



SEDUCED BY

MOONLIGHT

CHAPTER 1

A LOT OF PEOPLE LOUNGE BY POOLS IN L.A., BUT FEW OF THEM are truly immortal, no matter how hard they pretend with plastic surgery and exercise. Doyle *was* truly immortal and had been for over a thousand years. A thousand years of wars, assassinations, and political intrigue, and he'd been reduced to being eye candy in a thong bathing suit by the pool of the rich and famous. He lay at the edge of the pool, wearing almost nothing. Sunlight glittered across the blue, blue water of the pool. The light broke in a jagged dance across his body, as if some invisible hand stirred the light, turning it into a dozen tiny spotlights that coaxed Doyle's dark body into colors I'd never known his skin could hold.

He wasn't black the way a human being is black, but more the way a dog is black. Watching the play of light on his skin, I realized I'd been wrong. His skin gleamed with blue highlights, a shine of midnight blue along the long muscular sweep of his calf, a flare of royal blue like a stroke of deep sky touched his back and shoulder. Purple to shame the darkest amethyst caressed his hip. How could I ever have thought his skin monochrome? He was a miracle of colors and light, strapped across a body that rippled and moved with muscles honed in wars fought centuries before I was born.

The braid of his black hair trailed across the edge of the lounge chair, fell over the side, and curled beside him on the concrete like some patient serpent. His hair was the only thing that seemed black on black. There was no play of colors, only a gleam like a black jewel. It seemed as if it

should have been the other way around, that his hair should have held the highlights and his body been all one color, but it wasn't.

He lay on his stomach, head turned away from me. He was pretending to be asleep, but I knew he wasn't. He was waiting. Waiting for the helicopter to fly over. The helicopter that would contain the press, people with cameras. We'd made a deal with the devil. If the press would just stay away enough for us to have some privacy, we'd make sure that at prearranged times they had something newsworthy to take pictures of. I was Princess Meredith NicEssus, heir to the throne of the Unseelie Court, and the fact that I'd surfaced in Los Angeles, California, after a three-year absence was big news. People thought I'd died. Now I was alive and well, and living in the middle of one of the biggest media empires on the planet. Then I'd gone and done something that was even better tabloid fodder.

I was looking for a husband. The only faerie princess born on American soil was looking to wed. Being fey, especially a member of the sidhe, the highest of the high royals, I wasn't allowed to marry unless I was pregnant. The fey don't breed much, and the sidhe royals breed even less. My aunt, the Queen of Air and Darkness, would not tolerate anything less than a fertile match. Since we seemed to be dying out, I guess I couldn't blame her. But somehow the tabloids had gotten wind that I wasn't just dating my bodyguards, I was fucking them. Whoever got me with child, got a wedding. Got to be king to my queen.

The tabloids even knew that the queen had made it a contest between me and her son, my cousin, Prince Cel. Whoever got a baby first, won the throne. The media had fallen on us like a cannibalistic orgy. Not pretty, not pretty at all.

What the tabloids didn't know was that Cel had tried to have me assassinated more than once. They also didn't know that he'd been imprisoned by the queen for six months as punishment. Imprisoned and tortured, for six months. Immortality and an ability to heal almost anything does have some downsides. Torture can last a very, very long time.

When Cel got out, he'd be allowed to continue the contest, unless I got pregnant first. So far, no luck, and it wasn't for lack of trying.

Doyle was one of five bodyguards, the queen's own bodyguards, who had volunteered, or been volunteered, to be my lover. Queen Andais had had a rule that her bodyguards gave their seed to her body, or nobody.

Doyle had been celibate for centuries. Again, immortality, if it goes wrong, can have some downsides.

We'd chosen one of the most persistent of the tabloids and made our arrangements. Doyle thought it was rewarding bad behavior; the queen wanted us to show positive images to the media. The Unseelie Court of the sidhe has a reputation for being the bad guys. We can be, but I'd spent my fair share of time at the Seelie Court, the bright and shining court that the media think is so perfect, so joyous. Their King Taranis, the King of Light and Illusion, is my uncle. But I'm not in line to that throne. I had the bad taste to have a father who was full-blooded Unseelie sidhe, and that is a crime for which the glittering throng has no forgiveness. There was no prison that I could go to, no torture I could endure, that would cleanse me of this sin.

They can say that the Seelie Court is a beautiful place, but I learned that my blood is just as red on white marble as it is on black. The beautiful people made it very plain at a young age that I would never be one of them. I'm too short, too human looking, and, worse yet, too Unseelie looking.

My skin is as white as Doyle's is black. Moonlight skin is what I have, a mark of beauty at either court, but I am barely five feet tall. No sidhe is that short. I have curves and am a little too voluptuous for the sidhe—that pesky human blood, I guess. My eyes are tricolored, two shades of green and a circle of gold. The eyes would be welcome in the Seelie Court, but not the hair. It's blood auburn, sidhe scarlet, if you go to a good salon and get the dye job. It's not auburn, and it's not human red. It's as if you took good red garnets and spun the jewels out into hair. It has one other nickname among the glittering throng—Unseelie red. The Seelie have red hair, but it's closer to human red, orangey, golden, true auburn, or true red, but nothing as dark as mine.

My mother made sure that I knew I was less. Less beautiful, less welcome, just less. She and I don't talk much. My father died when I was younger, and there is rarely a day that I don't miss him. He taught me that I was enough, beautiful enough, tall enough, strong enough, just enough.

Doyle raised his head, showing the black wraparound sunglasses that hid his own black eyes. The light glittered off the silver earrings that graced almost every inch of his ears, from lobe to pointed tip. The ears were the only thing that gave away the fact that Doyle wasn't pure Unseelie

sidhe. Contrary to popular literature, and every wanna-be fey with ear implants, real sidhe do not have pointed ears. Doyle could have hidden the ears and passed for pure sidhe, but he almost always wore his hair back so that this one imperfection showed. I think the earrings were so you wouldn't miss them.

"I hear the helicopter. Where is Rhys?"

I didn't hear anything yet, but I'd learned not to question Doyle; if he said he'd heard something, he had. His hearing was better than a human's, and better than most of the rest of the guards. Probably something to do with his mixed heritage.

I sat up and looked back toward the wall of glass that led into the house. Rhys appeared in the sliding glass doors before I could call for him. His skin was the paleness of mine, but there the sameness ended. His waist-length hair was a mass of tight white curls framing a face that was boyishly handsome and would be forever. His one eye was tricolored blue, cornflower, and winter sky. His other eye was gone, lost long ago. Sometimes he wore a patch to cover the scars, but once he realized that I didn't mind, he seldom bothered. The scars trailed down his face but stopped short of his kissable, pouting lips. For sheer shape of the mouth, his was the prettiest. He was five foot six, the shortest full-blooded sidhe I'd ever met. But every inch of him that showed was muscled. He seemed to try to make up for the lack of height by being in better shape than the rest of the guards. They were all muscular, but he was one of the few who really took the weight lifting seriously. He was also the only one with washboard abs. He had the towels he'd gone for, in front of those abs, and lower, and it wasn't until he dropped the towels beside my chair that I realized he'd left his bathing suit in the house.

"Rhys! What are you doing?"

He grinned at me. "Bathing suits this small are like lies. It's a way for humans to be nude without being naked. I'd rather just be naked."

"They won't be able to print the pictures if one of us is nude," Doyle said.

"They'll print my ass, just not my front."

I looked up at him, suddenly suspicious. "And just why won't they be able to see the front of your body?"

He laughed, head back, mouth wide, a sound so joyous it seemed to make the day brighter. "I'll be hiding myself against your gorgeous body."

"No," Doyle said.

"And are you going to do anything picture-worthy?" Rhys asked, hands on his hips. He was totally comfortable nude. His body language never changed no matter what he was, or wasn't, wearing. It had taken two days worth of arguing to get Doyle into the thong bikini bottom he had on. He'd never participated in the court's casual nudity.

Doyle stood, and the front of the suit was tiny enough, and close enough in color, that I could see Rhys's point. If you didn't know how magnificent Doyle looked nude, you might think this was it, at a glance. From the back he looked almost as nude as Rhys.

"I am wearing this, and I am in public view."

"You're cute," Rhys said, "but if we want the tabloids to stop trying to snap pictures through the bedroom windows, we need to play fair with them. We need to give them a show." He spread his arms wide when he said the last, turning his back to me so I got the full view of the back of his body. The view was better without the bathing suit to break up the clean, muscled lines of him. He still had a wonderful ass, unlike some bodybuilders, who've taken the lack of body fat to a point where there is nothing soft on their bodies. You need a little softness to hide the lines of muscles, or it just looks wrong.

I could hear the helicopter now. "We're running out of time, gentlemen. I do not want to go back to having the photographers camped out in the trees outside the wall."

Rhys glanced back at me. "If we don't give the first tabloid a good show, they'll tell the rest that we lied, and we'll have them climbing all over us again." He sighed, and not as if he was happy. "I'd rather flash my ass to the entire country than have another photographer break his arm falling off the roof."

"Agreed," I said.

Doyle took a deep breath in through his nose and let it out slowly through his mouth. "Agreed." How little he liked it showed in the lines of his body, the way he stood. If he couldn't act better than this, Doyle would have to be excused from future photo opportunities.

Rhys came to the foot of my lounge chair and knelt on all fours, with his hands on the chair arms. He was grinning at me, and I knew he'd find a way of enjoying this. It might be duty, and he might prefer to just shoot the helicopter out of the sky, but he'd play fair, and he'd find a way to make it fun, if he could.

I gazed down his body, because I couldn't help it. I couldn't not look at him dangling there, close enough to fondle, close enough for so much. My voice was a little less than steady when I asked, "Do you have a plan?"

"I thought we'd make out."

"And what am I supposed to be doing?" Doyle asked. He sounded disgusted with the entire situation. He loved being my lover, loved the possibility of being king; he hated the publicity and everything that went with it.

"You can take one end, I'll take the other."

The helicopter was close now, perhaps hidden only by the line of tall eucalyptus trees that bordered the estate. Doyle flashed a smile, white and sudden as lightning in the darkness of his face. He moved with that liquid grace and speed that I could never match, and was suddenly kneeling beside my shoulder. "If I must, then I would have the sweet taste of your mouth."

Rhys darted a quick lick across my bare stomach that made me writhe and giggle. He raised his face enough to say, "There are other tastes just as sweet." The look in his eye, his face, held a heat and knowledge that stole the laughter from my throat and sent my pulse racing.

Doyle brushed his lips across my shoulder. The movement brought my gaze to his, and there was that same dark knowledge. A knowledge born of nights and days of skin and sweat and bodies, of tangled sheets and pleasure.

My voice came a little shaky. "You've decided to play. What made you change your mind?"

He whispered against my cheek, and just his breath hot against my skin made me shudder. "This is a necessary evil, and if you must parade yourself for the media, then I will not abandon you." That flash of a smile came again, like a surprise across his face. It made him look younger, almost like someone else entirely. It had only been in the last month or so that I'd

known Doyle had a smile like that inside him. “Besides, I cannot leave you to Rhys. Goddess knows what he would do out here on his own.”

Rhys ran a finger along the edge of my bikini bottom. “Such a tiny piece of cloth. They’ll never see it if we’re careful.”

I frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

He dropped lower on the lounge chair so that his face was above that tiny piece of cloth, his hands sliding under my slightly raised thighs until those hands came up over my hips and hid the bright red cloth of the bikini bottom. He lowered his face just over my groin, and his hair spread across my thighs like a curtain.

I didn’t have time to protest, or even decide if I was going to. The helicopter cleared the trees, and that was how they found us. Rhys with his face buried in my groin, his legs bent at the knees, feet kicking slightly over his bare ass, like a child with a piece of good candy.

I thought Doyle would protest, until he pressed his face into my neck and I realized he was laughing. Silently, shoulders shaking. He eased me back onto the lounge chair so that I was lying down again, still laughing, but hiding it from the cameras.

I started to smile and was glad my sunglasses were back in place. The smile started to turn into a laugh as the helicopter circled overhead, close enough to chop the water of the pool and send Rhys’s hair tickling along my skin. My hair flared in the artificial wind like bloody flames.

I was laughing full out now, which made things besides my shoulders shake.

Rhys licked across the front of my groin, and even through the cloth it slowed the laughter, brought a catch to my breath. He rolled his eye up the line of my body, and the look was enough; he didn’t want me laughing. He set his teeth into the cloth and grazed me delicately with his teeth. The sensation made me shudder, spine bowing enough to spill my head backward and open my mouth in a throaty gasp.

Doyle squeezed my shoulder, brought me back into my head a little. I was still shaky and had trouble focusing on his face. “I think we have had enough of a show for one day.” He laid one of the towels across my stomach. He handed the other one to Rhys.

Rhys looked up at him, and I saw the thought to argue cross his face, but in the end he simply began to get up, spreading the towel as he moved so

that the cameras didn't get a glimpse of the bikini bottoms. I'd half expected him to flash the camera, show the joke, but he didn't. He very carefully covered me with the towel, while the helicopter swirled overhead and the wind beat our hair around us. On his knees, he was fully exposed, and I wondered if there'd be photos with him politely fuzzed out, or whether they'd sell them to the European papers and not worry about it.

When I was covered completely, from thighs to just under the red bikini top, he scooped me up in his arms.

I had to shout to be heard above the sound of wind and machinery. "I can walk."

"I want to carry you." He seemed so serious when he said it, and it cost me nothing to let him do it.

I nodded.

Rhys carried me toward the house with Doyle walking a little behind and to one side of us. Doyle was being a good bodyguard, bringing up the rear, but he was also walking to one side, instead of directly behind us, so that he didn't ruin the photo opportunity.

He stopped at his chair and scooped up a third towel, then moved smoothly toward the house. I caught a glimpse of the gun wrapped in that towel. The helicopter circling overhead never knew that any of us was armed. They also couldn't see Frost standing just inside the sliding glass doors, hidden by a spill of drapes. He was fully dressed, and very fully armed. I think the reason I didn't mind the media games so much was that if no one tried to kill me, it was a good day. When that's your criterion for a good day, what's a few helicopters and some racy photos? Not much.

CHAPTER 2

FROST WATCHED RHYS CARRY ME INSIDE WITH ANGRY GREY EYES. Frost had been the one guard who voted against our treaty with the press. He would guard us while we did such foolish things, but he would not participate. His dignity would never have stooped so low.

He was handsome in his anger, but he was always handsome. Goddess had made it so that he couldn't be anything else. He was all cheekbones and flawless lines that would make a plastic surgeon cry with envy. Skin like snow, hair like silver frost glittering in moonlight, broad of shoulders, slim of waist, narrow-hipped, long of leg and arm. Clothed he was handsome; nude he was breathtaking.

He watched us walk across the cool tile floor with a look like a petulant child. He was the moodiest of the guards. The first to anger, the last to forgive, and he pouted. It seemed the wrong word for a warrior who had defended his queen for more than a thousand years, but it was the right word. Frost pouted, and it made me tired to see it. He was amazing in bed, a wondrous warrior, but shoveling his emotional shit was nearly a full-time job. There were days when I wasn't sure I wanted the job.

"The Goblin King has called on the mirror," he said in a voice as sullen as his eyes.

"How long ago?" Doyle asked.

"He's talking to Kitto now."

Doyle started toward the far bedroom, then stopped and glanced down at what he was wearing—or rather wasn't wearing. He sighed, heavily, then

padded barefoot across the tiles. He remarked over his shoulder, "If Meredith were dressed thus, it might gain us some advantage, but Kurag does not care for a man's flesh."

"That is not true," Rhys said, and the bitterness in his voice made me turn and look at him. I was still in his arms, so that just turning my head was somehow intimate. "The goblins love a bit of sidhe flesh."

Doyle stopped long enough to frown at him. "I did not mean to feast upon."

"Neither did I," Rhys said.

That stopped Doyle firmly on his bare feet, so dark against the white and blue tiles. "What are you saying, Rhys?"

"I am saying that there were many goblins who had never tasted the pleasure of sidhe flesh, male or female, and there were those who did not care that it was male." He rubbed the side of his face against my neck and shoulder, a comfort gesture.

"Kurag . . ." Frost began, but he couldn't finish the sentence. The anger at Rhys, or the reporters, or whatever, was gone. His face displayed the outrage they were probably all feeling.

I stroked Rhys's curls, so soft, and molded myself more tightly in his arms. I drew my fingers down the curve of his neck and shoulder. When the fey are anxious, we touch each other. I think humans would do it if their culture didn't confuse touch with sex so often. Touch can lead to sex, but at that moment I just wanted to hold Rhys and take that look off of his face.

Doyle came back a few steps, one hand on a slender hip. "Are you saying that Kurag . . . outraged you?"

Rhys raised his face from the curve of my neck. "He never touched me, but he watched. He sat on his throne and ate snacks as if it were a show."

"We have all had to sit through entertainments at our own court, Rhys. No one speaks of it, but how many of our fellow guards have agreed to a little one-on-one together for the queen's pleasure, if it would free them of the celibacy even for an hour or two?"

"I never did it." His hands convulsed around me, fingers digging in painfully.

"Nor I," Doyle said, "but I did not fault those who did."

"Rhys, you're hurting me," I said softly.

He put me down, gently, carefully, as if he didn't trust himself. "It would be one thing to choose it. It is another to be bound and . . ." He shook his head.

I let the towel fall to the floor and touched his arm. "Rape is always ugly, Rhys."

He gave a smile so bitter that it made me hug him, to comfort him and so I wouldn't have to see that look on his face.

"A lot of the guards don't agree with that, Merry. You're too young, you don't remember what we're like during a war."

I stayed clinging to him, trying to will him happier just by pressing my skin against his. I didn't want to know that my guards had done horrible things. No, that wasn't it. I didn't want to know that the men I shared my bed with had done horrible things. Then I remembered a conversation that I'd overheard months ago.

I pulled back enough to look into Rhys's face. "I remember this conversation, Rhys. You said you'd never touched a woman who didn't welcome your touch. Doyle said, outright, that the penalty for the queen's guards to touch any woman but the queen still applied to rape. You go to any other woman and it's death by torture, for you and the woman."

Rhys's face was suddenly paler even than normal.

It was Frost who said, "Not all the Unseelie sidhe warriors are members of the Queen's Ravens."

I looked at him. "I know." I felt like I was missing something. I stepped back from Rhys completely, so I could look at all three of them easily. "What am I not understanding here?"

"That nothing of which Rhys is accusing the goblins is something that members of the Unseelie have not done," Doyle said. He shook his head. "I must go and speak with Kurag." He seemed about to say something, then stopped and simply turned and walked toward the hallway and its string of bedrooms.

I looked at both the other men, still feeling as if they'd stopped the conversation early, as if there were secrets they would all keep to the death. The sidhe are a big one for secrets, but I was their princess, and perhaps one day their queen. That they kept secrets from me seemed a bad idea.

I let out a breath, and even to me the sound was impatient. "Rhys, I told you once that the goblin culture may not give you a choice on sexual

contact, but they do let the ‘victim’ set the rules. They can demand intercourse, but you can dictate how much damage they can do to you.”

“I know, I know,” he said, avoiding my gaze and starting to pace the room. “You’ve told me before that if I had known more of their culture I wouldn’t be short an eye.” He looked at me, and the anger was back, but it was directed at me now.

He didn’t have any right to be angry with me. Rhys was totally reasonable on almost every topic, except the goblins. The goblins were my allies for two more months. For two more months, if the Unseelie happened to go to war you would ask me, not Queen Andais, for goblin aid. Moreover, my enemies were the goblins’ enemies for two more months. I believed, and Doyle believed, and Frost believed, oh, hell, even Rhys believed that it was this alliance that had kept the assassination attempts to a bare minimum.

I was in the middle of trying to negotiate for more time on that alliance. We needed the goblins. We needed them badly. Every time I thought Rhys had worked through his issues on the topic, I was wrong.

“You’re right on one thing, Rhys, the goblins do not see same-sex sex as a bad or a shameful thing. If it’s the way you swing, it’s the way you swing. They also are much more likely than the sidhe to be opportunistically bisexual. If they have a chance to enjoy something they’ve never had, or something they may never get again, they’ll take it.”

Rhys had gone to the huge bank of windows that looked out over the pool. He gave me a view of his lovely backside, but his arms were crossed and his shoulders hunched with his anger.

“But just as you can negotiate for no damage done to your body, you can negotiate on the sex of your partners. There are some even among the goblins who are simply too heterosexual to be interested in exploring the possibilities. If you’d negotiated, then no male could have touched you.”

Frost made some small movement, as if he wanted to go to Rhys. He gave me a look that wasn’t entirely friendly.

Rhys’s voice brought us back to him. “Do you delight in reminding me that my worst nightmare was my own doing? That if I hadn’t been an arrogant sidhe who couldn’t be bothered learning about any people but my own, I might have known that I had rights among the goblins. That even the victims of torture have rights.” He turned, and rage filled his single blue eye with light. That circle of sky blue, the ring of winter sky, and that

brilliant line of cornflower around the pupil blazed. The separate colors literally glowed with his rage, and a faint milky light began to flit behind his skin. His power raised with his anger.

There was a time when I'd feared Rhys when he was like this, but I'd seen his anger too often to fear it. As Frost with his pouting, so Rhys with his anger; it was just a part of them. You accepted it and moved on.

If Rhys had suddenly blazed to life like some pale sun, then I'd have been worried. But this was a small display; it meant nothing.

"You're still being arrogant about their culture, Rhys. You act as if what they did to you is nothing that could ever have happened in the high courts of the sidhe. If the Queen of Air and Darkness bid it, or the King of Light and Illusion wanted it, it would be done. And the sidhe have no laws protecting the victims of torture. You're just tortured. The goblins may do more torture, maiming, and rape than the sidhe, but they've got more laws in place to protect the people who end up on the wrong end of the punishment. You get fucked over by the sidhe, and they fuck you any way they want to. So you tell me, Rhys, which race is the more civilized?"

"You cannot compare the sidhe to the goblins," Frost said, his voice dripping with that arrogance that has been more than one sidhe's undoing. I guess if you've been the ruling class for a few thousand years, you forget what it's like to be ruled.

"You can't honestly mean that you prefer the goblins' world to ours," Rhys said, and his surprise was overcoming his anger.

"I didn't say that."

"What did you say?" he asked.

"I'm saying that this attitude the sidhe have that nothing and no one is as good as they are isn't necessarily so. My father used to say that the goblins are the foot soldiers of the sidhe armies. That without the goblins as our allies the Unseelie would have been destroyed by the Seelie centuries ago."

"The goblins and the sluagh," Rhys said.

The sluagh were the nightmares of the Unseelie court. They were all that was most frightening, most monstrous. All fey, sidhe or no, feared the sluagh. They were the Unseelie's version of the wild hunt, and there was nowhere you could hide, no place you could run to, that sluagh would not find you. On rare occasions it had taken years, but the sluagh never give up

unless called off by the Queen of Air and Darkness. The sluagh were the queen's big scary gun. It is said that even King Taranis himself fears the sound of wings in the dark.

"Yes, the sluagh, those of our kind that most sidhe would rather not admit even belong in faerie, let alone that we could share a bloodline or two."

"We are not related to those creatures," Frost said.

"Their king, Sholto, is half-sidhe, Frost. You've seen him. His mother was Unseelie sidhe."

"Him, perhaps, but not the rest."

I shook my head. "The sluagh are the Unseelie, Frost, more than the sidhe themselves. Our one strength as a court is that we take in anyone. The Seelie Court keeps rejecting anyone who isn't good enough for them, and that has been the Unseelie's strength for centuries. We take in the fey they don't want. It's what makes us different from them; better, I think."

"What do you want from us?" Rhys asked, and he wasn't so much angry now as puzzled.

"Kurag is like a schoolyard bully. He only continues to pick at you because he gets such nice reactions from you. If you could act as if it didn't bother you, then he'd tire of the game."

Rhys hugged himself tighter. "It isn't a game to me."

"It is to him, Rhys. It's wonderful that you've overcome your feelings enough to sit beside me when I speak with the goblins, but truthfully, I spend so much time worrying about your feelings that I'm not as focused as I need to be."

"Fine," he said, "I won't go in with you. Consort knows, I'd rather not have to see his ugly face."

"When you're not there, Kurag spends time asking after you. He keeps asking, *Where's my delicious guard? The pale one.*"

"I didn't know he did that," Rhys said.

I shrugged. "He does."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Doyle said it would just upset you, and there wasn't anything you could do about it." I closed the distance between Rhys and me, laid a hand on his crossed arms. "I disagree. I think you're stronger than Doyle knows. I

believe that you can swallow this hurt, and help me turn the tables on Kurag.”

He looked suspicious. “How?”

I dropped my hand from his arm. “Never mind, Rhys.” I turned toward the hallway.

“No, Merry, I mean it. How could I help you negotiate with . . . him?”

“Doyle’s right, if I lose most of my swimsuit it will make it easier to negotiate with Kurag. He’s a terrible leech.”

Rhys shrugged. “And where do I come in?”

“Put on a robe and flash some of that gorgeous white flesh if Kurag gets stubborn. If you could keep your temper, no matter what he said, you beside me like this would distract him, not because of sex, but because all goblins love the taste of sidhe flesh. One of the things the goblins hated the most about making peace with the sidhe was that they couldn’t eat us anymore.”

“You ask too much,” Frost said.

I looked at that handsome, arrogant face and shook my head again. “I haven’t asked anything of you, Frost.”

“How can you ask Rhys to sit there and let a goblin think of him as food? It is beneath us.”

“If Kurag agrees to lengthen the alliance, I’ll be beneath a lot of goblins.” I’d said the last almost to be cruel. I was tired of hearing how much they hated my plan.

Frost’s face showed the disgust he felt. “The thought of any sidhe woman giving herself to goblin men is repulsive. The thought of a princess of the blood, and a future queen, lying with them is beyond anything I have words for. Even Queen Andais has never stooped so low to gain the goblins’ favors.”

“Kitto is half-goblin and half-sidhe, and for better or worse I brought him into his powers, full-sidhe powers, through sex. No one thought that any goblin half-breed could be full-sidhe.”

“Their blood is not pure enough,” Frost said.

“I may hate it,” Rhys said, “but Kitto’s magic is the magic of our blood. I’ve seen him glow with it.” He looked suddenly tired. “Kitto’s not even half bad for a goblin.”

"Merry," Frost said, and took a step toward me. "Merry, please don't do this. Don't say that you will bring over more of the goblin half-breeds. You have not seen them. Few of them are as fair as Kitto. Most are much more goblin-like than sidhe-like."

"I know, Frost."

"Then how can you offer yourself?"

"First, I want the alliance lengthened, at almost any cost. Second, the sidhe have been dying out for centuries, but if Kitto can be full-sidhe, then maybe other half-sidhe could be brought into their full powers. It would mean that the Unseelie Court would suddenly be stronger than it has ever been."

"The queen is excited about Merry bringing Kitto to us," Rhys said. "The queen wants Merry to try other half-breeds in her bed."

"And what if one of them gets you with child?" Frost asked. "No sidhe will accept a half-goblin king."

"At this point, Frost, I'd settle for just being pregnant. It's been four months of sharing my bed with all of you, and there's no child. I think I'm going to worry about winning the race first. Then I'll worry about who sits beside me."

"The sidhe will not accept a goblin king." He said it with such finality.

"I hate the plan as much as Frost does, maybe more," Rhys said, "but it's not my lily-white body that's being bartered over." He took a deep, shaking breath, as if he pulled the air from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. He finally said, in a voice so calm that it was empty of all emotion, "If you can agree to fuck them, I guess I can flaunt myself in front of their king."

"Rhys!" Frost looked as shocked as that one word sounded.

Rhys gazed at the bigger man. "No, Frost, it's time. Merry is right." He looked at me, and the ghost of his usual grin flickered on his mouth. "How distracting to Kurag will it be to see me nearly nude?"

"About as distracting as this." I ran my hands over the mounds of my breasts where they lay barely contained in the red bathing suit. My hands slid lower, down my ribs, my waist, to frame my hips. Rhys's gaze followed my hands like a starving man. Nude as he was, he couldn't hide how watching me touch my body affected him.

He was one of those men who looked small until he grew, and then you

knew he wasn't small in anything but stature. It was Rhys's laugh that brought my gaze back to his face. "Consort thank you, I love seeing that look on a woman's face."

A human would have blushed to be caught staring, but my cheeks held no heat as I raised my eyes to meet his laughter. If I had not stared at Rhys's lovely body, it would have implied that he wasn't worth noticing. My eyes held all the heat that would have blushed across my face if I'd been just a little more human, a little less fey. The heat in my eyes sobered his face, drenched his tricolored eye in heat of its own.

He had to clear his throat to say, "As distracting as all that, my, my." A smile flashed across his face. "So you're the tits and I'm the ass?"

That made me laugh. "That's one way to put it."

He stepped closer to me, letting his eye linger in one of those looks that is almost more intimate than a touch. A look that made my skin begin to glow, softly, as if I'd swallowed the moon and it was shining underneath my skin. It raised the hair along my body, caught my breath in my throat. All this from a look.

I had trouble focusing on him as he smiled down at me. "To see your body react to my gaze like that"—he let out a shaking breath—"I'd face a thousand ogling goblins to watch the play of light under your skin."

My voice came out breathy, very early Marilyn Monroe, but I couldn't seem to help it. "Why is it that you're the only one who can do that with just a look?"

His smile quirked into a grin, and his gaze slid briefly toward Frost, who was scowling at us both. "I could say it was because I'm the best lover you have." He held up a hand, as Frost took a step forward. "But I'd rather not have to fight a duel later."

"Then why?" I breathed.

The humor faded, replaced by a depth of emotion, intelligence, everything, that Rhys had managed to hide for centuries. A month ago, more by accident than design, Rhys had recovered powers that had been stripped from him centuries ago. All of the guards had recovered lost magic, but it was Rhys who had recovered the most because it was Rhys who had been stripped of most of his power. The price for the fey coming to the United States after they'd been kicked out of Europe was that there were to be no more large-scale fights among us. If we went to war against one another on

American soil, they'd exile us, and we were out of countries that would take us. The answer to keep that from happening had been the Nameless: a creature made up of the wildest magic the sidhe of both courts had left. But as with all spells dealing with wild magic, it was unpredictable. Some sidhe had barely lost any powers; others had been nearly stripped dry. The Nameless wasn't the first time the sidhe had done this. The first time was trying to stay in Europe after the great human-fey war. That one didn't take, but Rhys had lost a lot in the first great spell. The Nameless had taken most of the rest. Rhys had been transformed from a major deity to one of the less powerful of the sidhe. He'd lost so much; he would no longer allow anyone to mention his old name. Out of respect, and horror that it might have been one of them, all the sidhe honored his wish. He was simply Rhys now, and what he had been was lost.

A month ago he'd recovered himself. He was simply more. He could call light into my skin by looking at me. I wasn't sure if he was truly more powerful magically, or if it was the nature of his magic. I thought the former, rather than the latter, because he was a death deity and not a fertility god. Surely my body should have reacted more to life than death.

His voice came soft and low. "What do you want me to do?"

For a moment I couldn't think what he meant. It took all my concentration not to buckle at the knees. "What?" I asked.

Frost made a disgusted noise. "She's power-drunk. Rhys, you really must be more careful."

"It's been almost seven hundred years since I had this much power. I'm a little rusty."

"You enjoy how you affect the princess," Frost said. He was closer now, but it would have been too much effort to turn my head to look at him.

"Wouldn't you?" Rhys said.

Frost hesitated, then said, "Perhaps, but we have no time for it, Rhys."

I felt Frost's strong hands on my arms as he turned me slowly to face him. "Find robes for both of you while I fix this."

I thought I heard Rhys move away into the room, but I wasn't sure. I was too busy staring at Frost's chest. His white shirt was buttoned all the way up to the rounded collar. I knew what lay under that tightly buttoned cloth. I knew the swell of his chest as I knew my own hand. I felt heavy and

thick—not just thickheaded, but as if the hand I raised toward him was heavier than it should have been.

He caught my hand before it touched his chest. My red fingernail polish seemed brighter against his white skin, like startled drops of blood. “If there were more time”—he spoke low, just above a whisper—“I would wake you from this befuddlement with a kiss, but I would not trade one bemusement for another.” He bent close, whispering against my face, “And if my kiss has not the power to befuddle you, I do not wish to know it.”

I started to say something romantic and silly, like his kiss was always magical, but his hand where it touched mine had gone cold. Ice, his hand was like ice. If I’d been thinking more clearly, I’d have jerked back before he finished, but of course if I’d been thinking clearly Frost wouldn’t have done what he did. Cold shot through my body, a cold to freeze the skin and ice the blood. A cold so intense that it stole my breath, and when I could breathe again, it came from my lips in a white fog. I jerked free of him, and he let me go. I was no longer befuddled. No, I was clearheaded, and shivering with cold.

I fought chattering teeth to get out, “Damn it, Frost, you didn’t have to freeze me.”

“My apologies, Princess, but like Rhys, I have not had my full power in centuries. I am still relearning the niceties of it.” His grey eyes were full of snow, as if the iris of each eye were one of those snow globes that you shake up to see the snow fly. Almost every other sidhe I’d known glowed with power, and Frost could glow with the best of them, but when he called cold, his eyes filled with snow. Sometimes I thought that if I gazed into those grey, snow-flecked eyes long enough I’d see a landscape done small, see the place where he’d begun, see a time before I was born.

I looked away. My nerve broke every time, because I wasn’t entirely sure where those winter eyes would lead me, or what secrets they might reveal. There was something in the snow that frightened me. There was no reason for it. No logic to it, but I did not like the snow.

If I’d been human I’d have accused myself of being unnerved by the strangeness of it, but I wasn’t human enough for that, and Goddess knows I’d seen stranger things than snow fall in someone’s eyes.

I was already warmer. The cold never lasted long, but I didn’t like it. He had used it as foreplay once in our lovemaking, and though interesting, I

didn't want to repeat it. To hide the fact that I was unnerved by his magic in a most un-sidhe-like way, I said, "Why is it that only Rhys's magic bemuses me like that?" I didn't meet his eyes as I asked. Eventually, his eyes would return to their normal grey.

"None of us had lost as much as Rhys, and he was once a deity to rival any."

That made me look up. His eyes held a sense of movement, but were grey again. "None of you talks about what it was like before."

"It is hard to speak of that which is lost, and can never be regained."

"Are you saying that Rhys was more powerful than any of the rest of you?"

"He was the Lord of Death himself. Death followed at his step, if he willed it. When he was great among us, Meredith, none could withstand us."

"Then why didn't the Unseelie destroy the Seelie?"

"Rhys was not always Unseelie."

That surprised me. "He was Seelie Court?"

Frost nodded, then frowned. He frowned so much that if he'd been able to wrinkle, he would have had grooves in his forehead and around his mouth by now, but his face was smooth and flawless, and always would be. "Rhys was a power apart. He was the ruler of the land of the dead, and that is not truly Unseelie *or* Seelie. He was welcome at the shining court, but he was truly a thing apart, as were some of the rest of us. The system of two courts of the sidhe is relatively recent. Once there were many courts. The humans chose to call those of the fey who were beautiful and did them no harm *Seelie*. Those they found ugly, or harmed them, they named *Unseelie*. But it was not so clean a line."

"Like the goblins and the sluagh, now?"

"More like the goblins. The King of the Sluagh is a noble of the Unseelie Court. They are no longer truly separate. King Kurag holds no title among us; nor does any sidhe hold title in his court."

Rhys came back in with a white terry-cloth robe belted around his body. It was long enough that it came nearly to his ankles. It would have draped the floor on me. His white curls looked darker against the white of the robe, the difference between fresh snow and ivory. Shades of white.

He held the robe that matched my bikini. It was red, and meant more to

decorate the body than to cover, so that most of the robe was sheer, like seeing your skin through a haze of fire.

Rhys looked from one to the other of us. "Why do you both look so solemn? Nobody died while I was gone, did they?"

I shook my head. "Not that I know of." I took the robe and slipped in between the patches of silk and the scratchier sheerness. The next robe I got was going to be just silk, or satin, something that didn't feel like it was catching on my skin as I moved.

"So what do you want me to do once we're in talking to Kurag?" Rhys asked.

"Just flaunt yourself—maybe flash your ass or upper thigh. They're supposed to be two of the prime cuts of meat that you can carve off our bodies."

Rhys put his head to one side, as if thinking. "Will it bother him to see meat he can't taste?"

"It will be a little bit of torture, and I don't use the word lightly. The worst thing you can do to a goblin is show him something he wants and deny it to him. Showing Kurag his wildest desire when he knows he can't have it, it'll drive him mad."

"Or make him so angry he walks away from the negotiations," Frost said.

"No, Frost, if we make Kurag lose control that badly, he won't walk away. He'll respect the fact that we beat him this round. He'll try to find something else to distract us for next time, but he won't hold it against us. Goblins love a good game of one-upmanship. He'll be flattered that we went to the trouble."

"I do not understand the goblins," Frost said.

"You don't have to," I said. "My father made sure I did."

Frost looked at me, and there was something I couldn't read on his face. "Prince Essus raised you as if he was grooming you to rule the courts, yet he knew that Cel was heir, and not you. If Cel had produced even one child, the queen would never have offered you this chance."

"You're right on that."

"Why do you think he taught you to rule, if you were never going to mount the throne?"

"My father was secondborn and never going to rule, yet his father raised him to be a ruler. I think he raised me the only way he knew how."

"Perhaps," Frost said, "or perhaps, Prince Essus did not lose all his prophetic abilities when the rest of us did."

I shrugged. "I don't know, and I don't have time to worry about it."

Doyle came to the front of the hallway. "Kurag is willing to talk to you, Meredith, but he is not happy about it."

"I didn't expect him to be."

"He fears your enemies," Frost said.

"That makes two of us," I said.

"Three," Rhys said.

"Four," Doyle said.

Frost shook his head, his hair glittering like a curtain of Christmas tree tinsel. "Five. I fear for your safety. If we lose the goblins' threat, Cel's allies will move against us."

"Then we're agreed," I said.

Doyle was looking from one to the other of us. "What have we agreed to?"

"I'm going to play hors d'oeuvre for the Goblin King," Rhys said.

Doyle's black-on-black eyebrows raised up nearly to his hairline. "I have missed something."

"Rhys is going to help me negotiate with Kurag," I said.

"Help how?" Doyle asked.

Rhys dropped the robe off one pale shoulder, flashing down to one tight nipple. He grinned and shrugged back into the robe.

Doyle raised dark eyebrows. "Do not take this in a spirit in which it is not meant, but you have been a stumbling block to our work with Kurag. He has chided you, fully clothed, and you have practically foamed at the mouth like an ill-used dog. What makes you believe you can do . . ." He seemed to be searching for a word. He finally settled for, "What makes you believe you can stand up to Kurag's teasing on this day?"

"Today, I'll be teasing back. Merry said that Kurag is like a schoolyard bully, and she's right. Besides, if Merry can do it, so can I." He looked suddenly fierce again. All the humor had gone, leaving his face bleak. "Though I'd much rather kill goblins than negotiate with them."

“Funny,” Doyle said, “that’s exactly what King Kurag said about the sidhe only moments ago.”

“Perfect,” I said. “Let’s all go and irritate each other.”

Doyle led the way down the hallway. He looked terribly nude from the back. I realized that Kurag would have more than just Rhys and I to ogle. I wondered if Doyle thought of himself as a potential sex partner, or as a meal? I guess that all depended on how Kurag felt about sidhe men, and if he preferred dark meat to light.