



*Taming
the
Temptress*



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TAMING THE TEMPTRESS

THE WITCHES' BALL



KATE PEARCE

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WITCHES' BALL

Miss Nanto-Svelta

IS REQUESTED TO ATTEND
A WITCHES' BALL AT
NIGHTSHADE MANOR,
BOCKA MORROW, CORNWALL

THE EVENING OF THE
31ST OF OCTOBER, 1814

*Cordially,
Iris Wharton*

CHAPTER 1



The invitation to the Witches' Ball appeared on the side of Nant's well, the edges curled from the dampness in the sea air. Her first instinct was to rip it to shreds, but there was also a message from her father, who, being a god, had to be obeyed or one suffered the consequences.

Nant sighed and heaved herself up to sit on the paved top of the well. She'd had a busy night tending to her underground streams and was in no mood to tolerate her father's intrusion in her private affairs. His message was spelled out in smooth sea glass beside the invitation.

NANTO-SVELTA YOU WILL ATTEND THIS BALL.

With an impatient hand, Nant swept her fingers through the glass, scattering the pebbles into vegetation made sparse by the coastal weather. Within seconds, the pebbles leapt back into place beside the invitation, and there was a flash of lightning that left a trace of sulphur in the air. It appeared that Endellion was serious. She had to attend the blasted ball, even if she only stayed for a few moments. She'd seen what he could do to his disobedient children, and she had no wish to be punished.

She smoothed out the parchment to display the cream-colored invitation written in slightly blurred black ink.

You are hereby invited to attend a Witches' Ball on October 31st at

Nightshade Manor, Bocka Morrow, Cornwall.

Please RSVP to your hosts the Earl and Countess of Wharton.

Nant, had of course, heard whispers about the ball from her sister and the other deities and oddities who inhabited the coastal village of Bocka Morrow. From what her sister Malakia had told her, the earl and countess were attempting to persuade the notoriously insular magical community to go forth and multiply—or at least for the younger generation to make some attempt to find mates.

She hadn't expected an invitation, because she considered herself more of a minor local deity. She could not do magic spells like a witch, and while she drew power from her spring and waterways, she rarely chose to use it, preferring a quieter existence where she cared for her waterways, answered the prayers of those who left her offerings, and occasionally made sure that two lovers found their way to each other.

The last time she'd displayed her power was when her sister Malakia's suitor had carelessly dropped a coin down her well that had hit her on the head. He hadn't been impressed by her annoyance until she'd provoked a veritable storm over him that shocked him to his core. She often reminded Malakia that if she hadn't made Hezekiah aware of the magic around him then he wouldn't have come to accept that Mally was the goddess of the bay and sometimes a mermaid.

"Drat." Nant frowned. There was that word again. Magic. "I suppose I'll have to go."

She glanced up at the leaden sky where the sun had yet to appear and dived headfirst back into her well. It was a more direct route to the sea than walking or plummeting off the tall cliff, and she didn't want to miss her

morning swim with her sister. Even though she moved through the channels with great speed, she was still aware of every rock, barnacle, and grain of sand that encompassed her domain. The freshwater met the salt of the sea, and she pushed upward past the shimmer of her sister's tail and surfaced beside her.

“Good morning,” Mally said. “I was beginning to wonder where you were.”

“I was delayed by a message from a god.” Nant removed a crab that was entangled in her sister's golden hair and released it back into the water.

“Our father, or some other deity?” Mally asked as she effortlessly kept her balance in the choppy sea.

“Father. He's insisting I attend the ball at Nightshade Manor.”

“I wonder why?”

“I assume he thinks I'll meet a nice young man there.” Nant flicked water at her sister. “A magical one.”

Mally looked thoughtful. “If you choose correctly, it might enhance your own power. Have you considered that?”

“I am quite powerful enough, thank you very much. I've been alone since they built that storm drain up at the castle that destroyed my major tributary, and I very much prefer it.”

“Lerryn was always trying to expand his domain to overrun yours, so I'm not surprised you don't miss him. You were very young at the time. But not all males are like that. Hezekiah is—”

Nant held up her finger. “Wonderful, perfect, and not magical in the slightest, which means he doesn't compete with you.”

“It’s true that he doesn’t have a magical bone in his body, but while he doesn’t compete with me, he does complete me.” Mally’s smile softened and she looked toward the caves at the bottom of the cliff. “He waits for me to return to shore every morning to be certain I’m safe and well.”

“That’s only because he’s petrified of the sea,” Nant muttered. “He’s afraid he’ll have to come in and rescue you.”

Mally reached over and pinched her. “That’s not fair.”

Nant rubbed the spot and glared at her sister. “Fine, I apologize, then.”

“It’s not like you to capitulate so quickly. What do you want?”

Nant sighed. “Your advice about what to wear for the ball?” She smoothed the faded silk of her sopping-wet tunic. “I haven’t bothered with new clothes for years.”

Mally’s face lit up. “I’d be delighted to help you! Meet me at the inn at three this afternoon, and we’ll visit Mrs. Polkinhorne the dressmaker.”

Nant watched her sister swim back to shore where her husband awaited her with a large drying cloth and her clothing. Mally’s ability to change instantly from a sea dweller to a landlubber had always fascinated Nant, who had different abilities altogether. She and Mally didn’t have the same mother. Endellion wasn’t known for his fidelity; his love life was as erratic and unpredictable as the spring storms, and just as dangerous.

They had spent their early years together in the caves where the sea water met and mingled with the mouth of the river. It had been so long ago that neither she nor Mally could remember much about the women who’d cared for them, except that there had been more than one, and that they were kind.

Being immortal meant they’d only had each other while those around them grew old and died. After realizing the awful truth of their existence,

they'd both been careful not to use their powers to encourage any human to fall in love with them. Mally was given a prophecy about her intended husband and had to wait centuries for him to appear. Nant had enjoyed a brief liaison with her tributary, Lerryn, but he proved untrustworthy, and she'd decided not to risk falling in love again.

The likelihood of meeting anyone who suited her was small to nonexistent, but she still had to go to the ball to appease her father. What kind of man would be happy dwelling beneath the earth surrounded by water and the lushness of sea? Not many. She ducked down and swam toward the entrance to her tributary. She would attend the ball in her new gown, and that would be the end of it.



SEVERAL HOURS LATER, as she endured the disapproval of Mistress Polkinhorne, Nant wasn't quite so certain about her decision.

"You don't understand," Nant said. "I won't wear a corset. They are too restrictive for my... daily activities."

"Everyone needs a corset, dear. Your ball gown will not hang properly if you aren't wearing one." Mrs. Polkinhorne straightened and wrote something in her notebook. "I understand that you are one of our... more unusual residents, but one must maintain some standards."

"You can wear a corset for a few hours, Nant," Mally said from the comfort of her chair in the corner. "You can always take it off when you leave the ball."

"I'll have to," Nant muttered. "If I can't raise my arms above my shoulders, I can't swim properly. And no whalebone in the corset, please. There must be something else you can use, or my father will never forgive

me.”

“That is true. “Mally nodded. “I’ve found great success with narrow strips of steel or bamboo, ma’am.”

Mrs. Polkinhorne was beginning to look as if she wished she’d never agreed to provide Nant with a dress, and who could blame her?

“If you think it will be too much trouble, I can always borrow something from my sister, Mrs. Polkinhorne,” Nant said hopefully.

“No, you cannot.” Mally frowned at her. “I am twice the size of you, and you’d ruin my dresses with all that water.” She turned back to the dressmaker. “*Please* help her. She needs to look nice at the ball.”

“When is this ball, exactly?” Mrs. Polkinhorne asked. “You didn’t quite say.”

Nant looked at Mally, who shrugged. “I think it’s supposed to be a secret, but I believe it is tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow?” Mrs. Polkinhorne might have screeched a little. “I cannot make something in that time.”

Nant stepped off the platform. “Well, that’s that, then. Thank you, mistress, and good day.”

“No, wait.” Mally grabbed her arm and turned to the dressmaker. “You must have something, ma’am?”

There was a discreet cough from behind the curtain at the rear of the shop. “Mrs. Polkinhorne?”

“What is it, Agatha?”

A young woman with long auburn hair stepped around the curtain, her gaze firmly downward, her hands clasped in front of her. She wore an old-

fashioned dress with wide skirts and had a knitted shawl around her shoulders.

“I would be more than willing to make a gown for this lady, ma’am.”

“You?” Mrs. Polkinhorne didn’t look impressed. “You’re my apprentice. I hardly think you have the skills necessary to—”

She stopped speaking, and Nant’s gaze went to the girl and then to Mally, who had gone still, an amused smile on her face.

Agatha looked at Nant. Her eyes were as green as glass and just as clear. “I will make your gown. It will be beautiful. If you don’t wish to return to the shop, I will leave it beside your well on the headland.”

“How do I know it will fit?” Nant asked.

“Oh, it will.” Agatha smiled at her. “I guarantee it.”

She turned to her employer, who appeared to have been frozen in place, and snapped her fingers.

“So, it is settled, ma’am. There is nothing for you to worry about.” She curtsied and withdrew, leaving her employer looking uncertainly at Nant.

“Thank you, Mistress Polkinhorne,” Mally said as they both curtsied. “You have been most helpful.”

“Yes, of course, good day to you both...”

Nant linked her arm through Mally’s and dragged her sister out of the shop.

“What on earth was that all about?”

“Didn’t you feel it?” Mally asked.

“The magic? Of course, I did. Although what kind of magic Agatha was using, I am not quite certain.”

“Did you see her ears?” Mally kept walking down Castle Street until they reached the harbor. The fishing boats were already in after their morning’s work, and the fishermen were busy gutting and preparing their catch on the quayside. “They were most definitely pointed. Perhaps she is related to the elves.”

“Which might explain her confidence that she can make me a nice dress.” Nant ducked to avoid a low-flying seagull attracted by the fish guts. “I do hope she meant what she said, or I’ll have to attend in this old thing.”

She glanced down at her tattered garment. She couldn’t remember when she’d acquired her current dress, which was ripped to shreds, covered in greenish slime, and adorned with various ribbons left as offerings that had pleased her.

“I’ll wager that Agatha, whoever she is, will make you something extraordinary,” Mally said. “I’ll meet you at your well and make sure the rest of you lives up to the gown.” She grinned at her sister. “I think you’ll have to reconcile yourself to a haircut, too.”

“No!” Nant glared at her sister. “You will not touch a hair on my head.”

Mally kissed her cheek and headed back toward the inn. “Don’t forget you’ll need gloves, petticoats, and shoes, Nant!”

“Why?” she shouted back at her sister as the gulls weaved and dived over her head. “And where on earth do you expect me to get such things one day before the ball?”

Mally didn’t reply, and Nant stared out at the sea, hoping it would calm her rattled nerves. Did she even own a pair of shoes? She might have once, when she’d danced with Lerryn, her treacherous tributary, ribbons in her hair and a besotted smile on her face...

“Mistress Nant?”

She turned to find Agatha, the dressmaker’s apprentice, behind her. She carried a large basket that she held up to Nant, and was breathing hard.

“I thought you might need these to... accentuate your gown.”

“Are you spying on me?” Nant demanded.

“Not at all! I just wanted to make sure that the dress I make for you is shown to its best advantage.”

Nant held the girl’s clear gaze. “Does Mrs. Polkinhorne know you are doing this?”

Agatha’s chin went up. “I haven’t taken anything from the shop, and it is hardly my fault if my employer doesn’t seem to remember you ordering a new gown.”

Nant stared at her, impressed by the girl’s quiet confidence and her refusal to back down. She took the basket.

“Thank you.”

Agatha bobbed a curtsy. “You are most welcome.”

After Agatha left, Nant uncovered the contents of the basket and set them on the harbor wall beside her. There was a pair of soft silver dancing slippers, stockings, and garters. Also, two petticoats made of the finest sheer muslin and the softest set of stays she had ever seen.

“Hmph.” Nant repacked the basket and considered her route home. “Now I’ll have to walk back up to the clifftop, or everything will be ruined in the water.”

Nant picked up the basket and set off. By the time she reached her underground home, she would need a nap that might stretch into the next day

and bring the dreaded ball even closer. As she walked past the shops, she saw Agatha inside the dressmaker's, listening attentively to whatever her employer was telling her. Even though Agatha made no effort to acknowledge Nant, she was certain she'd been seen.

She nodded at the various shopkeepers as she passed by, aware that some of them looked as if they were afraid of her, which was just as it should be, and others looked puzzled as to why she was out and about in broad daylight. She knew more about most of them than they realized, having been the receiver of the hopes and dreams cast into her stream for centuries. Endellion had given her the sacred spring and underground streams close to Bocka Morrow bay to care for when she was a child, and she had performed her duties with meticulous care ever since.

Some of the villagers owed their very existence to her ensuring their parents' desires had been met and should be bowing in admiration. Nant caught a glimpse of her reflection in one of the shop windows and paused. She looked like a drowned corpse that had been tossed around on the sea for days before finally being brought to shore. It wasn't surprising that visitors to the town were giving her a wide berth.

She was breathing hard as she crested the top of the hill and stared out over the headland. When had she lost her joy, and simply become a means to an end? A deity who made others happy, but never found happiness of her own. She had Mally and her family in the sea, but was it enough? And since Mally's marriage, her sister's time had ceased to be her own.

Nant started walking again. Perhaps her father's command to attend the ball was a sign that things had to change. She didn't need to find a mate, but going to the ball might help her find herself, and at least make some new acquaintances. She glanced up at the clouds forming around the sun and

quicken her pace. The basket would be safe concealed within the stone walls of her well, and Nant would be even safer in her lair below the surface. She couldn't wait to feel the water against her skin. Existing in the outer world made her flesh crawl.

She set the basket in its hiding place, raised her arms above her head, and dived into the well, barely making a splash as she hit the water and disappeared into the depths. Tomorrow was another day, but for now she'd simply be herself.

CHAPTER 2



When Nant came out of her well the next evening, she was feeling refreshed but slightly nervous. The sight of her sister conversing with Agatha wasn't reassuring, and her instincts told her to dive straight back in—except Mally knew she was there and had already turned to greet her.

“Good evening, Nant.”

Agatha curtsied. “Mistress Nant.”

Nant clambered fully out of the well and sat on the side, her arms crossed over her chest.

Her sister looked at her. “I see you are excited to attend your first ball in a hundred years or so.”

Nant glanced meaningfully at Agatha, but Mally smiled.

“She is of our world. There is no need to be careful.”

“I knew that.” Nant scowled.

Mally rose to her feet. “Then shall we begin? I've seen your dress, Nant. You are going to look beautiful.”

Nant allowed herself to be turned and twirled like a doll as she was stripped of her old clothes and into the new garments with surprising speed. She suspected Mally was moving fast because she didn't want Nant to

change her mind. It felt strange to have dry cloth against her skin and breathe through the restrictions of the light shift.

“Let’s slip the gown over her head, and then I’ll do her hair,” Mally instructed Agatha. “Close your eyes, Nant, and keep them closed while we button you in.”

Nant did as they requested, wiggling her toes in the unfamiliar silk of her stockings, her fingers brushing the fabric of the gown as Mally fussed with her hair. After what felt like hours of prodding and poking, Mally stood back.

“Now, let me look at you.”

The silence went on for so long that Nant opened her eyes.

“What is it? Do I look hideous?” She glanced over at the dark, inviting entrance to her well. “Perhaps I shouldn’t go, after all. I don’t want to frighten people.”

“You look... beautiful.”

There was something in Mally’s voice that made Nant stare hard at her.

“Indeed, you do, mistress,” Agatha agreed.

Nant looked down at her skirts and went still. Somehow Agatha had created a gown that moved with the same lazy flow as her stream. A multitude of colors glimmered in the depths of the fine layers of fabric, reminding her of rainbows and pond life and the beauty of her waterways.

“You have done well.” Nant forced herself to acknowledge the remarkable work of the seamstress. “It quite suits me.”

Agatha nodded gravely. “I design from within, mistress. I try and anticipate your dreams.”

“You have exceeded all our expectations,” Mally said. “I only wish you’d

been here to make my wedding dress.”

Agatha smiled. “I would willingly make you another gown, ma’am. It would be an honor.”

Mally nodded and turned back to Nant. “Put your slippers on, sister, and find your cloak.”

Agatha handed both items over to Nant. She frowned as she put her feet into the soft kid shoes. How was she supposed to dance in such restrictive things? Not that she intended to dance anyway. Her plan was to make an appearance and leave as quickly as possible. The cloak had a hood she drew over her piled-up hair. Mally had intertwined ribbons and shells into the gathered braids that rustled gently in the breeze. That, at least, felt familiar to Nant, which was a small point of reassurance.

She glanced up the hill. Far in the distance were the faint lights of the mysterious Nightshade Manor, a house she’d never visited before, but had heard was owned by a magical family.

“I suppose I should get on.” Nant picked up her skirts. “Thank you both for your ministrations.”

Mally set her hand on Nant’s. “You don’t think we’d expect you to walk looking like that, do you?”

“How else am I supposed to get there?” Nant demanded. “I’m not even sure how one finds the place.”

Agatha took Mally’s other hand. “We have a solution for that, mistress. If you will just close your eyes.”

There was a strange rushing sensation in Nant’s head. When she opened her eyes, she found herself alone, standing at the bottom of a series of terraces leading up to an unknown house she assumed was Nightshade

Manor. She swallowed hard against a sudden queasiness and joined the other guests approaching the house's entrance.

There were several large groups and quite a few of them appeared to be arguing amongst themselves. Perhaps the notoriously shy magical beings inhabiting the Cornish coast were as reluctant to be here as she was. For some reason that made her feel better, and she picked up her skirts and moved quickly into the house. After handing her cloak to a waiting footman, she joined the line of guests moving toward the ballroom.

Her initial impression was of white walls and polished marble floors that made the hall look huge and the sparse furniture insignificant. The faint sound of music reached her through the open doors of the ballroom. She stopped again, suddenly uncertain, and someone walked into the back of her.

"Excuse me."

She half-turned to see an extremely tall gentleman scowling down at her. He had black hair and thick, dark eyebrows that were currently drawn together in a somewhat intimidating manner.

"What is the matter, sir?"

"You stopped rather abruptly."

She looked him up and down. "Did you suffer an injury? You look remarkably hale and hearty to me."

For a moment a blast of heat surrounded her, and all the hairs on her arms bristled.

"You startled me." His frown intensified. "I do not appreciate being startled."

"Ah, my apologies. I did not realize you were such a fragile flower."

She smiled, turned around, and stomped off as best she could in her slippers, aware that he was still looking at her. She arrived at the entrance of the ballroom and reluctantly gave her full name to the butler. She was one of the very few people who were by themselves and didn't seem to know anyone.

To her relief, almost no one glanced up when she was announced, which suited her perfectly. She joined the line to meet her host and hostess, the Earl and Countess of Wharton, and was greeted with a warm enthusiasm that surprised her. The ballroom was quite full and an air of something magical hung over the whole place that made her feel rather more at home than she had anticipated.

“You,” a voice said from behind her. She recognized the man who had run into her a moment ago, but didn't bother to turn around. Of course, he kept talking. “I don't believe we've been introduced.”

She started to move away. “Perhaps that's for the best.”

“I would... like to know your name.”

“Why? So that you can lodge a complaint with our hosts about me jostling you in the hall?”

He gently caught her elbow, and sparks shot straight up her arm, making her gasp.

“Damnation,” he murmured. “I didn't mean—”

She swung around to confront him, her fingers clamped over her tingling flesh. “What on earth was that?”

He winced. “I apologize.”

“I'm glad to hear it.” She raised her chin and met his stormy grey eyes.

“Now, will you please leave me alone?”

“I will if you tell me your name.”

“I’m Lady Spiddlygloop.”

“You are not.”

“How do you know?” Nant raised her eyebrows.

“Because I’ve met her.”

She had a sudden impulse to smile. Was he deliberately being absurd, or was he even more socially clueless than she was?

“The lady you refer to is at least ninety years old and has no living children.”

“That you know of.” Nant winked at him. “Now if you will excuse me.”

She almost skipped away, because she was trying so hard not to laugh. The confused expression on his handsome face had almost upset her. She’d had an uncharacteristic impulse to pat his cheek and reassure him that she was only speaking in jest. She headed for the far room where refreshments and drinks were being served and considered how long she needed to stay to ensure her father didn’t grow angry with her.

If she ventured forth too soon, he might drench her on the steps, or send a gale to force her back inside. Unconsciously, she rubbed her elbow where the unknown gentleman had touched her. She still felt the brief contact like an irritating insect bite. She gazed longingly at the large punch bowl. If only she could put her head in it and feel more normal.

“Mistress Nant.”

She turned to find her hostess beside her.

“My lady?”

“May I introduce you to Mr. Taranis?”

Nant looked up at her new nemesis.

“Must you?”

The Countess of Wharton smiled. “Now, we are all trying to be more sociable with each other this evening, so I would consider it a favor if you would allow the introduction.”

“As you wish.” Nant sighed and stuck out her hand. “I’m Nant. Pleased to meet you.”

His large hand engulfed hers and there was that sharp shock again, which intensified when he brought her hand to his lips.

“Mistress Nant, a pleasure.”

Their hostess smiled and retreated, leaving them staring at each other.

“Would you like me to get you a glass of punch?” he offered.

“Yes, please.” Nant tried to be pleasant.

He spent a few moments dipping the glasses in the punch bowl and then offered her one.

“Thank you.” Nant sipped the drink and immediately shuddered.

“Is it not to your liking?”

“I’m not used to such sweet things,” Nant said. “I usually drink fresh water from the spring.”

“Hardly fresh.”

She looked up at him. “It is if it’s from my waterway.”

“Ah.” His expression cleared. “That’s why I haven’t seen you about much.”

It was Nant's turn to frown. "Why would you care where I have been, in the first place? It's not as if we've met before, is it?"

"That is incorrect."

She searched his face and slowly shook her head. "I have no memory of meeting you, sir."

"Probably not in this form, but I can assure you that we have... connected before."

"In other lives, perhaps? Do you believe in such nonsense?"

He shrugged. "I only have to look around this ballroom to know that magical beings exist in many forms and in many places."

Nant looked through the door at the dancefloor where the orchestra had returned and were tuning up. She had a sudden desire to run through the ballroom and out into the darkness beyond.

"I have no time for games, sir." She set her cup down with a thump. "It was a pleasure to meet you, but now I must obey our hostess's demands and go and..." She forced the word out. "Mingle."

She walked off before he could touch her again or attempt to engage her interest. He unsettled her at some deep level, and she didn't like it.

"Would you care to dance?" A young man she'd never met stepped in front of her and bowed.

"Not particularly," Nant said.

"Perfect." He grinned at her. "I don't want to be here, either, but if my parents see me making an effort, they'll probably let me leave early."

Nant laughed and offered him her hand. "Then how can I refuse?"

He led her onto the dancefloor as the orchestra struck a chord. She

curtsied, and he bowed. Luckily, it was an old country dance she vaguely remembered.

“I haven’t danced for centuries,” Nant confessed as he expertly twirled her around.

“Then I must say that you are remarkably agile for a woman of such great age.” He linked arms with her, and they moved around the other dancers in the set. “I’m Ralph, by the way.”

“Nant.”

“I know who you are.”

“That’s a shame. I’m always hoping I’ll be forgotten.”

“How could anyone forget you? You’re exquisite.”

“And probably old enough to be your ten times great grandmother.”

He winked. “I’ve always been attracted to older women.”

“Shameless flatterer.”

She enjoyed the dance more than she had anticipated, and they parted ways with a fond goodbye. He rejoined his family group, and she noted the approval on his parents’ faces and wondered what he would tell them about her. Not that it mattered. He’d been charming, but she’d felt like his ancient maiden aunt.

She glanced over at the door to the ballroom. Could she leave now? She’d already spent more time than she’d wanted to at the ball. Her father couldn’t argue with that. She walked around the edge of the dancefloor and slipped out into the entrance hall, which was deserted apart from a lone footman stationed at the bottom of the stairs. The front doors of the house stood open, allowing a breeze that smelled strongly of the sea to circulate.

Nant approached the footman. "Where might I find my cloak?"

He pointed up the stairs. "The ladies' retiring room is the first door on the left, miss. Do you want me to call for your carriage? It is beginning to rain and a thick fog is coming in off the sea."

"There is no need. I can walk home from here," Nant reassured him before setting off up the stairs.

The retiring room was blessedly quiet, and it took her but a moment to find her cloak. As she turned toward the door, she caught a glimpse of herself in the gilt mirror set against the wall and paused. How long was it since she'd seen her reflection in a proper mirror and not in the surface of her stream? She walked slowly forward, admiring the way her gown rustled and caught the light like moonbeams on water. She touched the ribbons in her braided hair. Mally and Agatha had made her look beautiful.

Should she stay for a while longer? She felt the protection of the house around her like a living thing. Everyone was very pleasant, and she hadn't even sampled the buffet yet. And, yes, she couldn't deny that being with other people was... acceptable after so many years of shunning company. She pressed her palm to her heart and admitted the unthinkable. She was lonely.

The door opened, and a young maid came in and curtsied.

"May I assist you, miss?"

"No, thank you. I was just collecting my cloak."

"If I might say so, miss, you look lovely," the maid said shyly as she touched the skirt of Nant's dress. "That's one of the prettiest gowns I've ever seen."

"I quite agree." Nant was still smiling as she slipped out of the door and

made her way down the stairs. Her smile disappeared when she found Mr. Taranis pacing the marble floor, his hands clasped behind his back.

He glanced up as she came toward him. “Ah, there you are.”

“What on earth do you want?”

His brow creased. “Isn’t it obvious? I was looking for you.”

“Don’t you think your behavior is becoming a trifle obsessive?” Nant asked. “I am beginning to feel hunted.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I pose no threat to you—in fact, it’s quite the opposite.”

“You are talking in riddles again, sir. Are you quite sure you are sane? Magical powers have been known to have terrible effects on those who possess them.” Nant smiled sympathetically. “Maybe you need to go and lie down for a while.”

He didn’t move out of her way. “I’m trying to find a way to articulate something I apparently don’t have the words for.”

“Oh, dear.” Nant turned away. “Well, if you will excuse me—”

“Please don’t go.”

She looked back over her shoulder, and he sighed.

“I know I am doing this all wrong, but you aren’t exactly helping.”

Her eyes widened. “Why would I help you?”

“Because...” He set his jaw. “You’re the one.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

“I can assure you that I do not.” Nant squared up to him. “And now I

have quite made up my mind to leave. Good night, Mr. Taranis.”

She swept past him and exited through the front door. A wisp of fog curled around her throat like a finger, and she drew her cloak close. At least her father had allowed her to leave. Had she fulfilled her purpose? It would be pleasant to know exactly what he had required of her.

Due to the unorthodox nature of her arrival, she had no idea where she was, or how to leave the hall’s grounds. The fog had obscured all points of reference except the well-lit blur of the manor house behind her and the faint glimmer of the full moon. She had a sense of where the sea was, but that was it.

“Mistress Nant.”

The annoying Mr. Taranis had followed her out. She quickly ran down the terraced steps in what she thought was the direction of the gardens. There was no need to panic yet. Just because she couldn’t see anything, didn’t mean she couldn’t escape. She ducked behind a tree and breathed in.

There.

She took off her slippers and stockings, and immediately felt the connection with the earth beneath her. It was the source of her power and never failed her. The blood flowing through her veins was like the underground stream pulsing through the bottoms of her feet. She followed the surge, ignoring what was around her until she found what she sought.

“Mistress Nant, I must insist—”

She turned and almost collided with Mr. Taranis. Heat radiated from his body, and he was breathing hard. She instinctively reached out to touch him. Steam rose between them with a hint of sulphur and the snap of an electrical storm. He caught hold of her hand and visible sparks shot up.

“This is why we need to talk. Can’t you feel it?”

She looked into his gray eyes, and then wished she hadn’t, because now she wanted to kiss him, and worse—he knew it. How *could* he know? What was going on?

He leaned in, his stormy gaze intent and kissed her. The shock of it, the sense that their lips were melded together like soldering iron, was both exhilarating and terrifying. She kissed him back, the heat and need in her belly slowly expanding as he groaned her name. After what felt like eternity, she eased away, ignoring the flare of triumph in his eyes, and dumped her shoes and stockings in his hands.

“Such a pleasure, Mr. Taranis. Enjoy the rest of the ball.”

She closed her eyes and let herself fall back into the garden well. There was water down there, even if it was at a great depth. She had time to enjoy the variety of his curses echoing around the walls as she fell. Her feet met the rocks at the bottom as she came to a stop and looked up. A sliver of the full moon was framed in the opening of the well, but there was no sign of Mr. Taranis.

She touched her mouth, which was still tingling from his kiss. She’d know him anywhere now, and he probably felt the same.

“Devil take it,” Nant muttered as she struggled out of her ballgown and set it carefully on a ledge for retrieval later.

Whatever was she going to do? If her instincts were correct, and they rarely let her down, she hadn’t seen the last of the mysterious Mr. Taranis.

CHAPTER 3



Nant smiled at her sister as they trod water together in the bay at dawn.

“I had a very pleasant evening.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Did you meet anyone interesting?” Mally asked. “Did you dance?”

“I met the hosts, who were very welcoming, and I danced—once—with a nice young man.”

“What was his name?”

“I don’t remember.” Nant frowned at her sister. “What does it matter?”

“Because you danced with him!” Mally heaved an exasperated sigh. “You haven’t done that for hundreds of years.”

“I danced at your wedding,” Nant pointed out.

“That was different. What else?”

“I had no idea how to get home, so I had to resort to using an old waterway beneath their garden.”

“We arranged for the Tawstock family to bring you home.” Mally sighed. “Did you not speak to them?”

“I must confess that I didn’t notice they were there,” Nant said. “It was surprisingly crowded.”

“That’s because all the magical families in Britain have been pushed down to the far corners of the country. This is the only place left where we are allowed to live as our true selves.”

Nant nodded, her attention on the shoreline where the figure of a man picking his way between the rocks was becoming visible.

“What’s wrong?” Mally asked.

“Nothing.” Nant relaxed as she realized it was just Mally’s husband who always waited for her at the mouth of the caves. “Hezekiah is late this morning.”

Mally waved at her husband. He was scanning the horizon, one hand shielding his eyes. He waved back, and Mally smiled.

“I love him so much, sister. He was worth waiting for.”

“I know.” Nant patted Mally’s shoulder. “Shall we go?”

“You are very eager to leave my company this morning.” Mally poked her in the ribs. “It’s almost as if you don’t want me asking any more questions about the ball.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Nant was fairly certain she was blushing. “It’s more that I didn’t sleep well last night, and I’m rather grumpy this morning.”

“You’re always grumpy,” Mally joked. “Today you are... distracted. That’s it. As if your mind is on other things.”

“I am wondering how to retrieve my ballgown,” Nant said. “I left it down a well at Nightshade Manor.”

Mally was already turning to the shore. “Then when you write your

thank-you note to your hosts, ask if you can come and fetch it.”

“You’re so practical.”

Mally grinned and executed a perfect dive that briefly exposed her mermaid’s tail and splashed water in Nant’s face.

“Goodbye, sister.”

“I’ll get you for that!” Nant spluttered, but it was too late. Mally was already swimming away, her human form magically restored as she returned to the shore.

Nant floated on her back for a little while longer, aware that she had to be gone before the fishing fleet set off from the harbor, but somehow reluctant to leave. She closed her eyes and remembered the searing kiss she’d shared with Mr. Taranis...

Should she have told Mally about her encounter with the enigmatic Mr. Taranis? Despite her denials, there was something familiar about him. She couldn’t remember if she’d seen him before, or if it was more of a *sense* of him. She licked her lips, tasting the faintest hint of metal. Perhaps he’d found her equally familiar and had tried to explain the unexplainable, because none of it made sense even to her.

She swam slowly back to shore. And why did it matter anyway? She’d met someone who was both irritating and interesting, and that was the end of it. She had a river to tend, prayers and offerings to gather, and wishes to grant. Her life was overflowing with pleasurable things. She headed for the inlet where the freshwater from her stream blended into the sea and followed it home. She hadn’t paid Agatha for the dress yet, and that would never do.

She had plenty of money and treasures that had been thrown into her sacred spring and tributaries over the centuries, and could offer Agatha

whatever she desired. She stopped long enough to unlock her boxes, extract the appropriate coin, and make sure there were no emergencies requiring her attention. Eventually, she arrived at the bottom of her favorite well out on the headland by the castle and cautiously emerged at the top, shaking herself dry, a heavy purse full of gold coins in her pocket.

There was a basket beside the well with a note on top, which she assumed might be from Agatha. Just as she bent to pick up the note, a familiar slipper was thrust under her nose.

“You forgot this.”

She straightened to find Mr. Taranis beside her. He wore a long, black riding coat with a white linen shirt and highly polished black boots over his breeches. There was a sense of inevitability about his reappearance.

“You again?” Nant pretended to sigh.

He set her shoes and stockings on the side of the well. “I’m merely fulfilling my role, Cinderella.”

“I don’t know who that is.”

His eyebrows went up. “You don’t read fairy tales?”

“Why would I bother to read about people just like me?”

“Good point.” He nodded. “I have the Marshall’s edition in my library if you care to read it—although I seem to remember that Cinderella only dropped one shoe, and her prince took an extraordinarily long time to work out how to find her.”

“Typical man.” Nant snorted as she picked up the basket.

There appeared to be another dress folded up inside. Intrigued, Nant opened the note.

Dear Mistress Nant,

I believe you might require another gown for today. I hope this one meets with your approval. I will be in the shop tomorrow morning if you wish to settle your accounts.

Agatha.

Nant looked up to see Mr. Taranis regarding her seriously.

“Do you know Agatha the seamstress, sir?”

“I don’t think I have the pleasure.” He paused. “Is she one of your family members?”

“No, Mally and I think she might be an elf.”

“Ah, hence the dressmaking.” He nodded at the basket. “Did she make your ball gown? If so, she is very talented.”

“She did, and for some reason she has made me another dress for today.” She took the crimson dress out of the basket and shook it out.

“It will suit you,” Mr. Taranis said. “A nice contrast with your black hair.”

She regarded him speculatively. “You are a follower of fashion?”

“I like to learn new things in the privacy of my own home, Mistress Nant.” His quick smile softened his harsh features. “It is preferable to being out in society.”

“You hardly strike me as shy.”

His smile disappeared. “It’s more that I don’t wish to accidentally cause harm.”

“With your magical powers?”

“Yes.” He looked right at her. “In certain situations, it can be somewhat challenging to contain them.”

“How so?” Nant was intrigued despite herself.

He gestured at the basket. “I am more than willing to answer your questions if you agree to spend the day with me.”

“Above ground?”

“If that is acceptable. Although I would not be averse to viewing your domain at some point.”

She fixed him with a glare. “I don’t invite anyone into my world.”

“So I’ve heard.” He hesitated. “I am of a similar disposition, but even I get lonely sometimes.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I have my sister and my family in the ocean to sustain me.”

“Then you are truly blessed. I would still appreciate your company.”

Nant pretended to sigh. “Fine. I’ll come out with you for a little while. We can walk along the cliffs, and you can tell me why you are afraid of your own shadow.”

He raised an eyebrow. “That’s not what I said.”

“It’s close enough. Do you want me to come, or not?”

He bowed low. “I would deem it an honor. But I do have another suggestion. Some of the guests at the ball have remained at the manor. I suggest we join them so that we can enjoy a quiet walk around the grounds without exposing ourselves to half the village.”

Nant studied him carefully. “Are you staying at the manor?”

“I live fairly close to it.”

She glanced down at her waterlogged gown. “I’ll have to change.”

“Excellent. Shall we meet by the harbor wall?”

“Are you quite certain you wish to be seen with me in public?” Nant asked.

“Why wouldn’t I?” He paused. “Or are you implying that you don’t want to be seen with *me*?”

“Perhaps I simply prefer not to draw attention to myself.”

He pointed at the basket. “If you wear that dress, you’ll be unrecognizable. We’ll only be there for a moment before we walk up to the manor house. I doubt anyone will remark on us at all”

Nant sighed. Mr. Taranis obviously had no idea that small villages thrived on gossip, but she didn’t wish to keep arguing with him. “As you wish.”

He nodded. “Thank you.”

After he left, Nant wondered why on earth she’d agreed to do anything with him. She was beginning to question whether his abrupt method of conversing sprang from a lack of practice or a deep shyness. Despite his awkward manner, he exuded a calm strength that called to something within her. She wanted to understand what that was, and that probably explained her decision to accompany him.

The crimson dress fitted her as well as the ballgown. It had a pinned bib front that meant she didn’t require assistance to put it on, which suited her just fine. Agatha hadn’t included any stays, but the bodice was boned and gathered with lace and wouldn’t slip off her shoulders. Nant patted her hair, which had lost most of the ribbons and shells from the previous evening but remained neatly in its coils and loops.

There was a large woolen shawl at the bottom of the basket, and she wrapped it around her shoulders and covered her head. She placed her purse in her pocket and put on the stockings and slippers Mr. Taranis had left on the side of the well.

She didn't need to see her reflection to know that, in such normal garb, the only person who might recognize her would be her sister. The thought was quite comforting because the last thing she wanted was for her father to find out she was going out with a man. He'd find out eventually—being a god—but the longer she could keep the news from him, the better.

She took her time walking down to the village and past all the shops. No one hid from her or reacted to her presence more than to offer a pleasant good morning. It was remarkably liberating. She spied Mr. Taranis by the sea wall looking out over the harbor and slowed her steps. He was a tall, commanding figure and drew her like a magnet.

“You came.” He looked down at her.

“I said I would.”

His slight smile emerged as he took her hand and brought it to his lips. “I still had my doubts. I have hardly endeared myself to you, have I?”

“You are very irritating,” Nant agreed. “But I have been informed that I am somewhat contrary myself, so I cannot complain.”

He set her ungloved hand on his sleeve. “Shall we walk to the house, or would you prefer it if I rented a carriage from the inn?”

“I'd prefer to walk.”

Nant had no intention of appearing at the Mermaid's Kiss on the arm of a gentleman. Her sister might see them and want an introduction.

They set off. The weather was obligingly mild, and the sun popped out through the racing clouds to illuminate the scenery and make the sea sparkle like a jewel.

“Why did you attend the ball if you were so reluctant to do so?” Mr. Taranis asked.

“Because my father insisted, and I had to obey him or suffer the consequences.” Nant said.

“I didn’t realize you were coerced to attend.” Mr. Taranis frowned.

“It was the only way I would’ve gone,” Nant said. “I hate it when the person ordering me around is a god.”

“Your father is Endellion. Of course you fear him.” He nodded. “I had a similar problem with my great, great, great grandfather once removed.”

Nant paused to look up at him. “How do you know so much about me?”

He shrugged. “I told you. I like to acquire knowledge.”

“For what purpose?”

“Does there have to be a purpose? Can one not simply wish to know everything the world has to offer?”

“So, you’re saying that your knowledge of me and my family was just something you came across in your thirst for information.”

He considered her. “I wouldn’t put it quite like that.”

“I was being sarcastic,” Nant said. “You said I was ‘the one’, which suggests that your interest in me is very specific indeed.”

“Might we continue this conversation when we are safely within the grounds of Nightshade Manor?”

Nant glanced around the deserted harbor. “There is no one about, sir.”

“We both know better than that.” He reclaimed her hand and started to walk. “The sooner we get there, the sooner your perfectly understandable curiosity will be satisfied.”

Nant allowed herself to be marched briskly toward the manor house. It looked quite different in the daylight but still retained its magical feeling of security. She could understand why Mr. Taranis believed it was a safe place to share confidences. He seemed quite at home in the manor and took them in through a side door without announcing his arrival. He left her in the gleaming white marbled hall while he consulted with the kitchen as to a suitable picnic lunch. He soon rejoined her with a sizeable basket and a blanket over his arm.

Nant had resisted the temptation to poke her nose through the many open doors where the servants were setting the house back to rights after the ball. No one had seemed to notice her or offered to take her up to speak to the earl or countess, for which she was profoundly grateful. It only occurred to her as they left the premises, that Mr. Taranis might have used his powers to make them both invisible to the busy household.

She had to admit that she was enjoying herself. She couldn't remember the last time a man had challenged her and not swiftly backed down in fear when she'd retaliated. But Mr. Taranis would have to offer her some plain speaking soon. She'd never had the patience for people who couldn't get right to the point.

“We'll take the path down toward the sea and the cove.” He pointed to the trees. “It goes through the wood.”

“I thought you wanted to stay away from the sea,” Nant said. “It is impossible to hide from my father on the Cornish coast.”

“I am aware of that.” Mr. Taranis kept walking. “But there are certain... wards and protections here that he might struggle to get through at first.”

“I wish I’d known that before the ball.” Nant frowned. “I wouldn’t have worried about him coming after me if I’d left too early.”

“You did leave early. You didn’t even stay long enough for me to ask you to dance.”

“I danced.”

“I know. I saw you.”

Nant rolled her eyes. “Don’t tell me you are one of those men who consider it an insult when a woman as much as speaks to another man. If so, I have no time for you.”

“I merely wanted to dance with you.”

“You should have asked.”

“You didn’t give me a chance to do so.”

Nant stopped walking. “Are we going to argue all day?”

“Please forgive me.” Mr. Taranis bowed. “There is something about you that makes me behave like a schoolboy, which is ridiculous when I’m supposed to be immortal.”

“I know many immortals who are remarkably petty, but I tend to avoid them.” Nant looked up at him. “None of them make me want to argue with them as much as you do, so perhaps we are as bad as each other.”

He reached for her hand again. “Can we at least enjoy our picnic before we resort to bickering over nothing again?”

She sighed. “As I said, I *am* partly to blame. I have never learned when to stop arguing.” She turned toward the sea. “I would like to share a meal with

you, and I promise I will be on my best behavior.”

“Thank you.”

She helped him place the rug on a small, grassy slope overlooking the distant harbor. He sat down and opened the basket.

“I wasn’t sure what you liked, but there is ale and fresh water to drink, and an assortment of the food you missed last night from the buffet.”

“How thoughtful of you.” Nant sat beside him on the rug, arranging her skirts around her knees.

“To be fair, it was all they were prepared to offer me.” He stretched out his legs and handed her a napkin and plate. “The chicken is excellent, as is the poached salmon.”

Nant was already eating. She rarely got to eat cooked food, and it was always a treat.

Mr. Taranis watched her for a while. “I suppose it is hard for you to cook underwater.”

She nodded through a mouthful of freshly baked bread. She was beginning to realize that he truly was insatiably curious and probably not aware that his abrupt manner might cause offense. She might say the same about herself.

“Are you ever able to leave your duties in the hands of others?” he asked. The slight breeze was ruffling his coal-black hair in a very pleasing manner.

“Why would I wish to do that?” Nant looked at him. “It is my job.”

He frowned. “It seems rather unfair that you are tied to one spot.”

“Hardly that. My domain is quite extensive, sir, and I gain my power from staying exactly where I am supposed to be.”

“Forgive me if I sound rude, but aren’t there any other river deities or local gods who could assist you?”

“I did have a tributary once.” Nant wiped her mouth with her napkin. “He proved to be untrustworthy.”

He held her gaze. “He hurt you.”

It wasn’t a question, and Nant didn’t look away. “How do you know?”

He smiled. “I can just... tell. What did he do?”

“Lerryn tried to take over my entire river system. He thought that if he made me fall in love with him, I would do whatever he wanted.”

“He underestimated you greatly, then. What happened to him?”

“A dam was built just above his tributary, depriving him of his source of water, and he simply dried up and was no more.”

“Was that your doing?”

She shrugged. “I might have whispered certain suggestions in the right ears up at the castle when they were deciding which stream to divert into their moat, but I can’t take all the credit for it.”

“He was a fool to challenge you and an even worse fool to make you care about him first.”

She smiled. “It was a long time ago, and it taught me a valuable lesson.”

“Not to trust anyone?”

“That, and not to give my heart away so easily.” She held his gaze. “I am quite content as I am.”

“I hate to disagree with you, but—”

“You *love* to disagree with me,” Nant interrupted him.

“But you are so much more than your duties. You deserve to be loved and wanted for *yourself*, not for what you can do for others.”

“Now, that is just being ridiculous, sir. I am loved and wanted.”

“By your family, yes, but not by a partner—a lover if I might be so bold.”

“And what does that have to do with you?” Nant asked, setting her plate on the rug. “We’re barely acquainted, yet here you are, deciding as to my character and insisting that you know what is right for me.”

“I’m not doing that at all. I’m simply observing what I see.” He paused. “If that angers you, perhaps it is because there is an element of truth in what I’m suggesting.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. “I am extremely happy and content!”

He opened his mouth as if to argue with her but then closed it again and picked up the jug of ale.

“Would you like some?”

“No, thank you.”

He looked in the basket. “I brought water as well.”

“That would be my preference,” Nant said stiffly as he handed her the flask. “Thank you.”

She took a sip of water and forced herself to calm down. Mr. Taranis was very irritating, and being in his company was proving to be something of a test of her temper. Even more annoyingly, behind the impertinent questions and assumptions, she sensed real concern, which was confusing her as to his motives.

“What do you want, Mr. Taranis?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” He turned to look at her, the sun behind him obscuring his face. “You, of course.”

CHAPTER 4



Nant burst out laughing.

Mr. Taranis didn't take offense and continued to regard her calmly until she stopped.

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"It has taken me many centuries to acquire enough magic to assume this human form for long periods of time." He paused. "Like you, my form changes when I am at my most elemental."

She studied him carefully, amusement gone, and used all her senses to focus on the essence of him. Intense heat at his center, the smell of sulphur and heated metal, the crackle of light...

"What exactly are you?" Nant asked slowly.

His smile was wry. "Everything you are not."

"That's hardly helpful."

"I am like you—a thing made up of many parts that can assume a human form when necessary."

"And where are your family?"

"Not here. What remains of my line are scattered throughout the islands of the Aegean Sea."

Nant raised an eyebrow. “You’re suggesting you’re descended from the Greek gods?”

“It’s a distinct possibility—although I suspect my branch of the family came here with the Romans, whom, as you know, liked to collect and worship other people’s gods.” He turned to look out over the sea. “They are all gone now.”

“Then why did you stay?”

He shrugged. “At the time I thought it important that someone from our family and with our abilities remained to help the local people.”

“You stayed out of duty.”

He smiled. “That’s too kind. I was a stupid romantic fool who thought he could save a world that was already beyond redemption.”

The urge to touch him overcame her, and she reached for his hand, hardly noticing the instant shock from the contact.

“You did what you thought was right.” She paused. “When Lerryn betrayed me, I thought about leaving here. I decided that no one would want to seek advice or bring offerings to a being who didn’t know when she was being deceived.”

His fingers curled around hers. “Perhaps we were both fools.”

“It would explain a lot.”

She surprised a laugh out of him, and he looked down at her, an invitation in his eyes that she gladly took. She leaned in, set her mouth against his, and gently kissed him.

“Nanto...” he breathed against her lips, and she opened them willingly.

The searing heat of his tongue invading her mouth set off an inferno of

feelings, and she kissed him back with a ferocious need that came from deep within her. His hand slid into her hair, and he rolled them both onto the rug until Nant was under him. She didn't care. The feel of his hard body pressed intimately against her was a revelation. His knee slid between hers, pushing it wide so that he could fit his body even more closely between her thighs.

Above them, the wind cooled, and clouds gathered on the horizon, obscuring the sun. For once, Nant paid no attention to the weather. She needed to experience this man with everything she was. She curled her foot up around his buttock and shamelessly rubbed herself against him.

"Let me..." he murmured, his fingers gripping the hem of her gown and bringing it up to her waist. "Touch you."

"Yes," Nant said. "Please, don't stop."

He bit her throat as his fingers explored her most private parts, his thumb settling over the throb of her center as he drove her toward a climax. She gasped as she came, and he groaned her name, his fingers biting into her hip as she rose against him.

A drop of rain hit Nant squarely in the face, and she squeaked and opened her eyes. They appeared to be in the middle of a storm.

"Mr. Taranis." She tugged on his hair. "We're about to get drenched."

He cursed, withdrew his hand, and rolled off her. "Damnation. Come with me. I'll get you somewhere safe and dry."

For once, Nant didn't mind being ordered around. She had no knowledge of the gardens surrounding Nightshade Manor and was grateful for his assistance. She squealed as the rain began to fall in earnest and regretted the amount of clothing she was currently wearing. In her old dress, she would've found the closest source of water and dived in to wait out the storm, but in

her new finery that would be impossible.

“It’s just over here,” Mr. Taranis shouted above the rising wind as he drew her down the slope. There was a pile of circular masonry almost concealed by a towering bramble hedge that guarded the boundary of the property. When they reached what remained of the stone walls, he drew her behind one of them, wrapped his arms around her, and looked down at her face.

“Close your eyes.”

Nant rolled them instead and then regretted it as he took a step forward and dropped them both down the dark, echoing void of the long-destroyed center of the tower. She would’ve screamed if she’d had the breath. She chose instead to cling onto him until her feet hit something solid.

“Welcome,” he said, his voice echoing around the space.

“Where?” Nant tried to look around but couldn’t yet make sense of where she was. It certainly wasn’t a well. It was too big.

He let go of her hand. “To my home.”

“You live *here*? Why haven’t I seen you before?”

“You’ve seen parts of me.” He snapped his fingers, and several lights came on. He started walking, and she hurried after him. “Sometimes I’m in your waterways.”

“You wouldn’t fit.”

He kept walking. “Neither should you.”

She looked down at her feet where a large puddle of water was forming and experimentally touched her bodice which was somehow bone dry.

“How do you do that?” she demanded as she picked up her skirts and

went after him, her voice echoing in the stone-lined corridor.

“Heat.” He stopped in a room, which appeared to be a kitchen, and opened a cupboard. He took out a drying cloth and handed it to her. “For your hair.”

Nant gazed around the kitchen. There was a small range radiating heat and a pine table with enough seating for six people. A large black cat currently occupied one of the chairs and was fast asleep.

“Would you like something warm to drink?” Mr. Taranis held up the kettle.

“I’m not cold.” She walked toward him, and he went still. “How is it that you live here, and yet I have no knowledge of you?”

“As I said, I rarely assume my human form anymore. There is no point in making the effort when there is no one alive who remembers me.” He shrugged. “And to be fair, when I do appear, people tend to run away screaming.”

“I find your human form very pleasing.” Nant ran her finger up the buttons of his waistcoat until she reached his chin. “Although a closer inspection might help to confirm my decision.”

“Are you... flirting with me?”

“I believe so.”

“But you find me extremely irritating.”

“I do, but there is something about you that interests me greatly.” She stroked her thumb over his lower lip, and he shuddered. “I believe it is important to understand this... attraction I have for you, and the only way to do that is to experiment.”

“With what?”

“Your body.”

He set his hand firmly over her wandering fingers.

“Let me be clear. You are saying you are physically attracted to my physical form and wish to explore it more fully?”

“You are correct.” She half-turned away. “But if that is something that doesn’t interest you, then by all means make me something to drink. We can chat until the storm is over, and I can go home.”

He reached out and drew her hard against his body.

“Damn the tea.”

She grinned up at him. “That’s the spirit.”

His mouth descended on hers, and she was thoroughly kissed until she was breathless and desirous of more.

“You do have a bed somewhere in this ruin, don’t you?” Nant asked between kisses.

“I do, but I’m not sure I can wait that long.” He growled against her throat and lifted her off her feet. She wrapped her legs around his hips, and he cursed under his breath in a language she didn’t understand.

“You don’t have any drawers on.”

“I don’t like them.” She undulated her hips against his rock-hard shaft. She’d never wished for the power to disrobe a man more quickly in her life. “Too restrictive.”

“We’re definitely not making it to my bedroom,” Mr. Taranis muttered as he pressed her up against the wall one handed and dealt with the buttons of his breeches. “This isn’t how I planned our first—”

He abruptly stopped speaking when Nant lifted herself and slid down over his throbbing, wet cock.

She gasped at the heat radiating from his hardened flesh and how easily he filled her. She leaned back against the wall and let herself experience every slow clench of her climax against the steel of his shaft. Even though she sensed they were far underground, she could still hear the boom of the thunder above them shaking the ground.

“Nanto...”

She pressed her nails into his shoulder, urging him to take more, to give her another climax with the strength and fire within his body. He kissed her as he began to thrust, his tongue mimicking his cock, until she forgot how to think and simply existed in the red-hot world of need they were creating together.

When he came, she followed him, her body exploding with joy as he pounded into her with no finesse, but a primal need that called to something deep within her. She tasted sulphur and stars and closed her eyes against the flashes of light going off like fireworks in her head.

Silence fell around them, broken only by their attempts to regulate their breathing. He wrapped his arms around her hips and carried her deeper into his lair, pausing at a door at the end of the hallway and kicking it open. Candles immediately lit as he carried her in, and the door closed by itself.

He laid her carefully on the bed and looked down at her.

“Are you well?”

She nodded and pointed at his clothing. “Take everything off. I want to see you.”

“Only if you agree to do the same.”

She feigned a sigh. “I fear you’ll have to help me. You’ve quite worn me out.”

He took a step back. “Then mayhap I should leave you to sleep?”

Nant cleared her throat. “Mr. Taranis...”

“Taranis will suffice.”

“You will not leave this room until I have been so well satisfied that I fall asleep in your arms.”

“If you insist.” He started to take off his coat. “I believe I can accommodate you, mistress.”

“You’d better.” Nant looked up at him. “I’m a very demanding woman.”



MUCH LATER, Nant woke up wrapped securely in her new lover’s arms and tried to work out what time it was. As there was no natural light to guide her, she had to go on her instincts. To her surprise, they were so deep within the earth that she could sense the underground springs close by that had probably serviced the tower’s wells. She carefully reached out a finger and touched the stone.

The coolness of rushing water traveled up her arm and through her senses. She’d never slept well when she’d been away from her own waterways before, but this perhaps helped to explain why she had. As did the man lying next to her.

Taranis...

He wasn’t named for the god. He *was* the ancient god of the Cornish people. The bringer of storms, thunder, and lightning—the spark in a forge or the ashes of its destruction. It wasn’t surprising that she’d always had a sense

of knowing him. He was everywhere, his presence more powerful than she could probably imagine.

She eased herself free of his arms, wrapped herself in her shawl, and ventured out of the bedroom. Her thoughts were in turmoil, and she could never stay still when that happened. If she could not swim, she'd have to pace instead.

What could he possibly want with her? She was a local water nymph who presided over a magical shrine and its associated waterways above and below ground. Yet he'd implied that she was important to him. Nant sighed and gathered the shawl more closely about her. It wasn't exactly cold, but the air moved and shifted around her, the taste of the storm—the taste of *him* always present. Was he aware of her even while he slept? She wouldn't wager against it.

A slight sound caught her attention, and she looked toward the range. One of the lower doors was open, and the cat she'd noticed earlier was curled up inside enjoying the gentle warmth. She bent to pet the cat, and something heavy slithered over her bare feet. She made the mistake of looking down and slapped her hand over her mouth to keep from screaming.

The gleaming black scales of a massive snake-like creature slid over her skin and wound their way through the table legs and back behind the stove.

“Don't panic.”

Taranis's quiet voice came from the doorway. He was completely naked and breathing hard.

“I'm perfectly fine,” Nant whispered. “I'm more worried about the cat.”

“Nathair won't hurt him.”

“What about me?”

Taranis chuckled. "He wouldn't dare without my consent."

Nant slowly turned to face him, aware that the serpent, or whatever it was, had retreated behind the stove but was definitely paying attention to the conversation.

"You keep a twenty-foot-long sea serpent in your home?"

"He's still young," Taranis said. "He misses his mother and seeks the warmth of the stove for comfort. I am teaching him his duties." He snapped his fingers. "Come, *beither*."

Nant tried not to flinch as the serpent undulated past her. It headed straight for Taranis, and wound itself round his left leg, then his hips, his waist and across his chest to come to rest at his throat. Taranis struck a pose.

"Don't we look fine?"

"You look..." Nant stared at him. "Like a hundred stone carvings I've seen in Cornwall."

"It is one of the more popular ways I am depicted," Taranis said as he commanded the serpent to retreat. "Sometimes people prefer to portray me with the wheel and the lightning flash."

"I am aware of all your manifestations Taranis, god of storms."

"Yet you don't fear me."

She held his gaze. "Should I?"

"Probably."

She shrugged. "My father is a god. I have always lived with the knowledge that he could kill me with a snap of his fingers."

"With all due respect to your father, my powers are less... controllable."

"You're suggesting you might accidentally kill me."

“Yes.”

“Then perhaps it is time you learned to control your powers. You’ve had centuries to practice.”

“If only it was that simple.”

For a moment, his remote expression reminded her of her father’s, which was irritating.

“Explain.”

He shrugged. “Sometimes destruction is necessary for rebirth.”

“You’re saying the end justifies the means.” Nant met his gaze.

His eyebrows rose. “You sound rather judgmental. I find it hard to believe you have never had to make such decisions within your own sphere of work.”

Nant considered him. “I have always tried to do my best.”

“And you think I have not?”

“I don’t know.” Nant gathered her shawl close and walked past him. “I need to get dressed. Mally will be wondering where I am.”

In truth Mally wouldn’t be worried about her unless she didn’t turn up for their morning swim, but Taranis didn’t need to know that.

He called after her as she set off down the corridor.

“I wish you’d stop running away from me, Nanto-Svelta.”

“I’m not running. I’m retreating to consider my position,” Nant shouted back as she reached the bedroom and started to look for her clothes.

She took a moment to survey his bedchamber which contained the huge oak bed, a simple chest of drawers, and a bookcase stuffed full of treasures.

She could imagine him sitting up in bed reading by candlelight as the storms he created thundered overhead.

He came in and set a bowl of steaming hot water and a cloth on top of the chest.

“For you, mistress. I will await you in the kitchen.” He paused to retrieve his own clothing. “There are ways to access your waterways down here, but I would prefer it if you didn’t leave in that manner.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Good, then I’ll make us something to eat.”

She washed and got dressed again in her miraculously dry clothes. She remade the rumpled bed, noting that many of the luxurious pelts were from animals that no longer roamed Britain. She also took a moment to sit down and consider her thoughts. She still didn’t know exactly what he wanted from her. At one moment he was warning her off, and the next he was kissing her into delirium.

She’d never liked uncertainties, and this felt too important to run away from. She rose to her feet. Perhaps it was time to hold an ancient god to account.

CHAPTER 5



When Nant went into the kitchen, her host was setting food out on the table along with a jug of ale and two cups. There was fresh bread, cheese, a stoneware jar of preserves, and some apples.

Nant seated herself at the table. “Where do you get your food from?”

He gave her an amused look. “The shops in the village and the local farms. Where else would I get it?”

“You might magically conjure it up.” She waved her hand at the bread. “That would be far more exciting.”

“I could cook it, but making it appear out of thin air is, unfortunately, beyond me.”

“How disappointing.”

“For a woman who lives on fish and the scrapings of her waterways, you are remarkably picky.”

“I have the whole of the ocean at my disposal,” Nant said grandly. “I am truly blessed.”

He cut her some bread and cheese. “This will have to do for now.”

“It is perfectly acceptable,” Nant said. “Do you have butter?”

“Yes, of course. Although why you need it with the cheese, I’m not sure.”

He fetched the butter and sat back down. He looked remarkably unruffled despite their exertions, which was somewhat annoying.

“Do you know what time it is?” Nant asked as she buttered her bread. She was surprisingly hungry.

“It’s early evening.” He bit into his bread and cheese and slowly chewed.

“How can you tell at this depth?”

“I just can.” He hesitated. “Some... part of me is always out in the air.”

She nodded as if he made perfect sense, even though the very thought of having such power and reach astounded her.

“If I wished to exit through a water source, would I be able to do so from here?” she asked.

“Yes. There is a well just behind the kitchen that provides me with drinking water. You could leave and return through there.”

“I thought I felt something.”

“We are quite far down.”

“How did you end up in this place?” Nant chose an apple and started peeling it.

“It’s very old, like me.”

“And?” She gestured for him to go on.

“I once knew it as a fully functioning Roman garrison. When the army withdrew from Britain, taking the rest of my family with them, I remained.” He looked around the shadowed room. “The place gradually fell into ruin. The best of the masonry was taken to build other properties, like Nightshade Manor, leaving just the shell behind. I stayed on undisturbed beneath the ground as the land grew around me, obscuring the lower levels of the fort that

used to look out toward the sea.”

“And became a local god.”

“I was always that.” He smiled. “But I did go through a period when I resented the interlopers so badly that I would appear during thunderstorms with my serpent-footed monster and lob lightning bolts at unsuspecting humans.”

“I wish I’d seen that.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t. We must be a similar age.”

“You were created by the gods of Olympus. I am merely the offspring of a temporary liaison between a god and a water sprite.” She discarded her apple peel and neatly quartered the flesh. “I sincerely doubt that I am as old as the universe, although I sometimes wish I had more power.”

“It is both a blessing and a curse.” He paused. “I am seen as a bringer of destruction, but sometimes fire is necessary for rebirth.”

“So you said earlier.”

“You don’t agree?”

She met his gaze. “Of course, I do. It’s the same when my river overflows its banks.”

He nodded, his attention fixed on her face. “Yes, exactly. The sediment your river leaves behind fertilizes the soil and brings new growth.”

Nant gathered her resolve. Talking directly to a god was always tricky. “It still doesn’t explain why you sought me out.”

“I’ve always been aware of you and your sister.” Taranis poured himself some more ale. “My interest was revived when your sister’s prophecy was fulfilled, and she met Hezekiah Makepeace in somewhat spectacular

fashion.”

“You mean when he threw himself off the cliff trying to save her?”

“Yes.” He hesitated. “I have met many magical beings who have cast prophecies about me, but none have ever come true. I was intrigued by the fact that your sister had finally received the reward of true love.”

“This is all very heartwarming on my sister’s behalf, but I fail to understand how it relates to me.”

“If you will forgive me for saying it, Makepeace was not the sort of person I would ever have believed suitable for your sister.”

“I too had my doubts,” Nant confessed.

“It made me question my instant dismissal of all the prophecies directed at me. I made the decision to... reexamine them to see if there was new knowledge I could gain.”

“Which led you to me?”

“It led to my decision to attend the Witches’ Ball at Nightshade Manor. I was fairly certain that if there was a magical being for me, she would be there.”

“And you met me.”

“Yes.” He placed his hand over hers. “I did.”

“Is there a particular prophecy that relates to me? Because I’d love to hear it.”

“I don’t have the particular phrases learned by heart, but there were lots of references to fire and water.”

“Which makes sense.” Nant drank some ale.

“Do you find my place of abode acceptable?” he asked as he cut her some

more bread.

“I like the fact that my waterways surround it, but I doubt you have decorated for centuries.”

“Decorated?” His scowl returned. “It’s warm, dry, and safe. What more does a god need?”

“Do you have servants to attend you?”

“Why would I need them? I am perfectly competent.” He glanced around the dark kitchen. “I added the range.”

“Primarily for the serpent and the cat’s benefit,” Nant murmured.

“I can cook.”

“If I ever return, you can prove it.”

“I would like you to. Return, I mean.”

“I will certainly consider it. It is a long time since I’ve had such a competent lover.”

“Competent?” He positively glowered at her. “I am a *god*.”

“And I am a very demanding woman.” Nant smiled sweetly at him. “I’m sure that once you get some more practice, you’ll excel.”

He stared at her, his fingers drumming on the table, sparks shooting out from the tips.

Sweat trickled down the back of Nant’s neck. She set down her cup. “Thank you for the meal. I should leave now. I have a lot to do.”

He’d mentioned he sometimes had problems controlling his powers. Nant wished she hadn’t chosen to provoke him in an enclosed space.

“As you wish.” He sat back in his chair, his temper cooling along with his

expression.

“Did you say there was a well here?”

“I did. It’s behind the wall the stove is against,”

She glanced down at her new dress. “Would you mind returning this to the top of my well, so that I don’t damage it when I swim?”

“Of course. It’s not as if I haven’t got anything else of importance to do.”

Nant stood and brushed down her skirts. “I’m sure you can find a moment between creating storms and lightning bolts to run a few errands.”

He looked up at her, and she bent to kiss his forehead. “Thank you so much.”

She might have walked rather quickly toward the well and taken off her dress in haste, but she’d never admit it to anyone—especially her new lover.

She uncovered the well and breathed in the scent of running water, her mind already seeing and mapping the thousands of pathways that would get her home in the fastest time. She could enter the waterways at any point, but the smaller it was, the more power it required. She preferred to have her wits about her in unknown territory. She dived in and entered her familiar world, said a prayer to her gods, and was gone.

When she arrived home, she took a moment to appreciate her surroundings. Someone, probably one of the Romans Taranis had mentioned, had built an underground temple to the local water deities, and lined it with oyster and seashells, giving it a luminous quality even far below the natural light. Nant had claimed it as her own centuries ago and filled it with her treasures.

It was virtually impossible to get through the once-wide channels to the

sea and streams, due to years' worth of silt buildup and the coastline's erosion, but Nant had all she needed. She tried to imagine what Taranis would make of her home, and even more importantly how he would look stretched out naked on her bed...

She shook her head. Even imagining such a thing was new for her. She'd never wanted a man in her sanctuary before. Lerryn had complained bitterly at his exclusion, which was yet another warning she'd chosen to ignore. She touched her braided hair and contemplated combing it out. She secretly preferred it when Mally did it but would never ask.

Taranis's strong fingers had dislodged half the carefully arranged braids and she probably looked like she'd been dragged through a weir backwards. The only mirror she had was a polished silver shield someone had once thrown in her well as an offering. It wasn't very useful. She contemplated the task and decided against it. She needed to take a quick tour of her domain to reassure herself that all was well.

After that she would sleep, because despite her teasing, Taranis had worn her out. She smiled as she remembered the roughness of his hands on her and the metallic heat coming off his skin.

Nant sighed. "Stop this. If he wants to see me again, he's a god. He'll find a way."

Her faint reflection didn't look convinced, but Nant was certain she'd be hearing from him again. What she would do when he showed up was yet to be decided.



THE NEXT MORNING, she made her way down to the village and went into the dressmaker's shop on Castle Street. There was no sign of Mrs. Polkinhorne,

but Agatha sat sewing in a chair by the window, her head bent to her work.

“Good morning, Mistress Nant.”

“Agatha.” Nant held up the basket. “I wasn’t sure what you wanted returned to you or what was mine to keep so I brought it all.”

Agatha set her work aside. “Everything in the basket is yours, Mistress Nant. None of it would suit another, as it was designed specifically for you.”

“Thank you.” Nant smiled. “How did you know I would need another dress?”

Agatha shrugged. “Sometimes when I am creating something for a person I learn about their future. The dress appeared in my mind with you wearing it, and I knew I had to make it.” She paused. “You don’t have it with you?”

“It is in a very safe place,” Nant reassured her. “I took it off before I damaged it underground.”

“I hadn’t thought about that.” Agatha considered her. “I wonder if it is possible to make my garments immune to such stresses. It would require some very specific spells.”

“If you could produce clothing that didn’t shred, tag, or decay in the water I would be thrilled,” Nant said.

“Then I will ask my mistress.”

“Mrs. Polkinhorne?”

“Not quite. She has taught me a lot about fashioning human clothing, but I intend to offer my services to everyone, and I have family connections among the elves.”

“Judging by the comments I received at the ball about my gown, I think you will be very successful.” Nant took out her purse. “Now, let me pay you.

Will coin suffice or is there anything else you require?”

Agatha hesitated. “Gold and silver are always acceptable in any world, but I do have an additional request.”

Nant gestured for the girl to continue.

“I wonder if you have anything in your rivers that could be used to adorn my gowns?”

“I have a large collection of offerings including jewelry, glass, and precious stones. We could meet at my well on the headland, and you could go through my boxes.”

“That would be very kind of you,” Agatha said, her face glowing. “I always strive to make each gown unique, and having access to such treasures would be wonderful.”

“Then it is settled.” Nant placed a stack of gold coins beside Agatha.

“In return, I will make any garment you desire,” Agatha promised.

Nant put her purse away in the basket. “Do you think I will need more?”

“Yes.” Agatha smiled at her. “Indeed, you will. In fact...” She got to her feet. “If you would just give me a moment, I was working on something last night.”

“Do you ever sleep?” Nant asked.

“Not much.” Agatha’s reply was faint as she disappeared into the depths of the shop.

She returned with a day dress in a greenish hue that reminded Nant of the stillness of a mill pond.

“I think this one might be more water resistant. It’s made of wool.” Agatha paused. “And other things. I’d just need to sew the last button on.”

Nant stroked the fine fabric. "It is very soft."

"But also tough. Otherwise, the poor sheep who live on the coast would drown." Agatha smiled at her. "You can test the gown in the water for me if you wish. I'll be interested to see whether it works."

Nant made a decision. "All right, then. I'll take it."

Half an hour later she arrived at Mally's place of work and let herself into the kitchen. Her sister managed the Mermaid's Kiss Inn for its notoriously shy owners and lived with her husband in the attics. They were currently building a house on the cliffs and hoped to move in before the end of the year.

"Nant!" Mally came toward her. "What brings you out at this time of day? And in another new dress!"

Nant sat down at the table. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Is it about that man you met at the ball? The one you danced with?" Mally poured them both a cup of ale and sat opposite her sister. "I knew there was more to it than you were letting on."

Nant took a healthy slug of ale. "It does have to do with the ball, but not with that particular man."

"Go on."

"I met someone else. He was extremely annoying and rather persistent, and—"

Mally's cup thumped down on the table, and she scowled. "Do you need to teach him a lesson? Because I am more than willing to help you do so."

"Thank you for your support, sister, but I doubt either of us would be able to put a dent in his powers," Nant said. "His name is Taranis."

Mally's mouth formed a perfect O. "Not the actual *real* one—the ancient god?"

"Yes, that one."

"Good Lord." Mally shuddered. "No wonder he behaved so arrogantly toward you."

"I must admit that I provoked him," Nant said. "He took it rather well."

Mally sat back and looked at her for a long moment. "You like him."

"He... interests me."

"Does Father know?"

"I hope not. He might not appreciate me forming an alliance with another god."

"If I were you," Mally said slowly. "I'd make damn sure this gentleman is the one you want before being seen publicly with him."

"That might be tricky, because I've seen him since the ball."

"On land?"

"He was waiting to speak to me at my well. I went on a picnic with him."

"You went on a picnic? *Voluntarily?*"

Nant frowned at her sister. "I do have some manners."

Unfortunately, Mally knew her far too well to be deterred from her purpose. "What else did you do?"

"I might have gone back to his tower and shared his bed for a while," Nant said nonchalantly. "He has a serpent that lives in his kitchen."

Mally waved her hand. "Don't try and distract me with mythical beings. You slept with him?"

“Yes.”

“Was it worth it?”

“Indeed.” Nant smiled. “He has great potential.”

“Enough for you to form an alliance with him?” Mally copied Nant’s earlier language.

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

Mally shook her head. “Then you are foolish to encourage him. You don’t want to incite the wrath of another god, Nant.”

“I am aware of that.” She paused. “But how do you know?”

“Know what?”

“If a person is ‘the one’? He seems to think that I am that to him, but I can’t recall any prophecies allying me with the god of thunder and storms.”

“To be fair, you never paid attention to any of the prophecies,” Mally pointed out.

Nant took a deep breath. “I couldn’t bear it when Lerryn tried to control me, and he was just a tributary. Taranis is a *god*. What chance would I have against him?”

“None, if he chose to annihilate you.”

Nant looked at her sister. “Thank you for the reminder. It’s most unhelpful.”

“But you said something important, sister—that Taranis believes you are his chosen one. If that is true, he’s not going to hurt you.”

“Unless I tell him to jump off the cliff.” Nant paused. “Although I did suggest something similar, and he thought I was being amusing.”

Mally reached for Nant's hand. "Does he love you?"

"We haven't discussed such matters."

"Do you think you could be in love with him?"

"After such a short time? Of course not!" Nant eased her hand free. "Weren't you the one telling me to get out more? And now that I have, you're worrying about me."

"I didn't expect you to jump into bed with a god." Mally fought a smile. "Just be careful, sister. You are playing with fire."

"Ha, bloody ha. You are not amusing at all."

CHAPTER 6



The November days were short, and the sun had already disappeared beneath the sea by the time Nant made her slow way back to the headland. There were lights in the castle and the village below, but the sea was an impenetrable black, as was the sky above it.

Mally's reaction to Nant's confession had been exactly as she'd feared, which was somewhat depressing. How she had ended up in such a quandary was almost laughable. Withstanding her father's anger and not going to the ball would've been preferable to her current dilemma. She paused to regain her breath after the climb.

But would it truly be preferable? She'd met someone who challenged and intrigued her, and that hadn't happened in centuries.

Surely, she should be allowed to enjoy the moment without worrying about her blasted father.

As she approached her destination, she inhaled the scent of cigar smoke and found Taranis sitting on the side of her well, looking out to sea.

"You again?" She pretended to sigh.

He smiled as he extinguished his cigar under his boot. "I brought your clothes back as ordered."

“Thank you.”

He angled his head to look at her. “Is everything all right?”

“Not really.”

His brow creased. “Have I caused you trouble?”

“Of course, you have, and if my father finds out, then—”

He spoke over her. “Your father—”

She set her finger over his lips. “Ssh! The sea has ears.”

He kissed the pad of her finger and then licked it. “Then invite me underground.”

She considered him and decided to ignore every warning Mally had uttered earlier. “All right.” She stepped away. “Do you need to change?”

He looked down at his boots. “Not really.”

Nant rolled her eyes. “This is so unfair.”

“I’ll wait for you to get undressed, if you wish,” he offered.

Nant glared at him. “You will wait until I personally invite you into my home, and that’s the end of it.”

He bowed and Nant stood on the edge of her well.

“Come on, then.” He climbed up beside her and she took his hand. “If this doesn’t work and you get stuck, I will never let you hear the end of it.”

His laughter echoed in her ears until she hit the water. His fingers slipped from hers to be replaced by the sense of him surrounding her with the hiss of hot ashes on water as she swam toward her home.

She stepped onto the tiled surface of her entrance hall, shook the water from her clothes, and got to watch him materialize beside her and reclaim her

hand. He was completely dry and not a hair was out of place. He looked around her home, his keen gaze taking everything in.

“It seems you live in a Roman temple.”

“I believe so. There are the remains of a bathhouse right next door.”

He nodded. “That makes sense. I probably visited when they were still operating.”

Nant moved farther into the structure. Taranis paused to lay his hand on the head of the house god guarding the door and murmured a prayer. For a moment, she could clearly imagine him in a toga and sandals, visiting the shrine and praying to the local gods.

“Did you ever leave an offering here?” she asked as he joined her.

“I should imagine so. I was very afraid when the Roman commander was ordered to take all his men and leave the coast defenseless. I was willing to try anything.”

There was a bleakness to his expression that made her want to comfort him.

“I watched the boats leave from the harbor until there was nothing left to see. Still, I sat there... hoping my family would change their minds and come back. But they didn’t.” His smile was wry. “Most of them never made it to the Aegean. The channel was rife with pirates, and there was chaos in the ports.”

His attention was caught by a tray filled with metal jewelry—pieces that Nant had collected after they’d been thrown into the sacred spring and her wells. He picked out a pin—the sort that would’ve been used to hold a woman’s tunic together—and examined it closely, turning it over in his fingers.

“My mother and sister were caught by pirates and enslaved. I was too young and too far away to help them.”

Nant touched his arm. “You should not blame yourself for others’ poor decisions.”

“I am aware of that, but I still wish I could’ve done more.”

“You stayed and protected the people here.” She wrapped her arms around his waist and held him tight. “That is commendable.”

He sighed and dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “We are more alike than you think, Nanto-Svelta. Both trying to do our duty.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Nant said softly. “When we have been blessed in other ways.”

His fingers slid into her hair, and she raised her head to look at him.

“Will you show me around your dwelling, Mistress Nant?”

She smiled at him. “It would be my pleasure.”

The tour ended somewhat abruptly in her bedroom when he picked her up, threw her onto the middle of the bed, and followed her down. She stared up into his face and waited to see what he would do next. To her surprise, he gently cupped her cheek.

“You are the pearl of this setting. The most beautiful woman I have ever seen.”

She smiled. “You are obviously besotted. Have you met my sister Malakia?”

“She is beautiful in her own way, but she’s not you.”

“A bedraggled, grumpy water sprite with weeds in her hair?” Nant suggested. “Who has been known to bite or lose her temper on occasion.”

“Just what I was searching for all along.” His smile died. “You.”

He bent his head and kissed her with a slow thoroughness that ignited all her senses and made her want to purr with pleasure. She went to put her hands on his shoulders, and he caught them in one of his own and set them over her head.

She raised her eyebrows. “You know that if I really wanted to, I could break your hold?”

“You think so?”

“Maybe not.” Nant considered him. “Sometimes I forget how immense your powers are.”

His brows drew together. “I would never use them against you.”

“Is that a promise?”

“Yes.” He held her gaze. “Sometimes my frustrations leak into the atmosphere, but they are rarely directed at an actual person.”

“Rarely.”

He shrugged. “I never said I was perfect. I’ve taken great joy in sinking pirate ships by whipping up freak storms. Your father never objects.”

“He wouldn’t.” Nant shivered. “He always appreciates a sacrifice.”

“To return to the matter in hand,” Taranis continued. “I am perfectly capable of controlling myself when we are in bed together.”

Nant pouted. “How disappointing.”

His smile returned. “You would like to be struck by lightning when you climax?”

“I don’t know—would I?”

His grip on her wrists tightened. “Perhaps we should find out.”



FOR THE SECOND time in her life, Nant woke up wrapped in the arms of a god. Taranis seemed quite at home in her shrine. She wondered if the Roman connection to his crumbling watchtower made it feel safe and familiar to him. It was something of a relief that he'd passed that test—a test she hadn't even realized she was giving him.

She opened her eyes and became aware of a restlessness within her realm.

Taranis touched her shoulder, his voice hoarse with sleep. “What is it?”

“I'm not sure. I just know I need to be in the water.”

“I'll come with you.”

She came up on one elbow to look at him. At some point during the night, he'd magicked her hair free and now it cascaded down her back in lush waves.

“There is no need.”

“I am not commenting on your proven abilities to oversee your own waterways. I merely wished to accompany you.” He paused. “It would be an honor.”

“It could take quite a while,” she warned. “Something is wrong, but I'm not sure where the problem is, which means I'll have to search for it.”

“If I get tired, I can take myself home.”

“I haven't allowed anyone to accompany me since Lerryn.”

His brows drew together. “I'm not Lerryn.”

“As we have already discussed, you are far more powerful than he was. If you come with me, you must promise not to interfere or use your magic.”

“What if you are in danger?”

“In my own stream?”

He nodded. “If your life is in peril, I will intervene. Other than that, I will defer to you.”

“Thank you.” Nant kissed his nose. “Now, let’s go.”

SHE WAS SO USED to slipping effortlessly between forms to navigate the underground parts of her domain that it was interesting to watch how quickly Taranis adapted to the task. His essence flowed around her and through her, strengthening her with his steel and fresh perspective. His thoughts remained clear to her, and they could communicate.

It was delightful.

Despite his obvious desire to protect her, he followed her lead, took advice when necessary, and behaved like a perfect gentleman. She made the last turn that would bring them to where the freshwater met the sea and flowed down the narrow channel with Taranis beside her. The cry of distress grew louder, and she spotted a fisherman trapped in his nets. He was being smashed against the rocks that concealed the entrance to her waterway.

She headed toward him, and Taranis materialized beside her, his longer stroke drawing him ahead. The man was still alive, his eyes widening as the two of them held him afloat. Taranis used his strength to free him from the net.

“Stand clear!” Nant ordered as she smacked the water beside the fisherman and sent him flying upward toward firm ground and safety. The moment he landed, he continued to scabble up the slope, neither looking back, nor pausing to say thank you, his desire to live palpable.

Nant grinned at Taranis. “That worked out well.”

“We are an excellent team.” Taranis smoothed her wet hair behind her ear and drew her close. “Although I cannot say that I enjoy such working conditions.”

“Have they put out your spark?” Nant asked.

“Not quite.” He rocked his hips against hers. “But my powder is definitely wet.”

Before she could reply, the sea behind her began to boil and seethe, nearly sucking them into a gigantic whirlpool. Nant grabbed hold of Taranis and urged him backward.

“Stay in my stream! Do not leave it.”

“What—” Taranis stopped speaking as the massive form of Endellion the god of the Cornish Sea rose from the depths. His skin was mottled green like aged bronze. His long, flowing hair crawled with sea life, and he held a staff in his left hand. Water cascaded from his shoulders, and the creatures of the sea frolicked around him.

“That fisherman was mine, Nanto-Svelta.”

Nant bowed her head. “With respect, Father, he was at the entrance to my waterway.”

“He was.” Taranis spoke from beside her, and she wished she’d told him to keep quiet.

Her father’s attention slowly turned to Taranis, and Nant started talking again.

“He means no harm, Father. He lays no claim on your domain and is merely accompanying me.”

“That is correct.” Taranis inclined his head. “I have no power here.”

“I’m glad you realize it.” Her father’s booming voice resonated through her body like the scream of a drowning man.

“We will leave you in peace, Father.”

“You will leave when I allow you to,” Endellion growled. “I am speaking to your companion.”

“As I said, he is not here to challenge you.”

“Be quiet.” Endellion’s smile wasn’t pleasant. “I know who and what he is, girl, and I know exactly why he is here.” He paused. “He’s come to thank me.”

“For what?” Nant turned to Taranis, who was watching her father intently.

“For the gift of you.” Endellion nodded. “Why do you think I ordered you to go to the ball?”

Nant tore her gaze away from her father but couldn’t bring herself to look at her companion.

Endellion smiled. “He wanted to meet you and I obliged him. I am glad to see that he has tamed you.”

Beside her, Taranis stiffened, opened his mouth, and then seemed to think better of speaking.

Before he turned away, Endellion said, “You may thank me for finding you a powerful mate, Nanto-Svelta. Now both of you keep out of my domain.”

Nant didn’t wait for her father to disappear beneath the waves. She was gone before her treacherous companion could draw another lying breath.

CHAPTER 7



“Nant!” Mally’s voice echoed faintly down the well, her exasperation clear. “You have to come out at some point!”

Nant put her hands over her ears and huddled back under the covers. She didn’t need to leave and Mally knew it. She could survive on the water from her spring for centuries. But she’d never outlive Endellion or Taranis, so what was the point? Maybe she could find a new spring to care for in a different part of the world, sneak aboard one of the vessels bound for the Americas, and never return.

It wasn’t impossible to start anew.

“Nant, I have something important to tell you, and I won’t be shouting it down your well, because I don’t want *you know who* to hear about it yet.”

That was a new lure. Despite herself, Nant uncurled, and went to stand at the bottom of the well.

“I can hear you breathing, Nant,” Mally called down to her. “Come up here and speak to me.”

Knowing her sister could be quite remorseless, Nant sighed and came up to the surface. Mally recoiled when she saw her.

“Good Lord! You look like a drowned rat, and you smell like week-old

fish guts.”

Nant looked down and winced. She’d been scraping greenery off the side of her spring to sustain her and had collected enough spores on her clothing to become a living rock wall.

“What is so important that you have to drag me all the way up here?” Nant demanded. “I am rather busy.”

“Busy feeling sorry for yourself?” Mally said. “And don’t ask me how I know that things have gone awry. Your beau has been pestering me for days.”

“I have no beau.”

“Your lover, then.”

Nant raised her chin. “He is dead to me.”

“He’s immortal.”

“Will you stop, or shall I go back down again? What do you want?”

Mally examined her fingernails. “I’m not sure I want to tell you, when you’re being so unpleasant.”

“Then I’ll go.”

“I’m pregnant,” Mally said.

Nant stopped moving. “That’s... wonderful news.”

Mally flung herself into Nant’s arms, half crying and half laughing. “You know I have always longed to be a mother—to give to my own children what was denied to us—and now after all these centuries, it will finally happen.”

“Is Hezekiah pleased?”

“Thrilled and terrified.” Mally eased back and sat on the side of the well.

“He’s already wondering whether the child will be immortal or have a human lifespan.”

“I believe both our mothers were part mortal. We gained our life span from our father. Maybe it will be the same for your child.”

“I can’t wait for the child to be born and meet their aunt Nant.” Mally reached out her hand. “You will be part of our lives, won’t you?”

Nant didn’t have the heart to tell her sister that she’d been contemplating leaving. But if she stayed, what would she do about Taranis?

“Nant? I need you more than ever.” Mally squeezed her fingers. “And once you’ve sorted out this silliness with Taranis, perhaps you’ll soon have babies of your own to dote on.”

“Silliness?”

Mally widened her eyes. “That’s what he implied when he spoke to me. In truth, he didn’t seem to know what he’d done to make you flee his company.”

“He knows,” Nant said darkly.

“With all due respect, I don’t think he does.” Mally paused. “Perhaps if you talked to him, you could—”

Nant held up her hand. “Do you not understand the words ‘he is dead to me’?”

“You’ve always had a turn for the dramatic, sister. I didn’t think you meant it literally. And to be fair, he would be extremely difficult to kill, so it’s probably better to have a conversation with him, and then you can go your separate ways.”

Even the thought of being apart from Taranis made Nant want to weep,

but she hadn't survived for centuries without learning which battles to fight and which to concede.

"Fine. I will speak to him. Tell him to present himself here at midnight."

"Why so late?"

"Because if I accidentally push him off the cliff no one will ever know for sure if it was me."

Mally shook her head. "I must get home. Hezekiah worries about me being out in the dark."

"Give him my congratulations, won't you?" Nant turned toward her well. "Do you still intend to swim in the mornings?"

"For as long as I can get away with it. The water soothes me."

"If they have tails, you can give birth in the ocean."

"Not without Hezekiah passing out from the strain of being in the water." Mally sighed. "I might have to settle for the big bathtub in our new cottage instead."

Nant kissed Mally and sent her on her way. Her smile died as her sister's footsteps faded. How could she leave if Mally needed her? But how could she stay knowing Taranis was close by, but not in her bed? She'd already started to see and feel him as part of her, which had to stop.

She dived into her well and set about taking off her ruined dress and jumping into the stream to bathe. If she had to face him, she would make sure to look her best.



SHE MADE certain to arrive just before midnight so that he didn't gain any advantage or attempt to seek her out below ground. If they were going to

argue—and she couldn't see a way of avoiding it—she didn't want to be trapped anywhere with him.

A blast of freezing air blew in from the sea, and he materialized in front of her, his expression formal, his mouth set in a firm line. He wore his usual black coat, riding boots, and white shirt.

“Nanto-Svelta.”

She looked up at him. “Malakia insisted that I see you.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I didn't think you'd hide behind your sister or let her tell you what to do.”

“I'm not hiding.”

“You've been sulking underground for days.”

“Sulking.” She raised her chin. “Is that what you call it?”

“What else is it? You're annoyed with me, and rather than thrash it out, you decided to avoid the issue and disappear.”

“You think my behavior stems from annoyance?”

He frowned. “Will you stop answering my questions with questions of your own? It is extremely unproductive.”

A small rain cloud appeared over his head. He looked up, snapped his fingers, and it disappeared with a flash of lightning. “Don't do that.”

“It wasn't intentional. I know you are far more powerful than I will ever be.” Nant looked past him out to sea. “Have you finished showing off?”

His sigh was edged with the rumble of thunder. “I promised I would never use my powers against you.”

“I'm glad to hear it, because if I stay here, we'll have to learn to coexist.”

He blinked at her. “You were thinking of leaving? *Why?*”

“Why don’t we simply agree that I am sulking because I’m cross that you conspired with my father, and leave it at that? Obviously, you don’t think your behavior is worthy of complaint.”

“What else was I supposed to do?”

“Anything but ask my father to coerce me into meeting you.”

Taranis spread his hands wide. “He is a god, Nant. There is an etiquette to these things, and—”

“He’s a god, you’re a god, and I hope you’re very happy together. Because *no one*, Taranis, likes being moved around the chess board like a powerless pawn!”

“You’re not powerless! You know you are the one!”

“What if my father had denied your request to meet me?” Nant demanded. “What then? Would you have meekly acquiesced to his whim?”

“Why would he—?”

“Because he is a god! He likes to ruin the lives of little people like me.” He stared at her, and she kept going. “When he grew tired of my mother, he drowned her in her own waterfall. He held her down and laughed while he did it.”

“Nant...”

She only realized she was trembling when he reached for her. She staggered back. Her hand met the stone edge of her well, and she gripped it hard.

“If I’d told you at the ball that your father had arranged for us to meet, what would you have done?” Taranis asked quietly.

She took a moment to regain her composure before she answered him. “I would’ve run from you as fast as I could.”

He nodded. “If I’d engineered a direct meeting and your father had found out later, what would *he* have done?”

She shrugged. “Possibly killed me? Who knows.”

“Then...” He appeared to be searching carefully for the right words. “What was I supposed to do?”

“Leave me alone? Mention the matter to me before you took me to bed?”

“I tried—”

She cut him off with a wave of her hand. “Stop making excuses and leave.”

Behind him the clouds darkened, and a touch of sulphur permeated the air.

“I cannot accept that.”

“And I cannot stop you from using your power to compel me to stay with you.” Nant met his gaze.

A muscle flicked in his jaw. “You don’t believe my promise never to do that?”

“The promises of gods are notoriously unreliable.”

There was a long silence infiltrated only by the sound of the incoming tide below.

Finally, Taranis spoke. “I hoped you would forgive me, that the results of my method would trump the means. But if you can’t trust me, you’re right. What’s the point?”

She wrapped her arms around her waist and stared at him, her breathing

as ragged as his own.

“I thought you were braver than this, Nanto-Svelta.”

“Don’t you dare blame me for your decisions.”

He drew himself up. “I did what I thought was best to get the outcome I desired—a lasting and loving relationship with you.” He paused. “I know that you have reason to doubt men’s fidelity and loyalty, but it seems to me, that your refusal to agree to anything your father approves of is more important to you than I am, and for that I am heartsick.”

Nant opened her mouth to argue and then shut it again.

“If you change your mind, you know where to find me.” Taranis bowed low. “I wish you good night, Mistress Nant.”

He dissolved into a million pieces and was taken away by the wind, leaving Nant staring at nothing. She stamped her foot. How dare he turn everything around and make it her fault and look so... *heartbroken*? And to suggest that she was a coward...

With a curse, Nant dived back into her well and went to bed, but sleep wouldn’t come. Instead, she lay awake in the darkness, painstakingly going through her conversation with Taranis. It didn’t make her feel any better, so she got up and went out to tend to her waterways.



“YOU LOOK as if you haven’t slept a wink,” Mally said as Nant joined her in the sea for their morning gossip. “I assume that your meeting with Taranis didn’t go well?”

“He’s an arrogant fool.”

“He’s a god. Of course, he’s an arrogant fool. It doesn’t mean that he’s unlovable.”

“He dared to suggest that I was more offended by his method of sucking up to father to get to meet me than I was invested in having a relationship with him.”

Mally didn't say anything, and Nant looked at her.

“What?”

“Is it possible that he is right? It might explain why you are so cross this morning.”

“Oh, don't you start.” Nant might have shouted because Mally winced.

“I want you to be happy, sister, and I think Taranis is the right man for you.”

“So, I should just set aside my pride and go and grovel at his feet?”

“Would he ask you to do that?” Mally looked at her. “And is your pride more important than your future happiness?”

“You don't understand—”

Mally took her hand. “I've known you all my life. You protected me from our father, you stood by me when I despaired, and you never, *ever* let me stop believing that the prophecy would come true. I know you have little cause to trust gods and men in general, but Taranis was prepared to risk Father's wrath simply to *meet* you with no guarantee that you would even speak to him. Does that not count for something?”

Nant swallowed hard. “I'm afraid.”

Mally's grip tightened. “Of Taranis?”

“No! Of what trusting him means.”

“But you love him?”

“That isn't the point.”

Mally kissed her cheek. “Oh, my dearest, sister. It’s the entire universe.” She pointed at the shore. “Go and find your man and tell him what you just told me.”

“And make myself doubly vulnerable to him?” Nant demanded.

“Yes.” Mally gave her a gentle push. “Do that.”

Nant swam off, because what was the point of staying, when her sister was clearly delusional?

Despite her best efforts, she found herself swimming toward the coastline where Nightshade Manor stood. She found the hidden entrance to the cove and the freshwater spring within that led to Taranis’s tower. She emerged through the well beside the kitchen and went through the door. Taranis was sitting at the table with a bottle of brandy beside him and his head in his hands, the picture of despair. Something inside Nant slowly melted.

As she stepped forward, he looked up and groaned.

“I have no desire to fight with you Nanto-Svelta. If that is what you came for, please leave me in peace.”

She took the chair opposite and clenched her hands together on the tabletop.

“I was afraid.”

He went still.

“What if I trust you and things don’t work out?”

“That won’t happen, but I’ll humor you anyway. We’d go our separate ways.”

“But what if you didn’t want me to leave?”

He shoved a hand through his already unruly hair. “I’m not going to force

you to stay if you no longer love me, Nant.”

“But you could.”

He finally met her gaze. “Yes, because losing you would rip my heart out, and who knows how anyone will behave in that situation?” He paused. “I’d hope to be... civilized and let you go.”

“I don’t think I’d be quite so accepting if you left me,” she said slowly. “But I don’t have the power to stop you.”

“I can’t give away my gifts. I have a duty to the people here.”

She nodded and took a deep breath. “I suppose I’ll just have to trust you, then.”

He blinked at her. “You... will?”

“But no more deals with my father.”

He reached across the table and grabbed her hand. “That I can promise.”

“I am not a very trusting person, Taranis, but I will do my best. Because as Mally said, love is more important than pride.”

Taranis came around the table and drew her to her feet. “Your sister makes a great deal of sense.”

“I thought you told me not to listen to her?”

He framed her face between his hands and looked down at her. “Nanto-Svelta, I swear on all my powers that I will spend the rest of my immortal life loving and protecting you and our children.”

He kissed her with a rough possessiveness that secretly thrilled her. Eventually, she raised her head.

“What children?”

He grinned and tossed her over his shoulder. “Perhaps we should leave that conversation until after I’ve ravished you to my satisfaction.”

“Surely, that should be to mine,” Nant mentioned as he strode off down the hallway.

“You are insatiable.” He placed her on his bed and looked down at her.

“Then you are a very lucky man.”

Nant opened her arms and smiled at him with deep thankfulness. He understood her so well. If they did have children together, they would be loved and protected with all their parents’ might, and none of them would ever want for anything.

He snapped his fingers, and his clothes disappeared along with hers.

“Why didn’t you show me that trick before?” she asked as he straddled her hips, his cock already hard and ready for her.

“Because normally I like undressing you, but now I need to be inside you as fast as possible.”

Sometimes his honesty was very refreshing, indeed. Nant raised her right leg and planted her foot firmly on his muscled arse. He paused before he entered her, one hand planted on the pillow beside her head.

“What *now*?” she asked.

“You haven’t told me that you love me.”

“Oh, great goddess, you know I do!” Nant scowled at him. “Why else would I be here?”

He nudged her bud with his cock. She arched toward him, but he stayed tantalizingly out of reach. She met his determined gaze and sighed.

“I love you, Taranis. Now will you please get on with it?”

He then obliged her in the most satisfactory manner.



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GHOST OF A CHANCE



Chapter One

Castle Keyvnor in deepest Cornwall was the perfect place to avoid being seen. The many nooks and crannies, spiral staircases, crenellated walls, and forbidding fortifications meant it was also a marvelous place for a game of hide and seek. Unfortunately, due to the somber nature of the gathering to sort out the Earl of Banfield's successor, such a frivolous pastime would have to wait.

Violet DeLisle shivered, and wrapped her shawl more closely around her shoulders. Current fashion that required high-waisted, bosom-exposing gowns left all ladies prone to catching a chill. She was sitting in the drawing room with her stepmother, half-sister, and various members of the Banfield clan. There was a fire in the huge fireplace, but the heat barely penetrated the soaring stone walls covered with tapestries.

As usual, the women were waiting on the men of the family to make all

the noteworthy decisions about the future of the unentailed parts of the Banfield estate. The gentlemen were currently attending a meeting with the family solicitor, Mr. Hunt. Her father's interest in the matter was fairly peripheral, as the deceased dowager countess, Evelyn DeLisle was his aunt. Violet had no doubt that he would make his voice heard. He certainly liked the sound of it enough.

Violet focused on her darning. She needed her woolen stockings more than she had anticipated in the draughty hallways, where the wind echoed with a keening sound that set her nerves jangling. And she was never one to fly into alt. She left that to her beautiful, fragile half-sister.

A delicate sigh brought her attention from her work to the half-sister in question.

"This is so dull, Violet. Why did Papa make us leave home for this? He could have come alone."

"We were expected to attend, Letty. And you must remember that you look very dashing in black."

"That is true... and I do have my new hat to show off." Letty sat up, her blonde curls bobbing. "Mama said the Suttons might be coming. Their father is distantly related to the Hambly family. Have you heard from them?"

"Me?" Violet tried to look uninterested.

"You still write to Kitty, don't you?"

"Yes, I do." Violet wrinkled her brow as if searching for the answer; she had already underlined the date in her diary in red ink, and mayhap adorned it with a flowery heart or two. "I *think* they might be arriving today, but I cannot be certain."

"*All* of them?" Letty clasped her hands to her bosom. "Dear Charles,

too?”

“Possibly.” She’d forgotten that Letty had met all three of the Sutton brothers in London during her first Season. “Charles? Don’t you mean Edwin? He *is* the oldest son.”

“And the eldest son inherits everything. I am well aware of that, Violet, and I know my duty to my family.” Letty smoothed her skirts. “But Charlie is so amusing.”

Violet almost stabbed her finger with her needle. *Charlie?* That was *her* special name for him! When had Letty decided she had the right to use it?

The door to the morning room opened and the butler came in, bringing a fresh tray of tea. A footman with another tray containing glass decanters followed behind him.

All the ladies sat forward expectantly as the hum of male voices drew closer and then overflowed into the room. Violet saw her father, and then the far more friendly face of her stepmother’s second cousin, Edwin. He made his way to her side.

“Miss DeLisle. *Violet*, how very good it is to see you again. I missed you in Town this year.”

He bowed over her hand and brought her fingers to his lips. His hair was brown, as were his eyes, and he was dressed with the neatness and propriety of a country squire. He had a quiet manner about him, which was very different to his far more handsome and high-spirited brother.

“It is very nice to see you, Edwin. Is Kitty with you?”

“I am sorry to say that she was unable to accompany us, being laid up in bed with a bout of, what I suspect, was imaginary influenza. She said to send you her love, and that you are very welcome to come and visit us in the

spring.” He smiled. “In truth, we all enjoy your visits, so do come.”

“I will certainly consider it if my stepmother permits,” Violet answered. The thing was, she could never accurately predict her stepmother’s desires. They seemed to swing wildly to and fro like a weathervane in a storm. “I always enjoy Kitty’s company.”

After her father had met and married Mary Sutton, his second wife, straight out of the schoolroom, Violet had spent her summers at the Suttons’ country house with a variety of her stepmother’s extended family. She had practically grown up with Kitty, and regularly met her brothers when they returned from school. For the past two years, her stepmother had been focused solely on Letty’s upcoming debut, and had remained in London or at the DeLisle country estate. She’d loudly declared that Violet’s chances of catching a husband were exceedingly remote, and that she was tired of chaperoning a lost cause.

In truth, compared to the agonies of enduring yet another Season under her stepmother’s disapproving and critical eye, staying at home in the company of her younger half siblings was a pleasure. Her oldest half-sister, Letty was eighteen now, and Mary, her stepmother, was six and thirty—only ten years older than Violet.

“I didn’t realize your father was related by marriage to the Earl of Banfield,” Edwin remarked.

Violet lowered her voice. “It is not a connection he tends to advertise, seeing as his aunt, the Countess of Banfield, became rather peculiar after the death of her only son and had to be locked away.”

“Ah, yes. I’d forgotten about that.”

“My father is all too conscious of it because his own sister, my cousin

Claire's mother, was committed to Bedlam. He's always been terrified that one of us will exhibit the same traits, and was distraught when my mother provided him with three daughters and no heir." Violet sighed. "When he heard there was some discussion about the next *Banfield* heir, and the distribution of the unentailed estate, he suddenly became very interested in attending the reading of the will."

"An astute man." Edwin glanced around the crowded room. "It seems that everyone wants a piece of this particular pie. My family is also related to the Banfield clan, which is why *my* father is here. I'm not sure why he had to drag us along with him, though."

"That's exactly what Letty said to me earlier."

Violet peered around Edwin and discovered Charlie chatting away to Letty and one of the Priske family. He looked nothing like his older brother, having black hair, blue eyes, and the dashing manners of a pirate. He had been an engaging scamp as a child, and hadn't changed much. She knew from Kitty's letters that he drove his older brother and father to despair with his inability to settle down or find some meaningful occupation.

"As you can see, Charlie is in fine fettle for a man attending such a formal occasion," Edwin remarked.

Violet jumped and felt herself blush. "I do apologize. It was very rude of me to gawk at your brother while I was speaking with you."

His smile was wry. "It's all right; I'm used to it. Charlie draws everyone to him like a moth to the flame."

He never sounded at all bitter, rather resigned and full of admiration for his charming brother.

"I know how that feels," she confessed. "Letty has the same effect on

men.”

“Indeed. She is rather beautiful.” He looked wistfully at her half-sister.

“Are you one of her court?” Violet asked lightly. To her surprise, the idea of him at Letty’s feet somehow disappointed her.

“She has no idea that I exist. I’m far too old for her,” Edwin chuckled. “I’d be surprised if she can remember my name.”

“You are only two and thirty, and you are the heir to a viscount. Trust me. In their quest for a suitable husband, Letty and my stepmother have made a study of every unmarried peer of the realm—and their heirs. They have even written detailed lists.”

“With a face like that, she could marry as high as she wishes.”

“And she has an excellent dowry,” Violet added. “As you know, my stepmother brought considerable wealth into our family.”

She hoped no one around them could hear their frank discussion. Over the years they’d gotten into the habit of treating each other as best friends rather than distant relatives. She hadn’t realized that he’d developed a *tendre* for her half-sister... Charlie was grinning away at Letty, who had raised her perfect chin to look deeply into his eyes.

“Do you want to go and speak to him?” Edwin asked.

“To Charlie?” Violet remembered her manners. “Not at all. I’d much rather talk to you.”



Edwin doubted that, but he was accustomed to being used as a means to secure an introduction to his brother. He had hoped that Violet’s childhood infatuation for Charlie might perhaps have dimmed by now—seeing as she’d watched him charm his way through several London Seasons, leaving a trail

of devastated femininity in his wake. But she still seemed enamored, which left him in a somewhat difficult position.

“Is everything settled about the estate and the will now?” Violet asked.

“You jest. That was just the preliminary skirmish as all the gentlemen present took stock of one another and jostled for position.”

“I’ll wager my father was busy, then.”

He placed her hand on his sleeve and they promenaded around the large room.

“He... had some opinions, and was quite willing to express them.”

“You should go into the diplomatic service, Edwin. You would be such an asset.”

He sighed. “I’d quite like to be allowed to do *something*. I hate sitting around, waiting for my father to die.”

“Especially when he is hale and hearty and might live to a hundred.”

“And I care very deeply for him. What am I supposed to do?”

“Learn about the estate?”

“I spend a considerable amount of my time attending to the various holdings. It is very interesting but, as my father has the final say on all matters, I am only allowed to offer an opinion.” He blew out a frustrated breath. “I’m thinking of running for Parliament.”

“That is an admirable idea. You would do splendidly!”

“Thank you.” His smile was wry. “Although I don’t think my father would approve of my choice of party, he would still support my candidacy.”

She patted his sleeve. “Perhaps if you became a Member of Parliament, you could manage one of the minor properties in the constituency you

represent. Then you would have a home *and* a purpose.”

“Something far away...” Edwin mused, and then paused to look down at her. “What an excellent notion!”

She blushed, her porcelain skin touched with color.

“When the young Dawn with fingertips of rose lit up the world,” he murmured.

She blinked at him. “I beg your pardon?”

“From Homer’s *Odyssey*,” he hastened to explain. “Merely a classical observation.”

“As opposed to a silly compliment. You are terribly sweet to me.”

Sweet... Edwin found an answering smile somewhere. He didn’t *want* to be sweet. He wanted to be tall, and dashing, and handsome like Charlie. He wanted Violet to look at him as if he was the only man in the world. But she loved his brother. Of course she did. Charlie was infinitely lovable.

The Earl of Banfield entered the room, surrounded by his family. At least two of his daughters spotted Edwin and started purposefully toward him. Luckily, just at that moment, the butler appeared and announced dinner. Seeing as Violet was still beside him, he ignored the approaching horde, defied protocol, and smiled down at her.

“Shall we go in to dinner together? We haven’t had the opportunity to discuss Lord Byron’s latest epic poem yet.”

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ABOUT KATE PEARCE

New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author Kate Pearce was born in England in the middle of a large family of girls and quickly found that her imagination was far more interesting than real life. After acquiring a degree in history and barely escaping from the British Civil Service alive, she moved to California and then to Hawaii with her kids and her husband and set about reinventing herself as a romance writer.

She is known for both her unconventional heroes and her joy at subverting romance clichés. In her spare time she self publishes science fiction erotic romance, historical romance, and whatever else she can imagine. You can find Kate at katepearce.com.



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