy me.

They came out of the grass, skulking shadows, were-beasts sent by the Master, circled me, sniffed me with long, vulpine noses and stroked my feet with paws shaped like hands. I knew their kind, they came from a dark shadow near Thrid and were despicable beasts. Nearly indestructible, ferocious, stealthy and dark. They loved the shadows and must have been miserable in this bright sun. They too, knew my scent or would have tried to kill me. In a fight between a pack of them and me, I'm not sure which of us would survive the encounter. I wondered why the Master had sent his demon hounds on the trail of the caravan, I'd have thought it was his desire for the goods to reach Amber in one piece. Unless, he sent them to make sure I made it to Amber and they were here to ensure I did my job.

I turned round and followed my trail back. In only a few yards, I lost sight of every one of the hounds as they scattered into the sea of grass.

They had not wasted any time after my hurried departure, Tissarette had not even sent a scout after me. The entire camp was harnessed and ready to go on, had managed to get the front leaders going and were already a mile ahead of where I'd left. Of the hounds, there was no sign and I said nothing of them.

I watched for the remainder of the journey yet never caught one glimpse of the hell hounds. I even patrolled at night in my cloak and on foot but they had noses where they could scent me and I had to rely on my own five senses.

I knew the moment we entered Amber's land. I felt it as a tingle that started at my toes and fingertips which exploded in my guts. I drew in a shocked gasp and my unit members questioned me. I wasn't sure if it was pain or pleasure, all I knew was that it made me thrum. Singe-i danced under me as if she, too could feel the energy or magic of the place.

Chapter 27

We rode onto the plain of Kolvan, one among many. People, wagons, caravans and tent cities from every imaginable place had converged on Amber on the highest hill separated from the royal compound by a guarded wall. Higher still, I could see the Castle's towers ablaze with pennants and banners.

The city was strewn with ribbons and flags, buntings from every merchant and store had taken part in the celebration of war's end. One tried to outdo the next. Everywhere, the people wore smiles of great gladness and welcomed all they met. Tatterselle led the wagons

to a pre-arranged spot and set up quickly, efficiently but then, I suppose he had been there before. He had people arriving to check out his goods even as they unloaded so eager were they for the products the Tissarette had brought.

Captain Erc dismissed those of us who were ready to leave and paid us, a goodly sum in silver. It had been a fairly uneventful trip and the guards had commented uneasily on that fact. They had speculated that it was weirdly strange that no brigands had tried to attack so rich a prize especially since they knew we were short on protection.

Erc asked me if I cared to stay on as one of Tatterselle's personal bodyguards while he was in Amber. I hesitated and agreed, it would provide me with a good cover while I was on the Master's business. "You're the most invisible man I've ever seen, Corbel," he shook his head. "I looked for you on rounds and never spotted you once."

"My cloak is the reason for that," I said.

"Any chance of getting another one for me?"

"Sure. First, you have to kill the elf in it," I replied and he grinned. Of course, I was serious and he thought I was joking. I watched the crowds wandering through the grounds. There were maids and children, adults, nobles and their families, a veritable plethora of girls that drew the eyes. Some were escorted by their chaperons and others were alone. You could tell which ones were there to make money off the men and it wasn't long before most of the guards from our company paired off with one or two of the ladies.

"You, Corbel?" the Captain raised an eyebrow. "I know a clean brothel in town, the Madame doesn't charge much, the girls are pretty, clean and willing." He studied me. "You have had a woman before? Or do you prefer men? There's a house that caters to that, too."

I turned on my heel and walked off in a huff to disappear into the crowds. The Master had seen to it that sex no longer held any interest for me unless he ordered it so. I knew the Master would not contact me here, to use the communication spell in Amber would be to draw attention to the magic. There were seers who scanned the area for just such usage. He had formulated a plan and gone over it with me until I knew it forwards and backwards. My safe house was an Inn near the center of the city called the Grey Goose. My room was reserved for me, it was on the lower ell closest to the exits with stabling for Singe-i.

I walked and led her there, saw her safely settled and checked out the dining room. It was full, due to the Armistice Fest, the innkeeper told me if I hadn't arrived when I did, he would have filled my room with six more men. Asked if I would share for a reduction in price. Apologized when I growled no.

He brought me to the room, handed me the key and I opened the lock to peer inside. A cheerful room in yellow, curtains, a fireplace stacked with briquettes, a small table and chair where the occupant could eat alone. No windows, a second door leading to a privy chamber and bath with hot running water. A sink and a mirror. The bed was feather stuffed with a down summer comforter. The armoire in the corner was made of Whychwood and would block spells.

I eyed the floor, it was broad planks with throw rugs and would be my bed if and when I slept. "When is the concert?" I asked and the innkeeper winced as he shook his head sadly.

"The King has been practicing for a week. It's driving the population crazy and the animals in the Great Forest are in an uproar. Literally. They roar, howl and moan all night. Rock. It'll rot your brain and burst your eardrums." He shook his head again. "Whoever heard of a deaf leopard? Shall I have dinner sent to your room?"

“No. I’ll eat out.” I locked the door behind us and returned to the streets. Down the Street of the Golden Unicorn, turn left at Glory Avenue until I crossed Rebma Lane and Market Square. There before me was the road to Amber, the Castle and it was as packed with pedestrians as the rest of the city. You couldn’t walk five feet without hitting another body. Gawkers came to ogle the famed Castle of the Nine Princes and the King of Amber.

A young noblewoman rode by on a lovely gray mare, saw me and reined in her horse. Stared at me, her mouth hanging open and then she closed it. Mumbled, “blue eyes, not golden. You there,” she said clearly, pointing her whip at me.

I looked around, thinking she was aiming at someone behind or next to, but not me. “Me?” I asked dumbly.

“Yes, you. What is your name?”

“Corbel,” I answered. “It means blackbird.”

“Where are you from?” Now, she seemed uncertain. The crowds parted around us, the boy escorting her pulled at her arm. He was a tall redhead with green eyes, dressed in upper class clothing but with the castle’s colors on his cloak.

“Roelle, come on. They’re waiting for us, we’ll be late,” he protested.

“Szedged,” I answered bleakly, using the common name for the Master’s realm. To tell anyone I came from the Gray Realm would see me imprisoned at once or worse.

“I thought you were someone I once lov...knew,” she sighed. “Never mind.” She kicked the mare on and I caught her giving me backward glances until she turned the corner and was out of sight. I gave her no more thought and spent the day in my room catching up on my sleep for I knew my evening would be busy.

There was a crescent moon when I slipped out of the inn. I’d wanted to wait until the roomers were all drunk or asleep but it seemed as if the entire world was wide awake and participating in the fair.

There were rides on the Midway, games of chance and physical prowess, fortunes tellers and diviners. Shops for goods and dining, everything from roasted corn to a whole ox on the spit. Delicacies from all over the shadows. I found and ate one of the fuzzy purple fruits from Tatterselle and it was as delicious as I remembered. Candied apples, fudge and taffy. None of it tempted me past the Master’s instructions.

Wearing my cloak and mask, I drifted through the shadows towards the forest that surrounded the castle’s pilings. There were many guards all wearing the livery of the Castle’s elite unit and I wish I could say they were easy to sneak past. They weren’t. Many times I had to freeze when some strange wisp of sound or slight breeze of my movement alerted a soldier that I was nearby.

Twice, I saw the hell hounds and nearly jumped out of my skin as they turned their red demon eyes on me and silently snarled. I swallowed, suspected this was how the Master was watching me, the hounds were somehow reporting my actions back to him.

Carefully, I approached the massive stage set up for the concert. Raised above my head, the platform was built of metal pipes, wood with a backdrop shaped like a fountain with silvery strands that imitated the flow of water. Tree poles holding lights surrounded the stage and would light the whole thing up as bright as daylight.

A group of men were busy building a set, others were practicing on large fiddles, drums and horns, a group of crack armed men were watching everyone who entered the area. The nearest tree to the stage was forty feet away, everything else had been cut back to make room. The grounds were large enough to hold a thousand or more; I wondered if the

music would bring that many. In my disjointed memories, I had once known about rock music and liked it.

A shadow flitted overhead. Instinctively, I ducked and a hell hound leapt from the nearest shadow to pull me into darkness. As soon as we were enfolded within, a man-sized flying creature banked above us. I could see its glowing red eyes and an impression of its face. It seemed to be made of ugly gray stone with bat-like wings. Unbidden, its name came to me, Gargoyle. I muffled a cry as something took hold of my head and scrambled it, I couldn't think or see only the bite of the hound's teeth on my neck seemed real. It shook me lightly, just puncturing skin when it could clearly pop off my head with one snap. Holding me steady, it waited until the nearest guard checked the noise I'd made and found nothing so he moved on. I could see the tiny hairs on the back of his neck stir with that primitive sense that warned one something wicked this way comes. Only then did the hound let go, slashing me on the shoulder with a sharp claw as if to warn me not to be so foolish.

I found my way through the woods, my feet on a faint game trail that took me to the base of the mountain upon which the castle rested. From there, I threw back my cloak and proceeded to climb the granite handholds that the Master had assure me were carved into the back slope. I had no fear of being spotted, my dark leathers blended with the gray and black rocks and no one in their right minds would have tried to climb what was an impossibly sheer face. Even so, the top of the cliff would be guarded although I knew when they made their timed rounds.

The top of the cliff was flat, grass beaten down by many patrols and had not left many hiding places. Still, I could pull my cloak over my head and to all eyes would be a simple boulder or a tree stump. If you were attuned to your surroundings, you might notice a tree or a rock that hadn't been there before but with this elite unit, I wouldn't risk it.

In my belt was a coil of Denebian spider silk line attached to a folding grappling hook that the Master had procured from a shadow he said I would like. It was made of a metal called aluminum and was strong as steel yet light weight. I threw it above me, caught an abutment on the exterior wall of the castle and was climbing hand over hand before the next guard passed. In seconds, I was on the wall of the battlements and headed inside.

Chapter 28

The castle was cool inside and dark, especially in the corridors I was traveling. Torches guttered here and there, my passage moved the smoke in lazy circles. I made it to the kitchens before seeing another soul and the rooms were packed full of chefs and helpers, the ovens and cook stoves going full blast even in the dead of night. Surprisingly, I saw the red headed teen that had accompanied the lady on the gray mare. Heard his name called. Marcus. He was told to take a tray of tea and sweet buns to a room called the Rose Salon for an impromptu meeting and here I heard the title of General.

When he exited carrying the enormous silver tray loaded with kettle, tea cups, treats and plates, I followed behind him, a shadow only a witch could see. He led me up backstairs, across hallways not meant for noble feet until we emerged in a section of the palace used by the royal family.

I waited behind a corbeled arch as he knocked on the huge bronze doors. As they opened, I saw a pair of armed men look both ways down the hall and close the doors behind his murmured words. Opted to take the next window I could find and eased it open. The outer wall was inside the battlements and easy access across to the Salon's balcony. Those doors were closed and curtained but had a gap between wide enough for me to see into the room.

Four men were seated at a round table loaded with food, instruments and sheet music. The room was papered with pale peach paper covered with huge roses the size and shape of cabbages. The upholstery on the chairs and couches matched the roses, the carpet was thick hand-loomed in peach, rose and green. Fresh roses were in vases on the tables, in stands and at the door. A chess set sat to the side with a game in progress. Occasionally, one of the four got up to make a move. I saw Black check mate in four moves.

I heard the strumming of a guitar and saw a tall man with a gray neatly trimmed beard, bushy black eyebrows and electric blue eyes. He looked about fifty and carried himself like the soldier he was. It was the General and even without his uniform, I would know him for what he was.

Of the three men, only one I knew the identity of. Short, stockily built with red hair, goatee and Van Dyke, he had a merry face that looked ready to smile at any instance. His blue eyes had a decided twinkle. It was the King, Random.

I waited until the boy Marcus emptied the tray and walked back out the door. He called a cheery good night and retraced his steps. At the first corner, I tripped him, stuck him with a sedative dart and confiscated the tray. Dragged his unconscious body into the room which turned out to be a maid's chamber. I didn't kill him, he was only a boy and not even armed. Besides, he hadn't seen me and I could not bring myself to kill him.

The guards opened the doors to my knock and I kept the tray in front of my face even though my mask was firmly attached.

"Forget something, Marcus?" the closest one asked and my leaf dagger silenced him efficiently. As he staggered inside, I took the other one pushing his body inside the ante-chamber and locking the doors behind me.

All four men turned round as the guards bodies collapsed inside the Salon. There was no blood, I had made sure their wounds bled inside the body cavity. My sword was out already and I engaged the General, my prime target. He on the other hand, did not have his blade but picked up the steel guitar and swung it at my head. I met his lunge head on and the steel of my sword cut the instrument in half as if made of straw. The sound that came off the strings was eerily demonic. Random lunged for the chair and I stopped him at the point of my steel.

"Don't move, Random," I said, my tip at his throat. The other two men made as if to throw themselves between King and my weapons.

"You came unarmed?" I questioned softly. "Bad move."

Random backed up. "Who are you? An assassin, but from who, what shadow?"

"I am Blackbird," I replied and swiveled before they could move. I ran the General through the heart and pushed him off my sword as he collapsed. The younger man behind Random went for the dead guard's weapons and threw one to the King. I backed up towards the balcony doors. "I'm not here to commit regicide," I told them. "My target was Gracchus."

"If you think we'll just let you walk away after murdering the General and his guards,"

the younger man burst out, “think again.”

Both of them advanced, blades drawn. I raised my own and parried, an intense fifteen seconds of lunge, thrust, counter thrust. First blood was mine as I severed the younger man’s elbow tendon and his arm ceased to obey his commands. Blood spurted as his brachial artery followed. In seconds, he was pale and fainting as blood loss laid him out. The third man whipped out his belt and created a tourniquet saving the wounded man’s life.

I blocked Random’s thrust to my body and riposted in quarte, just missing his exposed right side. We danced across the room, the sound of our blades whistling as they cut the air. Sweat beaded his brow as he grinned fiercely at me. He was fast, perhaps even faster than me. “Who sent you, Master Blackbird? What is your name so that I know what to put on your tombstone?”

I reached the General’s body and leapt over it, angling closer to the balcony doors. Switched hands and came at him with my left hand but in doing so, left my side open and he took advantage of it to skewer me just above the hip. I gasped and shoved him off with a punch, catching him with a shallow slice on the thigh and he cut me again, this time high on the breast. Blood dripped onto the carpeting. I stumbled backwards and hit the balcony doors, flinging them open as he pressed me on. His strikes were supersonic, his swordplay the fastest I had ever seen. A master swordsman. Wounded, it was all I could do to keep him back long enough for me to catch my line and vault over to slide down to the ground floor. He shouted for guards and came after me, climbing down the wall.

I turned and ran for the second line I’d left on the cliff face and literally flew down the face of the slope as I rappelled, getting weaker as I went. Halfway down, I threw my cloak over me and let its magic shield my body from his sight. I fell the last twenty feet, my arms incapable of holding on any longer.

I felt...unwell. Cold waves fled up my body. Blood stained my clothes and from the corner of my mouth making breathing both painful and difficult. He had given me a lung wound.

I heard him shouting above me and it brought others from the staging area towards my position. Rolling, I hid in what little underbrush was there until I could both rise and escape.

Berating myself, I stumbled along the trail careful to leave no sign of my passage. It took me nearly three times as long to reach my room at the inn where I vomited up my meal and blood before collapsing on the bed in a stupor. I didn’t even try to treat my wounds.

It seemed almost like minutes later when a heavy pounding occurred at my door. I heard a rough voice ordering me to open up in the name of the King. Slowly and painfully, I arose, my clothes stiff with blood, my weapons in their sheaths ready for action. I opened the door partway and saw the Kings Guard, a whole unit of them, Captain, Sergeant and foot soldiers. His eyes studied me, the blanket wrapped around my shoulders, my pale, sleepy face.

“Your parents are inside, too?” the Captain asked, pushing the door wide and me aside. I let him in, my strength gone.

“They’re in Lameara on business,” I said naming the next district town over. “What’s this about?”

“King’s business. How old are you?” He scoured the room but since I hadn’t treated my wounds, there wasn’t any sign of blood or bandages in the room, nor smell of disinfectant or healing magic. He opened the privy and recoiled from the smell of vomit. I

had puked on arriving back from my trip to the castle.

“What is your name? Are you sick? Who’s taking care of you?”

“My parents. I puked up dinner, I ate something, too many somethings that were bad at the Fest. I’ve been here since yesterday, I came in with the Tissarette caravan. Master Tatterselle will vouch for me. My name is Corby Eidolon.” I could feel sweat breaking out on my forehead. “I hope I’m not contagious, I heard Black-lung Fever is going around from the outskirts of Blenheim.”

All of them backpedaled when I mentioned the fever, a notorious disease that swelled up a man’s nether parts and turned them black before killing them. Only affected men past puberty and who were sexually active.

“Can you prove where you’ve been all night?” the Captain asked. I shrugged.

“The Innkeeper saw me come in and lock the door. The exit is the door next to the bar, only way in or out. If I had left, someone would have seen me, the bar was filled with drunks. Kept me awake all night.”

I heard someone approaching from behind the soldiers and a tall man with dark hair and intelligent eyes pushed his way forward. He was handsome, dressed in black and gray with a silver rose at his cape closure and wore an elegant blade at his waist. I looked at it and then up to his face. We were nearly eye-level. “Corwin,” I said.

“Do I know you?” the Prince asked. His eyes dropped to the floor and we watched ruby drops of blood splatter from my bare feet onto the floor boards. His hand gripped the pommel as he drew the blade, Grayswandir.

I shouted a spell and leaped forward into the captain, tucking my foot behind the backs of his knees, hooking and sweeping them out from under and knocked him into his sergeant who dominoed into the enlisted men. I did it with the help of the power spell that gave me strength the equal to a cave bear. Threw myself over the massive pile, my blade in my hand to meet Corwin’s. He slashed and the power behind his thrust made my shoulder scream with pain. I whipped the blanket forward tangling it over his head and arm as I slid past him down the hallway to the next room, also reserved for me by the Master and under a different name. The door smashed open as I activated the spell that prevented anyone but me entry and stumbled for the window, diving through just as Corwin broke free. Landed on the cobblestones in a roll that should have been easy but with two holes in me and blood loss, I hit the ground stunned. Struggled past the vertigo and tried to rise, two knees smashed me on the back and someone rode me to the ground. I screamed, reached for my leaf daggers, my fingers clawing at the stones to push him off enough so I could reach my chest and his blade hit me in the back, low and on the right side. It felt like ice had pierced me, and stolen my breath. I gasped, felt my lungs shift in some irrevocable way, their function changed. As he pulled his blade free, I could not breathe. Blood filled my mouth.

“Master!” I cried. “I have failed you!” The Prince flipped me over as the squad rejoined him. Raised me up to watch the light fade from my eyes.

Chapter 29

It was dark. It could have been night time, my eyes could be damaged or it could be

because I was in a dark place. A very dark place. I moved a fraction and felt the straw under me covering dank stone. Not small bricks or ornamental flagstones. No, these were large cut blocks of commercial size. A chain rattled. It was attached to my wrists and ankles. Big links the size to hold one of the Master's Mastiffs. I let my fingers be my eyes as they explored further and the chain was bolted to the wall of equally big blocks with a huge metal pin screwed into the stone. Screwed into the wall of a dungeon cell. I couldn't turn it.

Raising my head was a feat more taxing than Sisyphus pushing the rock uphill, more tiring than Hercules cleaning the Aegean stables. I was cold, my hands told me I had been stripped and roughly bandaged.

"Master, save me," I whispered and called for the hell-hounds to come rescue me, one way or the other. I preferred to have them rip me to pieces than report to the Master that I had failed him. Although I had killed the General, his main instructions had been for me to take a hostage and return.

The door creaked open and figures holding torches entered my humble abode. I could barely see them even in the light.

"How old are you?" It was Corwin, the shorter man spoke and I recognized his voice as that of the King. The last man was a soldier, most probably the torturer.

"Kill me now," I rasped. "For I will not talk." I couldn't, the Master had a spell on me for that, also.

The last man in kicked me in the side and I gasped, felt the blackness deepen and a warmth run down my ribs. "Assassin, you're moments away from death," he warned, his voice coming from far away.

Corwin pulled him back. "Christ, Anson, he's nearly dead now, you hit him again and he will die without giving us any answers. Besides, look at the scars on this kid, he's obviously been tortured his whole life. You think we can do any worse? Tell us what we want to know, kid, and we'll help you."

"Help me to die?" I asked. Chuckled. "I have died before and the Master always brings me back." I coughed and blood stained my lips. Stared at the King. "I would have taken your life too, Random, but the Master said not yet." I shivered, an icy chill was creeping up my lips.

Corwin slapped at my cheeks lightly. "He's dying," he said from far away. "Do you want to try and save him, Random or let him go?"

"He murdered Gracchus," the King's words were grim and faint. "Saves us a trial, anyway."

I saw a white Unicorn in the corner of the cell and she stared sorrowfully at me. She was so beautiful that she brought tears to my eyes. I knew her, reached out my hand to touch her horn but the chains sent her skittering away. Her horn pricked my finger bringing a drop of blood. There wasn't much left in me but I would gladly give her my last drop of life's ruby elixir.

Vaguely, I was aware that another man joined the group and with him a blazing wheel of light that drove away my unicorn. "Analyzing," the thing spoke, rays of brilliance circling it and sparking around the room. "Dad, he's not from a far shadow. Definitely not from Lameara, or Szeged as he told Roelle. You're not going to believe this but his DNA says he's Amber bred and Shadow Earth, seventeen years old and Oberon's bloodline. Dad, he's your son and he's dying."

That was the last thing I heard before I died.

I was wandering in a wasteland and it resembled the tales of hell and the river Styx only here, there was a boat and the pilot was a woman with green eyes and skin. We were already under water; fish swam through the eye holes of a man's skull while others congregated near a sea monster's rib cage. The water was translucent green and shimmered making me slightly disorientated. My stomach lurched in the beginnings of sea-sickness but how could the dead feel nausea?

The green lady raised me up and pushed something down my throat, it tasted odd, burned and cooled at the same time. It was all I could do to swallow, even that hurt and took a conscious effort.

"Why are you in hell?" I asked her and she bent low to my mouth.

"What? Say it again," she urged. "I can't understand or hear you."

"Never mind," I closed my eyes wanting to sink back into the darkness but she tapped me lightly on the cheek. "Raven, open your eyes, please," she ordered and I did.

"My name is Corbel," I managed in little gasps. "You're too pretty to be a witch in hell."

"Oh Raven, you're not in hell," she smiled although her face was wet. Strange, how could your face be showing tears when we were underwater? "You're not dead, not yet, Raven."

"Who's Raven?"

"You are. Raven Murphy-Sines, son of Merlin, King of the Courts and grandson of Prince Corwin, nephew of King Random of Amber, my husband."

I tried. I really tried to get up. I managed to get one hand under me and pushed up but the moment I was nearly vertical, I passed out. Master, I tried to take the Queen hostage as you bid me but this body you have trained and fostered had been too badly damaged. I spoke the spell to bring me back to your shadow but the magic flared against the wall of sea water and dispersed, unable to function below the depths. I willed my hands to strike her and all it did was lightly touch her throat. She grasped my hands and pulled me into her bosom and rocked me. I rested my head against her soft skin and was comforted even though I knew the Master would not forgive me for this failure.

"If I'm not dead---it would be kinder to let me die," I whispered and went away again.

I woke many times. Sometimes, I could breathe and other times, something was down my throat and breathed for me. I was in a bed that moved up and down and had railings so that I could not climb out. I was grateful for the warm blankets piled on me. The air was rich and heavy, there were no walls around me that I could see, just walls of water with sea life beyond. While I was in the bed and room, the air was denser, richer as if under pressure and made it easier to breathe.

I was aware when visitors came and the composition of the room's atmosphere changed, became lighter with less pressure. I could hear them talking but I was in another place, another reality and treated them as an annoying hallucination, not real or tactile.

"He's so thin. Pale. His eyelids are translucent, he looks awful," a young girl cried in a whisper.

"Roelle, he can hear us," the green lady remonstrated.

"Is he making any improvement?" Random questioned. "Do you think he'll make it, Vialle?"

“So you can try and convict him to death?” she snapped back. “Look at him, Random, Corey, Bill. Just look, he’s been whipped, beaten with chains, burned, beaten and who knows what else. I’ve felt knife scars, broken bones and starvation rings on his nails. He has nearly been eviscerated, this child has been tortured to the breaking point and beyond. No wonder he doesn’t know who he is or that he’s not an assassin!”

“On the contrary, Vialle,” Corwin said grimly. “That is exactly who and what he is. Corbel known as the Blackbird, the master assassin for the Lord of the Gray Realm.”

If they knew that, I was truly doomed. I had one spell left that I thought might work, a simple spell taught me by the Master on a whim. I uttered it just under my breath and Corwin spoke. “What’s he saying?”

Someone leaned closer and listened but by then, I had nearly completed the water unplugging spell used to open a leaky bath drain. I heard the sound of water dripping, and then rushing, gushing as the deluge of the walls collapsing fell in on us. Drowning was the easiest way I knew to kill myself, a much more peaceful way to die than any the Master would choose.

“Christ! That was a spell! Vialle, do something!” Corwin shouted.

“I can’t! His spell uncorked the seawalls into this room!” She returned.

Corwin shouted, “Random, your Trumps! Use ‘em to bring us all to the Castle!”

Someone picked me up as I floated off the bed in a swirl of cold green water. It hurt as they applied pressure in those places where I’d been impaled by sharp steel. I felt an instant of coldness and abruptly, was dripping onto the stone floor of a giant Great Hall. Was deposited into a stunned guard’s arms and Corwin disappeared only to reappear seconds later with Random and the others.

Vialle told them she needed to be taken back to Rebma and deal with the disaster, she could enact repairs with help from the Queen and other sorceresses.

“What about the assassin?” The guard holding me asked. I tried to bite him, he merely pushed my head to the side. “Dungeon, Your Highness?”

“If you want him dead before sunset,” Vialle rounded on them in a fury. “Random, I forbid it! If you must, put him in Corwin’s room and post guards there.”

“I have a better idea,” Corwin said. “Call Merlin through Ghostwheel and have him meet us at Cabra. Anson, give me my grandson.”

“Corey,” Random said uneasily. “Are you sure about this? He’ll try and run you through, first chance he gets.”

The Prince nodded. “It was Grayswandir that punctured his lung, Random. If he dies because of me---well, that’s not going to happen. Besides, he’s so weak he can barely lift a hand.” His lips tightened as he thumbed through his infamous pack of Trumps, the Master wanted those worse than anything. He pulled two out and stared as he handed one to the King. Anson, the guard lifted me into Corwin’s arms and within seconds, we were in a study with thousands of books on shelves, on all four walls save for the space of windows and doors. There were even piles in the corner of the floor.

A leather couch large enough for a mastiff to stretch out was in the center of the room, a desk straight out of a medieval castle and a comfortably padded swivel chair. He laid me down on the couch, covered me and stared. I tried to roll off and barely managed to lift my head. My chest felt tight; a rattle was deep in my lungs. “Why didn’t you let me drown?” I wailed and he stroked my face as if I were a puppy.

“Two years, Raven, we’ve been looking for you. Two years of searching the shadows

wondering if you were dead or alive. What did that bastard do to you?"

I did not answer, I could not answer and moments later, that strange glowing wheel arrived within the room accompanied by a man and a creature made of stone. The man made my eyes widen in fear for it was like staring into a mirror. His face was mine own and that frightened me for if I looked like him, then how could I be the Master's slave? To deny the likeness was to deny my own existence.

"Who are you?" I whispered as fear raced through me. My whole body ached, I could sense everything shutting down as I slipped into terminal shock. The gray thing looked like a stone gargoyle and he called a name urgently, reaching for my flesh. I recoiled. "Master!"

"I am no master," I sighed. "I'm a slave."

"Dad," the wheel cautioned. "You're losing him. BP is falling, heart rate is dropping and thready, p-waves are starting. I'm going to inject him." Before I could move, the wheel thing stuck me several times in a humming blur. I felt an instant rush of heat and my heart shuddered, ran like a lemming for the cliffs. "Adrenalin, antibiotics, heart stimulant and pain killers," it announced. "He's going to crash in seconds."

I gagged. Heaved for breath and melted into the cushions. "Who are you?" I begged of the man with my face. "Tell me who you are."

He put his arms around me and hugged me tightly, laid his head on my cheek, his lips brushed my skin so that I felt his words as well as heard them. "Merlin," he breathed. "I'm your father, Raven. Merlin, King of the Courts of Chaos, I'm your Dad as Corwin is your grandfather."

I shook my head in denial but his face followed me into my nightmares.

Chapter 30

Hands rolled me, cleaned me when I could no longer control my bodily functions. The two men who claimed to be my father and grand-sire brought doctors, healers and witches to treat me. I refused to eat and when they forced food down me, I vomited it. The acid burned my throat, nose and even irritated my eyes. Of course, I wasn't doing it on purpose, I was just so sick that nothing stayed down and no matter what they did, nothing helped. I should have died thrice and finally realized that one or all of them had put a Death Abeyance spell on me. I hovered between life and death, unable to pass but not strong enough to fight to recover.

His doctor friend along with the demon wheel called Ghost had imported many queer items from other shadows. Mainly from a place called Loma Linda. I breathed oxygen through a nasal cannula, a blood pressure machine recorded my vitals every 15 minutes yet wasn't plugged into anything, it ran on magic.

When the doctor wanted pictures of my insides, he had Ghost scan me with X-rays and put the images up on a blank space on the wall. I could still hear and smell things, but my eyes didn't work well anymore. As I looked at something, it was as if I was peering through a distorted window that leached the colors out of everything and shimmered---a vibration that made me queasy if I stared too long. If someone asked me how I felt, my answer was always the same---I was dying, please let me go.

The Master came to see me and he was not happy. He told me that I needed to eat or he would beat me. I laughed sarcastically and said I was dying anyway so if he beat me, he would be doing me a favor by sending me to hell quicker than this lingering misery. He said I wasn't allowed to die, I still had my task to finish.

"But I killed General Gracchus," I pointed out amazed that I had balls enough to back-talk him. "If you want me to kidnap the Queen, I need help. I know you told me not to get killed or be captured, but I was not as good a swordsman as the king."

"No one is as good as Random," he agreed. "If you fought him and survived, I am proud of you."

"But he killed me, Master. One of them conjured the Death Abeyance spell on me." I paused. "Master, you said you are proud of me?" I sobbed. "You have never told me that, never praised me, Master. Are you real or am I imagining you?"

"Shall I beat you with the Kiss of Death, my Blackbird so you know reality?" he asked softly.

"Master, to end this, I would gladly bare my back to your lash," I returned drearily. "This existence is beyond my ability to endure. I beg you, let me go to my death and let me rest. Do not bring me back again."

"I need you, my Blackbird. Remember, I own your soul. You do not have my leave to die. Not until you have completed your mission. So get up off your skinny ass and recover or I will come down to the plains of hell and drag your bones back!" he shouted in my face.

"Yes, Master," I cowered and obeyed for I was his slave and could do no less than he bid.

Sunlight was pouring through the windows and fell upon my face. Gentle rays that warmed me, helped dispel the cold in my heart and bones. I moved feebly and looked around this room where I lay. It was not hell or a dungeon's cell but a circular room filled with books, plants and strange equipment gathered around me. A tent of see-through material was covering my face and chest, a slight hiss was in the background, oxygen as the doctor had told me before. I coughed and it felt as if my lungs were tearing apart, as if gravel was inside instead of air. I was terribly thirsty and hungry. Two armchairs were situated next to my bed although both were presently empty save for papers in one and an open spine book in the other.

"Hullo?" I called and my voice sounded like a croaking toad. "Anyone here? Master? Steen?" This didn't look like the Master's retreat but I was not allowed in certain parts of his manse so it could be a room I had not been in before.

Footsteps sounded in a hurried patter as if several bodies were running up stairs. The door flew open and a pretty girl ran in followed by the two men, father and son, Ghostwheel, the doctor and a whole crowd of other people until the room was so full I couldn't see the walls.

"You're awake!" the girl cried, tears in her eyes. "His eyes are yellow, look!"

"Amber," Merlin smiled. "Welcome back, Raven."

"The Master," I said, staring through the crowd for him. "Where is the Master?"

Merlin came forward and removed the tent from my face. "He was never here, Raven. You were hallucinating so I changed my form and pretended to be him so you would fight to live."

"It was you?" I knew the Master would never tell me he was proud of me. "How did

you know what he looks like or would say to me?"

"You provided the dialogue, Raven. I was just the prop dummy. You told us what he plans and how you would do it."

"No," I breathed, terrified that the Master would find out.

"You're safe here, son. No one but Random, Corwin or myself can enter the Lighthouse of Cabra. Here, you can recover, rest and re-learn who you were. He can't touch you here. I swear on the Unicorn."

"You don't know the Master," I despaired.

"Ah, but I do. I know Lucian Webster. He comes from the shadow where you were born only I knew him as Luke. Once, he was a friend before he decided he wanted to be a wizard and world maker. Tell me, did you ever meet a tall man, white-haired and white skin, favors black clothes and plays with silver balls that explode?"

"That is the demon that took me," I shivered. "To a place that was cold and dim, he killed me there and brought me back, sold me to the Master. He tortured me until I broke." I raised weary eyes to his face. "I tried to hold out, I swear but he took my soul, my hopes and dreams and destroyed them all."

"He is my half-brother, Mandor," Merlin snarled dangerously, his jaw clenching. "I will purge the Courts of conspirators and those that dared to harm my son." He turned to Corwin. "Dad, watch him?" At Corwin's nod, he was gone in a fusillade of sparks, his anger so violent that it exploded off him as he disappeared.

Chapter 31

It was nearly a week before Merlin brought me down out of the lighthouse and onto the beach. I didn't make it on my own, he and Corwin put me in a wheelchair and transported me via the Trumps. It was smoother than an elevator and took less time than going down the circular staircase. I hadn't been looking forward to that. Dressed in heavy wool with blankets piled on me, I sat like a mummified old man and let them do whatever they wanted with me. I hadn't seen or heard from the Master or his Hell Hounds and was beginning to hope I was safe here. I truly wanted to believe Merlin but I had tried before and hope was not something the Master had left me. I existed in a state of numbness, waiting for the events of fate to drop me.

Merlin pushed me down the rocky beach and I noted with some interest that a lovely sailboat was berthed at the end of a dock. Her sails were up and there was a rearing red Unicorn on the mainsail. "Yours?" I asked Corwin, he seemed the type to be in love with sailing.

He grinned. "The Great Escape," he named the boat. "I used her once to escape from my prison cell as a guest of Eric."

I stared out at the breakers and the reef. "I get sea-sick. I almost died from it on the ship from Anthis."

"You don't want to sail?" he asked and I shook my head no. Looked at the rocky shoreline, mounds of seaweed that had washed ashore and sea shells scattered in the sand. The huge bushes of purple flowers as large as my outstretched hand. It was peaceful. Saw

the footsteps in the sand, small ones like that girl. I wondered where she was.

“Who is she? Why did she cry when she saw me?” They knew who I meant. “What am I going to do?” I broke into a paroxysm of sobbing and both men enfolded me in their arms. I smelled subtle cologne and ozone, the scent of power and it triggered a memory of a gray man who had protected me. “Murph,” I whispered. “The gray man is Murphy.”

“Your...morph,” Merlin agreed. “And the girl is Roelle, your first...friend. Do you remember her?”

“Did I fuck her?” I flinched when I said that. Apologized and tried to explain. Told them what the Master had forced me to do to survive.

“Raven, did anyone rape you?” Merlin’s jaw clenched and his rage was palpable. I shuddered. Images from those early months were fractured and unbearable, I couldn’t remember anything but pain and misery.

“I don’t know. There were months when I was not in my own head, you know? The Master said he didn’t, he never touched me that way. Said it would negate his magic and make my worth null. He did send me to a brothel and let me have my fill. I’ve done terrible, evil things in his name. I killed your General, your friend, only one of many.” I swallowed. “I expect I will have to pay for my deeds, when I am healed, will your king hang me?”

“Hang you? We didn’t spend half a fortune saving you only to hang!” Corwin’s outburst was angry.

“How will you atone for the General’s death to your privy council and his family?” I asked. “Or are you in the habit of allowing murderers and assassins to go unpunished?”

Both of them were silent. I grimaced, in truth, I didn’t care whether I lived or died save that it was painless and permanent.

“Raven, you said Webster brought you back from the dead? How? Are you sure you were dead and it wasn’t just an illusion? He was good at those when I knew him,” Merlin said turning back towards the Lighthouse. The sun was going down and there was a decided nip in the air.

“What season is this?” I wondered.

“Fall,” they answered, staring at me oddly. I wasn’t sure what day, year or season I was in.

“I remember the smell of leaves burning in the fall, apples and cinnamon. Smoke and fire around a metal barrel. A gray man who gave me a birthday cake. How old am I? When was I born? Did you know my mother? All I have are dreams of a Unicorn. Nothing is left of the life I had before.”

Corwin put his fingers in his mouth and blew two short, sharp whistles and stared up at the skies. Presently, we saw a black dot circling at the height of an eagle and it dropped lower in lazy spirals until the gargoyle landed on two clawed feet, shrank and became a man. Gray haired, gray eyed with a smile as large as a pumpkin’s.

“Raven. How are you feeling today?” He took my hands and I rubbed my fingers on his flesh. He wore only a pair of shorts that hung low on his torso, he was impressively muscled and larger than me. His flesh was slightly cooler than mine but it was flesh and not stone, he was a man and not a monster.

“I don’t really remember you, Murphy,” I said frankly. “Do you know how old I am or when my birthday is? Or know my mother?”

“You are seventeen years old, Raven and your birthday is the Feast Day of St. Michael’s in November. I did know your mother, I was born of her blood to protect and

serve you.” He hung his head. “Alas, my master, I failed you.”

“You let that...monster take me. Where were you when I needed you?” I asked cruelly, not caring that I was being so or if I hurt his feelings.

“But, you and the boy Marcus went to town on your own, un-escorted and without permission,” he protested. “Unguarded.”

“And Marcus? Was he taken, too?”

“No, Raven. Only you. Marcus came back to the palace, brought your father, grandfather and guards to search for you but all we found were your clothes and the remnants of a spell. We searched the shadows for you. For two years; we have searched and all we found were rumors of an assassin called Blackbird.”

“I was taken from a back alley. From two men who tried to rape me,” I remembered. “That’s where I saw the Oreo.”

“Oreo?”

“You know, like the cookie. Black on the outside and white in the middle. The black and white man. The one with the silver balls he twirled between his fingers. He saved me from the rapists and brought me to this place. It was cold, and then I met the Lady.”

“Lady?” Merlin jumped in. I shivered in the chill air.

“Can we go inside, please? It’s cold out here.”

Corwin thumbed out his Trump of the top of the Lighthouse and we walked forward into the very same room without any of the effort of climbing all those stairs. I wasn’t able to lift myself out of the wheelchair and Murphy did the honors this time. He placed me carefully back in bed with pillows behind my back so that I could sit up to eat or whatever. Earlier, Corwin had given me a sponge bath and dressed me in clean pajamas. It felt great to be clean and wearing clean clothes but the effort had exhausted me and I’d fallen asleep to dream. I didn’t tell them my dreams, I tried to forget them entirely so they wouldn’t haunt my days.

Dinner was served by the girl, Roelle and she seemed to be both nervous and excited around me. She brought a tray laden with soup, sandwiches and fresh fruits, all cut up and easy to handle as if I couldn’t feed myself. Surprisingly, when I tried to lift my arm to my mouth, it shook all over the place. The harder I persisted in trying to hold it steady, the more it shook. I eyed the soup with trepidation, I really didn’t want to wear my food.

“Here, let me,” she said laughing. “I can do it faster and neater. Besides, it’s too hot and would burn you in a very bad spot.”

I looked down at my lap and agreed with her. She spooned the thick, meaty broth into my mouth. It tasted good, I wanted more and before I had realized it, I’d eaten the whole bowl. The sandwich was peanut butter and grape jelly. At the first bite, I swallowed and stared at Murphy. “You used to feed me peanut butter and grape jelly ever Friday, Murphy.”

“You remember that it was your favorite snack, Raven?”

“I remember, Murphy. No matter where we were, you would sit me down, tell me a story about Ireland and magic and feed me PBJ sandwiches until I fell asleep.”

In the morning, Roelle woke me with a cheery good morning and breakfast. She set the tray down and lifted the covers to reveal fluffy orange eggs, scones and a green tonic that the Queen had sent with orders to finish all of it.

I eyed the food, steam was coming off the hot plates and I asked if it was cooked downstairs. “Oh no, Prince Raven,” she said spooning the eggs onto a slice of toast. “The

Chefs in the palace kitchens make it, and then Prince Corwin trumps it over here. Me, too.”

“You mean you don’t sleep here?”

“No. Only Prince Corwin and Murphy. Murphy actually doesn’t sleep much. He flies overhead patrolling while you sleep and when the Prince isn’t here, Murphy is on top of the Lighthouse roof,” she explained.

“What is this place?” I asked.

“I can answer that,” Corwin said coming up the stairs. “Think of it like a bubble in space, a fold in the reality that only a few people have the key to.”

“What stops anyone else from entering here?” I returned uneasily and skeptical.

“They would have to have my Trump and the ability to walk the Pattern. Unless you can picture the Lighthouse exactly down to the finite detail, you won’t enter this place,” he explained patiently. “If you’re afraid that Webster or Mandor or Dara will find you here, it would be a billion to one chance.” He took the spoon from Roelle. “I’ll feed him, Roelle,” he said. “Dr. Flauvel will be here after he eats to check him over. Do you think you can sit up, Raven?”

“My name is Corbel, or Blackbird,” I said wearily. “Not Raven. Raven died two years ago.”

“You’re Raven, not Blackbird,” he insisted. “You are a prince of both Amber and the Courts of Chaos. You’re not a slave or a prisoner.”

“He owns my soul,” I whispered. “No matter what you say, I belong to him.”

Chapter 32

Finally the day came when I could stand on my own two feet and do my own care like pee without having to go in a bedpan or have someone wipe my ass. I wanted to climb down the spiral staircase of the lighthouse and check out the other rooms. They, being Corwin, the doctor and Murphy, would not let me walk that far.

Stubbornly, I insisted and managed to descend one whole floor. Wasn’t sure it was worth it, there was just another empty room with a shitload of leftover crap piled inside. I made a goal with myself that by the end of the week I would walk down the entire six flights and by the end of next month, climb all six stairs.

After one floor, I had to sit down and rest on the first step back, my head pounded in tandem with my heart, banging away as if it were a marching band. I was dizzy and sweaty and the look on my face dared any of them to say ‘I told you so’. My chest and side ached, too. When I lifted my pajama top, I could see the ugly puckered scars where Corwin and Random’s blades had punctured me. The chest wound was just to the right of my nipple.

Murphy touched the lash marks on my belly and his face turned to stone, his eyes gleamed red. He looked like a demon.

“Did you find the Hell Hounds?” I asked out of the blue.

“What hell hounds?” he questioned, his fangs growing as he morphed into his gargoyle form.

“The Master sent a pack to make sure I did my job, came back and to report to him,” I said.

“They’re still in Amber?” His tone was sharp.

I shrugged. “I dunno. I can’t sense them from here and I’m not certain they can’t tell where I am. Only, if they could, surely they would be here with me.”

“Are they your bodyguards?”

I snorted derisively. “Not hardly. They’ll rip me to pieces for failing the Master. When he comes to take me, I’ll try to kill myself first. If you are the friend you say you are, take off my head. He can’t bring me back if my head is gone.”

He stared at me and his stone face flashed from demon to human as emotions chased the change. “Raven, what has he done to you that death is an alternative to capture?” He was aghast and tried to hug me. I endured his touch but found no comfort in it.

“None of you understand!” I shouted. “I told you! He killed me and stole my soul! What is left is only a shell that belongs to the Master. When he comes, I will crawl back to him, I have no other choice.”

The gargoyle only stared at me and then asked if I wanted to go out on the beach for a walk before lunch. Warily, I told him I didn’t much care what he did and as for me, I was amenable to anything because basically, I had no say in anything. So that’s why we were strolling down a deserted beach on a narrow strip of sand and rocks watching the surf come in. I’d walk a few hundred feet and Murphy would shove the wheelchair under my ass when my legs would start to tremble. Needless to say, we didn’t get far.

“Raven, would you like to fly?” he asked and I stared at him, non-plussed.

“What?”

“Fly. Like we used to when you were little,” his eyes were very light and glowing.

“Away from here?” This sounded interesting, almost fun. “Yes. What do I have to do? Is it a spell?”

He wrapped his arms around me and morphed completely into his winged gargoyle form. With one swift, powerful leap, he was airborne, my weight a negligible afterthought. I wrapped my legs around his as those massive leathery wings stroked rapidly. He banked and I looked down at a toy sized lighthouse. I could feel my face stretching in an ‘O’ of wonder as he spiraled higher until all I could decipher was the sea and the land.

It was exhilarating and to my disappointment, over too soon as the rhythmic beat of his wings and my recent exercise combined to make me sleepy. My eyes closed when I so wanted them to remain open. I was halfway between slumber in that state called twilight sleep when he landed with a grunt on the top balcony of the lighthouse. He grasped the railing that circled the entire structure with his feet and climbed onto the solid grates of the flooring. The light was lit, a huge thing powered by magic and illuminated an enormous blaze throughout all nearby shadows.

“What’s it for?” I asked him and he stared at me in surprise.

“You know what a lighthouse is for!”

“I do, Murphy, but if this is a closed shadow then why the need for a light here? No one can see it,” I pointed out and he stood there with his mouth open.

“Never mind that. It’s time for your supper and bed. Aren’t you tired?”

I said all I did was rest which just made me more tired and didn’t say anything else but pondered the idea of a lighthouse standing in a place that existed nowhere else but this loop in space and yet was able to cast its beam throughout shadows. I smiled secretly and thought about what that meant as the door down to my room opened to show Corwin’s worried face.

“Murphy. We were beginning to worry. You’ve been gone for ages.”

“I took Raven for a fly-by,” he explained standing behind me and using his bulk to intimidate me to move. I stumbled forward and Corwin caught me easily.

“Whoa there, black bird,” he said and sandwiched between the two, we lock-stepped down the stairs returning to my room. The bed was turned down, clean clothes laid out and a basin of warm water, soap, washcloth and plush towels. Toothbrush, paste, deodorant and shampoo.

“Clothes? Am I going somewhere?” I questioned. Dr. Flauvel came out of the bathroom washing his hands. He greeted Corwin, Murphy and only nodded to me.

“I’m to give you a complete physical, Prince Raven. His Majesty’s orders before you stand before the Council,” he added.

“Murphy? Corwin?” I asked, my stomach in knots. I threw myself into an armchair, leaned back and closed my eyes as I rested my head on the chair back. “Is this where I plead for my life after admitting I was raised by a drunk mother and abusive father? Shall I throw myself on the mercy of the courts? Bullshit! I meant to kill the General, I was sent here to kill him. I am an assassin and refuse to deny it! Here I am, guilty as hell. So hang me.” The last few words ended with a sob which ran into hiccoughs, mumbles, grunts and sighs as my body relaxed into a deep sleep. It didn’t last long, I was shaken awake by Corwin and Murphy who had me up, dressed in sober uniform and restraints. Corwin apologized as he latched the silver cuffs on me, my hands in front so I could see that they were made of real silver and were spelled against any magic removing them.

“I’m no wizard or sorcerer,” I protested and the guard snorted in derision. Corwin murmured something about my use of spells in Rebma and the castle cliff. He grabbed my shoulder and cold chilled me to the core as the Prince Trumped all of us out of the room at Cabra to emerge in a small ante-chamber that was meant to be a holding cell off the Court Chambers. I could clearly see the King’s Council in session through the open barred door, it gave us an unimpeded view of the chamber and the scaffold in the lower bailey. I swallowed and that made the guard snicker.

“Not so brave now, are you, Black Crow?” One of the guardsmen came to the open door and addressed Corwin. “Prince Corwin, His Majesty requests the presence of the Assassin, Blackbird.”

Corwin took my arm and stood me up, my legs suddenly had no strength and I staggered a bit before they stiffened under me. “It’ll be alright, Raven,” he said quietly. I shrugged off his hand and stepped out into a large chamber with a raised dais upon which a score of men in procedural attire were seated. Dressed in official robes and wigs, with a contingent of uniformed and armed cavalry, I realized that these were part of the dead General’s forces and had come to see justice done.

There were huge windows behind the seated judges, beautiful stained glass depicting the Unicorn, the Pattern, and glorious exploits of Amber’s past kings. Armed guards covered every inch of egress, I saw loaded and cocked crossbows aimed at my chest.

Random stood and addressed me, his face stone cold, “Raven Murphy-Sines, Blackbird, you stand here before the court of Amber accused of the murder of General Gracchus, Lord Evenard. How do you plea?”

I grimaced. “Guilty. I killed him, it’s true. Hang me now and let’s get this over with.”

The Judges hissed as did the crowd that had squeezed into the available chamber seats. I thought I saw the girl, Roelle and the red-headed boy, Marcus. Murphy stood behind me

and Corwin at my right.

"I am Blackbird, King, the Assassin of the Lord of the Gray Realm and to him I owe my fealty and my life. Not you!"

"By order of this court, Raven, you have been sentenced to death," he said and I heard the girl gasp. "But, as King of Amber, I commute the sentence to life imprisonment. I'm sorry."

I felt that tingle in my bones and knew terror beyond what he could do to me. Looked up in horror as the air above my head began to glow. That ghostly wheel materialized and its voice stilled the assemblage. "Hold, King of Amber," it boomed. "It is not your right to judge the son of the King of the Courts of Chaos." Merlin appeared next and stood next to me, his hands ready with spells resting on his palms.

"Raven is mine to judge and punish, King Random," his voice stilled the courtroom and I saw the Queen in the background near the doorway closest to the window of the great dragon. I tensed and Merlin noticed, giving me a quick smile.

"Don't be afraid, Raven," he whispered.

"Afraid? I'm not scared, King. I'm eager. Eager for this to be over." I shouted out a spell and three things happened at once. My manacles burst into clay freeing me, the entire assemblage of men froze as I leapt for Vialle, Random's Queen, grasping her in my arms as the stained glass window fractured with the entrance of a great black and red dragon.

He swept up the two of us and was airborne in seconds even as my 'still' spell evaporated. I shouted as Corwin, Murphy, Random and Merlin yelled my name and the name of the Queen.

"I told you," I whispered to the dragon called Tiamont. "I am the Master's Blackbird." We were swept away on a true black beast, a King of the skies.

Chapter 33

I heard a woman's soft weeping as I twirled in the darkness. I didn't understand where I was or what was happening, just that I hurt. I hurt so bad I was reduced to a thing, a child and called out for my mummy. I heard a woman's voice call a name and it took me a long time to understand she was calling me.

"Raven. Raven. Wake up. Oh gods, are you alive, Raven? I can hear you moaning and breathing. Raven?"

Soft hands traveled up my legs to my waist, up my chest and to my face. To my arms strung overhead. "Oh my gods," she murmured. "Raven, what has he done to you?"

I didn't answer, it was the Master's voice, soothing, pleasant even baritone. No way to hear the evil it concealed. "Your Majesty. My little black crow is hanging from his wrists because he displeased me. Although he managed to kill General Gracchus and finally kidnap you, he also managed to tell both Random and Merlin my plans; get himself nearly killed and captured. He needed to be punished."

"You fiend! What did you do to him?" Her hands explored my body, found no clothing left to hide the marks of burns, lashes, cuts and bruises.

"I gave him ten Kisses of Death," the Master shrugged. "And because I no longer have

need of him, I let the Thrid have him. It seems his stay in Amber has toughened him, he's still alive."

Her hands were covered in both blood and tissue. "It's a toss up whether he lives or dies," the Master said carelessly. "Since he brought you to me, I no longer need him."

"You make the King of the Courts an enemy at great peril," she stated. Urine splattered the floor beneath me. The smell was rank and she moaned. "Cut him down. Please. Let me tend him. I'll do whatever you want."

"I don't want anything from you, Your Majesty. It's Random and Merlin I would do business with."

"Webster, treat Raven and Merlin will give you anything to save him," she came back her voice breaking. I hung near her head, blood pooling beneath me, my body chilling as my consciousness faded. The pain became a distant monster that howled just out of my reach, when it became dominant, my awareness of it became all consuming.

"I no longer need the boy. Let him rot." He said coldly.

"Please," she begged. "I'll do whatever you want."

"You'll do that anyway," he returned but his hands were at my wrists. He smelled of soap and fresh linen. When he released me, I fell to the floor at his feet, unable to feel my own hands and arms. He whispered in my ears. "I let the Thrid have you, Blackbird. Even now, their poison runs through your guts." He left us alone.

"What does that mean, Raven?" She tugged me into her lap and tried to wash my wounds. When her fingers found the blood at my backside, her keening was awful to hear and she rocked me in her arms as she understood that those creatures had raped me. I begged her to kill me, it would be more humane than to let the poison from those vile creatures eat me from the inside out. "Random will come for us," she swore. "Merlin and Corwin, too. We'll save you, Raven."

"There is no cure, Lady. It is like the bite of a basilisk. Better to die before it grows worse." I tucked my head into her breast and let the darkness fill me.

Steen entered the room and held a flask to my lips. I drank weakly and more water spilled than went down my throat. "Corbel," he said and pulled me up to lean me against the wall. I looked around; the walls were paneled, not stone and there was a rug under me. The Master had not had me thrown into his prison cells from which no one ever emerged alive. Someone had pulled a sheet around me and it was red and splotchy pink. Stuck to me as if glued on to my skin.

"The Queen?" I mumbled searching for her. "Steen, where is the Queen?"

"The Master has her in the Tower, Corbel. In comfort with a serving maid to see to her welfare. She is being treated as befits her station. What can I do to aid you?" His blue eyes looked drawn and worried. I marveled that he had enough courage to even offer to help me.

"Nothing. The Master has withdrawn his favor from me, Steen and the Thrid have fucked me. I'm poisoned and will die hence in great agony. Will you bring my blades so I may make a clean and merciful end?" I kept my gaze steady on him and he dropped his and sobbed.

"He said you would ask and I was to deny you, Corbel." He looked over his shoulder at the door. "You're in the room off the guards armory and he's told the Thrid where you are and to enjoy you with his compliments."

I keened, my hands scrabbling at him. "Please. Oh gods, please, Steen! Bring me a

blade, a piece of glass, a rope! Anything so I can end this torment!" I begged, crying. If the Master's Thrids took me one after the other, my mind would die long before my body went.

"I can't, Corbel. He would know and my life would be next. I'm not as brave as you." He put the flask to my lips again but I could no longer swallow. He bolted away from me leaving me alone.

I unwound the sheet and it was no easy task to remove the cloth stuck to my bloody flesh. As carefully as my swollen hands could, I peeled it off and tore open the wounds. My teeth ripped the material into strips and my clumsy hands braided those into a thin rope. When I tried to stand, my body betrayed me, unable to climb higher than my knees.

In all the room, there was nothing I could drape the noose over or through to either strangle myself or break my neck. When I tried to stand, I simply fell over and as I came to, the Master was seated before me, a pleased smile on his countenance. "What would you do for me so you would live, my Blackbird?"

I was speechless. I had nothing left to give him, nothing I wanted and since he no longer wanted me, had no reason to remain alive. His eyes were alive and fairly dancing with excitement as he drank in my pain and despair.

"Master, without you, I have no purpose in this existence, no reason to live. You have taken my blood, sweat, fear, hopes and dreams. Even my memories and sense of self. Without you, I am nothing. End me now and let me rot in peace. This is all I can ask of you, not for mercy for I deserve none nor expect any. You have taught me that. As a tool that has served you, I ask only that you put this broken and useless tool aside and seek another."

He clapped his hands. "Oh, what a performance, my black bird of despair." He leaned into my face. "Do you remember I spelled you with the Death Abeyance Conjunction? It is still upon you. Unfortunately, I never learned how to reverse it. Which means you can't die. Suffer to the point of death but are unable to step one inch beyond. Which brings me some interesting experiments I can enact upon you. Your suffering...excites me, Corbel. I find myself quite aroused by your torment."

He dropped his clothes and his body was lean and powerful, his erection a sight I averted my eyes from. "Master," I pleaded and crawled away from him but he followed, tormenting me with every word as he described what he had and would do to me. "Master," I said as I rolled onto my back and stared into his gray eyes. "If you fuck me now, the poison from the Thrids will enter you, too."

He stopped dead and regarded my broken body. "Yes, there is that. However, my black bird, I lied. I never let them do more than beat you and taste your blood. So, I can finally taste your forbidden fruit as I have dreamed about these last two years."

"Master, please," I begged him, tears running down my cheeks. "Don't do this to me."

"How can you stop me?" he advanced on me and touched my face, cupping my chin with both hands and dragging me forward so that his lips touched mine. He tasted me and I tasted the corruption of his evil and the staleness of cigarette smoke. "Bite me and I will whip the hide off your back, Corbel," he threatened. "Turn over." He reinforced his command by flipping me on my stomach and I shrieked as I kicked at him. He held me down with his body, his sweat sliding against my flesh like the slime of a snail. I fought him, fought until the very air in my lungs was gone, every muscle stretched to the breaking point and when I could fight no more, I went away in my head and did not wake until someone threw cold water in my face.

Steen was the first face I saw when I opened my eyes and he was wiping a soft wet

cloth across my back. I was lying on the table in the Still Room on top of a soft towel with my head turned towards the door and my arms hanging off the edge. I groaned, a soft hiss and he stopped stroking. “Corbel?” he asked in surprise. “You’re awake?”

My first words made no sense and he asked me to repeat them. I swallowed and licked my lips, my mouth and tongue were sore, there were teeth marks on top of my lip. “What happened?”

“You don’t remember?” he asked carefully.

“Where am I?”

“The Still room. Master Lucian carried you here three days ago. I’ve been taking care of you since then.” He studied me very carefully as his hands trailed down my back towards my buttocks. I lunged as he touched me, screamed and flailed at him yet he held me down with no effort. “Corbel, easy,” he soothed. “I am not going to hurt you, or...touch you anywhere like that.”

“What did he do to me?” I wailed. “Did he let the Thrid fuck me or didn’t he? It’s all mixed up in my head, I don’t remember anything past him beating me.”

“You’ve been raving out of your head for the last three days, Corbel. Master Lucian has had me taking care of you since. He’s been coming to see you every day, has ordered us to feed you and see to your health. He even called a healer for you.”

“Why?”

“Because he told us you are his new bed toy,” Steen whispered and I stared at him in horror. I tried to get up, my aim to dive through the window for I knew the fall from six stories up would smash my head to mush and even his magic could not bring me back from that. Steen saw my intent in my face and tied my wrists to the table legs, apologizing as he did so. “The Master warned us you would try to kill yourself. Corbel, think, if you were to succeed, it would be our lives too. I can give you yarrow root, the Herb Woman said it would blank your memories so whatever he does to you will be forgotten and he won’t know you took it.”

“I would rather die,” I sobbed. “I swear by the Unicorn, he will not take me again.”

Steen shook his head. “The more you fight, the more he enjoys it, Corbel. I watched him, the moment you stopped resisting, he became impotent and only beat you until his arm grew too tired to continue and then he let the Thrid Captain beat you.”

“He made you watch?” I was aghast, trembling with the shame of it.

“He made all of us watch, even the Queen, she fainted, Corbel and he made her stay conscious the whole time. She will kill the Master if she can, I saw true hatred in her eyes.

I paused, confused. Was I the only one who knew Vialle was blind? If so, I wondered if I could use that to aid in her escape. Trembling, I took out the idea of planning to rescue her and cursed myself for a suicidal fool with no chance in hell of succeeding, but without it, I had no other reason to keep breathing.

Chapter 34

I dreaded the Master’s return and yet, he did not make an appearance and that made it worse. Every time I heard Steen’s footsteps approaching, I went out of my mind only to be

relieved when I realized it was the manservant. He washed me, put soothing unguents on my back, ass and stomach and when they had healed enough, a soft woolen shift over me that he promised would not stick to the wounds. He fed me and took care of my need to relieve myself, all without complaint or disgust. When I asked him why, he said because the Master had ordered it and because he remembered how it felt.

“You?” I asked around the rim of a crystal goblet filled with watered wine. I was barely conscious and thought he might be a dream.

“Did you think you were the first and only one, Corbel?” He shook his head. “The Master found me in Bergman, I was the youngest son of one of the Golden Treaty Diplomats. Webster took me, raped me before my twelfth birthday, did it for a year and then trained me, sold me to a brothel in Denaria. When I was sufficiently broken, meek and skilled as both a valet and a catamite, he brought me back to serve in his house.” He lifted his silken tunic and the scars on his chest and back were faded white lines. Burned into his shoulder were the words PROPERTY OF THE MASTER-LW. “That’s not all he did to me, Corbel.” he smiled sadly. “He took my manhood from me so that I can never feel pleasure again.”

Instinctively, I cupped my balls and paled.

“I would have killed myself, too. But the Master had put a geas on me that prevents me from harming myself or others. So don’t worry when I touch you in those places, it means only that I am treating your hurts, it means naught to me.”

“I’m sorry, Steen,” I cringed. “Did he send you out to kill for him, too?”

“No,” he said and now I saw tears in his eyes. “He sent me out to whore for him.” Gently, he put down the crystal goblet and picked up my plate. “Another bite?”

Sickened, unable to eat, I shook my head no and stared at my limited view from the Still Room’s table. All I could see was the door, the far wall and the row of windows where freedom teased me. He traced my line of sight and said softly, “there is no escape, Corbel. I know. I tried myself. For twenty years, I never made it farther than the Thrids. He let them have me.”

“But, the poison from their seed---it’s toxic!” I protested.

He nodded. “So they say, it ate my insides but I survived. One of the few humans ever to be fucked by a score of Thrids and survive.”

“You didn’t go insane?” I marveled that he had called me brave.

“For three years, I lived in the kennels with his hounds until my wits returned. The Master does not easily give up his slaves,” he said dryly.

“Will you help me, Steen?”

He shook his head. “My advice is to pretend to enjoy it and he’ll lose interest quickly. Fight him and he’ll enjoy it more and won’t stop pursuing you.” He picked up the dishes and set them aside to restrain me loosely before leaving me on my own.

“Steen,” I called twisting my head so I could watch him leave. “Steen, please. A knife, bring me a knife.”

He shut the door so quietly, it was as if a ghost had slipped through but I heard no latch of a lock or spell uttered to seal the door. Of the spells the Master had taught me, several would aid me in releasing the bindings on me. The problem I encountered first was that my body refused to obey me, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t raise myself up to get off the table. Rocking was beyond my scope of movement and the more I frustrated myself trying, the more my muscles cramped up. Finally, I gave over to sleep and let my

subconscious work freely.

The next person in the room was the cleaning crew. Youngsters not much younger than me, two boys who had that downy cheeked look of the pre-teen, armed with buckets, mops and brooms. They skittered nervously around the table and came no closer. As if they were afraid I would attack or contaminate them.

“The Queen,” I asked, my voice a rasp. I was very thirsty. They stopped sweeping to murmur quietly to one another. “You won’t be punished for talking to me, will you? Please, tell me how the Queen fares?”

The younger boy had grayish green eyes and dark brown hair, his brother was taller by a head. I didn’t know them but the Master had scores of servants I’d not had contact with. “What are your names, boys?”

“Grelor and Brinn,” the taller said. “Is it true you rode a dragon and killed the King of Amber?”

“I rode the dragon, ‘tis true but King Random is alive and well,” I sighed.

“He’s declared war on the Master and shadow worlds that back him. Spies have reported a massive army on their way here. Led by a giant on a black demon that shoots flames from his nostrils,” Brinn reported. “The Prince and the King of the Courts ride with him.”

“They come to avenge the Queen’s honor and rescue her,” I said and winced as my pain escalated.

“Not rescue you, Blackbird?” He touched me and even that innocent hand on my skin made my flesh cringe in terror.

“Please don’t touch me,” I mumbled. “I can’t stand it. Will you bring me a blade?”

His eyes turned round and his skin whitened to pale gray. “No-o,” he gasped. “If we did that, the Master would have our heads.” He turned and furiously attacked the floor as if a year’s worth of grime was stuck to the tiles. The pair spent an hour cleaning until the room was spotless, even emptying the chamber pot Steen had helped me use. I watched despondently until my neck ached from twisting and they were at the door, packing up their dirty tools. At the last, Grelor ran back towards me, bent down and whispered in my ear, “the Queen fares well, my sister Nellie serves her.”

“Thank you,” I whispered back and the sound of the door slamming shut was gravid. I turned my head into my bicep and dozed.

I knew it was he by his scent even before he stroked his palms down my backbone and cupped the mounds of my ass. He felt the sudden ripple of my flesh as I cringed from him.

“You tasted divine, Corbel,” he said into my ear. “I’ve experienced every type of sex there is and none has ever given me the same satisfaction as I achieved with you. Don’t worry, you’re safe from the Thrid, I would never let them touch you and ruin my sex slave.”

“And what will you say to Random and Julian when they stand outside your gates?” I returned. He looked startled as I had the nerve to caution him.

“I thought you suitably chastened and meek, Corbel. Do you wish for another lesson?” He laughed as if my defiance delighted him. His whip was coiled at his side and he stroked it lovingly.

“If my words would incite you to kill me, I would shout them to the world, Master. But, it matters not, you will have your way no matter what I say or do so fuck me until your prick falls off.” I closed my eyes and waited patiently for the assault to begin and after five

minutes when nothing happened, opened them to find the room empty and alone.

Steen came in later, to feed me supper and there was a huge bruise on his face, one eye nearly swollen shut, black, blue and purple as blood pooled beneath the skin.

“Who did that to you, Steen?” I gaped.

“The Master hit me when I inquired about you, Corbel. He seemed...perturbed.” He untied me, swiveled me around and upright in a chair near the windows. “Don’t even think about it,” he warned as I looked to see if one was open. “I will use the stun rod on you if you so much as lift a leg.”

“He wanted to fuck me again, Steen and I said go ahead. Do it and get it over with. He couldn’t get hard and after awhile, he left,” I said in wonder. “I’m sorry if he took it out on you.”

He turned to face me head on and I saw undisguised rage in his whole body as tears slipped out to run silently down his cheeks. “He killed the boys,” he growled. “He hung them from their heels and sliced every bit of skin off each child and fed it to his hounds. He cut off their penises and threw them to the Thrids. Then, he went to their muscles. They lived almost to the point where their bones showed. He let the Thrids eat the rest, they cracked their bones to get at the marrow, Corbel. Those beasts did the same to their brains.”

“Why?” My heart stopped in fear of what he would say.

“You know why, Corbel,” he returned. “The older boy tried to smuggle a note from the Queen to you.”

“I swear I never said for them to do that!” I protested. “I asked only how the Queen fared.”

He sobbed. “They were my boys, Blackbird. The only children I would and could ever have.”

I was silent but made a promise that I would not die until my hand took the Master’s heart.

Chapter 35

Steen’s next appearance was with the woman who held the household keys and distributed the linens. She stared at my near naked body and pursed her lips. “The Master said for silks and linens, velvet doublet?” she asked. “I’ll stick to his wounds and removing the clothing will make him bleed ruining the material.”

“It is the Master’s wish,” he said woodenly. She nodded.

“So be it. Dress him as befits a prince, he said,” she agreed. “Although he looks like a prince of death. Is he still crazed in the head? Will he fight me when I dress him?”

“The Master will dress him and no, he won’t fight you. He can’t and he has learned that it gets him nothing but pain and torture.”

“No one of us believed he would survive this last...lesson. Never have I seen the Master so incensed. I’m to make him presentable for this evening’s Banquet. The Barons and Lords of the War are joining his Lordship for dinner. Also, the Queen. Now, there’s a true lady. Would that all his...guests... acted like her.”

“Steen,” I whispered, in my head it was a shout. “Give me something for the pain. It

consumes me,” I begged. My very nerve endings seemed to be on fire yet I could not escape into unconsciousness.

“The Master said you were not to have anything, Corbel. I am sorry,” his face was stoic but as she turned to leave, the housekeeper pulled out a twist of paper and handed it to the manservant.

“Tis poppy dust,” she whispered, her lips still. “A pinch on his lips or nose will ease his pain.” She coughed. “I will return an hour before the Banquet to bring the garments and sew them on. See that he is bathed, dried and awake.”

Steen bowed and she departed. Once she was gone, he carefully untwisted the paper and poured a grayish white powder between my lips. Gritty and bitter, it tasted harsh and my lips, gums and tongue went numb. My face burned from my neck to my hairline and I sagged onto the table. I was awash in a sea of numbness and didn’t care that he rolled me onto my stomach tugging the silken shift off my body.

Despite his previous assurances of not sticking, the material had adhered to the more weeping of my sores and tore scabs loose as he removed the thin garment. It didn’t hurt, I was deliciously numb all over. Once I was naked, he brought a basin of hot, scented water and carefully washed me from head to toes. The water that ran off the table to pool at his feet ran red with blood.

He dried me with soft wool and rubbed oil into my skin, treating me as if I were a cherished doll. I dreamed I was back at Cabra and opened my eyes when Steen gasped in alarm. “What?” I asked sleepily. I raised my head and stared. Just as suddenly as it appeared, my prison in the Lighthouse disappeared and we were in the Master’s still room on the table.

“Corbel,” he whispered, hope in his eyes for the first time I had seen it. “Corbel, can you do that spell again?”

“T isn’t a spell,” I wondered. “I won’t leave without the Queen.”

“How did you do that?”

“Steen, if you tell the Master, I swear, I’ll kill you. I won’t rest until you’re dead,” I threatened.

“For twenty years I have suffered, boy. Do you think I would throw away my last chance of escape?”

“Somehow, you must get me to the Queen or the Queen to me,” I said. “Then, I can bring us all through to Cabra.”

“The Lighthouse of Cabra,” his eyes glowed. “I remember it from when I was a child.”

“You’ve been there?”

“Of course. You have to sail across the Straits past the Lighthouse to reach Bergman. Don’t you know any geography of Amber?”

“No. The boy I used to be lived on a shadow world they tell me. When I died and the Master brought me back, he took all my memories.”

“Who were you, Corbel?”

“He said my name was Raven, Prince of the Courts of Chaos, son of King Merlin and grandson of Prince Corwin of Amber.”

His face reflected shock and he was speechless. “What power does the Master wield that he dares to do such things to the Court’s son and Amber’s Queen? What demons does he possess?” His hands trembled and he spilled the basin of water at his feet. In his haste to leave, he left unfettered and with the windows open. I waited for a few moments and when

no one came back up, spelled the door locked and sat up. Slowly, drunkenly because I was stoned out of my head. For the first time in a week, I was able to stand and after a fashion, walk. The wall held me upright it's true but I did make it to the window without falling flat on my face. I realized I was naked and blood still dripped from the deeper cuts and lashes yet I couldn't feel it. I pushed the window open wider and craned my neck around until I found the correct tower. Pointed my finger and uttered the spell that projected my image where my fingers aimed.

The tower was richly furnished and as my double solidified in the Queen's chamber, I could see as well as if it were really me inside. A circular room with a thick stuffed divan, black four-poster bed and canopy, a table, mirror and chair where a lady could do her toilette. All done in deep rose and blue. A thick carpet covered the entire stone floor save for in front of a marble fireplace busily devouring chunks of ash and oak. Long tapestries of silk covered both the doorways and windows. I stood in one, holding aside the heavy rose colored damask shot with gold thread.

The air smelled of heavy, sickly sweet roses when I knew she much preferred pine and sea-breezes. She was sitting at the make-up table brushing her hair, no sign of her maid, Nellie but I supposed she was probably attending to her brothers burials.

"Vialle," I whispered and she turned her head towards me, leapt to her feet, dropping her silver brush.

"Raven!"

"I haven't much time, Lady. I have discovered I can reach Cabra. However, I need to be in the same place as you when I attempt to leave. And Steen would come with us."

"Are you not here now, Raven?" she reached out a hand to touch me but I was not in a corporeal form. "Are you a ghost come to taunt me? I hear you but I do not hear your heartbeat or your breaths."

"I am a doubler spell," I explained. "Meant to confuse an enemy. It is one of a few the Master taught me."

"He is not your master, Raven!" she burst out. "As Random and Corwin explained to me, once you have traveled the Pattern, you are blessed with certain powers. One of which is the ability to draw a place and trump to it. I, unfortunately, cannot do that."

"Does the...Master, Webster, know you are blind, my Lady?"

"I kept it from him only a little while, he realized it when I tried to comfort you and treat your wounds. Raven, how are you? Are you...sane? I heard stories..."

"My mind is functioning, lady. Whether it continues to do so coherently," I shrugged. "Right now, I'm leaning out the still room window stoned out of my mind. The...he is planning a Banquet tonight with his cronies and both of us are the guests of honor."

"I know. He wants me to wear a gown of his choice and I refused. I'm wearing what I came in. Can't you call that dragon to break us out of here?"

"Tiamont answers to him, not me, lady. It was his orders that he carried us off."

"He said he gave you to the Thrid--."

"He lied. It is his joy to make me hopeless in despair and wallow in my emotions," I swallowed as I thought of how she had been forced to witness my degradation. She sensed my thoughts.

"Raven, rape is no different for a man than a woman. It is power over the individual. Can a child stop a mountain from falling on his head? No. Nor could you, wounded and near death fight a man both older, stronger and more vicious."

“More vicious than the assassin, Blackbird?” I laughed bitterly, nearly in tears.

“Raven, you are not that creature. Underneath the shell he has put on you, you are nothing but a gentle 15 year old boy looking for a father and a mother who would love him for the sweet, brave, intelligent child he is.”

I was sucked back into my other self as the spell broke with the first hand on the locked door. Shouts reverberated along with the furious pounding on the thick planks and that spell burst. Servants, guards, Steen, the housekeeper and the Master nearly fell into the room as the door gave way. Black looks marred his face as he saw me leaning against the wall by the open window. First, he seized me by the throat and smashed his palm into my chest. Fire erupted and drove away the numbness. I cried out in agony as he flung his other hand towards Steen. I saw him picked up and tossed out into the hallway, he didn't utter a sound as his body twisted around the stone pillars.

“Master!” I bleated. “Stop! Steen did nothing wrong! I used the spells you taught me to get loose!”

He forced me down to my knees and bent my head to his feet, tore the whip from a guard's hand and laid into me. By the second, I knew it was the Kiss of Death wielded by pure rage and he used the flagellum, the whip designed with steel barbs and teeth. Four and I was flat on my face in a pool of blood, in so much pain I could not breathe. As his arm rose for the seventh time, it did not descend. The Baron Resonant held him back, his face gravid with disgust.

“Would you strip the hide from his back, Lucian? Will you present a dead body as a trophy to incense the King of Amber? Kill him and neither King nor Court will ever stop hunting you, not stop destroying this realm and all of us. Is it not enough that you have stolen his queen and Heir, raped the boy and made him a slave and a murderer? Do you think he will die for you now? You have destroyed and thrown away your most valuable weapon.”

Hands reached under and lifted me. The faces were pale blurs, so very far away. I was yet again dying and welcomed it. Felt the spell that kept me from the final release kick in and hold my weakening heart in thrall. I tried to say thank you but my words were whispers on a silent breath. They carried me somewhere, to hell I think but it was too full so I came back to the top of the tower where they laid me out and let the ravens peck at my flesh until the bones were laid bare.

Chapter 36

“Hush, my dear boy, hush,” a sweet voice soothed and the crying child I heard ceased its fretful wailing. “I know it hurts but I must pick out the dirt and torn flesh or it will fester. My Lady, do you have more of that poppy dust? It's worn off and I still have over half his back to do. Gods of Oberon, bone is showing in places. The shock alone will kill him.” I could not see. The only senses I had that worked were my ears and my smell. The scent of diseased and bloody flesh contrasted with the sickly stench of attar of roses. I thought I must be dead midst the funeral flowers. I tried to feel for the sides of grave dirt and my hands would not move, they were bound to something below me as I lay on my belly. My

cheek was pressed into a pillow. Gently, I bit it and tasted clean linen and feathers.

She touched me and I screamed at the fury of the pain yet all that came out was a mewl like a baby lamb. Something thin and flexible was placed inside my mouth and air puffed through it. Gritty powder coated my gums and the world receded from my awareness.

Days became nights, turned into weeks where I wandered in a cave of torments. My body was on fire, my skin eating itself, my very bones as brittle as May Day ice.

I would hear a man and woman shouting at each other over my head and the pain would escalate until I was driven mad by it. He would come in and sit with me, pick up my hand and kiss the palm. Promise me the world if I would return to it but all I wanted was to die.

She would take me in her arms, careful not to touch those places that the fire lived in and rock me to sleep. She sang to me and told me stories of a gargoyle and a unicorn. I believed neither nor did I believe in happy endings.

The door rebounded off the wall and booted feet hurried in. The Lady stood up, her hand on my shoulder as I lay in the crib made expressly to keep me from falling out of bed.

“The Master says pack your essentials. His, too,” the guard announced. “He’s moving to his headquarters behind the army.”

“I take it the Amber Forces are approaching?” she questioned.

“He said hurry or he’ll make it worse on the crow.”

“Will you send me help or must I carry it all myself?”

“One bag and a cart to carry him,” he replied. I heard the sounds of packing and she tucked another set of sheets and blankets on me. I lay under a sheet on my belly with only a thin strip across my genitals. Nothing else could I bear against my tortured flesh.

“I will need drugs to keep him quiet and out of pain. If he hurts, he will moan and yell, not a good thing on a forced retreat.”

“If you don’t keep him quiet, we’ll gag him,” he threatened. “And it’s not a retreat.”

“If you gag him, he’ll suffocate.”

“That’s your problem,” he was surly.

“Raven,” she said in my ear. “You must be quiet or you’ll be punished. Do you understand?”

More men entered the room and lifted me onto a stretcher, I cried out as they jostled my back. Muffled the next cries. “Quiet as a mouse in the churchyard,” I sobbed. “The gargoyles eat mice. Oh, I wish I were in the cells now, Murphy. It hurts too much to bear!”

“I know, beloved,” she whispered. “For my sake, you must hush and endure it. Remember, Raven, the Lighthouse waits for us.”

“Light thickens and the crow, Makes wind to the rooky wood,” I said in a sibilant whisper.

“Do you understand, Raven? If you shout at the wrong time, we could be found and attacked. I don’t want to gag you, you’re having enough trouble breathing,” she worried.

“Death has conquered me,” I answered sagely. “He took me and threw me back. I can only suffer, there’s no end for me.”

“He’s talking nonsense,” the guard said roughly.

“He’s out of his mind with pain and fever,” she protested. “I’ll keep him quieted, you just get us where we’re going!”

I swayed and dipped down a long tunnel out into the open air in the gray skies. Was placed inside a box on wheels with the lady at my side. We bounced and I bit my lip to keep

from crying out as the movements jarred and pained me. By the time they stopped, I was once again insensible and she let me lay.

Vialle woke me to pass a flask of water down my throat. I fought her until her repeated urgent whispers told me it was drugged with more pain killers. “We’re halfway to Epping Wood,” she said and I remembered thinking should I know that place but she added further, “at least, that’s what Steen said.”

Somewhere, inside my tortured mind, I was glad that Steen was with us and not dead. I thought he was dead, I had seen his body hit stone with the finality of death. “Steen?” I questioned just above a whisper. “Is Steen hurt? I didn’t mean for him to get punished. Is he alright?” I asked everyone I saw, everyone who stuck their head in the wagon to stare at Amber’s Queen and the Master’s Blackbird brought low.

“Hush, Raven,” the pretty green lady soothed, brushing my forehead with cool hands. “Look at me, my dear son.” I stared into her green eyes and knew she could not see me so I raised my hand and a skeleton of a claw came up instead. She took it and pressed it into her cheek. “Long ago when the world was all under sea,” she said in a tone not unlike a melody. “There lived a wee boy who had seaweed for his locks of hair and eyes the pearly pink of the abalone. He played hopscotch with the giant clams and rode sea horses in races that he always won. His name was Erebnor and he was as spoiled as any prince-ling ever born.

“Now, his parents who were the king and queen of the Sea warned him that he could not take for granted that everything in the vast oceans would love or even like him.

“So, he charmed his way across the ocean kingdoms and said, ‘see, King Father and Queen Mother. I am be-loved by all I greet. The Kraken adore me, the giant whales give me rides upon their backs and the great sharks let me scratch their bellies!’ Still, his parents warned him and in his blithe ignorance, he traveled far until the ocean floor led to a great light over his head. Of course, he had to explore this and presently, he had his first sight of the other world’s sunlight and the immense glowing orb we call the sun.

“And being young, foolish and full of himself, Erebnor came out of the sea’s embrace to walk upon the sandy beaches for which he had no words. He found the sunshine exhilarating, unaware that it was drying out his skin, burning the delicate flesh of his eyes. Nor did he realize that men lived upon the land for he had only seen their drowned bodies and bones as they fell to the ocean’s floor.

“Erebnor went right up to the first man he saw and smiled his most charming smile, introduced himself and the man saw only a disgusting fanged sea creature that he promptly pierced through the middle with his harpoon.

“Erebnor died on the sand and the fisherman brought his catch back to his village to show the townspeople what manner of sea monster had threatened and almost eaten him. When they were done with his baked flesh, they threw his bones back into the sea where they drifted down to the lonely depths where his mother and father found them and recognized his fate.”

The driver and guards who rode alongside said dryly, “that’s a horrible story.”

“You were expecting the Little Mermaid?” Vialle snorted elegantly. “Ah, he’s nearly asleep.”

“Is he dying like they say? He really defied the Master and tried to protect Steen?”

“He is forever dying,” she said sadly. “That...monster can torture him to the point of death over and over again yet he can’t die.”

The guard lowered his voice, his eyes lowered in disgust. "The Master...used him?"

Vialle spat, her voice seethed with hatred. "He raped him, raped a boy too young to have even experienced love for a woman. Worse than anything I've ever seen. He's bled for three days from that alone. There are places on his back and buttocks where the bone shows through, he used a whip I wouldn't have used on a direwul. He's been tortured and abused and yet he worried more about a man who aided that fiend than he did about himself."

"Is it true he is Random's Heir?"

"Yes," the Queen spoke so quietly I barely heard her. "Until we have children of our own, Random has proclaimed Raven as his Heir."

The sound of horns broke in the distance and the wagon jolted as the animals reached a faster gait. Voices shouted and pierced my delirium.

"Forward, double time!"

"Bring the wagons forward to the lead! Cavalry emplacements to the rear and both flanks! I want the Griffons and the Wyverns scouting ahead!"

"Sergeant, a squad to protect the Queen and see to it that the wagon reaches Epping Wood and the Palisade before nightfall, the Marshall of Arden is only a day behind us."

"Kennel Master, have the hell hounds leashed and ready at dusk, inform the Thrids and the Weilor handlers to patrol if we are still on the march."

The wagon swayed violently back and forth, the very same motion that made me so ill on the Mercat. My belly undulated in noisome response and I vomited copious amounts of frothy bile. On my belly, it reduced me to laying in it and the smell made my caretakers swallow in sympathy. "Nellie!" she called and it was one of the guards that replied.

"She's ridden ahead, My Lady, to make ready a place for the both of you."

"He's sick to his stomach. You must slow down," Vialle ordered.

"Not unless you want the enemy cavalry firing on your...rear," he returned. "Advance scouts are engaging Lord Webster's army. We're taking heavy casualties and the Lord is leaving his wounded behind."

"How many does Amber have?"

"Over a hundred thousand," he swallowed.

"And Webster?"

"Between the Barons and the lords of the Gray Realm, nearly the same number of men. Plus the Magic creatures."

"What mystery force does he hold in reserve that he dare to wage war on Amber?" she asked.

"I do not know, Your Majesty, save that the Barons do not fear losing, not even when they heard what Webster had done to the boy and taken you." He hesitated. "I will see you and the Prince safe to the Palisade, Majesty."

"I would be grateful if you found Steen and my maid, Nellie, too."

"Aye, Mum."

I heard the sound of running hoof-beats and she wiped my face, trying to get me to keep something down without up-chucking. If I could have moved, I would have tossed and turned. Instead, I cried between bouts of emesis which only made the oozing lacerations on my back hurt worse. I screamed for my mother, I cursed the gods and the Master, I implored fate and witches in general to deliver me from the results of that cursed spell. I prayed for death, I longed for it with the passion of the most devout flagellant yet it

was denied me.

Vialle cried as my suffering continued. If she could have ended my life, I believed she would have done that for me.

Chapter 37

The wagons pulled into a fortified stockade with a well defended castle hewn out of a granite mountain. I didn't see it but I overheard the Captain of the Guard describing it for the Queen. She was the first one settled in a secure tower and she made sure I was brought with her. Her maid Nellie and Steen met us in the open courtyard. He assigned four men to carry the stretcher with me on it up the spiral flight of stairs to the Queen's bower. The windows were barred, I did not see them but one of the men mentioned it to Vialle and she told me. Made sicker by the constant motion of the running cart animals, I lay nearly comatose until a man's hands deposited me on a bed and tried to remove the coverings on me. I fought. Feebly, but viciously until Vialle eased me with her voice.

Once settled in, she dosed me with something for pain and nausea before seeing to her own needs. The fire was going briskly, food was making its way into the room and someone tried to feed me. "Leave him be, Nellie," Vialle said. "If he will eat, it will only be a few bites. Perhaps toast and tea. He suffered terrible motion sickness and nearly threw up his insides. Some peppermint and chamomile tea would do him a world of good."

A younger, lighter voice agreed. "I will see to it, My Lady."

"A wreath of flowers on his grave, Proclaim his glory to the world," I said and the lady asked me what I'd said.

When I spoke again, she said, "Raven, I can't understand you. Speak slowly, clearly."

"Brothers in death we are," I sighed and tried to sit up. Since I was on my belly, it necessitated rolling over and I made it all the way onto my right side. Several hands eased me down and I whined I wanted to get up, go for a walk and pee. It took only one of them to force me back into a prone position. "It's the pit of hell," I complained bitterly. "Too hot. Charge the place with a bucket of snowballs."

"Raven, go to sleep. You need to rest. Nellie, can you ask the resident healer for a sleeping draught? He's fighting too much to get any rest."

A girl's voice, clear and sweet. "They're treating the wounded, My Lady but I can go ask for something from the apothecary."

"Damn you, Galyon. I must rise to fight the dragon!" I cried. "Yonder lies the Lighthouse, its beams shine throughout the world!"

"Raven, quiet," the green lady cursed me and held my chin in a grip an iron man could not break. "Nellie, go before his words condemn us all."

"Yes, Mistress." Her footsteps were pitter-pats or rain on the roof, hoof beats down the bridge of memories. I cried and fingers dug at the bedding piled under me. I was afraid and couldn't remember why. Tossed my head, tried to turn over and listened to scraps of conversations.

The Fifth Cohort met Julian's force head on and only pushed them back when the Gray Lord joined the battle. His spells sent the navies backwards in a rout.

Random's cavalry is fast approaching. Golden Circle Treaty signers have sent a legion each but won't reach the front for three more days.

"The Master comes!

"Steen, hold him so I can pour this down his throat. Easy, I don't want him to choke."

Warm, spicy stuff. The mead of life served by a Viking maid and Odin's right had. I swallowed and a gentle fire started in my belly. "Is it soup yet?" I asked. "Can you hear me now? Peter Pan hates Captain Hook. WHOA, that was some good shit you dropped on me, Perry."

I let my head drop and giggled as the drug induced euphoria took over. A figure leaned over mine and kissed me on the lips, I smelled bayberry and cologne, ashes and male sweat. Gagged and turned my head away from the feel of soft velvet, leather and the hilt of a sword. "Murphy?" I reached out a hand expecting to feel cool stone flesh and instead, felt rock hard muscles and sweaty clothes.

"How are you, my sweet pet?" The Master stroked my back, his fingers digging into the sores and causing the pain to reach beyond the hold of the pain killers.

"Your Majesty, how does he fare?" He let his finger reach my buttocks and in the sudden quiet, the lady slapped his hand away.

"Not one hair on his head shall you touch while I have anything to say, My Lord Webster," Vialle spat. "I may be blind but I am not helpless. Besides, he has been puking all afternoon and is delirious."

"Vialle," he started.

"Queen Vialle or your Majesty," she returned haughtily and I saw her glowing as if lit by fire from within. I thought she was priming to use some sort of magic. Dragged my wits together enough so that I could converse rationally and reasonably clear. "It's alright, Vialle. He can't hurt me any more than he already has done. What do you want, Father of Lies?"

"To see you, my beautiful slave."

"You see me. See what your love has done to me," I retorted. "I don't need any more of your so-called devotion." Vialle hissed and the hand on my hip felt odd, as if the skin morphed to a leathery texture. My eyes wavered and I could swear his form changed to a different man, shorter, broader with a decided resemblance to my father. I blinked and the Master returned, he pressed his hands on my deepest wounds, enjoying my muffled intake of pain.

"Steen, see to it that Corbel is moved to my room," he ordered and Vialle attacked him, fists and teeth, spitting curses and spells that he countered with a laugh.

"Vialle," I managed. "Stop. I will go with him. There's no need to put yourself into danger because of me. I belong to the Master, my body and mind are his to do as he sees fit."

"Raven?" she whispered in shock.

I smiled sadly. "Corbel, my Queen. Corbel, the Blackbird."

Steen and two of his guards picked me up and nearly dropped me as their hands encountered the bloody mess that was my back. Webster ignored their protests and took me from them, carrying me as if I were a child, his arms tucked under my butt and shoulders. I could not bear to look into his eyes, they gleamed with triumph as he walked effortlessly to his chambers.

Kicking open the double doors of a master suite, he ordered servants to bring a meal

for two and the finest brandy in the place before he set me down on the high backed four poster bed carved with nymphs and unicorns. He put me on my back, knowing it caused me greater pain, went to the fireplace and poked at the logs making sparks jump out onto the steel firescreen. "I know you came from a shadow world called earth, Corbel," he said. "From the years 2013, 14."

I attempted to find a comfortable spot where the pain and the heat did not bother me. When he turned back to approach me, his eyes lingered on my chest and the bulge in my groin. I cupped my dick and he took my hand away.

"I once thought to make you like Steen," he smiled. "But in my selfish subconscious, I always knew this day would happen. Fuck Amber, Random, Corwin and Merlin. And fuck you, I shall."

I tried to lie quietly and endure but the first touch of his bare flesh on mine sent me into a frenzy where I fought him despite my intentions.

"Scream, my Blackbird," He held the nape of my neck as he pushed me deeper into the mattress. "Scream out your anger and pain, it but makes me harder and come more." He shouted and his seed spilled out, ran down my legs until I thought I would drown in it.

"You're so tight and dry, my love. I find you quite enchanting, your blood makes me wild with lust." He rode me all night and the blood from his assault stained the mattress, his hands and his belly as if he were painted red by Mars, the god of war. By then, I no longer had the breath to complain, he fucked a piece of meat, not a man or even a boy.

"Corbel," he called, wrapping a robe around his bloodstained form. He poured a snifter of some fine liquor, flipped me over and raised me up by leaning me against his own body. "Corbel, drink." He put the crystal goblet to my lips and the scent of fine Amberian brandy assailed my nose, slid down my scream coarsened throat to puddle in my belly like liquid fire. "Corbel, do you hear me?"

I blinked slowly. "Master, I was going to escape you."

"I know, Corbel. You were going to trump out with the Queen and Steen."

"Yes, Master," I said dully. "Master, will you keep me as your whore?"

"Forever and always," he answered.

"You will not let me die?"

"Alas, I cannot. The spell I placed on you has no reversal, Blackbird. It has changed your blood and your organs. I could even cut off your head and you would recover from that. There is no escape for you."

"Not fire, Master?"

"Not fire, cremation, dismemberment, explosion or any other death, Corbel. Once you walked the Pattern, you bound the spell to your very soul and now, I hold that power taken from you. One day, Corbel, you will love me and that day, I will give you what you want freely."

"Master, I would sleep now with your permission," I begged humbly. He gave me more brandy and then dipped his finger in the ruby liquid wiping it on my opened lashes. It burned with a sharp, eager sting and he licked at it, blood and liquor mixing in a bouquet he found to be intoxicating. He slept, his arms wrapped around me, his legs pinioning me so that even if I could or wanted to, I could not move. He slept the sleep of the just while I wished for the sleep of death.

Chapter 38

I woke crying and as soon as I realized it was me, I choked back the tears and attempted to pull myself from under his nakedness. I succeeded in shifting my torso out from under him and dried blood on me and the sheets crackled. My entire body was on fire, I could feel each separate pain as one massive pulse of agony that made me breathe in short sips, bite my lips to hold in the mewling cries. He groaned and rolled over, leaving me free from his oppressive weight and presence.

Every bone, muscle and inch of flesh on my body screamed at me to find a hole to fall in, to reach for a knife and cut my throat. Instead, I made my body fall slowly off the bed and inch by agonizing inch, pulled myself over to the privy pot under the screened chair in the closet. I threw up dry heaves and faint tinges of blood and when my hand tried to hold my dick to pee, the strain was nearly as bad as when he had rammed his prick into my dry hole. Little came out but bloody mucus and I couldn't bear the thought of sitting on anything, let alone crapping. Besides, I hadn't eaten anything in a while so there was nothing to come out.

Turning on the water from the sink, it gushed out smelling of faint rust and hot. I drank, not caring that it was near scalding and when my thirst was quenched, reached for the stack of linen and towels on the counter. Laid them in the sink soaking them and dragged them onto the floor so I could lay on them. The heat felt good and I stared up at the rough stone of the ceiling in a semi-lucid daze. Talked to myself, resigned myself to a life where I had no freedom, no rights, was a sadistic man's slave-whore who could not be killed. I no longer cared about the green lady, the Queen or the manservant, all I could focus on was how to please the Master so he would make my life that little bit easier.

"Corbel? Where are you?" His voice was sharp, panicky coming from the other room.

"In the privy, Master," I replied.

Presently, he stood in the doorway staring down at me, his eyes heavy lidded but gentle. "Do you need help, Corbel?"

"No, Master. No need to soil your hands."

"Corbel, your blood is royal and powerful, it holds no dirt or taint." Tenderly, he took a cloth and washed me, handling my privates as a lover, the rest of my body with great care. He opened the closet, searching for something, knelt atop me and applied medicines that cooled the fire in my back. I could not stop crying.

"Am I hurting you, Corbel?" he asked softly but not stopping.

"No, Master. Because you are taking care of me."

"You see that I love you, my Blackbird?"

"Why, Master? I am scarred and ugly, stupid and slow to learn, in constant need of your attention and discipline. I need to be punished frequently to do things correctly," I offered.

"You are as I have trained you, Corbel. Shut up and let me take care of you."

"Yes, Master." I closed my eyes and kept as still as a corpse while he bathed me with warm rags and water. When he was done, I made to crawl back to the bed but he picked me up and carried me where he arranged me to his liking. I fell asleep from sheer exhaustion and the smell of roasting food roused me as no other stimulus could have.

A table was laid with linen and beef cuts, vegetables, potatoes, rolls and a beautiful cut

crystal of Cognac. The firelight made prisms of flame through the glass. The Master was busily stuffing his face, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. A timid young girl served him from the snifter. He looked over at me. "Corbel, you awake?" Without waiting for my reply, he threw his gnawed bones onto my chest which hit with a greasy thud. "Are you hungry?"

"No, Master." I was naked before the serving maid and she stared frankly at my bloodied and scarred back.

"My gods," she murmured. "The flesh is nearly gone from his entire back. Shall I bring the Healer, my Lord? And some pain draughts?"

"Corbel?" he asked, holding aloft a rib bone covered in meat and juices.

"No, Master. You enjoy it more when I am in pain." I closed my eyes, deluding myself that if I could not see her, she could not see me.

"Bring me clothing from the stores for him. In the blue chest the men brought in last night. Send the Captain of the Guards and the Barons, General Devial and the Magic Division Handlers."

"Yes, my Lord." She curtsied.

"Are there any more maids such as you in the Palisades?"

She hesitated. "No, my lord. The village women fled as soon as news of your arrival came."

"Why are you still here?"

"Six of us drew the short straw and I was not married, engaged or pure."

His eyes ravaged her and she explained. "I had given myself to a passing soldier, got with child and lost it so no man would take me for wife. I am available for anyone who wishes."

"Corbel, would you like to fuck this maid?"

I opened my eyes and looked at her. Seventeen or eighteen, tall and cleanly made with long yellow hair bound into a kerchief. Large blue eyes of a steady, honest nature. Pleasing to the eye with high, small breasts, tight waist and sturdy thighs.

"No, Master." I turned away.

"Why not, Corbel?" His voice was soft and dangerous. To deny a gift from the Master was to ask for punishment.

"I do not think my prick will harden. I am too sore and tired," I answered carefully. "I do not feel lust for her."

"For me, then?"

"My life is to please you, Master."

"It would please me if you take this whore."

I struggled to my side, rolled off the bed and attempted to stand. She came over and helped me, her grip on those few places I did not hurt. "It will be alright," she whispered. "Are you one of those that enjoy men only? I know how to pleasure them, too."

"No," I said so only she could hear me. "Once, I think I loved a girl but it was long ago and far away in a dream."

Her hands were skilled but my desires were dead and nothing she did could bring me to a state where I could perform. The Master pulled me away and took her instead. Used her so harshly that she cried out in pain and fought him. He beat her until her blood pooled in a cloud around her head and rear. Sated, he collapsed on the bed while I remained on the floor.

“Is she dead, Corbel?”

My fingers found the spot on her neck where the great vein pulsed and there was nothing. “Yes, Master.” I stared at her face, I didn’t even know her name.

“Are you sorry now you did not have a piece of her?”

“I did, Master.”

“You mean, ‘you are’,” he corrected.

“Yes, Master.” She had given me a piece of her compassion, a gift worth far more than a dalliance with her body.

“Go do what I told her,” he ordered.

“Yes, Master.” Slowly, I rose to my feet and using the wall and whatever was in my reach, stumbled towards the chamber’s doorway.

“Corbel, don’t you think you ought to put something on?” he asked lazily.

“I have nothing, Master,” I said humbly, trembling lest he beat me, too.

“Oh very well,” he spoke a short spell and I was abruptly cloaked in my cape of dust and shadows. I stroked the familiar fabric and opened the door into the hallway. Guards stood there and one roughly grabbed my arm, staring at my bare feet.

“Here, where are you going, slave?”

“The Master sends me on errands,” I said simply. His fingers dug painfully into my muscles. I said nothing.

“Rinlon, is that you?” the Master called from inside the room.

“Yes, My Lord Webster. Is it your wish that this slave leave?”

“Go with Corbel and see that he completes his tasks for me. I have doubts that he will make it without falling.”

“Yes, Lord Webster.” He closed the door and demanded, “well?”

“Clothing from the blue trunk in the Great Hall. I’m to bring it up to the Master’s room. First. Send the Captain of the Guards up. The Master wants to see the Barons, General Devial and the Magic Division Handlers.”

“Where’s the maid, Lilli?”

“The Master raped and killed her. Send someone to remove her body, also.” I furrowed my brow, wondering if I was supposed to take care of that or if he preferred the sight of the broken female. The guard stared at me.

“Are you still human? Do you have a soul, any grief or anger?” he burst out.

“All I have is fear and pain,” I returned wearily. “Show me the way to the Barons.”

“Send a messenger.”

“The Master told me to do it, that means I have to take the message.”

“Can you walk that far?”

“We shall see.”

Chapter 39

The Barons were ensconced in the Great Hall surrounded by their men at arms, aide-de-camps and Master Sergeants. They gaped at me as I struggled to walk with the guard’s hand holding me up by the armpit. No one said a word at the sight of my bare feet

or pale, white face.

Baldly, I relayed the Master's message and the named persons departed ahead of us. The guard with me assigned two men to carry the trunk up to the room. He looked at me. "Do we return now, Lord Corbel?"

"I am no lord. Rinlon is your name?"

"Guardsmen 1st Class Rinlon Prael," he turned me around and used both hands to aid me in remaining upright. By the time we reached the Master's suite, I was clearly in distress and Rinlon was carrying me. The Master looked up from his table and conference with the Armed Forces People and ordered the guard to place me on the floor.

"Floor, Lord Webster?" Rinlon chided. He slid me carefully onto the bed and removed my cloak to gape at the sight of my naked, bruised and bloody body. The face he turned to the Master was strangely blank but there was a dark shine in his eyes and his jaw ticked.

"Thank you," I said simply and pushed him away. "The Master will deal with me now."

Slowly, the guard returned to his post outside the door. Baron Resonant's fist was clenched at his side, the other on the hilt of his sword. "Lucian, what have you done?" His voice was a deadly insult.

"Do you think to challenge me, Philip?" The Master's voice was amused. I knew his hand was on his blade, toying with the hilt or perhaps, fingers moving in an elaborate spell casting. I wanted to watch but even my eyelids wouldn't lift at my command. I felt odd. Insubstantial. As if my flesh had suddenly become something else.

"Master!" I cried out in fear and I saw him turn to stare at me on the bed. The others at the table pushed back from their chairs to leap to their feet. A glowing light formed around my body on the bed and made me look paler than death. I saw this from a point of view above the body and felt a stretching sensation from it as well.

My hair was long, silky but shot with silver, every spare ounce of fat missing from the near skeletal frame. My eyes were open, huge pools of citrine from which a manic shine emanated, made brighter by un-shed tears. He, I, it was not breathing. There was no rise and fall of that bony chest, the open wounds on both sides of its torso were blued as blood drained back into the corpse. The Master shouted. "NO! He can't die! The Spell can't be reversed!"

The Baron laughed. "So much for your vaunted magic, Lucian. You've finally murdered the son of King Merlin. What will you tell the King now?"

I saw him pick up the body on the bed and hug it to his chest as he recited spell after spell until the room was awash with drifting magic. My body dissolved in his hold and the light winked out drawing me with it. Drawing me away from that scene, that place and from life.

The light was in me, a presence that was cold yet comforting. It filled me with reassurances that I was safe and would be cared for. It wasn't a...human presence but something more like an entity. I floated in a void, a bubble of light that it created just for me and bathed me in blue-violet rays that gently warmed and soothed the parts of me that ached.

After a time in which I had no way to judge or measure, I asked its name or title. It responded that it was the Logus, the power behind the Courts of Chaos which now saturated my body. "Does that mean I'm dead?" I asked naively. The pain oozed away, I

felt a well-being I hadn't experienced in years. Eyes open or closed, it made no difference in what I perceived, all I saw was an afterimage of a bright orb. "Like the Pattern? Am I dead?"

"No. And no. I removed you from Webster's influence and brought you to the Logus center. What you feel are the eddies of power and magic infusing your cells and repairing them."

"I thought the Pattern walkers could not mix with the Logus," I thought and it heard me.

"You are unlike any human ever born, Prince of the Void. In you, resides the power of both Pattern and Logus, melding together and separate. You have the ability to...set one above the other or to force both into one. That is why Webster wanted you, why the factions fight over you, why the Queen Mother and Mandor spirited you away. You must choose one over the other."

"King Random, too?"

"Of course. To save his realm and crown, he made you his Heir, did he not?" the Logus returned.

"Everybody wants something," I said bitterly.

"What do you want, Raven-Corbel?"

I hesitated. "Death."

"There is no longer death for you, Prince of Chaos. You are forever a part of the Logus and the Pattern. Only by destroying both can you find the death you seek. However, the power you are privy to, now ensures no man's hand will ever be able to harm your body again."

"I'm like a god?"

It laughed. "I am a god. You are one of my chosen disciples. I can punish you with the forces I control for I am the Logus."

"So, I'm still a slave, just a different master," I sighed. At least this one wouldn't beat me.

"You will rest. The repairs will take time and be a drain on your powers. Sleep." I felt its presence inside my head and it shut off the lights so it was instant darkness.

Waking was a pleasure. I yawned, stretched and shook when I saw that I was floating in the center of a gray nothingness with a dim light surrounding me. Waving my hands and legs only made me warmer and had no discernible effects on movement or the ability to perceive it. I shouted and my voice did not echo back, it just disappeared into the smoky vapor. I drifted in an eternity with no thoughts, no pain just a feeling that my body was once again whole and belonging only to me. I experienced no hunger or thirst, no sense of time passing, just an endless sense of well-being.

The Logus came as a presence behind my eyes, and in my head. It asked a question of me; a decision about balance and taking sides. It wanted to know if I would choose between the side of the Pattern or it, the Logus.

My decision was instant, my loathing for the side of the Master evident yet I sensed a millisecond of dis-satisfaction on the part of the Logus. It reminded me that it had saved me from Webster. Neither would I choose Random even though my heart broke at the thought of denying the Unicorn.

"If you don't choose the Logus," it told me. "I will have to send you back to Webster."

Who is not really Webster.”

“What do you mean?” I demanded.

It smirked. “Your power sensed a deception once and yet you did not pursue it. Webster is no more a human from your old shadow than I am. He masquerades as Lucian Webster, he thinks to seize control over me but all this time I have been controlling him through you.”

“Through me?”

“Does he not sob like a broken child at your loss? Does he not dare a war to keep you? He took you because he knew you were the power piece in this game of Chess but when the time came to play and lose you, he could not throw you into play.”

“He wants a war to overthrow the throne of Amber,” I retorted. “Why don’t you ask Merlin for his allegiance?”

The Logus flared red with anger and pain hit me, the very maximum of all that Webster had done to me, an exquisite agony and the Logus laughed. A cold sound that had no humanity in it. “The spell he cast on your cells has been destroyed, son of Merlin. It is in my power to let you die and even end your existence.”

“Then why do you need me?” I returned.

It shrieked a howl of frustration and sent me flying through the voids, from one gray realm to another, from blazing blue to frantic red, to revolting purple and violent black shot with scarlet flashes, where eventually, I recognized the sight and sound of warfare.

Magic bolts soared overhead, griffins and wyverns screamed as they drove into centaurs and satyrs. Horses neighed in fear and panic as the air smelled of sulfur and blood, ozone and the sharp, bitter tang of lightning and tears.

The ground trembled underfoot with the massive weight of elephant like creatures and millions of feet, human, equine, vulpine, bovine and magical. Wagons drawn by common animals such as oxen, mule and horse galloped past me followed by monsters. Lines of soldiers in red and violet uniforms marched forward with heavy pikes, their sergeants exhorting their ranks to charge.

My back hurt and I felt beneath me a piled bulk of branches and limbs. I wore clothing, fine lace and butter soft wool, a uniform bedecked with gold and silver braid, polished boots and a circlet of gold on my brow. I lay atop a robe of spotted fur and there were flowers piled at my head, feet and at my sides. My hands were laid upon my chest, tied at the wrists and held the pommel of an ornate sword.

A guard dressed in formal attire stood at each corner with a lighted torch. My eyes widened as I took in the fact that I was laid out on a funeral bier, a pyre ready to be immolated. Only problem was, I wasn’t quite dead yet.

I didn’t say anything, I just rolled off and started running, twisting at my wrists trying to tear the ropes free. I’d gotten ten yards away before my immolation crew realized I wasn’t dead and waiting for the first spark. Within minutes, I was able to merge into the chaos of the battle lines, dodging dead horses and wounded men and monsters.

I wasn’t sure how far the front lines were, I wouldn’t recognize the Amber forces or their allies. I just hoped I wasn’t hit by an arrow or reckless swordsmen before I could escape to the sidelines. Shouts pursued me but in the melee, the noise, confusion and carnage of the battle, no one paid any attention to the four other screamers.

I tripped over a struggling horse, a big bay with an officer’s saddle as it attempted to rise, trapped by its reins. On the saddle was a sword still in its scabbard, I pulled it free and

sliced the rope holding my wrists together. They parted with a snap and I had no time to worry about the thin ribbons of blood the ropes had left behind. Climbing aboard the horse, I sliced its reins free and used my legs, seat and hands on its mane, aimed it for the side of the battlefield where the barrier of woods and hills funneled the forces towards the center of the valley.

Behind me, I could feel eyes on my back but refused to turn and look. Whatever was chasing me would have to use either magic or luck to stop the runaway from bolting as my frantic heels urged it on.

Somehow, my charge emboldened the forces of the Master, rallying behind me. I heard them cheering as now, I swerved and leapt over short, blue-skinned men with two sets of arms and leaking purple blood where the Thrid forces had met them head on. Their fallen standard was snatched by a Thrid Captain and raised aloft, a flag of neon green with a Golden Circle in which a Unicorn danced.

I saw men and boys, dressed in Amber's colors, their faces young, brave and resolute. A red-head caught my eyes, a Thrid on a glivet aiming for him with an ax and I could not stand by to watch the youngster die by such a creature or weapon. Steering with my hand and knees and minus the reins, I hit the Thrid with my horse and sword, decapitating the captain, jerking back to pull the blade loose from the astonished body. It toppled from its mount and I was past, ducking under the swing of a light saber wielding cavalry man.

The horse headed up a small rise at a trot and I sat back in astonishment as before me on a vast plain lay an army so immense that I could not comprehend it.

Sunlight gleamed off of their weapons, harness and armor. Hundreds of thousands of men, animals and monsters. Machines that threw rocks and battering rams. Creatures the size of dinosaurs, winged beasts like flying tanks. Gargoyles in the skies that dropped flaming pots atop the heads of anything unlucky enough to be in reach. The horse reared and stopped dead at the sight before bolting to my left. I heard the air whistle and the sky darkened as thousands of arrows swarmed towards us like a flight of locusts. There was dust everywhere, the air was thick with it and hard to breathe. The ground was either bare of grass or wet with the offal of dead and dying.

The army behind me raised their shields and ducked under them. The sound of the arrows hitting was as loud as thunder. I was not so lucky, I had to depend on the horse's quick legs and my ability to judge the bolts flight and targets.

Mostly, they fell short and to my right, in the thick of the company following me. One or two came closer, one struck the horse in the neck right in front of the saddle bow. He collapsed as the arrow severed his spine, throwing me from my seat to land face first on the ground with a force hard enough to knock me for a loop. No helmet, I remembered just before the sounds of battle faded.

Chapter 40

I was in the rear of the battle lines among the wounded. I saw so many different races, I wasn't sure what side I was with or if I was a prisoner. Healers were so covered in blood of all shades and colors, I couldn't recognize their uniform colors.

One reached me and his three fingered hand with sucker tips grabbed my head and twisted it gently back and forth. I blinked. He had definite scales. His touch caused a certain portion of my head to start throbbing and I felt nauseous.

“Head injury,” he announced and shone a light in each pupil. “Concussion, moderate. Are you wounded anywhere else?”

I stared at him. “What side are you on?”

“Memory loss? What’s your name and rank? Nurse!”

“Are you Amber or the other side?”

He hooted. “As if Webster would waste his magic on saving wounded soldiers. I’m with the Golden Circle Alliance. You?” He eyed what was left of my funeral suit. I searched my head for the crown and he took it to mean my head hurt. Which it did. “Sorry. Can’t give you anything for a head injury. Got to stay awake. Ah, nurse,” he said to the human woman in a one piece red jumpsuit. “See to this soldier, he’s a bit confused. Concussion. Remove his clothes and check for other injuries, please.”

She started to pull at my lace shirt and tugged my pants down. I fought her for possession of them but she whipped out a blunt pair of snips and cut everything off. Her eyes widened and she gasped as she saw the healed scars on my body. The doctor cursed fluently and snapped, “who did this to you, child?”

I bolted up off the stretcher and for the nearest door. Trouble was, my head felt like a balloon on a string and I couldn’t find the door. Just endless rows of stretchers and cots with wounded bodies everywhere, nurses and doctors moving among them treating those they could and ending the hopeless with mercy.

The sounds inside what looked like a huge warehouse tent was eerily quiet, I expected the moans and cries of wounded and dying yet they clearly weren’t complaining. I saw men missing limbs, guts heaving out of bellies and others literally cut in half. The doctor’s voice carried clearly, he told one of the other nurses to catch me.

I dodged a tall male in red, flinging myself over a cot with a dead Thruid on it, managed to spit on it and stumbled down a long row that disappeared into darkness flanked by three people on my right and four two rows over on the left. Everything was white, the cots, linens, stretchers, doctors, the only color I could see were the red jumpers of the nurses.

I ran for the nearest opening I could find and away from those pursuing me, found myself in a nightmare of more and more rows of cots stretching as far as I could see. Stopped. Turned round and looked. In every direction, no matter where I looked, I was surrounded by the wounded and dying. I looked up and saw the top of the tent, poles, the roof yet nowhere could I discern what held it up or how to get out.

The group reached me and eager hands pulled at me, set me flat on a stretcher, brought me back to the same doctor who pursed his lips. “Very bad, boy. Very bad for your concussion. You need to rest, be quiet. Mayr, give him a shot of Bedevice.”

“His concussion, Doctor?” she asked, frowning.

“It won’t do him any good if he runs his head into something. Better he rest.”

“Yes, Doctor.” She did something to my arm and I felt slow, like the world was losing time.

“What happened to you? Who put these terrible scars on you? It’s criminal.” He stroked my belly and rolled me over to palpate my back. I let him touch me without complaint, I felt lethargic and sleepy. I yawned, uncaring that I was only in my underwear.

“What’s your name, boy?” she asked and I thought she was pretty but not as pretty as

the green lady. I told her so and she patted my cheek as I was lifted into the air and carried. Carried a long way past where I'd started and into a smaller room where the light made the white so brilliant that it blinded me. I fell asleep but I didn't tell her my name.

Someone came in every hour and woke me. Took my pulse, respirations and blood pressure. Asked my name, rank and my unit. I said I didn't know. When morning came, the inside glow softened instead of brightened and the roof peeled back in places so that blue sky and soft breezes wafted through dispersing any lingering scent of blood and death.

"Where am I?" I asked the next one in who wasn't either a doctor or a nurse but clearly an officer. He wore a neat uniform of dark navy with silver buttons, high boots and held a fancy cap at his waist. Belted and with a sword hanging from the white leather. He was a Tissarette and a high ranking officer from the silver clusters on his shoulder boards.

"I'm making my rounds of the wounded, soldier," he announced. "One of my cavalymen said you took out a Thrid to save Private Marden and suffered an injury yourself. Your name, rank and unit, sir?"

"I don't know," I fell back on that answer and it did not satisfy him. He studied me, stared at my face which was still swollen somewhat from my headlong dive into the dirt. My clothes were no clue, I was in an open backed knee length gown which gave the staff access to every part of me. My yellow eyes puzzled him, he picked up both of my hands and rubbed palms and fingers. Next, he examined my feet and peeked under the gown. I slapped his hands away and turned red as he grinned.

"Well, you're human enough. Got five fingers and toes and the rest of the...male equipment so I know you're from Amber or one of her close shadows. Leaper divined you, there's no magic hiding your form from our sight so you're not demon kin. You killed one of Webster's top Lieutenants so I know you have no love for the Gray Lord's side." He raised my gown again and stared at the welts, scars and damage to my flesh. "Were you a prisoner that escaped? You're too young to be a soldier. Even Webster doesn't recruit teens."

"Yes," I said hastily. "I was held captive in his headquarters at the Palisades."

His eyes lightened with eagerness. "Did you see any other high-ranking prisoners? A Lady, a green lady who was sightless?"

"You mean the Queen?"

"YES!"

"Will you try to rescue her?"

"With your help. Any information you can provide would help us tremendously."

"There are other prisoners there," I said slowly.

"We know. We're particularly interested in capturing Webster's assassin, the Blackbird. Did you see him?"

"If you see him, you're dead," I said flatly. "Besides, he's dead. Webster killed him." I wasn't expecting the look on the officer's face. It was despair, regret, and equal portions of satisfaction. "Who are you?"

"Major-General Sebastein Dineeni. Amber's Seventh Cavalry."

Somewhere, someone had told me that the 7th Cavalry was synonymous with ignoble defeat.

"Do you remember your own name and family? Your town or shadow?" he asked gently. "May we contact someone and send you home? How old are you?"

"Seventeen," I answered bleakly. "I don't know who I am or where I belong. I'm tired."

I'd like to sleep."

"I won't bother you but you have my gratitude for saving the Private's life and later, we'd like to pick your brains on the layout and defenses of the Palisades."

"Is the ...he back there?"

"Webster has retreated to the castle, yes. Fortified and warded. We can't dent his perimeter or breach it. With your insight and help, we could find a way."

"Will you ask the nurse to bring me a paper and pen?" I asked. "And a drink? I'm thirsty."

He looked surprised and turned his head towards where a door should be. Spoke aloud, "Nurse!" In seconds, one of the red-suited women appeared. This one looked like a teen from Amber's courts. She was young, pretty and bubbly. "Ah, Iantha," he grinned. "Our young hero needs your tender care. Rest, lad and get well." He bowed at the waist and left. The girl arched an eyebrow at me. "Well? What can I do for you?"

I turned red and mumbled, "Bathroom?"

She snorted inelegantly and held her hand to her mouth. "Oh crap," she complained and I said, "well, no, I have to pee."

She laughed and I realized I had said something that had struck her as funny. "I'll get you a urinal." She reached behind her and pulled this long, tube thing out of the air and handed it to me. "Unless you want me to do it?"

I blushed at the thought of her touching me. "What is this place?"

"You're not from around here, are you?"

"I don't know. It's just that everything is strange. Why can't I find a door out of here?"

"Well," she said as if I were retarded. "We can't very well have our patients falling to their deaths, now can we?"

"What?"

She explained slowly as she realized I had no clue what she was talking about. "We're in Nesium Citrous, the Hospital Cloud City. We're ten thousand feet above the plain where the battles are taking place. Transport of the wounded is quicker and we save more lives. We're higher than the winged regiments can reach so we don't have to fear aerial attacks or arrow strikes, ballistas or magic bolts. They tend to fizzle out after a thousand feet high. There are no doors or windows because some species would suffer a fatal heart attack if they saw they were thousands of feet in the air."

"We're floating in the air?"

"Are you afraid of heights? I can order you a tranquilizer."

"Look, I just want to pee and get out of here," I said seriously. "I'm not really hurt. Can't I just leave?"

"No, Dr. Leaper says you're to have rest and quiet so your head and mind can heal properly. I can bring you lunch if you're hungry and thirsty."

"I'm starving. Do you think I can have something to draw with? It keeps me from thinking about things."

She looked sympathetic. "I'll see what I can do." She disappeared from my view only to reappear moments later with a tray of hot food and beverages. "I input human Amber cuisine for you. I hope that's acceptable."

"I'll eat simple things, nurse. Bread, cheese, watered wine."

"We can do better than that. Besides, you can't drink alcohol with these drugs," she said cheerfully. "I have roasted beef, mashed turnips, peas and Passionberry tarts. Tea with

cream. Potato rolls with whipped butter. You're a trifle underweight, or so Dr. Leaper says." She set the tray down near my cot and adjusted something underneath so that it rose up and folded itself into a chair. "Do you need help?"

"No, thank you." I picked up the knife and ran my fingers across the blade. Too dull to cut anything even the meat. I reached for the bread, slapped a piece of beef on it and crammed it into my mouth, washed it down with sweet, hot tea. Four bites and my stomach had had enough but I managed to wolf down four of those tarts.

"How's your headache?"

Surprised, I realized I hadn't felt anything from my head since I'd awakened. "It's gone."

"Good. You've been awake for over 24 hours so the risk of lapsing into a coma is negligible. We can downgrade your status to mobile, it gives you access to the lounging areas and activities."

"NO!"

She looked startled at my vehement dismissal. "No," I repeated softly. "Please. I can't stand to be around anyone. I was tortured, you see. Please, can't I stay here another few days?"

"I can see if that's okay with Dr. Leaper," she smiled. "Let me see if I can find you a sketch book."

"And a pencil," I reminded. She nodded, asked if I was done and waited as I folded up the leftovers in the napkin, tucking the pouch under my cot. She regarded this with astonishment.

"You need only to ask for me whenever you are hungry."

"Sorry. It's a habit from...prison."

"I see. Call if you need anything." She disappeared and this time, stayed gone.

Chapter 41

An orderly walked into my room from out of a corner when I wasn't looking and startled me. I wasn't doing much of anything but lying on the cot and staring at the blue sky over my head. Not even a cloud marred the sameness to break the monotony.

He was from one of those far off shadows that produced good workers with little imagination and made great soldiers. He handed me a square tablet with a scribe and I just stared at it. I didn't want a magic device that allowed me to draw upon it, I wanted real paper. The scribe worked only against the surface of the tablet and not anywhere else. I complained and he stared stoically at me making no reply.

I looked around and asked for a spare sheet and a piece of charcoal. He delivered both easily enough. Leaving me alone, I hung the sheet on the rack around my cot and closed my eyes. Remembering the tiniest detail of the room at Cabra. With quick, sure strokes, I drew the room and before my eyes, the colors filled in and became real. I knew if I stepped forward, I would emerge in that room in the Lighthouse.

With equal swiftness, I drew the bedroom where last I had seen the Master. I was somewhat nervous about stepping blind into his room so as an afterthought, I did a quick

sketch of my nook at the Master's manse in Szeged. I stepped forward and stumbled as my feet tripped on the carpet near his bed. Laying atop the covers were his abandoned clothes. I searched through his drawers, pulling out leather trousers, shirt, vest, belt and cape to cover all. My eyes glimmered in joy when I spotted my set of leaf daggers thrown carelessly on his bureau. The room looked as if it had been hastily packed, most of his important stuff was gone. In his closet, I found the elven cape and a sword. I left my first cloak and took the elven, it was like my shadow cape and would mask me.

In the kitchen I found bread and foodstuffs left out and bread dried out as well as opened flasks of wine. What I didn't see were his servants. It seemed that they had all run off as soon as the Master's back was turned.

I packed enough food for three and gathered up a wine-skin. Slinging the pack over my shoulder, I checked the area one more time before slapping myself in the head. It hurt. "Damn. I need to make a return trump," I said, disgusted with myself.

Using a piece of charcoal from the fireplace, I drew the image of the room where I had died in the Master's arms. Felt the flush of...magic, power, whatever race through my hands into the drawing and I was stepping forward there in a whisper of movement as the elven cloak flared. A man was bent over the bed smoothing back the linens as I emerged, weapons drawn but I knew that supple back and the motion of his body.

"Steen!"

He whirled around, deathly pale and gasped, his hands held out before him in protection. "Gods of the Firmament! Are you Death come to take me at last? I saw your body laid upon a funeral pyre!"

"Did you see me burn, Steen? No, I rolled off before they could torch me," I put down my daggers and hugged his stiff, unrelenting body. "Steen, I'm alive. I need your help to rescue the Queen and stop this war."

"He told them you were dead."

"The Master? Told who?" I questioned.

"The Barons. Baron Resonant. He sent a missive to King Random and King Merlin with the news of your death by Webster's hand and asked for terms of surrender. The Master slew the Barons in his rage and retreated to the Tower where the Queen is held. He spelled great magics there and any who try to approach are destroyed in blue fire. He's been up there for a week."

"A week! I've been gone for a week?" I gaped.

"My Lord, you have been dead since Candlewick. It is now Moontide."

I counted. Was amazed and dismayed to learn I had been gone for nearly a month. "The forces have laid siege for that long?"

"Aye. Random's Coalition holds the land around the Palisade and his Magicians work daily to break the wards that guard the castle but so far, no one has made it inside or left, save you." He eyed me. "How did you do it?"

"Trumped my way in. Or did you mean, how did I live again? I died, Steen. The peace was wonderful. No pain, no worries, just endless sleep. But this power called the Logus asked me to choose sides. I refused and it brought me back here to suffer. Again, only this time, I'm mortal and I can die."

"You're alive," he marveled and smiled. Shook himself. "What do you need from me, Corbel?"

"I need to reach the Queen," I stated.

“You can get into the tower?”

I shrugged and wandered the bedroom, it looked the same as when I had last seen it save empty of the Barons and the Master. “I don’t know. I think I have to be able to see it well enough to draw it but we shall see.”

“If you attack, he will kill the Queen, he already warned the Kings he would do so,” Steen warned.

“Take me as close as you can,” I ordered and he nodded. Crossing to the door, I followed and frowned as I saw the flowers placed on the bed covers. Pointed and asked him what they were for. His answer shocked me.

“A memorial for the boy called Corbel,” he said. The bed was a wash with roses cut from the Master’s gardens, wild flowers from the woods and sides of the lanes. I swallowed. It was more than from just Steen.

“For me? From the staff? Why?” A lump formed in my throat and tears threatened to fall.

“How many times, Corbel, did you deflect the Master’s wrath from another taking it on yourself?” he returned.

“I never,” I shook my head. “I looked out only for myself, to ease my own way.”

He smiled secretly. “You never knew what you did, but others saw and noted it. When you died, they all came forward to mourn you.”

“I thought they hated and feared me, Blackbird, the Master’s killer,” I said in wonder.

“To the Master’s eye, yes but in their quarters and in the dark whispers of the night, they talked of you and how you always fought back, if even in only a small way. Your body bears the scars of that insolence. Even after he beat you to death with the flailed whip, you are here to attempt the impossible. Is it possible, Corbel, Blackbird, that you can be broken?”

I sucked back a sob thinking of all those times when I had broken, had been his slave, his puppet with no other thoughts but to please him so he would love me enough not to hurt me. When the pain dished out by his hand nearly became pleasure. When he raped me, I almost became his, almost changed to one of those that craved both sex and pain before pleasure could be achieved. Was closest to becoming his in every sense, from my mind to my body. If I had not died, nor been taken by the Logus, I would now be kneeling at the Master’s feet, bound by blood and mind as his willing, adoring slave.

Steen said softly, “oh my Lord, your face! Never have I seen your face show so much emotion! I know your life here has been hell for I have been in your place but Corbel, I would never have survived what I see here.” He stroked my face and reverently kissed me.

Stepping back, he opened the door and led me out to the hallway. No sign of any guards and Steen explained that those of the army still inside the compound were guarding the outer walls. The rest of his forces were camped outside engaging in skirmishes with the Amber forces. Of his original hundred thousand, about half were still alive and fighting, holding off the Amber army and allies from reaching the Palisade. Some force prevented them from moving forward to take the relatively small fortifications and I suspected it was the power of the Logus.

He brought me to the bottom of a staircase, a narrow spiral of well-worn stone treads that led upwards inside a massive boulder built tower whose foundations went deep into the bedrock of this land. I sensed an ancient river of power beneath my feet and knew why the Master had chosen this place. Here, he could draw upon that power and use it to repel all

but the greatest spells. As we stood on the first step, we felt a great rumbling and the ground beneath us trembled. My fingers burned and a backlash of power spilled down towards us. I pushed Steen behind me and flung the elven cape over us both as blue flames roared down the shaft and consumed the very air around us.

It lasted less than a minute yet in our fear it seemed longer than we could hold our breath. Cautiously, I pulled the folds of elven material off us and shuddered. Steen held onto my back even more white-faced than me.

“What was that?” he cried.

“Backlash of a spell rebounding off the Master’s wards,” I explained. “A powerful one, too. More powerful than I know.” It had the flavor of the Logus and I suspected it had been sent by King Merlin.

“We must go up,” I said and the manservant nodded, placing his life in my hands. The ground trembled again yet the Tower stood firm.

He asked if the fire would come again and I shook my head no. Once a spell of such force was used, the receiver was armed against it with a counter spell and it would likely not be efficient. If it failed once, the wielder would go on to another, more powerful. What the last one had felt like was the Dissolution Spell, it should have dissolved the ground the tower stood on as well as the bonds that held its very stones together. We began our climb.

Chapter 42

We climbed the stairs one at a time, with Steen behind me. He offered to go first but took no persuasion to be second. He was after all, only a mere man, not even a soldier. I gave him one of my spare daggers and he took it with a repressed shudder.

“Don’t stick me with it by mistake,” I said and he looked at me as if I had made a joke. We kept rising, there were no chambers off the stairwell in this tower and when I strained to see ahead, all I saw were the stairs and the walls. Not even arrow slits to let in the sunlight. We climbed in a sort of twilight, parts of our rise were lit by guttering torches, one placed on every landing. They burned with a cold smokeless flame, a magical light not fueled by wood or oil.

“It seems we have climbed higher than a normal tower,” I said. “How many floors is it?”

“I have been up many times to serve him, Corbel and each trip was different. Sometimes, I climbed only three or four, sometimes as many as ten flights.”

“You can come and go without the fire?”

“I never tried. Only when I was summoned. Can you use my memories of the room?”

“No. You would forget some minor detail and it would not be where we intended to go. I have to see the place so I can draw it.” We saved our breath for the climb and in another four flights, we surprised a guard who heard us long before we saw each other.

“Steen?” he called down and the manservant passed me to stand in front and block the guard’s view of me. Which would only have been as a shadowy thing because of the elven cloak. “What are you doing, Steen? Did Lord Webster call for you?”

“No, Rinlon, he did not,” Steen answered and glanced at me. I knew that guard and

came forward so that he could see me. Threw back the cape and his eyes widened in wonder. He was speechless. Sputtered and was finally able to speak.

“You’re not dead!”

“Not anymore,” I cocked my head, my hands on both leaf daggers. “Will you let us pass?”

“Depends,” he grinned.

“On what?” I asked softly, my grip tightening, ready to cast the blades out.

“On whether you came here to rescue the Queen or join the Master.” His eyes became flat and dark as he waited for my answer.

“I came to kill him,” I said flatly. “First and foremost, I am going to kill him.”

“He’s warded the Tower. No one gets in or out unless he lets them in. You felt the tremors?”

I nodded. “I suspect it was Merlin’s attack trying out a few spells. I need to get in the room where the Queen is.”

“The only way is if he lets you in, Corbel. And he will let you in,” Rinlon said. “He raved like a maniac when you died, he gave you a King’s funeral.”

“He almost gave me a funeral pyre. Lucky I woke when I did,” I said dryly.

“Otherwise, I’d be ash and a smoky ghost.” I hesitated. Steen put his hand on my shoulder, it was warm.

“I know you fear to be in his hands again, Corbel but it is the only way to get inside. You know he would punish me if I asked for entry before he calls me and he hasn’t called for me in days.”

“I know,” I said softly, gritting my teeth so hard my jaw ached. “I’m not afraid he will break me again, I’m afraid he will see how much I loathe and despise him. My hatred is a bright burning flame I can’t hide.”

“Your hate is something he would cherish for it feeds his need to subjugate,” Steen said. “It’s the lack of fear he will notice.”

“Oh, I still fear him, Steen,” I returned. “My soul, if I had one, would be praying to the gods for courage.”

“Of course you have a soul,” both of them said vehemently.

I shook my head in denial. “The Master took mine when he killed me the first time. I saw him do it. As my last breath left my body, a thing like a shadow emerged. Glowing, ethereal and beautiful, he caught and trapped it in the globe he wears at his neck. It was part of the spell he used to bring life back to me. Mine is only one of many. He told me of others, Iowin, the famous Black Elf who was a master swordsman, Leonnora, the Sorceress Witch that almost took Oberon. The thing in the Black Armor that nearly bested Corwin although I’m not rightly sure if it had a soul as it was already a shade. He has a score tucked neatly in there.”

“Are you sure, Corbel?”

“There is a part of me missing. My memories and my emotions. All that’s left is fear, hate and rage,” I said advancing another step. Rinlon moved aside and we saw the first chamber off the landing, a small room set up for guard duty. He had a chair, small trunk, a table with pitcher and bowl, his weapons and nothing else.

“Privy?” I raised an eyebrow and he flushed.

“Just let go down the stairs,” he mumbled. “Besides, I’m only here four hours and then another guard does his shift.”

“What’s above?” I asked.

“Death,” he answered. I looked at Steen.

“Can you hide him until I come back?”

“I can dress him like a guard and when my shift ends, take him back down or he can go back on his own and hide,” Rinlon mused. “Next shift isn’t due for another two hours.”

“Stay, Steen. That should be enough time to do or die.” I pressed their hands. “I salute you. If I am not back in two hours, don’t panic. Give me a day.” Ran lightly up the stairs with the elven cape around me, the hood up and a spell surrounding me with a shield of ice.

Met a wall of resistance another twenty feet and felt the wards explode against my cloak. It burned me, more resistance than when I walked the Final Veil in the Pattern yet like there, I was able to move forward into the obstruction.

“Master,” I called knowing that my intrusion would be felt as well as my use of magic. The wards fell away and I stepped out into another realm akin to the Courts of Chaos where the Laws of Reality were not enforced. Gravity did not exist here, I saw trees and plants floating in clumps as islands in the skies, growing upside down and sideways, water flowing up next to fountains that splayed sideways.

A room opened up in front of me, a palatial chamber with a fountain from which pale gold water splashed into a well that looked fathomless. I trod across marble floors of ivory shot with veins of real gold and the furniture was gilt. Servants moved silently about performing chores, not one acknowledged me.

I walked upon a carpet of mauve interwoven with gold wire towards the figure I saw lounging catlike upon a throne on the far wall. Beyond that, I looked down on a scene of pastoral nightmare. Dead and diseased crops, starving animals and demon kin roaming the land looking for food.

“Master,” I approached the throne and dropped to my knees waiting. He barely glanced at me.

“Are you another construct the Logus has sent to mock me, ghost? I laid you to rest upon a funeral bier myself.”

“Did you stay to see me burn, Master?” I asked, keeping my eyes on him.

“My Blackbird would not be so bold and brave as you, shade. Begone before I pull the power of this node down upon your master,” he retorted.

I drew out my leaf dagger and slit my palm, letting the drops of blood fall on his hand. “Once, you told me my blood was royal and pure, Master. Do you still find it so?”

He tasted it and his face stilled, his whole body tensed as if a string pulled taut and ready to snap. “Corbel? Is it really you?” he asked and there was hope in his gray eyes. “The spell worked?”

“No, Master. The Logus returned me but in a breakable state. I now can die and neither can you use that spell on me again. Once I am dead this time, I shall stay dead.”

“Why did you come back?”

“Master, where else would I go?” I asked and dropped my gaze, hiding my hatred.

He reached out a hand and pulled me up by my collar, a choke hold that constricted my breathing. His fingers forced my chin up, digging into the bony pressure points of my jaw. Pain flared in my mouth and neck, he felt the sudden shaking of my rage and mistook it for fear.

“You still fear me, my lovely Blackbird,” he gloated and wrenched my arm behind my back dragging me over to his couch. My mouth instantly went dry and I tensed, ready to

fight him. Stopped and let myself go limp and willing. He forced me down and held me with his body, his hands ripping at my clothes, throwing weapons and garments to the floor. Pulled himself free from his own pants.

“Master, please don’t hurt me,” I whispered with an effort. I wanted to sink both daggers in his arching back. “I came to you willingly. The Logus said you are not to defile me or it will pull its support from your side.”

He stopped his pursuit of me and stared into my eyes. “The Logus spoke to you?”

“Yes, Master. It told me I must choose sides or be destroyed,” I answered.

“And you chose mine,” he sneered.

“No, Master. I chose neither, an option that infuriated the Logus. It sent me back to die upon your funeral pyre but I awoke and freed myself.”

“How did you get here?”

“I returned to the battle lines and trumped myself to your room in the Tower in the Palisades. I met Steen and he told me where to find you.”

“You lie, Corbel,” he snarled and hit me. His fist smashed into my chin and instantly, I tasted blood, stars pin-pricked my vision as my head snapped back into the couch armrest. He kissed me, licking the blood off my open mouth, his tongue invading my throat. I gagged and pushed him away only to have him rain blows upon me until I passed out. Providing him with the pleasure I had denied him earlier. In fact, the Master preferred his sexual gratification in blood and pain rather than in the act of penetration.

Chapter 43

Tied to a set of marble columns in an ante-chamber. I was hanging from my wrists and on my knees before an audience of soldiers and demon kin. The Queen was seated in a chair with a maid and a guard keeping her from rising. He was whispering in her ear.

The Master was dressed in blood red leathers with a heavy black robe over it and open from neck to floor. I swallowed in terror as I saw the flagellum in his hands.

“Master,” I whispered. “No, I’ll die. For good.”

He heard me. “Admit you came back to take the Queen, my Blackbird. Admit you came to kill me and I will let you live.” He swung the flail and cracked it near the pillars. Marble flew in chips from the floor. Several pieces hit me and drew tiny stings of blood.

I said in desperation, “I came, Master because I love you.”

The air was curiously still as if the entire assemblage had withdrawn their breaths. He lowered his upraised arm, told them all to leave and stood at my side. “Say it again, Corbel,” he encouraged.

“Master, I came back because I no longer fear death, no longer want to be anywhere but at your feet. Because I love you more than life itself. I belong to you, Master and that is all I want or need.”

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. “I believe you, Blackbird,” he murmured and stripped off his clothes. Once naked, he whipped me, blood springing swiftly as the flail touched my skin. I screamed. Before my cries of pain died, he turned the whip on himself in a bizarre parody of one for me and one for himself. He managed only to reach five on me

before he collapsed on me, adding the burden of his weight to my own straining wrists. “Now we are bound in blood and pain,” he murmured, his lips on my own fevered back. I felt his erection fade as he passed out leaving me in a gray haze of agony.

He woke first and his groans woke me. “Master,” I whispered. “Get up. You will bleed to death if you don’t get help.”

“Corbel, my lovely Blackbird. Your blood runs in my veins and mine in yours. What you feel is what I feel. What I do unto you is visited upon me. We are joined at the soul.” Aghast, I stared at him and the look of triumph on his face was devastating. “So, you see, my Blackbird of deceit, I know you lied when you said you loved me. As I know you came to take the Queen and to plant your daggers in my black heart.”

And before my eyes, he slowly dissolved to become another man I had seen once in my fevered dreams. A short, well built younger man that looked curiously like my remembered images of Merlin. “Who are you?” I mumbled.

“Jurt. My name is Jurt.” It meant nothing to me. “Didn’t see my picture in Corwin’s Trumps, did you? Nor dear Bro Merlin’s? I’m your Uncle, Raven. Uncle Jurt. Half brother to Merlin and resident of the Courts of Chaos. This lovely place is part of my realm, part of my inheritance when Merlin usurped my claim on the throne. Mandor did me the favor of ‘rescuing’ you from those two men who wanted to rape you back in Amber. He held you in Chaos until I arrived to buy you at the slave market. I spent two years breaking your stubborn self and find you still a problem. How I love that in you, it’s like having a baby Merlin to torture and fuck. Oh, don’t worry, I won’t touch you again, I really do prefer to torture you. It gives me a better orgasm than fucking your dry hole.”

I screamed and bucked trying to tear my wrists loose, trying to get to my feet and attack him. He rose lithely to his and before my eyes, the wounds he had suffered faded away to mere shadows on his back. “Just an illusion to fool you, poor unsophisticated magic user. The spells I gave you to learn were mere child’s primary lessons, Corbel. None could cause me more than a bee sting. Now, I have a war to win.” He pointed at me and the blue flame that Steen warned me of shot from his index finger and wrapped me in torment. I could not faint but only suffer and endure.

“Steen,” I thought. “Run! Hide! I have failed.” The image of the Queen, her head high and unbowed was all that kept me from giving up.

I felt the incursion of magic as it bounced against the Master’s...Jurt’s warded shield. Each blow from Amber’s side resonated in my body and caused the pain to soar. It escalated until I thought my mind would crush under its weight. The harder I fought against it, the worse it hurt. Hurt was not strong enough of a word to describe it, the very fiber of my cells were in agony as if their structure was being torn apart. Each time it subsided, I felt weaker and closer to complete collapse.

The Logus came and stood before me, it took the form of a glowing wheel and mocked me. “Not to choose one side over the other puts you in the middle, son Raven, slave Blackbird. You are the pawn upon which this war pivots. Even now, your blood and will power Jurt’s spells. When you collapse, as you soon will, the backlash of power your death releases will destroy Amber’s King, his army, his family and the Pattern allowing Jurt and me to become supreme. With you gone, destroyed by your own power, I will make Jurt my puppet and become the dominant force in creation.”

“Why does everyone want to rule the universe?” I ground out forcing my words

beyond the pain. I put the agony in a box inside my head and managed to climb to my feet rather than be on my knees. "I won't. I won't choose sides. The Pattern exists as does the Logus. Without Darkness, there can be no Light. Without pain, joy has no meaning. Without Evil, Good is not felt."

The Logus shrieked, struck me on the chest and my heart shuddered. Pain seized me and my resolve to stand faltered. I threw my head back and fell as far as the chains would allow me, writhing on the floor. My heart felt as if it would explode out of my chest.

Oh gods. I hurt. I hurt. I could not bear it. Master--- I cried out and in my inner vision, a mythical beast appeared. A white Unicorn. A being of such physical beauty that I could only stare in bemused fascination. Where she trod, flowers sprang up and her gaze upon me was both compassionate and frightening. She touched me with her horn, the dangerously sharp tip resting lightly on my aching heart. The pain abated and coolness spread the course of my body, numbing the fire of those lashes on my back. The chains on my wrists fell away and I stood in the glade with her.

Lifted my hands to her horn and caressed the golden spiral, advanced them to the soft hollows over her crystal blue eyes, the silken hide under which steel muscles rippled. I choose," I said. "My choice is neither. And it is a choice, not a reluctance to choose. Though you be beautiful and good, you alone are not enough. The Pattern must have its opposite or all is nothingness. I choose to be the balance between Chaos and Order."

She bowed her head and went to one knee before leaping straight at me. I shouted and her spiral horn took me dead center and pierced my heart. I had a moment of astonishment, a second of obliterating pain and then, an endless darkness.

This awakening was strange, my body hurt but in a different way. I still felt the fire licking at my cells and the tearing agony of the five lashes that had exposed bone in my back but it was muted somehow. I stretched and arched my neck, objects seemed to be further away than they should, as if they were forty or fifty feet below me and smaller. My eyes blinked and I was seeing with pin-point accuracy, each individual blade of grass and pebbles in the soil. I gasped and my shoulders ached. Turned my head around and actually saw behind myself. A vast expanse of black leathery wings and diamond scaled black hide ending in a tail with a forked barb.

My mouth hurt and something jerked at it, pulling my head down to ground level. I stared into the amused face of my torturer and uncle. Jurt. The Master.

"Like it, Corbel? Truly, now you are my Blackbird. The Logus gave you to me as a pet. You will serve me in this war." I shook and thrashed but what he had in my mouth kept me bound to his hand. "It's the bridle of Bellerophon. Remember your Greek fairy tales? It works on Dragons, too and that's what you are now, dear nephew. Your Logus blood took over and morphed you into your demon form which I now control." He leapt onto my back, gouged me with his silver spurs. I screamed and took off into the sky with powerful strokes of my wings. Flew as high as I could and dove, intending to smash us both into the ground. He jerked the reins and forced me to a complete halt and I beat the air frantically hovering. Though large as a house, I was lighter than I seemed.

"You can't escape me, Corbel," he laughed. "Only pain will follow you should you fight my commands. A dragon is very sensitive to pain and its bodily responses far outweigh your human mind." He demonstrated by lashing me on the wounds of my back and I almost fainted. With legs, reins and whip, he steered me towards the battlefield far

below.

Chapter 44

Hundreds of thousands of Chaos soldiers stood side by side with mere humans. Amber's forces were arrayed in an arc before them, a golden army of Knights and horses, centaurs and horned beasts, heroes and fools readying to defend their Queen and Realm. I ached at the beauty of it, I despaired at the horror that was sure to come. I saw the King on a small black horse surrounded by his Guard and his brothers at his side.

The King Merlin stood apart, circled by his demon friends and other soldiers, by black men that looked like stone sculptures, by Magicians and spell casters.

As my shadow flew over them, they looked up and their faces blanched. Merlin shouted. A score of Wyverns launched and attacked me, buzzing annoying gnats that I involuntarily knocked out of the air. Their bites when they had managed to connect were like pesky flea bites. One got lucky and snagged the tender bit of skin between my back legs on the inner thigh. I roared and whipped my head around, belched and fire shot from the back of my open mouth scorching the unfortunate creature into a greasy puff of smoke.

I gagged and Jurt aimed me at the forefront of Random's army, I felt a massive buildup in my stomach and as he lowered my head by wrenching at both reins, I spewed fire down on ranks of mounted men. The screaming was terrible.

Horses and people scattered as dozens went up in flames. The cries of men and dying animals cut me to the bone. Men burned so brightly, were gone in a charred flash. Jurt banked me, my wing dipping low enough to sweep an entire phalanx off their mounts in a tangle of broken bones.

A bomb burst on my ass and I whipped around, tucking my tail between my legs to spot a familiar figure hurling magic bombs at me. Merlin was fighting with the power of his spells and Jurt grinned as he lifted me above the King.

"Hi, Bro," he yelled down and I saw Merlin's eyes widen, his mouth dropped in astonishment.

"Jurt?" he questioned and left himself wide open as the Master raked my left side causing me to drop my left leg with its eight inch scimitar claws gouging deep scars in the soil and bedrock where Merlin stood. My wings beat hard enough to nearly topple him. The smells of blood and men gagged my sensitive nose. I recognized the King's scent, he smelled of lightning and sharp breezes. He recovered with a muttered spell that sucked the air out from under my wings. I fell like a two ton stone. Seconds before we collided with the dirt, a whole host of soldiers in dark green uniforms raised their lances up, the Master blew a hurricane under me and I soared upwards and northwards. The Lancers tossed their weapons, most missed as my wings and the hurricane force winds took me higher. Several hit my belly and bounced off the diamond hard scales. I caught the others in my talons and heaved them back at the ground, wincing as I speared three at a time.

No matter how hard I tried, I could not shake the bastard off me, the bit in my mouth had some kind of magic that forced me to obey him even without the pain.

Fire lashed at my side and Merlin unleashed another bombshell of magic. It licked at

my scales and froze them. Suddenly, I weighed more than dragon aerodynamics could cope with. We started to nose dive, the harder I beat my wings, all forty feet of them, the faster I fell. I was so cold. The Master screamed at me and jerked my head around to my ass and held my mouth open until flame belched from it to melt the ton of ice on my wings and lower body. I bounced up with the sudden lightening and pulled a loop that the g-forces nailed him with, crushing him against my shoulder blades. I ran into a volley of arrows and crossbow bolts, several bit deep into my chest and hurt. I screamed and before the sound echoed back to me, black figures buzzed me, drawing scarlet lines upon my scales.

I swatted at them with my tail, connected with two and screeched when the barb bounced off stone not flesh. Banking, furious, I turned on these creatures without direction from the Master, my forelegs reaching. Caught one and squeezed, useless against what I thought was flesh and was clearly stone. Flying stone figures.

“Gargoyles!” the Master shouted. “Not Chaos or Pattern magic! Fly!”

I was no longer was capable of human speech but I thought in my head with disgust, ‘What do you think I’m doing, asshole?’ Reached out with my back feet and took the imprisoned gargoyle from my front legs throwing it as far as I could. Watched it sail a mile or more from the battlefield and hit a huge oak tree where it shattered into pebbles. Soared over Random’s standard and pulled the bolts from my chest with a wrench that almost unseated him. Blood, thick and blue arched to the ground and splattered both human and their allies. I saw men dipping their weapons in it, I saw the Master’s shock troops meet head on with Amber’s cavalry. Saw horses fall and men on both sides die. I bellowed in anguish, the Master forced me to spiral so that he could see the entire battle. He shouted orders to his Generals and advanced an entire command to Random’s flanks.

To the right of the cavalry was an odd unit, a group of men in orange near a machine that looked suspiciously like cannon. To my utter amazement, they rammed round stones into the barrel, aimed and let fly. In an explosion of orange smoke, fire balls approached me with a whistle, stopped in mid air to become objects like a child’s jumping jack. I back-flapped, spread my wings as it exploded. Spines shot out of it, pierced my wings which became lead weights. Shredded them to lace threads, I couldn’t fly and began my descent to the ground stunned.

“Shit!” the Master yelled. “Corwin found that powder that explodes in Amber! Pull up, you useless pile of scales!”

I couldn’t, my wings were lacerated into lace, my head filled with noise and confusion. Even with him pronouncing spell after spell, I still plummeted to the ground. Landed on four shaking legs like a cat but my head hit one of the cannons, crushing operator, gun and the animals used to haul it. Laid there stunned as the Master spelled a protection spell when he leapt off to attack those on the ground still capable of fighting. A division of Demon and Pike men covered his back as his Generals ordered a charge.

“Get up,” he ordered as he kicked me in the ribs. “Get up,” he cursed. “You might not be able to fly but you can still fight. You take Merlin down and I’ll go after Corwin,” he ordered, drawing his sword.

The gargoyles landed and engaged him, distracting his attention from me. A man in an officer’s uniform shouted for his men to charge and I was fighting for my life against men on foot with long spears and axes. I could ignore those with swords, their blades were too small, thin and flexible to puncture an organ or dragon hide but the lances were deadly. I elbowed, smacked, clawed and butted my head and neck through their ranks. Skewered

more than a few with my tail. It must have been poisonous, even the slightest scratch sent the humans to a screaming death.

We fought until piles of dead surrounded us, until blood ran red under my feet and the smell pounded in my nostrils. I went mad with blood lust, and only came back to myself when one of the last standing near me was the King, Merlin and the Master. They fought a duel with blades, interspersed with spells, a danse macabre of death, a ballet of blood.

I threw the last half of the man I'd torn apart to watch the challenge, ignoring the rest of the battle lines still going. It looked as if the Master's side was in the lead; I saw no sign of Random's standard or his personal guard. He was fighting on foot.

Just as I saw the Master lunge for Merlin, a giant on a black beast of a horse charged us, a long pike in his arms, twelve foot if it was an inch. It was aimed at me yet all I had eyes for was the Thrid creeping up on Merlin's unsuspecting rear. I leapt and Julian's Morgenstern caught my tail as the Thrid's blade intersected my neck instead of Merlin's back. His blade went clear through and out the other side. I screamed and blew a blast of dragon-fire that burned the despicable creature in its tracks just as Julian's lance pierced me through the chest and out behind my left wing pinning me to the ground. I cried out in mortal agony for help and the Master took off without a backwards glance laughing, leaving me to the tender mercy of the warriors.

Merlin reached up and yanked the reins, pulling my head down flat on the ground so Julian could whack off my head. I closed my eyes so I wouldn't see it happen. In truth, I didn't believe I could have stopped his stroke if I wanted to, I was weak from blood loss and the horror of what I had done. Before a scant five minutes since I'd been abandoned by the Master, Amber's men were tying me with chains and magic, a muzzle and dragging me forwards with a harness of horses who were terrified of my form. I struggled just long enough for the twelve foot lance in my chest to fracture as one of the gargoyles pulled it out. Blood spurted in a stream thicker than a man's arm. Thick, copious amounts. In a lovely shade of blue.

"It's dying," Merlin said grimly. "And I saw Jurt. With Werewandir. That bridle controls the beast."

Corwin said, "Merlin, I saw it take out a Thrid at your back. It could have avoided the lance if it hadn't jumped for the blade aimed at you."

"You saying it helped me?" he gaped.

"I'm saying maybe it was forced to fight for Jurt, like Raven was," he said.

Raven was? I thought. Did that mean they thought I was dead? Was I Raven, Corbel or the Blackbird? The Master had left me to die. I sighed and with my muzzle bound, it came out as a snuff of sulfur tainted air.

"What do you wait for, Sir Julian?" One of the soldiers demanded. "Slay the beast!"

"It's not wholly dragon," Merlin said. "It's in its demon form and Jurt wouldn't have been riding it if it wasn't an important officer. We can question him when he reverts. He must know where Vialle is being held."

Merlin recited the spell and tingles of magic electricity traveled up and down my form yet I did not change. Corwin shouted as a mass of Thrid and Wyverns rushed their small group from behind me.

"Leave it!" Random shouted. "Retreat!" Julian reached down and hauled the king atop the giant horse, pivoted and galloped off. Merlin threw me one last glance and disappeared with Corwin as Thrid clambered over me.

The sounds of a rout merged into that of a retreat. I lay in a widening pool of blood midst the dead and dying. Hours passed and the sky darkened as the battle field quieted.

My inner furnace chilled but I wasn't dead yet. The sights and sounds of the fight had become faint, my heartbeat was as slow as the beat of the earth's.

Scavengers picked the field, Thrid officers because they had the guts to finish off the wounded and because they delighted in eating the almost dead. They hooted and ran when they saw me, as if dragon was a particularly tasty treat. I was able to raise my head and threaten them and not being the smartest creatures on the flat, was able to intimidate them enough to make them detour around me. At least until the sun set.

Smoke puffed from my nostrils, the only sign of heat in the darkness. No one wandered the field, after dark was when the coyotes and jackals came out, I heard the howls of wolves and other beasts, heard them snuffing as they ate their way to gluttony. The night was long and lonely. The pain from my wounds kept me flattened to the ground, unable to move. Whenever I tried to crawl, I made no more than inches in progress forward.

In the morning, the first thing I saw was the Master staring down at me from the back of a big bay stallion who reared and pawed the ground wanting to attack me. He jerked the heavy spade bit and forced the stud back to the ground. He was dressed in battle armor and had Random's standard tied to his gauntlets. "So, you're still alive, my Blackbird," he said studying the lake of blue around me. "I thought Merlin or perhaps Corwin would have taken your head by now. Oh, what joy to be able to tell my brother he slew his own son."

He dismounted and danced around me, poking me with his sword. Its bite was harsh but nothing compared to the agony when he slid the sharp steel into the hole left by the broken lance. "Almost pierced your heart, Corbel," he said gaily. "Shall I finish the job and show you mercy?"

Bastard. As if he knew what mercy was. He slashed and the chains fell off me, he wrenched at the reins and pulled my head up staring into my dulled eyes. Cut off the muzzle. "Get up, dragon and follow me," he ordered and such was the power of his magic that I could only obey, dragging my broken and bloodied body behind him.

Chapter 45

I tried not to look upon the carnage for fear of seeing someone I knew. Not that I had any friends but I could still recognize people who had lived and served in the Master's Realm if they were sprawled on the muddied field. I did not ask who won, if Amber had, the Master would be dead or running. If he had, I would be dead and he crowing like a bantam rooster to all creation. He would be sitting on the Royal Throne of Oberon.

We trudged silently towards the far off line of forest and such was my disengagement that I made no sign of the thousands of human corpses hanging from trees growing upside down in defiance of gravity. These corpses were Amber's elite Throne Guards, the finest trained soldiers in all the Realm. They did not appear to be suffering from any wounds yet they were clearly dead.

"Do you hate me, Corbel?" He smiled, his hand drawing upon the reins so that I must face him.

I thought, how easy it would be to open my mouth and swallow him whole.

“Ah, a faint glimmer in your eyes,” he said in satisfaction. “It was your eyes, you know, that told me you had Chaos blood in you. As always, my beautiful Blackbird, you never fail to surprise me. You know you are the tenth boy I have taken, broken and put where you are. You are the only one who has survived and remained relatively sane. Of course, you are the only one that is Amber born and Chaos bred of Royal blood. I’d been looking for one of Oberon’s bastards and found none but the nine known, went on to Corwin. He was so very careful not to spread his seed among the natives like our esteemed grandfather. Merlin seems to be his only get. And then, I found you. Dear Flora couldn’t wait to tell and sold you to the highest bidder.” I wondered idly who she was and where, why she should be of interest to me. Her name brought a strange pang to my gut that I recognized as fear. “Flora is safe from you, Corbel. We gave her a nice place far from Amber and close to her favorite city on that shadow world you called home.”

Somehow, he knew my thoughts. He tilted his head and his horse stepped over a barrier that looked like a stone curb. As I dragged myself over, mystic flames tore at me, burrowed deep into my wounds and cauterized them. He held me there until I wanted to die and when I thought I had, pulled me through. I collapsed at the foot of a black granite mountain shaped like a pyramid. Atop sat his manse and was reached by a spiraled ramp only wide enough for six men abreast. “When you recover, Corbel, fly up and attend me.” He regarded me. “You have lost over half your blood. To replace that, you must eat. Magic can repair the damages to your bones and muscles but for blood, you need meat. Take whatever food you can find. Don’t eat the Thrid, they don’t taste all that good and will make you sick. Besides, I need every warrior and I will punish you if you kill even one. Humans are particularly tasty but I suppose you’ll go with your high moral standards and stick to animals.” He leaned close. “Beware. Not all the creatures you’ll find will be animals. Some are like you, mortals trapped in demon form. Eat one of those and you will be trapped in this form for the rest of your existence, be it long or short.” With that, he left me sprawled on the ground of black granite sand and rock where not a blade of grass pushed its weary way between the cracks. His troops closed around him and I watched bleakly as they ascended to the peak. It took them mere moments as if the ground under them moved along like a treadmill.

Hours, days later, I was able to move. The hole in my chest had sealed shut although the scales over it were soft and red tinged. My neck wound ached with a dull thud, like an annoying toothache. I couldn’t see it but my surprisingly sensitive front legs told me it too, was sealed but tender to the touch.

As I rose up on my haunches reminiscent of a sitting dog, lightheadedness assailed me as my low blood pressure tried to account for the sudden increase my heart was making. I staggered, dropped to all fours and waited until I was fully conscious. This time, I raised my long neck and head slowly, only to shoulder height.

The air sparkled. My sense of taste and smell were acute, much more subtle than my human nose had ever been. A drifting eddy brought the scent of mud, salt, death and blood. Men, Thrid and roasting meat. I spread my wings and although there were holes in the membranes, I thought they were healed enough to fly. I beat them slowly. They ached but it was bearable. Dust, pebbles and rocks washed away as the force from my down-strokes became more powerful. Springing up off my legs, I threw myself into the air and was flying only to double over as a massive cramp twisted my belly. It took several more before I

realized that it was hunger pains and that it was a serious flaw in such a dangerous beast as a dragon. Fuel was obviously an important and necessary commodity to one.

I rose high enough to see the entire valley which lay between two mountain ranges of black granite and obsidian. Trees grew only on the valley floor between the slopes, nothing on the banks. The forest was thick yet my eyes could see the faint yellow and reddish splotches that indicated a warm, living being. I could actually see their heart beating as a fiery red core and it was clear enough to identify man or beast. The Thrids hearts were lower, near where a man's liver would be so I knew to steer clear of them.

I rode the thermals, reaching higher and higher until I hit a barrier of sorts. It struck me with pain and loss of breath, dropped back down only to test it time and time again. A rough estimate gave me an hour's flight time around the Master's peak. I could go no farther or higher, was bound to that perimeter.

By now, my stomach was a burning demon and coherent thought was difficult. I needed to kill and eat or I was going to fall out of the sky.

To the east, I found a small herd of animals that resembled buffalo with curly yellow fur. No human or demon form could my infra-red sense. I dived in a silent rush and because of the way the yellow buffalo's necks were built, it could not look up or see me. My shadow did not send them into a stampede and I plucked one neatly off its feet with my rear legs. Instinctively, my tail came forward and barbed the creature in the neck. It went limp in seconds even before it had a chance to react.

I tore it to pieces and ate on the wing. It took four of the beasts to satisfy my hunger. With my belly full of meat, I rose to the highest thermal I could catch and soared, occasionally flapping to keep myself airborne. I slept and was in a dream where I was an eagle soaring free. When I woke, there were tears in my eyes. Dragon tears. They fell to the ground far below and hit with a crystal note that echoed for my ears only. The Master called and I returned to land on the balcony outside his bedroom.

Chapter 46

He wore comfortable jeans, a long-sleeved t-shirt, boots from his own special tailor. I crouched and curled up so that I fit in the space allotted for me. Inside behind the ornate stone balustrades was a room overdone in elegance with marble floors, exquisite handwoven rugs and tapestries, candelabras of gold and silver, a bed carved of rosewood and inlaid with amber. On the heavy brocade gold coverlet were a set of clothes; leather trousers, black tunic and harness holding my leaf daggers. My eyes widened and then I lowered them. He was implying I would return to my human body.

He moved his fingers in a complicated pattern and uttered a spell that I could feel on my dragon hide. I shrank and he grew larger until I was crouched on my hands and knees before him, naked and covered with black and blues, heavy scabs where I had been wounded. He touched my bare back and scraped at the fresh scars from his last whipping.

"You tried to kill me, Master," I whispered and he kicked me in the belly. I rolled and sucked for breath as he watched.

"You were supposed to die, Corbel," he said. "Your fucking father was supposed to

kill you. Even Julian would have done the deed.”

“Why did you morph me back?”

“Still the spark of defiance and curiosity, Corbel? Would you like another dance with the flagellum?”

“No, Master,” I said, gritting my teeth and trying to cover my nakedness. His eyes narrowed and he hit me on the side of the head. My hand came up and caught his. We vied for dominance and he cursed, spitting out a spell that froze me in my tracks.

“Where did this courage come from, Corbel?” he snarled. “You dare to raise your hand to me? Tenfold will it be returned unto you. I can break your spirit again, son of Merlin.” He paused and smiled. “I think I’ll tell you the fate of your friend, Corbel. Do you wonder where Steen is? I see your eyes flare with hatred and fear. You should fear.” He called out and a trio of servants appeared. Mostly human and led by a guard I knew slightly named Carolus. His eyes widened when he spotted me.

“Milord?” he bowed on one knee to Jurt.

“See this slave, guard?” At his nod, Jurt continued. “He has displeased me greatly. Tie him out on the Pinion Rock and tell the Thrid Captain to do with him as he wishes. Make sure he lasts longer than Steen.”

The guard swallowed. “Yes, milord. To the death, then?”

“Well, I don’t want him eaten but they can play with the parts. Make sure they fuck him first. All of them. If he survives that, bring him in and let him rest the night so we can watch tomorrow.”

“Milord,” Carolus hemmed.

“Do you wish to take his place, guard?” Jurt snarled. He smiled as he devoured my fear and trembling. Tears crept down my face not for me but for the man who had tried to help me and suffered the worst fate I could imagine. Death when it came must have been a blessing and I hoped it came quickly for both of us.

The three of them picked up my stiff, unmovable body but before they carted me off, the Master kissed me on the lips, caressed my body almost as if he was saying goodbye. I begged him with my eyes, I swore promises to him, I pleaded with the gods, the Logus and the Unicorn not to do this to me. No one heard my pleas.

They carried me to the north side of the palace and on an open plateau off the soldiers barracks was a flat rock of sharp obsidian, waist high shaped like an altar. There were manacles for both wrists and ankles, and for around the neck. Near it was another wedge of rock like a half wall and I puzzled over its use until Carolus brought me towards it. I screamed inside, tried to struggle until he put me face first, on the rock on my stomach with my hands over my head and secured to rings in the ground. My ass was in the air. My ankles chained and spread apart so that I was spreadeagled over the rock just wide enough to support my middle. It cut off my ability to take a deep breath.

The stasis melted and I exploded, trying to twist like a wild animal, trying to slip out of the cuffs, or to slide off this rock. I pleaded, begged and cried, all resolve and courage evaporated in lieu of this potent threat. My sanity was in jeopardy besides my life.

“Please, please, please, Carolus! Don’t do this! Don’t leave me here! Oh gods! I’m scared, I don’t want to die like this! Master! Please, Master! I’ll promise you anything! I vow on the Pattern, on the blood of Amber! Don’t let the Thrid have me!”

Carolus shivered and gripped my hand before hurrying away. He did not want to watch me break down. I sobbed until I had no more tears left and they hit the rock beneath me, a

shiny pool of salty crystal that reflected my anguished face back at me. I could see bits and pieces of torn flesh. A few teeth, hair and splashes of blood. I gagged and vomited, joined what I took to be the last mortal remains of Steen.

I smelled them before I heard them, a sharp stink that cloyed the back of your throat, the iron tang of armor and salty sweat. Musk and rotten meat. I bit my lips to keep from screaming as it touched me. A slow, lingering pinch down my back that burned icy and then warmth ran across my ribs to patter on the ground. It had used its disemboweling claw to slice open my back. It took my blood and used it to lubricate the passage it was fondling. I sucked in one last deep breath knowing that no matter what I said or did, nothing was going to stop this, that I was going to survive this, kill the bastard that ruled this realm and save Vialle. I vowed it on the Blood of the Unicorn.

The Thrid placed its elbows on either side of my neck and leaned on me. He smelled like dung and his organ was thick, probing at my hole. I clenched my buttocks and prayed it would be over quick. I knew its prick was massive, barbed and once it entered me, it would tear at my insides with spines that were hooked and inject me with toxic seed that both poisoned and destroyed tissue with acid like results. When it exited, it would tear more going out as the barbs were designed to hold its mate and ensure fertilization. Sex for a Thrid female was a once in a lifetime event, she died during the act and her fertilized offspring would eat their way out once mature. This Thrid let his right hand dangle near my wrist and I arched my back trying to dislodge him. My feet never touched the ground so leverage wasn't there to help me. I stifled a sob of frustration and sheer terror as he snuffled at my ear. He whispered and it took me several tries before I listened.

"Hold still, you fool," he muttered as he played with my cuff. His voice was human and recognizable. Rinlon. "I'm sorry. I have to do this. It's not what you think, it's a metal tube with fake blood. Understand? It's not a Thrid organ, I'm not a Thrid." He shoved and my insides burst in pain and blood spread from my rectum. I cried out and the world rocked, receded as I fought an overwhelming despair. My mind fractured. I could not handle what was happening, I was inventing false reality so I could cope with true horror.

The cell was in the heart of the black pyramid. I was curled up on a thin blanket with blood running down my legs and back. I smelled like the Thrids. I wondered how many had taken me, how many of them had pieces of my insides attached to the spines of their sex. How long I survived depended on how many had raped me and how much I'd been infected with.

As I looked up, I saw a window on the wall and people were dancing to the strains of a minuet. I looked through the window and they waved to me, I hummed to the sounds of the waltz. The ladies were beautiful with their white powdered hair and lovely formal gowns. Diamonds sparkled on their high-heeled shoes. The men wore tails and sashes, twirling and dipping with evident joy. I ached to join them. A tall man in pale blue approached and bent a knee before me.

"May I have this dance?" the gentleman questioned and held out his lace enveloped hand. His fingers were long, delicate and adorned with huge blue gemstones.

"I've nothing to wear," I protested and he nodded.

"No matter. Come, get up. Dance with me."

I rose to my feet and he did not stare at my nakedness but gripped my wrists, tugging me through the window which sprouted French Doors as we entered them. The people

moved aside to give us room, he held me lightly at the waist and wrist.

“Corbel, I gave you the key to your cuffs and in the tube are pen and paper. Corbel, you have to come back. Do you understand? Rescue yourself.”

“What kind of dancing is this?” I asked, puzzled. He shook me and slapped my face. It stung. The music stopped. The people faded and the window slipped away. I was lying on the cold stone floor of the cell with only the corridor’s witch light providing feeble illumination. A guard was slapping my cheeks with warm hands. As he saw I was cognizant, he stopped. He smiled in relief. “Corbel. How do you feel?”

“Why didn’t you leave me alone?” I cried. “I was someplace else, not here. I don’t want to die here, like this!”

“Oh my dear boy,” he tried to hug me and I beat at him.

“DON’T TOUCH ME!” I seethed.

“Corbel, no one raped you. I promise. Not the Thrid or Webster. It was an illusion.”

“I felt it. I felt its prick go inside, it hurt and made me bleed. It raped me. I’m going to die,” I shuddered in horror.

“No, Corbel. It was me, disguised as a Thrid. I am a spy for Amber and I used a spell to change my appearance. What I inserted into you are Trumps, paper and a pen so you can escape. Steen told me what you planned to do.”

“Steen is dead,” I said flatly. “I killed him.”

“No,” he was surprised. “Steen was murdered by Webster.”

“Steen died for helping me,” I returned.

“He died in a fall from the Tower trying to rescue the Queen when you didn’t return.”

“The Master said he fed him to the Thrid. I am going to be manna for the Thrid. Will you give me a blade so I can cheat them from their pleasure? I can’t give you anything except for my body, do you want that? The Master seemed to enjoy it.”

“Damn,” he muttered. “Damn it, I didn’t want to do this,” he reached into the pocket of his uniform shirt. From it, he took a short metal tube and stuck it in my neck. I complained and rubbed at the spot and felt a bead of blood. It made me angry enough to want to plant a dagger in him. Fire raced through my veins, distorted my vision and my perceptions. I was suddenly stone cold sober, hopped up and ready to jump at the slightest sound. I looked around with terrified trepidation. “What did you do to me?” I wailed, clutching at his forearms.

“Corbel,” he hissed. “Shut up. Be quiet. I’m not supposed to be here. Are you...sensible now? All I did was give you a shot of Moonbane.”

“You think me mad?”

“You were. You are, Corbel. Your mind broke three days ago. You were babbling and laughing, dancing and singing as they tortured you and then, you went catatonic. Webster ordered you left here until you were aware enough to finish the torture he planned. Seems he gets no pleasure out of tormenting the insane. No response, you see. Can you stand up? He whipped you, sodomized you with his wand and then beat you with it until it broke. I treated you with heal-all and most of your wounds are scabbed over. I couldn’t help your blood loss, do you feel faint?”

I searched his face and the over-laden image of a Thrid Captain kept intruding. “Who are you?” I gasped and he bear-hugged me firmly. I could not resist. He smelled like a sweaty, fear filled man who used bayberry on his hair and spicy aftershave. His cheeks were rough with three day old whiskers that scratched my skin. I felt his heartbeat under

mine, fast and as frightened as mine, his muscles under the were-hide cloak were hard and supple yet not as hard as the Thrid. I felt lower and when I encountered his definite manhood and not the Thrid's heavy organ, I believed. He shifted his hips away, embarrassed.

"Sorry," I whispered dropping my hands. He helped me to my feet. "What do you want me to do?"

"Escape, Corbel. Flee this place," he was puzzled.

"The Master does not want me to," I said and he shook me.

"Corbel, he is going to torture you until you have nothing left. He wants, he needs for one of the Princes or the Kings to kill you. When one of them spills your blood, it will destroy both the Pattern and the Logus opening up a new entity of Power and Webster means to use your blood to make him that entity."

"I won't leave without the Queen," I hedged and shook my head.

"She's in the Tower. At the Palisades. Not here. Steen managed to bring her there before he fell. Quite the man, he was," Rinlon admired. "He said not to give up on you. He was a hell of a climber, too. He climbed the outside of the tower to reach her."

"He was a son of Eregnor, the son of one of the Golden Circle Treaty Diplomats," I said sadly. "He was the true hero."

"He was the missing Prince of Eregnor, Sterling Orate?" Rinlon gasped.

"Prince? And he said he was no warrior," I mourned. "He endured twenty years of the Master. I had only two." I looked at him. "This tube you...inserted. How do I remove it?"

He explained and I followed his instructions. Moments later, the thing was in my hands. I opened the steel tube and emptied it into his hands. Unrolled it to reveal a trump of the Lighthouse, another of a forest. None of any of the Princes or of Amber direct. Paper and a pen which he passed to me. With shaking hands, I drew the Tower room with enough detail to be almost a painting of it, felt the familiar tingle and we were there. As soon as my flesh met the sandy pebbles at the base of the mansion, my body wrenched into a cramp I couldn't straighten from and I fell. When I could move again, I saw the black scales of the dragon form. I cried out and the wail echoed against the mountains. The guard drew his blade and advanced on me.

Chapter 47

Rather than let Rinlon hurt me or be forced to kill him, I leapt into the air and flew off. Circled the Tower and used my acute vision to search the interior for the Queen. Saw her seated in her room attended by women and unguarded. I was puzzled as to why she was alone and the Master had not sent others to retrieve her. Far below, I heard the guard shouting for Vialle to run as I dropped lightly to the balcony and rested my wings. Scrunching them as close to my body as I could, I squeezed myself through the doorway. Her women screamed and ran. She stood her up and spoke.

"Who or what manner of creature are you? Have you come to kill me or ransom? Or rescue? Can you speak? I can smell you and hear your heartbeat." She paused and her face reflected both shock and wonder as she advanced towards me, her hand outstretched. She

was as lovely as ever, still in the same gown I had last seen her in though it was terribly tattered. I lowered my head so that her slender hand reached between my head spikes and my eyes. Her touch was electric, soothing and memorable. "I recognize your heartbeat, Raven," she whispered in awe. "Though your form is somewhat changed."

I snorted and a puff of sulfur scented breath hit her in the face and blew her hair loose. I apologized and she laughed. "I take it this is your Chaos form? Can you change back to your human one? It fits neatly in this space and would make conversation a trifle easier."

I nudged her just as the door flew open and Rinlon burst in, blade extended. She turned to face him.

"Stand back from the beast, Majesty," he gasped, a trifle winded from his run up two hundred feet of stairs.

"No," she answered. "Rinlon, is it? This creature would never harm me, it is Raven, my nephew."

Rinlon dropped his blade on the floor such was his astonishment, his mouth open and gaping. "Prince Raven is the Blackbird, this thing?" His face paled in shock. "Oh, my Lady, the things that bastard has done to him! The things I have done to him! My Lord, forgive me?" He fell to his knees and bowed his head to the ground. I hit him with a leg and stood him up. Placed both of them on my back between my shoulders and the muscles of my wings. Opening them inside was impossible. I climbed up the rest of the Tower and perched on the roof. Diving off was exhilarating for me and terrifying for them. I could feel their tiny heartbeats against my scales as they hung on with arms and legs.

Rising high, I flew as fast as I could until the Tower and the Master's territory lay far below and behind. I kept my eye on my surroundings, discovered that I had a sense that told me what was around before I could see it.

My passengers whispered conversation was clearly audible to my dragon ears. They updated each other on the recent events and Rinlon shouted a question at me. As if I could answer. A dragon's throat was designed for two things, eating its prey and belching fire. Neither choice would suffice here.

I flew carefully not just because I carried two humans who were not capable of flying but because I did not know if the Master had put up a barrier here to keep me in.

We flew on for hours and just when I thought we were safe, I hit something that stopped me in mid stroke, I fell hundreds of feet before I thought to level off and fly backwards.

Landing on the ground, I shrugged them off my back and walked forward on all fours until I met the solid, invisible obstruction that denied me forward momentum. It took them a few minutes to figure out the problem, they had no trouble with crossing it, only me. We stared at each other from either side and frustrated, I lifted my head and howled. It echoed off the mountains but went through the barrier. Rinlon walked back over. "I can't feel anything. What is it? A spell?"

Vialle tilted her head and touched it. "I can't feel anything, Raven but I can sense it. A sort of tingly, sparkling net of force. It's part spell and part something else. There must be a series of lodestones that power it."

I shooed them back away from it and let loose a horrendous mouthful of flames that stopped at the wall and shot up it for hundreds of feet without any effect on the barrier at all. Rinlon gaped. "What happens when he farts?" he asked in wonder and Vialle surprised me with a big belly laugh. She almost cried she laughed so hard and he joined her. I shook my

head and flew up a few yards to check out where we'd landed.

We were in a small valley, a hollow between two ridges that were on the lower slopes of some truly magnificent mountain ranges of granite and basalt. There were trees scattered here and there. Bushes with masses of pink flowers and no leaves. A stream chuckled over gray, blue and reddish slate slabs, and over rounded stones that were soft limestone and sparkled in the water. Something that resembled grass grew sparsely where there was a pale pinkish soil. The sky had a pewter look to it with fish-scale clouds. I dipped my muzzle into the water and sucked up a bellyful, it was cold, clean and potable. They followed me, wiping their mouths with their hands.

"Do you know where we are?" Vialle asked. I could not answer and did not know. Rinlon looked around.

"We flew due east towards the Cascadia Range. I'm not sure how fast it flew," he stopped when Vialle gently corrected him by saying he, not it. "He flew. We passed over the Hegremon River so I suspect we are near Whichgren."

I climbed the ridge and studied the back-trail. I smelled something like a hart and leapt, forgetting that I was forty feet of monster aiming for a tree break. I broke the trees and it more than my hunting skills knocked down the hart breaking its back. I bit off its head and crunched the tasty morsel, throwing tree trunks out of my way like matchsticks. Carrying the body back to the pair, I dropped it in front of Rinlon and sat back on my haunches. He grinned.

"Looks pleased as punch, Majesty. Got a grin on his... face like a cat ate the cream," he said. "He's brought us dinner. Or lunch. Might be handy to have a portable cook stove and gamekeeper." Removing his knife, he gutted and butchered the roe throwing me the parts he didn't want. I caught them on the fly and ignored his comments of here, Spot. Sit, Rover until he said Fetch, boy.

I snorted steam at him and nearly blew him off his feet. I didn't mind being used for a cooking stove but I preferred my meat bloody, not scorched. I ate what was left over, hides, hooves and horns. Lay down and rested my head on my feet with the two of them tucked close to keep warm as the sun went down.

Vialle murmured, "you're so warm, Raven. Like my own heated blanket." We watched the sun set and the twin moons rise. At the first ray of moonshine hit my scales, I felt the same stretching, cramping pain and cried out, waking the pair. We stared at each other.

"Oberon's beard!" Rinlon yelped. "You're naked!"

I looked down at myself and I was. All six foot, pink and scarred. I was human again. I didn't say anything but turned and ran for the barrier, stopping inches from where I'd last felt it. Sucked in my breath and pushed my hand through. Followed with the rest of me. "Vialle," I said in joy. "Vialle!" I broke down, sobbing as if my heart had broken and she enfolded me in her arms, pulling my head into her breast so that I heard and felt her heartbeat. She rubbed my naked back.

"Oh, my poor dear boy," she whispered, her tears as copious as mine. "I thought I would never see you again." She saw me with her hands, exploring my face, my chest and back, stopping at the rise of my buttocks. "Rinlon, your cloak, please," she ordered and he placed the heavy wool tenderly around my shoulders.

"Gods, boy. Is there an inch of your skin that bastard didn't mark? How did you survive such tortures? The scar tissue on your back is..." He was speechless.

“The Master is very generous with his whip,” I said flatly, wiping my face with my hands. “We can’t stay here. He’ll know I’ve exited his spell boundary.”

“Raven, why can’t you change as you will it? Like Merlin does?” Vialle asked me.

“It’s not me that changes, it’s the Master’s spell. He made me into a dragon. So he could use me in the war. He means for Corwin, Merlin or Random to slay me and destroy the Pattern and the Logus. One of Amber’s blood must spill mine for his scheme to work. I won’t choose sides, Vialle. I can’t. That leads to a worse scenario. I am the Balance.”

“I don’t understand, Raven but I will follow where you lead,” she said.

“Rinlon, can you lead us out of here? Towards the next town or village?” I asked.

“There are none for a hundred leagues. We are near Whichgren Fens. Home of the swamp cats and other not so friendly creatures. Bogs and snakes and other nasties. Too bad you can’t just pop back into the beastie and fly us out of here.” He looked down at my bare feet. “Will you be able to walk without foot coverings, lad?”

“I’ll have to, none of you have any extra pairs. Too bad I ate the hide, I could have made moccasins. Sorry. I have no control over it. Be grateful the Master took off the bridle, with that on me, I have no free will.” I stared off into the darkness and he took a brand from the fire and led us deeper into the woods.

Chapter 48

We marched all night, stopping only for pee breaks and Vialle insisted we not leave her to give her privacy as she was certain there were animals waiting from the brush. I didn’t second guess her, in my dragon form I could have both seen and smelled them. As a human, my senses were not the equal of hers or the dragon. My feet broke down on the rocks and branches of the forest floor. I kept it from them but Vialle could tell I was bleeding.

Near dawn, she made us stop and had Rinlon tear strips from my cloak and bind them after washing in a nearby stream. Neither of us had thought to pack a bag with medicines or provisions. We had to use what we had with us or our hands. Vialle laughed and said we could drink out of her slippers but doubted we’d enjoy the taste.

“Vialle,” Rinlon whispered as I let my head fall on my chest. “He seems very warm to my touch.”

She put her hand on my forehead, it seemed ice cold. “Milady, are you warm enough?” I returned alarmed at how cold she felt to me.

“No, Raven. You are chilled. How do you feel?”

“Tired. Hungry. My feet hurt,” I complained and stood up. Would have fallen over if Rinlon hadn’t grabbed me. I looked up at the lightening sky. “Dawn’s coming. I wish we were in Chessaria, the dawn there is spectacular.” I helped Vialle to her feet and followed Rinlon. He found a game trail and the going was easier. We encountered little glades in the woods with wild apple trees and berry bushes with prickly thorns overloaded with ripe fruit. The thorns caught at our clothing and added to the general frayed look of fugitives. The footing here was easier on my feet, pine needles and sandy loam. It even smelled different.

The sun came up. Huge, golden and shot off rays of dazzling color. I saw thousands of

butterflies follow the rays and descend to the feathery leaves of gingokomellan trees. The sky darkened to a turquoise blue with a flash of green, like marbled cat's eye. Rinlon gaped and turned in a circle to see Vialle smile. "Where are we?"

"Are you lost, Rinlon?" I worried taking the opportunity to sit under the apple tree. Reached up and plucked one, took a bite of sweet/tart Mac. Ate the whole thing, core and all.

"This isn't Whichgren. We should be smack dab dead center in the Fens. The sky's all wrong and the trees," he said.

"Yes, we're someplace else," Vialle agreed. "Raven has changed a few things and brought us here. I knew Corwin could Hell Ride, I only suspected you might be able to, Raven."

"Hell Ride? The Master asked me that, once." We both asked her what that meant. She explained.

"When you are running for your life, you can change the surroundings little by little towards the goal of Amber. Like a Trump. Too large a change is dangerous, it brings you to a shadow where you don't want to go. Describe what you see, Raven." I did and she nodded. "It sounds familiar. Find a road next."

We shared the apples and berries, he laughed at the sight of us stained with berry juice. We walked on, Vialle's hand reached for mine as if she was afraid to let go of me.

Pine trees with lacy branches guarded larger meadows. We trod on sand between banks of laurel and sage. The path became a wider trail intersecting with water holes and streams that became rivers. We saw red deer, marmots, chipmunks the size of rabbits and something that resembled a teddy bear in size as well as color.

Grass appeared, each tiny tip glistened with dew and as we swept through the waist high sea, were both dampened and enchanted as it made a melody of faint chimes. I felt the change under my feet before I saw it. Smooth marble slabs so white they seemed to catch the sun and glow. Along the sides were flowers with pansy faces in a riotous jewel of color that turned to face us. When the sky marbled and the silvery deer-like creatures came out of the forest to stare and point at us with their hands, I knew where we were.

"Chessaria," I said. "I dreamed I was here when I was a child. A long time ago."

"Memories, Raven. Your memories are returning," she said calmly. "I suspected it was where we were earlier when you mentioned the butterflies."

"Is it safe to rest? Both of you are near dropping with exhaustion and his feet are in terrible shape. You need to eat and rest," Rinlon advised. Vialle deferred to me.

"Don't hunt anything that is gold or silver, Rinlon," I said picking out a spot off the road. The grass flattened under me as I made a nest. "There are water sources near the yellow barked trees. All of the mushrooms are edible, there are beetles that live on the underside of the orange ferns. They taste like fruit." My voice trailed off as I sank deep into exhausted slumber.

I woke because a particular itching started on the back of my neck. It was too annoying to sleep through and as I sat up, I noticed that both of them were asleep. There was an impressive pile of foodstuffs next to Rinlon stuffed inside his tunic. The itching grew to a pain that translated as foreboding. I was afraid and stood up on feet that had swollen to twice their size and my toes looked like buttons on a hog's butt. My skin twitched, my back flared as the scars pulled at muscles no longer used to free movement or the way I'd lain these last few hours. I woke them, my face grim. When they asked for explanations, all I

said was, “the Master. He’s coming.”

We ran. I shifted the scenery as many times as I could and still the sense of being followed stayed with me. “He is following us?” Vialle gasped as we ran down the side of a road as paved as any cityscape. We dodged vehicles that looked vaguely familiar until you got a glimpse of the orange skinned hairless three eyed drivers. They merely stared at us as if half naked humans running was no big deal. I noticed sardonically, that none of them stopped to give us a ride. They used the universal middle finger at us, too.

“He can change the scenery same as me,” I huffed finally. “He must have the same abilities as Merlin.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because the Master is his brother,” I furrowed my brow. In all the time I’d been his slave, I never thought of him except as the Master, not Webster or even Jurt. I realized I had forgotten that little detail, that he was Merlin’s half brother. “He told me his name was Jurt.”

“Jurt. I’ve heard mention of him. A bad apple,” Rinlon mused. I stifled a noise between a snort and a sob.

“I will kill him when I have the chance.”

“No, Raven,” he said. “I will.”

“He’s a better swordsman than Random. Are you in his class?”

“I’ve seen Webster fight. I can take him,” he said confidently. “Can we head for Amber?”

“I’ve been trying,” I returned. “Something is blocking me. I don’t know if it’s me or the Master or even something that Merlin put up.”

“So where are we headed?”

“Cabra.” I tensed as the sky darkened to a pewter gray and harpies dive-bombed us, scattering the vehicles on the road into a massive multi-car pile-up. Horns added to the cacophony of rending metal, shrieks and foreign curses. The orange people oozed out of their cars and stood on the middle of the lanes shooting spit balls at the flying hags. When one gob connected, the harpies screamed and fell out of the sky, holes eaten right through.

“WHOA! Toxic spitballs!” I said and darted for the nearest sedan to stop abruptly as a bird woman lifted it off the road by her claws only to deposit it nearly on our heads.

“Raven, I suggest we run and hide!” Rinlon yelled as he grabbed for the Queen’s hands.

Up ahead was a bridge abutment with a road under it and another atop providing some coverage. We ran as more of the harpies fell out of the sky. Rinlon took two more with his sword thrusts after an impressive leap before we reached the underpass.

My body ached all over, my feet burned so bad that I wasn’t sure I could take another step. I shivered as chills ran down my back and made my limbs shake. My stomach clenched in fear and urine dribbled down my legs.

“Vialle!” Rinlon said urgently. “Catch him!”

I collapsed and turned my head to the soil under my face. “Master,” I said in defeat knowing he was nearby.

“Raven, fight. Don’t let him take you. Don’t let him win!” Rinlon urged, holding me. “Boy, your father loves you. The Queen loves you as a son. If you go to him, you go to our deaths.”

“I am already dead,” I said hollowly. “The Master killed me two years ago.”

“No, Raven,” Vialle said and held me tight. “You are Raven, the living bond between the King of Chaos and the Unicorn of Amber. In you is both the power of the Pattern and the Logus. Seek your destiny and your freedom.”

I was the dragon and as the Master called for me, I answered.

Chapter 49

He came with his army and all the time we had spent running had been for naught. We were back on his turf, in Szeged proper and it had been ravaged by Amber forces. Death and destruction were everywhere. I stood in front of the pair and hissed, blowing a stream of super heated fire at him. He deflected it with a gesture as if it were nothing to him. Unleashing a bolt at me, I reared up and spread my wings as far as I could guarding my two companions from his mystical fire. The blast from his hands hit me on the chest and sparkled on my scales. Most of it bounced off save for the still tender spot where Julian’s lance had pierced me and the Master had prodded me with his sword. He looked disgruntled as if he had expected different results.

I nudged them to run and they did not move; I pushed them to get back on me and they did that willingly. When I spit out the tube that Rinlon had brought me, he caught and opened it to reveal the Trump of Cabra. I was gambling that it would work with my dragon eyes and before the Master could loose another magic bolt, we were flying through to the Lighthouse. I heard his roar of outrage and shivered. The last thing I saw was his enraged face as he uttered a spell that faltered as it hit the power of the Trump, stopping before it could follow us.

I circled the Lighthouse and did not expect to see an army camped around it or a navy out to sea. As we popped out into the azure skies above the light, an armada of warships let loose a volley of spears and arrows at us. Several hit my body and bounced off, unable to penetrate the diamond hard scales. Others went through the more delicate membranes of my wings and tore gaping holes. It was the harpoon from the flagship that did the most damage. Over the screams of my passengers to stop shooting and my sudden dart to avoid a new barrage of arrows that would hit them, I flew right into the path of a three pronged steel shaft trailing ropes and a net. As luck would have it, one of the prongs hit the same spot as Julian’s lance and drove deep into my chest. I screamed and immediately, my wing muscles refused to function. I spiraled, falling lower to the sea, trying desperately to keep aloft in a shallow dive. The sailors winched in the net as it expanded to encircle me. Blue blood sprayed the air. Vialle and Rinlon’s voices soared above the shouts of the soldiers but only I could hear them. Frantically, I aimed for the beach not knowing if the two would survive a fall even into the water. Smaller boats put out and rowed towards me. My vision was going. I couldn’t see whose standards were on the nearest cutter.

I fell out of the sky and hit the edge of the beach and the water like a ton of bricks. Half in the water, half on sand. Gouged a crater with my weight yet cradled my two riders as if they were precious eggs. “Run!” I thought pushing them away. I blew them onto their feet with a huge breath, and could not understand why I couldn’t catch another. They wouldn’t leave me. Men in uniforms leapt ashore and held the pair at sword point. I managed to roar

and a tiny blast of steam squeaked from my throat but no flame. The net tightened and they dragged me onto my side, back out into the water.

Rinlon shouted and fought them. I heard Vialle's cries of anger and despair. Fought so very hard to come to their aid. Moaned as the pain of the steel embedded in my chest gave way to horror as the Master and his forces arrived and began firing on the ships.

"The Queen!" I heard from a dozen seamen and within minutes, her name was echoing from thousands. Men surrounded her and ran with her to the Lighthouse. Rinlon stayed and made his way to my side.

"Raven," he gasped, staring at the metal shaft hanging in my chest. "What can I do?" I lowered my head, put my front legs onto the pole and pulled it out with a tremendous jerk. My scream drowned out men's voices and the sounds of the battle. The rush of blood alarmed him, he took his cloak and pressed it into the wound. His face paled to stark white as he said, "my god, Corbel, I can see your heart!"

I grunted, raised myself up and one handed, threw the harpoon at the Master. It fell short because my strength was gone but a black winged man caught it out of the sky and sent it on. Jurt laughed and cast another spell, seemed stunned when neither spell worked or the gargoyle was affected. He stood on the spear, aimed it, rode it like a surf board to its destination.

Sailors swarmed me, hacking at those parts of me that they could reach. Mostly, I ignored them save for the one that used an ax on my tail. He cut off the forked barb and I screamed at the fresh agony, reached back and snapped the surprised hacker in half. Came face to face with Sir Julian who lunged for my eyes with his sword. It was exquisitely painful as he sheared into my eye with a smoothness that at first, seemed as if I'd only blinked. My vision burst into sparks flaring like rockets, I shook my head tearing loose his blade as half my world went dark. He was grinning fiendishly as he leapt over my head and onto my neck riding me like a bronc.

I rolled over dislodging him, nearly crushing him under my belly but the movement made me bleed more and weaken. I couldn't breathe fire, I couldn't raise my head and barely saw Rinlon fighting for his own life at the hands of a Bactrain warrior. I heard him shouting 'NO!' somewhere off to my left as Julian raised a sword on my outstretched neck. The entire world stopped. I saw out of my one eye the glee on the Master's face, the blood lust on Julian's, the horror on Rinlon's as the blade descended. Time stood still. The Pattern waited, the Logus waited as my last and final death began.

His sword fell. Reverberated as it bounced off stone. I swore I saw chips fly but I could have been wrong, I was blinded, mortally wounded and losing blood as if from a leaking water hose. The last thing I saw was the stone gargoyle between me and the razor sharp blade in my uncle's hands.

Voices murmured over my head and concern was in their tone. Puzzlement, horror and sympathy. Traces of conversations that made me restless in my delirium. My neck still hurt, my eye throbbed with a dull ache and there was a fire raging in my chest. I coughed because it hurt to breathe and it hurt worse than I could bear it when I coughed. It felt like my entire body was fracturing in pieces and coming out from my lungs.

"You can see his heart beating," one of the voices fretted. "I don't know how to treat...dragons. Only men, centaurs, fauns, wyverns and hippogriffs. He's too large to transport to the Hospital Clouds and besides, they've never treated a dragon, either. If he could convert, I could help him."

“If he converts, he’ll be dead in minutes,” replied the voice I thought sounded familiar. “Do you know how to help him, Sergeant Rinlon? My Queen?”

The Green Lady was back. I tried to move and see her but something held me immobile and I was too weak to do more than pull feebly at the ropes. “He’s trying to fight the restraints. Tell him not to move. If he starts bleeding again, I won’t be able to stop it. He’s almost out of blood, anyway. I can barely get a blood pressure.”

“Raven. Dear boy, listen to me,” my Queen said urgently. “You must lie still and let the healers work on you. We can’t move you and he’s still out there. Murphy managed to get a harpoon in him. He’s wounded and has retreated to his last redoubt. He’s on the run, Raven.”

Not dead. The Master was not dead, he was merely waiting for me to die so he could harness the power and destroy both realms. I crawled forward scant inches and a gargoyle sat on my head and held it by the horned spikes over my eye. I could see out of only the one and that was just of a dim, wavering stone statue.

“Still, Corbin, my Raven,” it spoke. “Still as a mouse in the courtyard or I will box your ears.” Something about the threat made me listen. I kept as still as he requested and slipped into coma. From which I did not expect to waken.

Chapter 50

The King came. Both of them. Stood before me and laid their hands on my head. What I perceived through one eye was different, it lacked a definition to their form. Like seeing through badly shattered glass. Or perhaps, it was because I was dying. They spoke to me and when I made no response, spoke to each other. Their conversation went on as others joined them.

“Merlin, are you sure it’s safe? I know Vialle said it’s Raven but is it Raven with a human mind in a dragon form or a dragon with Raven’s mind lost inside? Do you have any spells to reach him? Or heal him?”

“I don’t know, Random. The kingdom hasn’t seen a dragon in thousands of years. I don’t know if he can order the change or Jurt holds the key. Dad, any ideas?”

“Ask Ghost,” returned Corwin. All three were present, if only the Master was here, he could take all his enemies at one fell swoop. Out of the corner of my left eye, a glowing wheel transfixed me. I thought it some celestial being come to bring me to hell for after all my deeds, I was surely not going to Elysium. It whistled and bathed a green light over me. Spoke.

“Dad, I’m sorry. Nothing I can do or know what to do. He’s dying, has maybe a few hours. Something pierced his heart and he’s lost almost all his blood. If he was human, he’d classify as one of the living dead.”

“No,” Merlin whispered. “No. It can’t happen. If I have to cede to Jurt to save him, I will.”

That made me rouse a little. If the King did that---he might as well finish me off so both realms would die. “No!” I protested and it heard me.

“Raven?” the halo asked. “You can hear me?”

“Are you a saint?” I asked it.

“Dad! He’s...talking to me!”

Voices broke out in excited bedlam. I went away until peace reigned. “Raven? Raven? Answer me, damn it! I can’t see if he’s still breathing!”

Curious. All of them were leaking water from their eyes. I shifted my focus towards the one wearing the glowing ruby jewel in place of her eye and was drawn towards it with an eagerness almost like hunger. She told me her name and that the Pattern and the Unicorn weren’t done with me yet. She took me inside the Jewel and we were standing inside the Pattern and the Logus at the same time.

“My name is Cora, Raven. Like you, I am born of the Pattern and Guardian of the Jewel of Judgment.”

“I won’t choose,” I said almost hysterically. “You can’t make me, you can’t let me die, it will destroy all the shadows and both real worlds, Chaos and Amber.”

“I know. I won’t ask you to choose one over the other. Your choice is simply this, do you want to live or die?”

I laughed until I cried. I wanted the peace of death after all I had endured and yet, I wanted also to live. To smell fresh cut grass, the scent of new mown hay, of autumn leaves. The texture of a woman’s lips, how fresh sheets felt against bath warmed skin. The taste of fuzzy purple fruit as its juice ran down my chin. The play of muscles beneath me as a horse galloped in joy because it could almost fly.

She brought me back to the ground with a simple touch. “Dworkin is my mentor, Raven and your great grandfather. It was he that created the Lighthouse of Cabra and the first Trumps. Even the Pattern itself was made from his blood. To save your life and your body, you must walk the Pattern alone without help from the Unicorn or the Logus. Once you pass, you can use the power to return to your own body.”

“Healed?” I asked.

“No. That you must do on your own with proper medical attention.” She was gentle. “Raven, the dragon body is almost gone. When it dies, if you haven’t completed the Pattern, you will also die.”

“How do I get there? My body is too weak to walk, let alone fly.”

“I will show you the way.” She picked up my hands and it was warm, human. Pointed me towards a hill and a cliff I recognized from my foray to assassinate the Amber General. It was Kolvan. My first steps took me right to its face and down the long marble staircase to the Pattern.

My body was so weak I was afraid I wouldn’t even make it to the first Veil, let alone force my way through its entire length. I checked to make sure I had no blood leaking from me to burn it, my skin was whiter than snow and my veins faint blue traceries under. I couldn’t raise even a bead of ruby liquid. When I looked back for the lady, she was gone. Raising my hand to my damaged eye, I stepped out onto the First Veil and it was as if I was wading through a fast moving stream that nearly knocked me off my feet. I looked down at my feet and saw only two, still swollen and sore from our forest run. I left faint footprints on the swirling, misty footing of the Pattern. Heaved a deep breath and pushed on. Faces appeared out of the mist and mocked me. Thrud soldiers reached for me and their phantom arms fell through me as if I too, was a phantom. They chased me and promised me a lifetime of pleasure if only I would defer to them. I ignored them though it was hard not to shiver in acknowledgment of what they had done to me. When the Master appeared, I

nearly fell off the path. Cowered and hunched down almost to my knees and waited. I knew it was dangerous to stop but I could not pass him. He held his whip and his eyes promised an unending session of his kisses. The Green Lady smiled and urged me to have courage, the man of stone threatened me with sharp teeth and a slap on the back. I closed my one eye and felt for the way with my inner sense and my hands. To move forward took every ounce of courage I had left and I only knew I had passed him when Steen patted me on the shoulder and smiled. Not far now, boy, he whispered. You can do it. I asked him if he was free and happy now that he was gone from the Master. He told me that his shade was, no more torture or death awaited him, he could rest with his boys. I asked him if his soul was free or still bound. He said it had always been his, that the Master had not taken it. It had all been an illusion, a spell made to bind him in mental chains he would never break.

I made it through the Waterfall before I faced the next test. This one was the hardest, I was forced to relive the worst days of my life. A review of all my tortures and the foul deeds I had done for him. Even those days that I had spent in madness were laid bare before my eyes. I teetered on the edge of a mental breakdown again, I wanted to throw my hands over my ears and run howling from the path. I wanted so badly to step off the way and let the Pattern destroy me. I didn't. I walked on, my legs trembling, my breath short and wheezing in distress, my bowels churning as they threatened to open and foul my legs. Before my eyes was the Final Veil and now, the effort to push through was almost more than I could muster. I fell onto my hands and knees, wanted so much to just plant my face into the mist and sleep. The Unicorn danced a tattoo beside me and let me use her legs to raise myself up. "Mother," I whispered, the effort almost my last. "You are not to help me or it is all for nothing." She became the woman I remembered from my dreams, tall and lissome with that healthy American look and such very dark green eyes. I saw my chin and cheekbones in her face and the grit and determination I lacked. She shook her head.

"Raven, you have the most obstinate courage I have ever seen. You endured two years of that vile creature and in the face of certain death, would not choose. Will you choose now, if I told you I could heal you, make your body as pure and perfect as it was when I conceived you?"

Softly, sadly, I said, "no."

"You have passed the Pattern," she said calmly and took my hand as I stepped out into the center. I could see Cabra, and earth, all the realms and shadows she had traveled with me before she died and left us. I saw Murphy born from her mortal body's blood and bone in one of Ireland's many henges, bound by ancient magic that had nothing to do with Amber or the Courts and so, was not bound by it. "You may go anywhere the Pattern can send you, anywhere your heart desires."

I hesitated. "But not back in time."

"Would you repeat the same lifetime over? You can't change the past nor can you be the same person if you did. Jurt exists in the here and then, only by erasing him can you change the future." She kissed me. "You are my son, in blood and bone, in magic and reality, in past and future. I love you now and for always, as long as the Pattern waits and the Unicorn exists."

Before my eyes, she slipped into the white mythical creature and vanished. I closed my eye and saw only a soft whiteness. Thought only a moment and found myself back on the beach in my dragon body. It was night and the sands were lit by braziers so that I shimmered. It looked as if a million fireflies had descended on the place and made it a

fairlyland. Yet the air was somber and no smiles on any of the faces I saw around their fire pits. I breathed, a deep breath and felt an internal shifting. Saw the chest of the great dragon's body fall and not rise again. Heard one of the watchers cry out in alarm. The big tent nearest me flapped open and men emerged at a dead run to clamber about me. I saw the two kings and both were shouting at the healer. The stone man whose name I remembered as Murphy stood back and was smiling. He opened his wings and flapped them, the noise so loud that it generated everyone's attention.

"Murphy, are you smiling?" Merlin demanded, his face wet with tears. "He's dead. My son is dead!"

"No," the gargoyle said. "The dragon is dead. Raven is not. I am still here, if my master were dead, I would be too. I am bound by her blood to protect and aid him. Were he to perish, I would go back to the earth as dust from which I was created."

"Where is he, then?"

Before their assembled eyes, the immense broken and quiet body of the dragon fell away to leave me in its place, sprawled in the same position and nearly in the same condition. I wasn't aware of anything, Murphy told me it all later. How the man called Merlin shoved all the others aside and picked me up, ran with me to the tent and bullied the doctors to do something, anything to get me stable enough to take to a hospital. How Corwin, Random and my father trumped me to the finest medical trauma center in all the shades and bullied the staff to admit me immediately. Not that they wouldn't have anyway, I was pale as a white-bellied fish with a blood pressure nearly extant and a great bloody hole in my chest.

I woke up a week later in a flat position on a bed too soft for my bones. Didn't know where I was or who I was. Only knew that I hurt and when I moaned, a person in blue came in and did something that made it all float away in a lovely haze. Sometimes, I would open my eyes, there was a darkness over the other one and see a dark head bent over a tablet whose screen was brilliant and cast a glow on his face. It spoke to him and told him I was awake but before he could see me, I was gone again. I was vaguely aware of people rolling me this way and that, taking care of my body and feeding me through a tube. I drank through another but it all had a surreal feel to it as if I wasn't quite there.

Time passed as slowly as it did when you had no control over it. The periods where I was lucid grew longer and longer, and with it, the constant pain. My chest hurt the worst, I was bandaged from my neck to my belly button, my ribs ached with every breath and there was a thing in my nose pushing air. My throat was sore as if some huge pipe had been shoved down it. My exploring hands found tubes and needles in various parts of me.

I moaned and the blue people came in and stuck me. I had them well trained, at the first sign of discomfort, they stuck me and I floated away. What bothered me greatly was the obstruction in my sight. When I tried to feel for my eyes, both hands refused to move up that way. It took me some time to realize I was tied so couldn't move them. That my right eye was bandaged thickly and felt...odd. I was looking at things through a drugged haze and out of only my left eye. When it dawned on me that I was blind, I freaked out, cried in distress and it brought the blue people running. Words poured out of my mouth and they did not understand me. I heard their questions but my responses to them made no sense, not even to me.

Chapter 51

“What’s he saying?” I heard repeated.

“I’m blind! I’m blind! I can’t see!” I shouted but they acted as if I were moaning.

“He’s aphasic. We were worried because of the extent of his blood loss and oxygen deprivation to his brain. Clearly, there’s been some brain damage due to that or the hemorrhagic shock.

“Raven, can you open your eye? Are you in pain?” The voice matched the face. Tall, dark haired with gray at his temples. Kind blue eyes. He wore a white coat over the blue, it gaped open as he leaned over me and shone a light in my eye. “Reaction time seems normal. Can you blink, Raven?” He picked up my left hand and placed his finger in my palm. “Squeeze my finger, Raven.” I squeezed as hard as I could yet my fingers barely moved. Still, he seemed pleased. “Do you know your name, Raven? I’m Dr. Michael Algernon. I’m a thoracic Trauma Surgeon. I did open heart surgery on you a week ago. You’re doing fine. In another few days, we’ll remove your staples and let you get up for some gentle exercise.”

I gagged and was able to touch the heavy bandages on my right eye. Asked again and this time, he understood what I was asking. “Your right eye was totally destroyed by something that pierced the iris. We had to remove it. When the orbit is healed, you can either get a prosthesis or wear an eye patch. There are some remarkable prosthetics out there you can’t tell from the real thing. The wounds on your neck and back are healing well although we did have the reconstructive surgeon in to repair them. He had to take large grafts of dermis from your thighs to cover some of the areas where bone was showing. Do you know who did this to you, Raven? The police want to question you but I put them off until you were stable.”

I closed my eye, the entire ten minutes with him had exhausted me. “Raven, do you understand everything I’ve told you?” I squeezed his fingers again less tightly than I had before. “Can you say something, Raven?” he encouraged.

“Dragon...piss,” I said and that wasn’t what I meant. I tried again. “Mirror. Glass. Beer.” I could see the pitcher of ice cold water in my mind’s eye but couldn’t get the right words out. Licked my dry lips and swallowed. Grew frustrated and started to cry with my inability to make my wishes known. “Ice...rocks,” I screamed.

“Are you thirsty?” One of the other blue people asked and it was a she. With blonde hair and blue eyes that were complimented by her clothes. “I’m Sally, one of the CCU nurses. You want a drink, don’t you?”

“No, no, no,” I said, nodding my head. She filled a paper cup and held a straw to my lips. I drank two sips and was gently spiraling back down in a cave.

Woke up later that afternoon after a dream that scared me so bad I woke screaming and thrashing which brought the man in the beautiful three piece suit leaping to my bedside. “Raven? Are you in pain? Nurse!” He turned to face what I saw as a dark gray blob and was a door. “He’s moaning and moving. Is it time for his pain shot?”

The lady with the blue eyes checked my eye, my wrist and looked at her watch. “No, Mr. Merle,” she said quietly, smiling at me. “He had his last dose of roxynol only an hour ago. He shouldn’t be feeling any pain yet. Probably just a bad dream. One of his meds has

that side effect. Raven, honey, are you awake?" She moved and watched me track her. "Thirsty?" She didn't wait for my answer but held the cup and the straw to my lips. Some of the water dribbled down my chin and made a cold wet spot on the pillow beneath me. "Would you like me to raise your head, Raven?" I nodded and she inclined me, stopping when she read some reaction on my face.

"Majesty?" I whispered and the nurse thought I was saying something else.

"This is Mr. Merle, your father. Do you recognize him?" she asked and plumped up my pillows. I didn't like her being on my blind side. My heart beat faster and the machines made a loud alarm.

"Would you leave us, nurse?" the King asked politely and she nodded once, saying to push the button if either of us needed anything. He waited until she was gone. "How do you feel, Raven? Do you understand what's going on around you?"

"Styx," I said and he looked puzzled. "Coin on...eyelashes."

"River Styx or pick-up sticks? A copper for Charon. Death?"

I nodded and turned my head away. He picked up my hand and I tried to jerk it away, I couldn't stand to be touched by anyone but males made it worse.

"What did that bastard do to you, Raven?" His eyes searched my face. I retreated into my stolid silence. I wouldn't talk about it, I couldn't talk about anything I had gone through without going nuts. "Talk to me. Tell me what I can do to help you. Do you want to go back to Dad's house or the castle at Amber? Or Rebma with Vialle? Any place you want, Raven. The doctors say you'll recover nearly 100%."

"My ball?" I asked bitterly holding my eye.

"Dad had both of his eyes burnt out by his brother, Eric. He spent four years in the dungeons blind and half starved, Raven. But his eyes grew back. You must have enough Amber blood in you that the same thing might happen. If not," he shrugged. "Look at Vialle."

I bared my teeth. "Go far."

"No, I won't go away. Nor will Dad, or Uncle Random. Or Roelle, Rinlon or Murphy. They have all come to see you, hardly left your side since you've been here."

"Prison? Crow?"

"The Blackbird died with the dragon, Raven. All that's left is a boy who needs his family and a long convalescence with his friends."

"Have zero."

Gently, he put his arms around me and I stiffened, terrified that it was the Master holding me again. "Please, Master," I whispered. "Don't hurt me more. Do any wants if don't harm."

"Raven, Jurt is wounded and on the run. The last thing he'll do is look for you. Besides, you have guards and a gargoyle watching out for you. And magic. I've put spells and wards around this place and you. If one scent of Jurt or his men approach this shadow, every man I command will stand between him and you. Plus me, King Random and Dad."

"Why?" I searched his face for answers and saw compassion, love and fear.

"Because you're my son and I love you. I have Ghost tracking Jurt. He's good at that sort of thing. Go to sleep, Raven. Let us worry about him now. It's no longer your task."

"Don't know me," I said. I closed my eyes just for a little while and it was hours later when I woke again to find myself being handled like a package as I was rolled, bathed and

my bed changed. I knew the nurse, she was a small woman and completely unassuming. She didn't trigger my panic mode even as her hands invaded my body. I looked out the window and saw the night sky with the moon riding high. Recognized the stars, saw Orion and the Pleiades, the Dipper and Cassiopeia. Wondered how long it would be before I was called to task for the evil things I had done.

Lifted the sheet off me and stared at my naked body as the nurse finished bathing me. I gaped at the huge raw, red line that split my chest from neck to belly. She washed around it with warm moist wipes that were soapy, dried me with warm soft towels and applied fresh dressings over the staples.

"Ninety-three," she said. At my uncertain look, she added, "ninety-three staples on the exterior and several dozen more on the inside. Dr. Mike cut your chest open, cracked your ribs to work on your heart. The staples come out tomorrow, the others will dissolve on their own." She hummed as she finished and pulled a clean gown on me. She'd already changed the bedding, pulled me up and checked my nails, my ears and combed my hair. "Want me to brush your teeth for you, Raven honey?"

"No. Please," I nodded and watched as she put paste on the brush, a cup of water to rinse and a pink basin to spit into. I had a flashback of flying harpies and orange men spitting acid at them, lunged and tossed the stuff across the room, crying in agitation.

Corwin was first in the room and when he grabbed me, I immediately fought him. He was much stronger than me and simply held me until I was gasping for air, sweat stained my face and gown and I was spent. "Get the doctor in here," he growled not letting me go. Minutes later, two of them were in the room fussing over me.

"Blood pressure and pulse are both elevated. What triggered this upset?" the doctor named Algernon asked. "Raven, what's wrong?"

I tried to get loose and run, even managed to make it to my feet before they forced me back into bed. I tried to fight them, I was as weak as a used tea bag, just couldn't get my body to cooperate. I cursed them and he turned to Corwin.

"I want to sedate him before he does himself harm."

Corwin agreed. "Do whatever you need to do to keep him safe."

"Nurse, 10 cc of Ativan," he ordered and she ran from the room. I jerked my arms and flailed, screaming at them to leave me alone. Saw the room waver and change shape. Saw Corwin start, his lips grim as he countered my instinctive use of the mental image of a Trump in my head. Screamed louder when I recognized the Master's room in the Tower, the last place I wanted to enter.

"Raven!" he shouted and dug his elbow into my neck. The sight and sounds of everything wavered and turned dim. When the focus sharpened, I was strapped down on the bed and struggling to remain conscious. I was floating and lacked the will to care about anything. They were speaking over my head as if I couldn't hear their conversation.

"The boy has all the hallmarks of a child that has been sexually molested, Mr. Corey. When he was admitted, we did tests for occluded blood and it was positive but due to the severity of his other injuries, we put it aside to deal with his cardiac issues. I've found further evidence of severe sodomy and torture. I had to look up the name of the device used on his back. From the state of the wounds, it could only have been the Roman flagellum. What the English called the cat-o-nine-tails. There are over fifty individual whip scars on his back and buttocks alone. Not to mention broken ribs, fingers, lungs scarred from pneumonia, puncture scars on his belly and surgical cicatrices. He's worse than any

gang-banger ever brought in here for bullet trauma. What was this kid into?"

"He was kidnapped from my country house over two years ago," Corwin explained. "No ransom note. They wanted to broker a deal with him as bait. Sold him overseas to some cartel after he escaped."

"You got him back."

"Not without a heavy cost. He was nearly dead and you're saying he might have brain damage."

"He does, he has aphasia. The inability to speak correctly. How extensive the damage is we won't know until we do tests."

"Will his brain recover?"

"The brain isn't like a arm that is broken. We can set the arm and it heals with hardly a trace it was broken. Not so the brain. Once tissue dies or is damaged, the area doesn't come back. We can train another part of the brain to take over some of the dead area's function but it's still dead. His personality may change, he won't be the same boy he was before."

"But he'll be alive," Corwin argued. The doctor hesitated, his voice dropped.

"I'll send the staff Psyche Doc up. He really should speak to her. Boys that have been in his situation always try suicide after an incident like what he has obviously gone through. We'll have to be vigilant around him. Don't leave him alone no matter what he tells you."

"No worries there, Doctor. He has his own personal bodyguard. You met him. Murphy."

"Not an easy man to forget, he's like a stone warrior," the doctor agreed. "Where was he when the boy was kidnapped?"

"Raven and a friend ditched him in a...tavern."

"He'll sleep six or seven hours with the Ativan and it will lessen his anxiety." He hesitated. "I hate to ask but if you can afford it, I recommend a private duty nurse on 24/7. Or else, he should go to the Psyche Wing where he can be monitored 24/7."

"I can afford it," he said dryly. "Frankly, I can buy this hospital out of petty change. If there is anything you or the hospital needs, and I stress anything, you have only to ask, Doctor Algernon. My grandson is the only one I have and my son's only child. He is the most important young man in all the...world."

"Do you have a particular agency in mind for the nurses? If not, I can recommend some of ours that are looking for private duty and he already knows most of them. Less stress on him if he doesn't have to get used to new people and none of them are men," he offered.

I saw them go out the door and called him. He didn't hear me. I tried again. "Corey. Grand sire?"

He came swiftly to my side, standing where he knew I could see him. "Raven."

"No go far way," I begged him. "Danger. Mouth up side down."

"It's all right, Raven. Your guard is outside this door. Shall I send him in? He wants to talk to you, anyway." He turned to the doctor in the doorway. "Would you ask Murphy to come in? Perhaps the others as well? I know CCU has a policy of only two per visit? Would you please make an exception?"

The doctor nodded and a group of people eagerly entered to ring my bed. Even through the haze of the sedative, my panic escalated. My eye darted back and forth, my hands clenched the sheets. The gray man clamped his huge hand on my chin and forced me to

stare into his gray eyes only they flared red. “Raven, mi carriádhe sei eamön,” he spoke in a harsh tone. It made me sit up, be still and I expected a box on the ears.

“Murphy,” I whispered and kept my gaze on him.

“You are safe, Corbin. I swear this on my soul which is yours. You are warded and protected by magic both arcane and Chaotic, both Amber, Irish and by good, clean steel.”

I saw Rinlon and he winked at me, opening his long jacket to show me his blade. Corwin carried Grayswandir at his side. I blinked and it was gone, obviously spelled so no one could see it. “Go to sleep, I will stay at your side and protect you, even in your dreams.”

The pretty blonde girl pushed her way in and kissed me on the cheek. I blushed as my thoughts immediately went to what I would do to her if I was mobile.

“I’ll protect his dreams, Murphy,” she retorted. “You stay out of his head. Do you remember me, Raven?”

I had vague memories of her but images of other encounters and what the Master had done made me turn my head away in disgust. I wanted to force her down and take her, subjugate and humiliate her as had been done to me. Murphy pulled her away. “Roelle, he is still confused and mind addled. All of you had best leave and leave him to me.”

Corwin whispered in his ear and his gray eyes widened, turned red as he stared down at me. “Aye, my Lord Prince. I will be vigilant. As for nurses, no need. I do not sleep and will be with him where ever he goes.”

They left me alone with Murphy. He sang me to sleep with lullabies in Gaelic and Erse, languages my mind remembered in my dreams if not the waking world.

Chapter 52

Days passed. They took out my staples and I was allowed to get up and exercise. Short walks and then, they took me to do a stress test where they evaluated my heart. Checked all my organs and even my brain. I understood direction, had trouble with simple tasks like putting on clothes in the right order, putting round blocks in round holes and squares into square holes. Zippers were impossible for my fingers to grasp except for the giant one on the wooden board. I hated trying to do the buttons.

I had trouble picking things up from the floor, because I no longer had any depth perception. My speech was hard to understand, halting, I could see the proper word in my head but it came out of my mouth as something totally different.

This morning, I had served myself breakfast under Murphy’s watchful eyes, messier than usual because I had been given a knife and wanted to hide it from him. He made me nervous. It was only a butter knife but I thought I might be able to hone it to a dangerous point by using the concrete of the wall. When he turned to see Corwin and Merlin enter, I slid it off the tray and tucked it under my thigh where it quickly lost its steel chilliness.

“Good morning, Raven, Murphy,” both greeted us and Merlin came around to hug me even though I flinched and sat back. He looked at the tray and raised an eyebrow.

Murphy said, “He’s sitting on it.” Merlin held out his hand and I glared back. He muttered a spell and the knife under my leg burned hot enough to blister. I ignored it and he sighed, reached under me and pulled it out.

“You’re as stubborn as my grandfather, boy. It runs in the family. Here, Murphy.” He handed the gargoyle the knife and uttered another spell that turned the burn numb. “No wonder you pissed Jurt off,” he sighed. “He always did like to torture the lesser demons because they fought back even when it was likely to hurt more. He hated me growing up in the Courts. Having you to break must have been a great way to take it out on me.”

“Crawled tiny wizard,” I snarled and felt the tears spring to my eyes. They puzzled over that one and it was Murphy that deciphered it.

“Called him baby Merlin,” he translated. There was a knock on the door and two young women came in, introduced themselves as the physical and respiratory therapists there to work on me. Everyone but Murphy went to the waiting room while I performed for them, no better than before their foolish tasks. Next, came a woman dressed in soft pastel suit with a white coat. Her name was embroidered on the left breast pocket in blue.

Dr. Caroline Nieve, PhD. She came straight to my good side and held out her hand. “Hello, Raven. I’m Dr. Nieve. Dr. Caroline Nieve. I’ve come to talk to you.” She ignored Murphy as if he was furniture but it didn’t annoy him. Murphy didn’t have feelings like a human, after all, he was stone. A gargoyle. He grinned and took a seat on the window sill and he looked like a stone sculpture until I blinked.

“Being?” I asked studying her hands. They were soft, her nails long and polished. Short hair in a bob, green eyes and freckles on her little nose, glasses in her pocket. Pretty in a soft, chic way. Fierce intelligence in her eyes.

“I’m a doctor of Psychology, a Psychiatrist, Raven. I help people overcome the trauma of physical, mental and sexual abuse.”

“Far away,” I snarled and lifted my hands. Murphy was there in a split second, lifting her aside and grabbing my arms. He held them apart and above my head.

“You will not harm anyone who is trying to help you, Corbin,” he said in a tight voice. “Or I will punish you.”

“You mind you can?” I hissed. “Look at body! Took more than you could plate out! King of Cruel my Master. Spit on you!”

“Please, Murphy,” she said and put her hands on his bulging arm. “He can’t hurt me. He’s too weak. Besides, anger is good. Anger means he knows what was done to him was wrong and not his fault. Anger is easier to break through than apathy.”

Murphy let go and my arms dropped to the bed. I sat mulishly stubborn as she settled herself in a chair and sat quietly. The tension built but my mind vault had been created and honed under the Master’s tutelage, was rich and textured, a place made inviolable by an expert. It was where I went after his tortures to hide from what he had done. It was the coping mechanism that allowed me to survive.

An annoying tapping noise kept intruding. I opened my eye to stare at both of them. They were rapping a pencil against a board and the repetition irritated me to no end. “Pop. Died,” I countered.

“Will if you will,” she said and I gaped at her. It was so childish, I was astonished. “Just talk to me, Raven. Just conversation. It’s good for your brain and will make you feel better.”

“Mouth and head fucked,” I said grudgingly. “You tattle. Me, ears.”

“I talk and you listen you’re saying?” she encouraged.

“No.”

“I believe your ‘no’ means yes,” she smiled. I nodded. She spoke, told me her name

and where she'd grown up, how she decided to become a doctor of the mind and help people who'd been abused. That she had suffered sexual abuse as a tween from the age of ten to thirteen, too old after that to interest her father anymore. Out of jealousy and rage, she turned to drugs and whoring, tried to kill herself with alcohol and razor blades. Came out of it, went back to school and had her father arrested, convicted and sent to jail where he lasted only one week before an inmate killed him. Wrote a paper on the suicide rate of teens and correlated it to sexual, physical and mental abuse and proposed how to save those teenage lives. Implemented a program and was successful in 85% of her cases. The other 15% tried but called before they actually died and received medical care. Only one died and that motivated her to try harder, it had been her baby brother born ten years after her. He had cut his own throat rather than deal with the horror of his own father brutally sodomizing him at the age of eight.

I shivered, imagining what it would have been like to be forced by an older man at that age. At least, I had been sexually and physically mature and large enough not to have ruptured anything internally. "Lucky," I said and she struggled to decipher my meaning.

"Lucky he died?" she returned finally.

"Yessss," I hissed, a long drawn out sibilant whisper. Waved my hand at my chest. "Me."

"You want to join him, Raven? To kill yourself?"

"Can't."

"Why not?"

"No sticks me. Zero-ness."

"You don't believe in an after-life?"

"Soul gone. Master took."

She turned to Murphy. "What are your religious beliefs, Murphy? Religious affiliations? Raven, what do you believe? And who is the master?"

"Zero," I said. For me, there was nothing. I wasn't sure if I was even allowed to die, the Unicorn had told me if either of my relatives killed me, it would destroy both the Pattern and the Logus. If I killed myself, I wasn't sure if the same rule applied. In fact, I no longer cared. I was tired, tired of this life, tired of struggling, of waiting to fall back in the Master's control. As long as he held my soul, he held me. Years ago, he had killed me, brought me back but in doing so, left a vital part of me behind.

Murphy tried to explain to her who the Master was without making it sound like a fiction story but he embellished on what he suspected had been my lot. I felt sorry for her but no empathy. The world was a cruel and harsh place, only the tough survived, I feared I was no longer one of them.

She stayed about an hour, pressed my hand and told me she would be back again in a day or so. Prescribed more drugs and said goodbye to both of us.

Lunch came and I picked at it. I was more used to bread, water and cheese, an occasional watered wine and for a rare treat, a piece of discarded fruit from the Master, usually thrown at me. This endless variety of meats, pastas and sandwiches that everyone tried to get me to devour usually wound up in Murphy's stomach. I let him order and picked off what I wanted. For snacks between meals, he ordered peanut butter and jelly, those I ate without any urging, they brought back memories of simpler days. I still felt as if this Raven they talked of was someone else, not me. I no longer felt like I was Corbel the Blackbird, or Corbel, the dragon. Neither did I aspire to be Raven the Prince. I was in a vague limbo,

waiting. Waiting for the Master to return and my fate be decided.

The new drugs I was on made me feel as if a veil was between me and the rest of the world. I didn't care. I ate what they put in front of me, put their wooden blocks in the right holes most of the time and spent a lot of my time sleeping or dozing. Drooling. The doctor came in once a day to inspect my incision, listen to my heart and ask me questions. Which I answered in vague response.

"I think we can cut back on the Thorazine, he seems a bit too sedated. I had hoped he'd level off, it's a really minute dose," he told Merlin. Today's suit was a blue pinstripe, very sharp. "I would recommend discharging him soon. His appetite has improved, his bowels and kidneys are functioning well, his lungs are clear and his motor skills have increased swiftly. He should go to PT 3X a week, there's an excellent clinic near your home. I think it would be better for Raven to go out to them rather than have one come to the home. Patients such as Raven are in danger of becoming reclusive but don't force him, that would only exacerbate his condition. He should see Dr. Nieves at least twice a week until she says otherwise. The nurses will make appointments before you go home. How does that sound, Raven? You ready to go home?"

I barely looked at him. "Home. No home." They didn't understand what I meant and for once, I had confounded Murphy. I was sick of the sight of him, cursed him and told him to leave. Ordered him away. Through it all, he merely sat there like a...stone. I couldn't stay angry, it required too much energy which I didn't have.

The doctors discharged me three days later. Murphy dressed me in fresh new clothes. Jeans, dress shirt, jacket, socks and sneakers. No belt, or laces. Put me in a wheelchair and listened as the nurse explained my post-op care, meds and appointment dates. Gave the two Amberites telephone numbers and an impressive wad of papers. A card from a detective in Robbery/Homicide.

I rode down in a wheelchair, the car waiting at the curb was a Cadillac Escalade driven by a man named George. He seemed to know me, he called me by name, came out to assist me into the back seat in the middle. Seat-belted me in. I tugged, it was snug against my belly but not tight enough to hurt. Merlin tucked a soft pillow behind my back, any kind of pressure on those wounds hurt. Corwin sat on my left, Murphy on the right and Merlin took the passenger seat up front with George. Since I didn't have a window, or the interest in watching the scenery whiz by, I closed my eye and pretended to fall asleep. People said things when they thought you weren't listening.

"How come you aren't scared of the car, Raven? It's not something you would have experienced in Webster's realm. I mean, Jurt." Merlin asked.

I had assumed it was a carriage like the ones we had seen in the harpy attack. Sat forward and stared as the driver shifted a stick and the car slid smoothly away from the front facade of the hospital. In some fashion, I remembered these things so that they did not seem all that unusual and yet to Corbel, they were objects of magic. "What city is this?"

"Washington. Washington General Hospital we just left," Murphy answered. "It's one of the best, if not the best facility to handle trauma victims. Lots of gunshot wounds here and it's staffed by former servicemen who have treated battle wounds."

"Thirsty, Murphy," I complained and he opened the center console to hand me a bottle of water. All four of them watched me struggling to open it and when I did, I squeezed too hard and the contents shot out the top and soaked me. Furious, I threw the bottle but before it could hit anyone (although I was aiming it at the driver), Murphy snatched it out of the air

and handed it to me as if nothing had occurred. Frustrated, I drank what was left and Merlin used a spell to dry my clothes.

“Temper, temper,” was all he said. I sat and fumed, making and throwing out plans to escape. Escape where, I didn’t know or care, I just wanted to be alone.

Other vehicles passed us. Moving so fast that their wake buffeted us. Some were over fifty feet long and would have given my dragon body a serious challenge if they could fly. Others were so small that I wondered how a human body fit inside one. There were thousands of them on the road, all colors and sizes. Elevated roadways looped around us, rose up and came down with amazing defiance of gravity. My vision was limited to what I could see through the front window, the side ones opposite me were blacked out. I couldn’t turn around to look out the back.

“Where going?” I asked, sulking. I couldn’t slump, it pulled at the new skin growing on my back. The doctor, a burn specialist, said my back looked like raw hamburger and he would treat it much like a burn victim with skin grafts of real human skin and synthetic grown in a lab. He was curious how I’d become so scarred and Murphy had stepped in, diverted the conversation.

Merlin and Corwin had a harder time getting the police to back off. Finally, he told them I was brain damaged from the lack of oxygen due to blood loss and couldn’t remember anything. Since I was underage, he could limit their contact with me and they had arranged to meet us at his home for a short interview.

“Dad has a nice place on the Chesapeake Bay,” Merlin answered. “With a sailboat, gardens and lots of rooms to wander in. Books, videos, blue-rays and a great private beach. A quiet, safe place to convalesce.”

“Whoopee.”

Corwin smothered a laugh. Said, “Typical teenage response.”

“How would you know, Dad?” Merlin shot back. “You weren’t around for my teenage years.”

“No, I was stuck in a blue cave courtesy of your mother and her cohorts. How is she by the way? We heard rumors you cut off her head.”

Warily, he answered, “She’s in Salurn, one of the old Duke’s former estates where she promised not to make trouble.”

“You believe her?” he seemed skeptical.

“Dad, she cried when she told me Raven called her Granny. Besides, she can’t leave Salurn without me opening the way.”

“You didn’t exile her?” Corwin gaped at me. “Dara is many things but I’ve never seen her cry. So, you think Jurt will approach her for help?”

“She is our mother. Murphy said the harpoon hit him in the lower back. It was coated with Dragon blood.”

“Which means he can’t heal it with magic.”

“No.” Corwin shuddered. “I can’t think of anything worse than killing your own son unknowingly. Lucky Murphy stopped Julian from cutting off Raven’s head.”

“I owe him a return favor for nearly spitting him with that jousting lance. What did he think, he was St. Michael against the dragon?”

“I was born on St. Michael’s Day,” I said as clear as a bell.

“So you were, Raven,” Murphy agreed. He put his arm around my shoulder, the weight was light and warm. I caught myself leaning into his chest. Not because it was comforting,

but just to rest my stiff back.

Chapter 53

George turned round and spoke to Corwin for a second before he returned his attention to the road. I felt the car make an abrupt change in speed, deceleration as we came to a complete stop. Corwin leaned forward to stare out the window, his arms on the front seat. “What is it?”

“Road block,” George said.

Merlin looked grim. “On an Interstate?” He pulled out a thing my mind called a cell phone but Corbel did not know its meaning. I watched as pictures appeared and vanished as his fingers moved on the screen. “Nothing on the news about an accident or road closure. Nothing about Homeland Security or DEA traps,” he said into the dead air. Outside our vehicle, horns began honking, beeping, in strident cacophony that escalated to our annoyance. Corwin un-belted, got out of the car and leaned back inside his door.

“Stay here.” I saw that he had Grayswandir in his hand. Murphy stirred beside me and Merlin gave me a sharp smile. “Ghost, are you here?”

The lights dimmed and brightened as that glowing wheel entered our dimension. “Dad,” it spoke and seemed to take a look at each of us.

“What’s going on, Ghost?”

“Don’t know. I’ll check. None of my data sources indicate an accident up ahead,” it started and before it could finish, something big hit us and flipped the car several times, picked it up and tossed us through the air. George’s head snapped back hard enough to stun him at the least. From the sound as he hit, I assumed his neck had cracked. Murphy’s seat-belt broke and he went flying out the open door, smashing me into the seat hard enough to knock out all my air.

When we landed, it was upside down and I could see my feet dangling, held in by the lap and waist belt. The car made strange noises, ticking and groaning sounds. Dripping fluids, splatters and hisses. Acrid fuel and white vapor were coming out of the front. Glass had shattered and was everywhere. I shook my head and tiny crystals winked in the sunlight off of my clothes and hair. The door on the other side of me wrenched open with a groan of tortured metal and a head peered in. No one I knew. A human face in a green uniform and carrying what my Raven memory said was a gun. An automatic with the capability to fire multiple shots and make me into Swiss cheese.

“Target acquired,” he spoke and pushed on my belly. Unlatched the belts and watched me as I fell on my head. I sucked in a breath and considered my aches and pains, nothing really new to add to the list. He grabbed me by the collar of my new jacket and dragged me out of the car. Over my head, I saw blue skies twirling crazily and smoke. Big fluffy clouds and jet contrails bisecting all the blueness. He dragged me through grass interspersed with gravel and although I knew it must hurt like a bitch, I didn’t feel anything. I blinked slowly, my body and mind in a nothing zone. I could hear his side of the conversation.

“No. Didn’t say anything, sir. Seems dazed. No obvious wounds I can see. Lots of glass on him. His eyes...eye is blank, pin-point. I think he’s drugged.” He paused. “No sign

of anyone else. The driver looks dead. I popped him one in the head to make sure. Coming in.” He hauled me up with one hand and held me until my legs stood straight and firm. “Can you walk?” he asked, his face and eyes fierce but eminently human.

“Drummers beat,” I said.

He shook me. “Did you hit your head?”

“Fleas riot.” I stared at him.

“The target is addled, sir. Confused.”

“Phantom Opera!” I shouted and pushed at him. Took him by surprise as I placed my hand on his knife, a huge thing with a serrated blade over nine inches long and he didn’t have time to bring his rifle around from where he’d dropped it down by his leg the blade snicked through his throat and his head popped back trembling off his neck to go thumping blood burst out and hit me in the face but I was ready with my forearm so my eye wasn’t blinded his head hit the ground his surprised eyes looking not at me but his own headless corpse as I pushed it away to let it fall on his own face.

I hadn’t meant to slice so deep, the blade was heavier than I’d expected and my depth perception off. I pushed the gushing corpse over and removed the thing he wore in his ear hearing the voice I knew better than my own. The Master.

Spoke carefully, as clearly as I could, “Death twitches my ear. ‘Live,’ he says; ‘I am coming.’”

I am the wound and the knife!

I am the blow and the cheek!

I am the limbs and the wheel---

The victim and the executioner!”

Only I heard his scream of outrage, a wounded bestial noise that promised me eternal torture and eventual death. I closed my eye and sent my senses out, caught the whiff of magic and started walking back through the grass of the center median ignoring the smoking vehicles, sirens and flashing lights. No one saw me as I trudged along the strip which separated the six lanes of traffic. It was heavily wooded and kept me hidden from any passing cars. I wandered like a zombie, my coordination off but my inner sense told me what direction I needed to follow. I saw other vehicles approaching the wreck and disgorging more human men dressed like the one that I’d killed. Looked at the huge knife I carried still in my hands and found a place for it in my pocket but it was so sharp and heavy, it tore a hole through and fell out, nearly taking my foot with it. I thought about going back for the sheath and realized that was both dangerous and stupid. I wondered where my guards and keepers were, wondered anew at the eagerness I was feeling at the thought of confronting the Master. I was still afraid of him, of what he would do to me, of whether I would bend to his will or if my new hatred and resolve would allow me to resist him. I knew without question or reservation, that this meeting would be our last.

As I walked, I barely noticed the sky changing colors or the grass becoming taller, wilder. The sounds of cars on the interstate faded away to the more mundane of birds, crickets and bees. I did notice when flying lizards appeared and my path became a game trail bordered by pansy faced flowers that watched my progress. Stones rolled under my feet and followed as if I were the Pied Piper. A harpy hovered over my head and shit on me. I cursed and before I could finish the words, she fell out of the sky, her feathers on fire that even her frantic rolling couldn’t put out.

“Logus power!” she screeched and burnt to a crispy chicken. The smell was foul, no

pun intended and lingered like a dead polecat.

This place looked like a cross between the shadow world where Vialle had been held in the Tower and Chessaria. I could sense the magic here, it was strange and tasted strongly of both the Logus and the Courts of Chaos.

I walked out of the woods and into a meadow. At the far end stood a castle built of white stone that glittered in the sunlight. It was cool here, the hair on my arms stood up as I shivered.

The Logus materialized and bared my way. "You are not permitted entry here," it challenged me. I snarled and opened my hand to throw a ball of energy at it, black, smoky and virulent. It caught it in a net yet it oozed out and covered it, squeezing it tighter until the Logus disappeared with a pop. I had no idea whether I had destroyed or merely banished it and I didn't care.

There were no guards between me and the castle. I kept walking forward until I reached the drawbridge and the portcullis, both barred and drawn up. No moat surrounded the castle but green grass that glimmered as if made of glass. When I stared, it seemed to suck me in and wrapped my mind in stasis. Except my mind was damaged to the point it couldn't understand me enough to ensnare me in its confusion. I saw the narrow path of safe passage if I squinted just so and set my feet upon it. It was like walking the Pattern only harder because it was nearly invisible. Halfway across, I lost the thread only to find the way using my newly acquired sense that detected magic. As I stepped through the last step, the gate came down and nearly crushed me. Only a sudden stumble saved me as I fell forward into the courtyard. Everything was white, blazing white save for drops of blood that glistened on the stones. Blue drops. I reached out a finger and tasted it, the blood proved to be mine. It had a rich, smoky flavor that I recognized as Dragon blood mixed with demon and human.

"Master," I said climbing to my feet. "I am come." I found him in the Throne Room, leaning back with careless indigence, his legs spread out in front of him. His skin was pale and he looked as if he was in pain. He no longer bore the image of Lucian Webster but his own face, Jurt. Demons attended him, working on his back and side.

"Corbel, my Blackbird," he said huskily. He smiled. I felt his charm as he worked me.

"You are wounded, Master. I sense my blood runs through your veins and prevents you from magicking it healed."

"Your dragon blood will kill any magic user, Corbel," he agreed.

"Why did you send those humans for me, Master?" I was curious, knowing that my questions would enrage him.

"To bring you back to me, Corbel," he answered quietly.

"To kill me, Master?" Behind me, I heard his guards moving almost silently as they surrounded me.

"If I had wanted you dead, Corbel, you would have died the first day after I took you." He sat up and waved the guards back. "Why did you come?" His eyes glowed fiercely.

"I have no worth without you, my Lord," I whispered. "I can find no comfort in my old shadow and skin. If I am to die, I want it to be at your hands and no other."

"What are you saying, Corbel?" he demanded standing so that I had to look up at him.

"I want to die at your hands, Master," I said humbly.

"I don't want your death, Raven," he said. "Not anymore."

"Corbel, Master, not Raven. Never Raven. I am the Blackbird of your dark desires. My

soul belongs to you.”

“And your heart?” he countered.

“I have none.” I went to my knees and held out my arms so that his soldiers could bind me. They approached and searched me, removing the dead man’s blade and binding my hands behind my back.

The Master rose with an effort and stepped down the six ceremonial steps to stand over me. Lifted me to my feet and leaned into my neck. He bit me with short demon fangs and I thrashed only a little as he drank at my blood. It was an ecstasy I had not imagined and I moaned as he strengthened and I weakened. His hands slid over my back searching. He found the bandages and the skin grafts. Lethargy filled me and my mind saw flashes of intense colors and images, none of which made sense. He probed my mind and saw the changes. “You are not lying,” he said in surprise. “Your mind is almost childlike. Simple. Easy to control. I can make you mine in ways I only dreamed about. I thought you wanted to kill me.”

“I did. I do. But I do not wish to live after. The worlds will be a better place when both of us are gone,” I said slowly.

He looked startled. “Corbel, what have you done?”

“I poisoned my blood with Dragonbane and you have just imbibed it. Even now, it courses through your body destroying your magic and power. As it runs through me,” I said and felt the first twinges hit my stomach. I grimaced and bent over. As a Dragon, the blood did me no harm, as a human, it was a deadly poison worse than anything the Thrid could inject me with.

He swung Werewandir and it bit deep into the stone steps, he lacked the power to raise it to my head. “Master, the worlds will not miss either of us. Sit down with me and let us meet our end together. As Master and slave who loved you.”

He growled deep in his throat and fell taking me with him. It was a race to see who would perish first. He with my poisoned blood or me lacking enough to keep my body and brain functioning. As I lay there with his body on top of mine, images of my childhood came back to me. I remembered a woman’s lovely face as she rocked me to sleep under mossy green dolmens, I remembered the stone man sweeping me through the sky as his wings propelled both of us among the steeples and belfries. I remember the softness of my first kiss and Roelle’s pansy purple eyes and the feel of a friend’s hand on my shoulder. I remembered too, how my daggers slid into my victims necks so that they bled internally, how it felt when my sword pierced lungs and hearts, how others shivered under my straining body as I violated them for my Master’s pleasure. I did not need to remember pain, it was always with me. What I needed to know was how others felt that pain and turn it back on Jurt. His eyes opened, dark, lost and wounded.

“I loved you,” he gasped, his lips blue, his face slowly turning gray as the oxygen left his tissues. He cut my bonds.

“I know, Master,” I told him softly. I felt his body shudder as his spirit left him. Gently, I pushed him off me and reached inside his shirt for the necklace he wore that contained my soul and the legion of others he had stolen. The guards stood around us yet made no move to attack.

I jerked the chain loose and held it to my lips, its cool surface soothed my burning face. I pictured the place I wanted in my mind with the Pattern foremost in my thoughts and I was there, lying on the floor of the carpeted tiles as Random leaped to his feet in alarm with

drawn foil.

Here, guards attacked and held me under a ring of spears and sword points. I laughed feebly that they believed I was a threat to them. In the condition I was in now, I would be lucky to strangle a mouse. Random kicked them away and knelt at my side lifting me up by the material of my jacket.

“Raven! What have you done?”

“Majesty, Uncle,” I smiled and it was as if my face was cracking, I had almost forgotten how. “I killed him. The Master is dead. Worries no more.”

“Raven, what’s wrong with you? What has that bastard done?” He turned his head. “Get Dr. Flauvel! Find the Prince and King Merlin! Ghostwheel?” Men ran and I laid my head back as shudders gripped my frame. “Raven, look at me! Raven, open your eyes,” he ordered.

I did. “I’m sorry about Gracchus,” I whispered. “I owe you a life. Will you take mine?” I gasped for air, my fingers and toes were ice, I felt myself moving away from him in inches of time. A bright light grew in my vision. “Unicorn?” I murmured.

“No, Raven. It’s Ghost. Random, I’m scanning his body, he’s nearly exsanguinated and his tissues are sodden with Dragonsbane. I know of no medical solution.”

“Can you give him an antidote?” Random demanded. My body was taken up in strong arms and the sensation of being trumped somewhere filled my awareness. I heard Corwin and Merlin’s voices raised in shock and concern and after a little while, I could open my eye to see them gathered around me in a room all in white with charts of skeletons and organs on the walls. Their doctor was with them, the King, Rinlon, Roelle, the redheaded boy Marcus who had been my friend, Murphy and Vialle. Ghostwheel. I looked at Murphy first, beckoned him close.

“I release you,” I said and he shouted denials. “Would you die for me?” At his growl of assent, I added, “I would that you live for me. I release you.”

“What did you do, Raven?” Merlin demanded. “What did you take?”

“Dragonsbane mixed with my dragon blood. The Master took my blood from me, he died in my arms as he wished.” I looked at my grandfather. “I would ask if you would bury me in your cenotaph, Grandfather.”

Merlin cried out, “No!”

“Father. Dad. I leave your realm unchallenged. Your sword Werewandir rests at Cabra for your hand only. Your brother Jurt is no more, he has gone to his ancestors.” I gripped the chain that held our souls. “Dad? Will you...” My voice faltered. I moved as the pain washed over me like a tide of flames burning so hotly that they melted my bones.

“Raven,” my father had tears in his eyes.

“My soul,” I thrust the stone at his wavering image and Vialle laid her hand on my heart. The fire eased a trifle and my face smoothed out. “Didn’t want to live with this on my heart and head,” I ground out. “Was going to hang me, first chance. Even with you round, Murph.” Heaved a breath and couldn’t catch another. “Dad,” I whispered one last time.

Epilogue

The Unicorn came. Stepping daintily out of nothingness and pranced down the mile long red carpet upon the golden tiles of the Throne Room. Doors sprung open as she advanced and the occupants within fell back with mouths gaping in wonder to sink to their knees in obeisance. She traveled her way into the heart of Castle Amber with a growing crowd at her heels stopping only at the door of the small room that Dr. Flauvel called his

clinic.

Her blue eyes flared like gas flames and tendrils of magic spiraled down her horn to dance across the lintel. As one, the room's occupants looked up with tears in their eyes and the sound of sobbing. The King of Amber saw her first as his eyes reflected shock, awe and astonishment.

They stepped back as she entered the room to lay her head on the boy's breast. No movement, no heartbeat could she discern and from her own eyes, two crystal tear drops fell to the ground with the sound of chiming bells. Her horn speared out and took the chain from Merlin, her silver cloven hooves smashed the gemstone into fragments that sparkled in wisps of rose colored glitter that hovered before they streaked for the windows and sky. There were thousands, lighting the room with the glow of a million candles and where they touched a hand or face, each person felt the soul who it carried and the blessed release she and the boy had given them.

The last one was a golden colored spark and Merlin held out his hand to watch it settle there. He closed his fingers around it and whispered, "my son. Beloved son. I wish you joy and no more sorrows on this journey." His son's soul glowed as bright as any nova.

Random ached to touch her, this living legend but was afraid. She brought to mind the tales of men who had dared to lay their hand upon her and been destroyed, of women claiming purity of heart and been victims of their own lies. She came to him and touched him lightly with her beautiful horn. "I would give it all up for his life back," he said brokenly and Merlin vowed the same. She shook her head, the feathery strands of her mane drifted to the floor and she slowly backed out of the room to stand before the assembled ranks of the entire palace staff from the lowest pig herder to the King himself.

"Her horn," a whisper broke the eerie quiet. "Her horn can cure the vilest poison, make the foulest water pure and crystal. She can heal him."

Merlin came out to speak, "She cannot raise the dead and my son is no more." His voice caught on the last and he choked. The stone gargoyle wrapped his arms around the King and consoled him. She left them, leaping forward and was gone yet no one saw her exit the room, or window or castle but the palace lost the air of enchantment when she was gone. Below them, the Pattern quivered, sending ripples felt all the way to the Courts of Chaos. The people crowded around the door, wanting to see the boy and wish him safe journeys, to say their goodbyes and offer condolences to both Kings and Queen.

He lay on the doctor's table, his lips slightly parted as if waiting to take another breath, his skin as pale as alabaster marble, one eye still glowing golden as if his spirit had not fled. His hair was matted with sweat yet he smelled of fresh flowers and sharp mountain breezes.

They touched him, whispered prayers to him and bade him safe journey onto the next shadow forgiving him for what he had brought to Amber. The castle's flags flew at half mast, the bells proclaimed their somber dirge that mourned the loss of King's Heir and a King's son.

Roelle and Vialle washed his tortured body and mourned the wounds anew. Stared at the sight of fang marks on his neck and how white his skin was without any blood to bring the peaches to his blush. Bathed his hair and brushed it back, marveling at the strands of silver in it for all that he was only seventeen. Saw the slight smile still upon his lips and wondered at what he'd found to laugh.

Both father and grandfather came and dressed him as befit a prince. White brocaded silk with gold thread, gems and braids. Dainty white slippers on feet that still bore the signs

of his barefoot run across unforgiving forest floor. Upon his brow, they placed the royal crown of Amber's Heir embossed with the Unicorn and the Pattern. Around his neck, Merlin laid the symbol of the Logus and the Courts of Chaos. They carried him in his coffin, a simple thing of white oak covered in blue silk to the Grand Cathedral where he lay in state for three days so that the entire kingdom, her neighbors and allies could come to pay their final respects.

The funeral was simple, yet elegant. Over a million came to the capital, more than had come to the Coronation of Eric or Random. Per the Prince's request, honor was given to Sterling Orate, Steen, for his aid and sacrifice to the Crown of Amber. Vialle spoke of his courage and cried, she told them how the two had risked and paid all for her safety and rescue.

No one but the family and his friends saw him laid to rest beneath the immensely impressive monument that had been erected for Corwin when he was presumed dead. His name was etched below Corwin's, the day of his birth and death. His father and grandfather lingered, hands rubbing the stone and brass words of the cenotaph. Read the words he had lived his life by.

Courage is the price that life exacts for granting peace.

The soul that knows it not, knows no release

From little things;

Knows not the livid loneliness of fear,

Nor mountains where bitter joy can hear

The sound of wings.

Courage.

When the last mourner had gone, only two people stood in front of the monument, their hands on the plaque that had only been erected in the last few hours. It bore the Prince's name and his father ran his fingers along the recessed ancient script. "Raven," he mourned and his father hugged him tightly offering unspoken comfort. There were flowers growing at the base of the monument and masses of them that stretched from the castle all the way to their feet. Arrangements sent by the kingdom and subjects from as far away as shadow earth. Above them, a dark shadow obscured the sun and Corwin looked up, shading his eyes.

"Murphy's patrolling?"

Merlin looked at his father, frowning, his dark brows meeting together in that perfect arch that was part of the family look. "Dad, Murphy is with Rinlon and Roelle. She broke down and had to be carried to Dr. Flauvel's." Together, they looked up at the skies and slowly, Merlin's face brightened until his smile reached his eyes. They watched as a large black form with huge wings circled overhead and blew a huge blast of flame and smoke into the sky. The black dragon settled neatly to the ground and tucked its massive wings into its shoulders, long neck lowered to their eye level. His great glowing eye was golden and when he opened his mouth, he exposed teeth as wicked, sharp and large as any monster. Merlin stepped back in trepidation, ready to cast a spell of protection about the two of them. Corwin laughed and patted the creature's side and it turned its head to gently nudge him onto his back. He looked down at his son with the Dragon's head resting on

Merlin's hands.

"Merlin, are you coming?" Corwin asked.

Merlin said, "Ghost? Are you here?"

Ghostwheel materialized at the end of the dragon's nose and was totally ignored. It rumbled deep in its throat. "Uh, Dad," the Ghostwheel said in nervous tones. "That's a dragon."

"Yes, Ghost, I'm aware of that," Merlin replied, loosening the collar of his mourning suit. "My question is this, can you reach his mind?"

"His, Dad?"

I snorted little rings of smoke into the air and thought, "Hi, Ghost. See if Dad wants a ride."

Merlin laughed joyously and swung up on my back as I leaped into the air with strong wing beats. Within seconds, I was a thousand feet above the castle. I could feel their excited heartbeats and heard their innumerable questions yet I couldn't answer other than through Ghost. He expanded to fit around the tip of my nose horn which drove me nuts because it made me cross-eyed. Ghost asked me if I was still blind and I tilted my head to the right to show him the empty, scarred socket.

"How are you alive?" he asked for my father. I shrugged and nearly unseated my passengers.

"Sorry. I don't know if I am alive. I don't know. I remember all of you standing around me in that little room of the doctor and then, my---the Unicorn came and took my hand. Brought me to her bower, laid me on her bed and I went to sleep. When I woke up, I was back in this form. I died, didn't I, Ghost?"

"Yes, Raven. Dad and Corwin, King Random buried you in Prince Corwin's cenotaph. It was a beautiful ceremony, a Prince's funeral. Did you watch?"

"No. I only... woke a little while ago. Flew in circles until I remembered my name and this place," I admitted.

"Will you come back all the way, Raven? I mean, your human form?" Dad asked and waited for Ghost to translate my reply.

"I'm not sure how this works, Dad. I don't think I have a human body anymore. Then again, the dragon body died too." I stretched out my neck and flew over the city, my shadow making monster shapes on the ground. The citizens of Amber looked up and pointed. I felt a compulsion to return and changed direction to hover over the palace. Her standards were flying from the five towers and at half mast, my dragon vision picked out the short, red-headed man in jeans with the lady in green beside him.

"My Queen," I thought and her face lifted, her magic allowed her to read my thoughts.

"Raven! I recognize your heartbeats!" she cried in delight and astonishment. She turned and spoke to her husband, my dragon hearing brought her words to me with perfect clarity.

I landed on the top courtyard on two legs and gently let my front down so that my Grandfather and Dad stepped off lightly. Tucked my wings close and arched my neck so that my head was level with hers. I rested my blind side without horns on her cheek, a delicate procedure as I was incapable of judging depth, a dangerous precedent as I could be attacked and killed as I was no longer capable of guarding that side. A sign of eminent trust. She kissed me and if a dragon could blush, I would have turned bright red.

I turned my attention to King Random as his guards bolted for our group having just

arrived in the courtyard. He waved them back and Rinlon was among them. I saw him mouth my name.

“No need,” Random ordered. “The Throne of Amber has a new Protector of the Realm and a new standard. The Black Dragon of the Golden Eye, Raven.”

I looked at the King but spoke to Ghost, he relayed my words in my own voice and startled me. “Your Majesty, I owed you a life and paid with my own. I pledge my fealty to Amber and your throne. As long as I shall live and am the Dragon, I will guard against all invaders foreign and domestic, I swear this by the blood of the Unicorn and the Pattern.” I turned to my father. “King Merlin, my father, to you I pledge my honor and love, I will protect your life and your throne against all invaders excepting a war between your two kingdoms for I am the Balance between Order and Chaos, neither of which shall rule the other and I cannot choose.” I dropped to my knees and laid my neck on the ground between the two, the most vulnerable position a dragon could offer.

Merlin and Random shook hands over me and I reached into Shadow and pulled out Werewandir, the brother sword to my grandfather’s, to present to my father. He took the blade gingerly from me as Random quivered with a thousand questions.

The sun lowered and I felt a drawing within me. Without explanation or words, I leaped away into the sky flying back towards the woods and the Unicorn’s retreat. As the last ray of sunlight disappeared behind the horizon, I was asleep beneath century old oaks with my head tucked under my wing. I dreamed of Amber and the boy Raven. A story I had somehow lived but it no longer seemed real. I woke with the dawn on the wing over the kingdom, guarding the land under my black wings.

The End.