

A woman's profile is shown in a soft, painterly style. Her blonde hair flows in large, elegant waves around her head. She is wearing a large, multi-strand pearl necklace. The background is a light, warm tone with subtle, swirling patterns that complement the hair's movement.

SUNDAY'S CHILD

★
A HOLIDAY NOVELLA

GRACE DRAVEN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *RADIANCE*

SUNDAY'S CHILD

GRACE DRAVEN





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DEDICATION

*SUNDAY'S CHILD is dedicated to my two favorite guys:
my husband Patrick and my son Brendan – that beloved puzzle
piece.*

*Sincere thanks to the author Elizabeth Hunter for allowing her
magnificent Gio Vecchio to have a cameo mention in this tale.*

PROLOGUE

WERE it something more meaningful or noble, Andor Hjalmarson wouldn't think twice about choosing execution over such humiliation, but to willingly die because he coaxed the wrong woman to his bed made him one idiotic martyr. He was neither an idiot nor a martyr.

His aunt, the Supremely Divine, Majestically Beautiful, and Eternally Sublime Dagrún of Ljósálfheimr pinned him with a glare colder than sharpened icicles. "You are an idiot," she declared.

Andor stiffened but held his tongue. He balanced on the thin edge of Dagrún's mercurial mercy. A glib remark, or even a rebellious one, and she might well rescind her offer that allowed him to keep his head attached to his shoulders.

The sainted, immortal Nicholas of Myra stood beside him, not at all pleased to find himself dragged into such an awkward situation but still willing to help the ljósálfar queen's troublesome nephew. "I can keep him busy for the length of his exile, but his skills will be wasted with me. You'll lose a capable warrior, Your Majesty."

"And you'll gain one, Nicholas." A black scowl marred Dagrún's perfect features. "And keeping him busy is exactly what he needs. He obviously has too much time on his hands if he's running about Ljósálfheimr seducing all of Algr's concubines."

"I seduced one," Andor protested. "The least of the king's favorites."

“Silence.” Dagrún rose from her throne. Her graceful strides carried her across the length of the throne room until she stood almost nose-to-nose with Andor. He lowered his eyes before her glacial stare. “The only reason your head isn’t mounted on the gates of Niflheimr is because of Algr’s affections for me and his recognition of my affection for you—which is fast souring.”

The queen swept back to her chair, her gown’s long train shimmering with the ethereal light cast by far off Asbrú. Andor’s eyebrows rose as Dagrún’s gaze found the venerable saint once more, and her features softened. Had there once been more than friendship between the ljósálfar queen and this Christian bishop made immortal?

“I place Andor in your capable hands, Nicholas. Surely, a thousand years under your tutelage will teach him respect and caution.”

Andor almost blurted out such exile would likely only teach him boredom. He kept the words behind his teeth as Dagrún’s eyes narrowed.

Nicholas tucked his vestments around him and smoothed his beard. He bowed to the queen. “I will do my best, Your Majesty.” He glanced at Andor, the expression in his eyes both resigned and wary. “Ready, son?”

Before Andor could answer or protest, the saint tapped the end of his crosier twice on the marble floor, and the realm of Ljósálfheimr disappeared. His exile had begun.

NICHOLAS WONDERED if he'd fallen from favor with the elf queen. What other explanation could there be for her sending him the most prideful, stubborn creature to walk any plane of existence? If he weren't already a saint, dealing with Andor Hjalmarson for a thousand years—and a day—without killing him would guarantee Nicholas canonization. As it was, he braced himself for another of the countless arguments he'd had with the elf over the centuries.

Andor scowled, arms crossed. "Every house celebrating Christmas in Philadelphia now has a few unique gifts under the tree, as you requested."

Nicholas rubbed his temples. Andor's interpretation of help during Christmas delivery often involved unexpected chaos. "Would you care to explain your actions at the Wilmington household?"

"Not really."

"Andor, you stripped a man down to his underwear, tied him to the banister with tree garland—which I'm certain you strengthened—and set off the house alarm on purpose!"

"What was I supposed to do? He was robbing them! Don't you think there's something a little pointless to delivering gifts to people just so others can steal them?"

The saint began to pace, his once stately bishop's robes now filthy from a long night of world travel. His back hurt; he was hungry, bone-weary, and desperately needed sleep. Having a small crowd of his gnomes meet him at the gates

when he returned with yet another tale of Andor's escapades wasn't exactly how he wanted to end the Season.

"If you felt the need to interfere, you could have done so in a less obvious manner."

Andor refused to budge in his defense. "I left him without a single bruise." He smiled. "Though he cried as if I'd broken every bone in his body."

Nicholas groaned. "Son, I can see why your people thought you strange. You have a sense of justice and compassion they don't possess, and it's been honed over the years. But you have a clumsy way of going about it. I have a reputation to uphold—kindly, giving, jolly and all that. Children won't want to stay up and catch a glimpse of me if it becomes known Santa travels with a vigilante elf."

Andor's hands curled into fists. Like Nicholas, he began to pace, his long legs eating up the space in the cozy parlor.

"Why not a vigilante? A protector? Have you kept track of how many times we've been shot at, fired upon and attacked over the years? I took a crossbow bolt in the leg from John Peasant in 1343 while leaving a gift at the end of his child's bed. Remember that?"

"He mistook you for a leprechaun bent on mischief."

Andor growled low in his throat. "Shows what good it does me to glamour myself as one of your nisse so I don't scare people."

He had a point. Despite the frivolity and lightheartedness associated with Saint Nicholas and the Christmas season, it was a dangerous business. Nicholas himself carried a few souvenir scars from Christmases past.

He was saved from arguing further by a polite knock on his door. "Enter."

The door opened, admitting Carolan, one of the diminutive nisse chiefs. His ears, pointed like Andor's, but much longer and more pronounced, twitched in agitation. "Forgive me, Nikolai, but we have a problem."

Nicholas stopped short of another groan. There was a hot pot of tea waiting for him and a comfortable bed ready for when he finally had a chance to sleep. It looked as if he might not see either for some time to come. “What now, Carolan?”

“You bypassed a delivery.”

“What?!”

The gnome pulled a small scroll out of his pocket. “Indeed. One Claire Summerlad, age seven, Dallas, Texas, United States.”

Andor snorted. “Not my fault. You assigned me the American east.”

The saint passed a hand over his eyes. “I’m getting too old for this.”

“You’ve been the same age for almost seventeen hundred years. That’s not much of an excuse.”

Nicholas laughed, the sound booming off the walls. Andor had gotten in a small dig, one that restored Nicholas’s good humor, despite his weariness. “Touché, Andor.” He nodded to Carolan. “I’ll take care of it now. It’s one household, a meager one at that. There won’t be much to bring.”

The nisse chief bowed. “I’ll have her things waiting when you’re ready.”

After he left, Nicholas turned to Andor. “You’re welcome to join me.”

Andor raised an eyebrow. “You trust I won’t do something against your rules?”

Nicholas chuckled. Despite his many transgressions during his long servitude to the saint, Andor remained one of his favorite helpers. The nisse didn’t always understand Nicholas’s tolerance for the unruly, often haughty elf, but they hadn’t witnessed what he had.

The early years of the twentieth century had been bleak ones, when men seemed hell-bent on destroying each other in the travesty known as the Great War. Millions died on hillsides and in trenches from wounds and disease. The greatest drain

on his magic had taken place then, when gifts weren't toys or trinkets but nearly dead hope, a pail of food to eat, a loved one returned alive from the battlefield.

It was during one of those years they had passed over a field carved into a maze of trenches. The December air was icy, filled with the scent of sulfur. Nicholas had sent Andor to a small village nearly razed to the ground by war. Only two families remained, widows with children and an old man. When he returned for the elf, he wasn't at their appointed meeting place. Instead, Nicholas found him in one of the trenches.

A soldier, gut-shot and bleeding out, lay dying in the frozen mud. He was no more than eighteen, and Nicholas remembered him as a small child, vibrant and determined to catch Père Noël stuffing his shoes with treats by the fireplace.

Andor crouched over him, his graceful hands bloodied as he spread them over the boy's wound. Nicholas remained silent as the elf spoke softly, ancient words of ljósálfar power that brought comfort and a surcease of pain.

The boy's stark face relaxed, turned peaceful as he stared up at Andor. "Are you an angel?"

Andor's pale, unearthly beauty took on an ethereal glow, magic pouring from him as he met the soldier's gaze.

"If that's what you wish."

"I don't want to die alone."

Andor's voice chimed like the music of bells. "You're not alone. Your forefathers await you."

The boy's expression turned beatific as he looked past Andor's shoulder to a spot beyond the world's reality. "It's Christmas," he said.

"Yes."

"Merci," he said on a gentle sigh. His eyes glazed over, and he was gone.

Andor passed a hand over the soldier's face to close his eyes. "You're welcome."

When he climbed out of the trench, his broad shoulders were bowed. He looked to Nicholas. “There’s much death here.”

Nicholas clapped a hand on Andor’s shoulder. “Come, lad. We’ve more to do this night.”

That moment had forever changed the saint’s view of Andor Hjalmarson, and while his antics during the Season sometimes drove Nicholas to distraction, he’d never forgotten the elf’s compassion.

“Nicholas?” Andor’s question, laced with impatience, brought him back to the present.

“Hmmm?”

“Are you certain you trust me to behave?”

“No, but I want you along anyway. Gather your things. We’ve a small girl to visit.”

THE HOME NICHOLAS had accidentally bypassed in his deliveries was on the second floor of a derelict apartment building that looked as if it wouldn't pass the most relaxed building code. The foundation sank at one corner, causing large cracks to stair-step up the brick walls. Balcony railings hung loose from their moorings or were missing altogether. Windows were cracked or completely shattered, trash littered the walkways, and in one very dark corner of the building, a man tightened a makeshift tourniquet around his arm and reverently kissed the plastic chalice of a hypodermic needle.

Andor followed Nicholas up the stairs to Claire Summerlad's apartment. In his centuries among them, the elf had seen the rise and fall of men and their civilizations. He'd been amused and admiring to watch great minds figure out the world was round, how gravity worked, what made the light bulb shine and how to fly to the moon. He'd been equally horrified to watch the white mushroom cloud explode skyward. Men had surpassed the álfar. They had become god-like in their ability to destroy. Yet, for all their knowledge, their power and their creature comforts, they were sometimes reduced to this—running poison through their veins in a futile attempt to stave off an internal darkness.

“Leave him be, Andor. He's far beyond any small comfort we can give him.”

The saint's advice interrupted his reverie, and he was surprised to find himself back at the bottom step. “He can't see us, Nicholas. What harm would it do?”

“None, but what good would it do? There’s someone waiting for us, one whose belief is so powerful, it gives her strength and hope. That poor soul gave those up long ago.”

Andor sighed. Nicholas was right. There were some too far gone for even his brand of magic to touch and ease. He jogged up the stairs on silent feet and followed Nicholas through the closed apartment door.

It was dark inside save for the single strand of twinkling lights wrapped around a tabletop artificial Christmas tree that looked as if it had been rescued from a dumpster. One small gift, wrapped in red paper, lay under its lopsided branches.

A faded couch and a lawn chair were pushed against one wall. Two egg crates, stacked one atop the other, supported an old TV. Garland made of construction paper loops hung above the window looking out onto the main walkway, and a child’s hand-drawn pictures of Santa and all his entourage were taped on the walls in various places. This was an impoverished household, but one where the spirit of the season was alive and well.

Nicholas motioned with his hand, and both he and Andor became visible once more. The elf raised an eyebrow. “You don’t often do that. Are you hoping she sees you?” He didn’t bother whispering. The magic suffusing the apartment kept their voices silent to all save each other.

The shuffle and crackle of Christmas paper was loud in the room as Nicholas dug in the small bag he brought. Three colorful boxes wrapped in gold and silver paper, with cascades of ribbons pouring down their sides, joined the lone present. They were accompanied by unwrapped gifts as well—a stack of books and a sketch pad with artist pencils.

The saint’s eyes twinkled. “You might want to glamour yourself, lad. She’s coming down the hall now.”

Andor had only seconds to overlay a glamour, that of one of Nicholas’s nisse. Even after all these years, it still unnerved him when those children lucky enough to “catch” Santa and his helper looked at his legs when they spoke to him in their high, breathless voices.

Claire Summerlad, age seven, was a skinny, graceless child made up of knobby knees and elbows. Her short, blonde hair stuck out at all angles, testament to the rigors of a restless sleeper. She approached the door slowly, as wary as any creature who senses a strangeness to its surroundings.

From his vantage point, Andor had a clear view of her face when she caught sight of Nicholas standing next to her decrepit little tree with its array of gifts beneath it. Gray eyes widened to the size of dinner plates, and her mouth formed a silent “O” of amazement.

“Hello, Claire. Merry Christmas.”

It never failed to send a tingle down Andor’s spine when a child uttered Nicholas’s name with such wonder. He felt it again when Claire spoke.

“Santa?”

Nicholas laughed, a great rolling thunder of mirth that made his beard shake and might have awakened the entire apartment complex if the magic didn’t work to keep it contained. He held out his arms.

The child ran to him, but skidded to a stop when she caught sight of Andor off to the side. It was his turn to gape. Claire wasn’t looking at his legs. Instead, her head tilted back, eyes looking far up to his much greater height so she could meet his gaze.

His indrawn breath echoed louder than Nicholas’s laughter. A Sunday’s Child. Claire was a Sunday’s Child, and one with enough of the Sight to see beyond his glamour. She walked closer until she was directly in front of him. Andor paused for a second, then crouched until he was eye-level with the girl.

Nicholas stood forgotten as, for uncounted moments, elf and human child stared at each other, enraptured. “What do you see?” he asked her softly.

A small hand rose, fluttered across his face. “Forever. I see Forever.” She smiled, revealing a missing front tooth.

How rare a thing to find a Sunday’s Child in this age of disbelief. Hundreds of years earlier, ljósálfar like himself

would have hunted her, made her a changeling to live among them and guard against her betraying their presence with her deep Sight. Now they would take her just to assure themselves they hadn't completely faded from the world.

"I like your ears," she said. "They're very pointy." Claire grinned but didn't try to touch him.

Andor returned her smile. "They're my best feature."

"Andor."

The elf dragged his gaze from Claire to Nicholas.

"We have to leave."

"Yes."

Claire grabbed Andor's hand, startling him with her sudden action. "Don't go," she pleaded. "You can eat breakfast with us. My mom is making pancakes, and you can help me open presents."

It was difficult to free his hand from hers. He'd very much like to stay, but Nicholas was right. Their time among this world was fleeting, limited to a single season and a single night. Claire was luckier than most in that she saw Nicholas in all his Christmas glory. She was more unique than most in that she saw Andor in his true form.

He bowed before her, a courtly gesture usually reserved for Dagrún. "I'm sorry, Claire. We have to leave."

His stomach knotted when her gray eyes glazed with tears, but she held them back with a loud sniff. "Okay," she said in a wobbly voice. Her smile returned full force when she turned to Nicholas. "Thank you, Santa."

"My pleasure, Claire." Nicholas's voice deepened, gained a rhythm that vibrated deep into Andor's bones and made him a touch drowsy. "Now, I want you to go back to bed. The presents will still be here, and there's a special one for your mother, too."

Andor's brows rose, as did the saint's, when Claire managed to fight off the sleep spell long enough to address Andor once more.

“Come see me next year. I won’t forget you. You won’t forget me?”

The knot in his belly tightened. She would forget, or cease to believe. Time and age would see to it, even for a Sunday’s Child. The human adult changed belief systems, relegating the wonders of childhood sorcery to memories. Such knowledge never bothered him before. It did now.

“No, Claire. I won’t forget you.”

She nodded slowly, her eyelids drifting to half-mast over her eyes as the spell took effect. “Okay.” She yawned twice and tottered out of the room. Her sleepy voice drifted back to them from the hall. “Goodnight.”

The silence in the small living room held nothing of magic in it. Nicholas sighed, and there was an odd sympathy in his dark gaze. “You’re lucky. We rarely come across one like her these days.”

Andor closed his eyes. “I know, and I’m not sure if I should celebrate or grieve.”

“I’VE ESCAPED the stacks for today, and I’m going home.” Claire peered around the carpet wall separating her cube from Dee’s. “Do you need anything from me before I go?”

Dee Howard glanced up from her monitor for a moment and paused in scribbling notes in a ratty notebook. She blinked at Claire as if trying to remember who she was. “I’m sorry. What?”

Claire sighed. As one of the archivists employed by the Carmichael Research Institute and Museum, she worked closely with the curatorial staff on multiple projects. For the past three months, she’d been hip-deep with Dee in preparation for the illuminated manuscript exhibit Dee was coordinating. There were times she thought she’d have to bring up a blanket and pillow and sleep in the repositories room just to get half the work done for this project. She was suspicious Dee was already doing just that.

“I’m leaving for the night. You should too. It’s after 6:00, and you’ve been here since at least 5:30 this morning.”

A puzzled frown knitted Dee’s brow. “How do you know that?”

“Time stamp on the first e-mail I got from you today.” Claire shrugged on her coat. “Gotta go. I need to relieve Elise so she can get home.”

Dee’s phone rang. She answered and held up a finger to Claire in a silent request to wait. Claire used the opportunity to fish her purse out of one of her desk drawers. By the time

she'd dug her keys out of a side pocket, Dee had finished the call and left her cube.

"I'll walk with you," she offered. "That was Andor. The first crate from the Matenadaran just arrived at the loading dock." Her voice virtually quivered with excitement.

Claire made to tease Dee that she'd probably find her hugging the crate, waiting for the preparator crew to open it, but the odd, unfamiliar name sidetracked her. "Who's Andor?"

The staff at the Carmichael was relatively small compared to other larger museums like the Houston Museum of Fine Arts or Natural Science. Claire had worked at the Carmichael for four years; she knew most everyone, at least by name. She didn't recognize the name Andor.

Dee halted her with a hand on her elbow. She gaped at Claire. "You haven't met Andor the preparator?"

Claire burst out laughing. Dee's description, delivered in tones of disbelief and amazement, conjured images of a murderous cyborg with one glowing red eye and a mission to wipe out all of mankind; that, or his name flashing in great big, flashing billboard lights. "Not that I remember, and I think I would have, based on your reaction."

Dee whistled. "Oh yeah, you would remember meeting him. Prime eye candy. Too bad he's only temp. On loan from the Menil to help out while Paul is on medical leave."

Their senior preparator had hurt his back during setup of a sculpture exhibit. For most of the year, the crew made do through any shortages of manpower, but during Christmas, the Carmichael was insanely busy, and the loss of even one person had an obvious ripple effect. Claire was surprised the Menil, far busier than the Carmichael, had been willing to loan out one of its preparators even temporarily.

The two women passed through hallways of closed office doors and file rooms until they reached the loading docks. Two large trucks were parked in the bays, one with its trailer doors open and a parade of people carting out containers on dollies and pallet jacks.

Dee raised her hand and waved at someone in the crowd. “Andor!”

Claire looked to where Dee waved and spotted a tall man with a blond ponytail checking off something on a clipboard. He turned and waved at Dee.

“Wait until he gets closer,” Dee said. “It’s almost criminal that a man can be that good looking.”

Claire gave her a dubious look. Were it anyone other than the reserved, serious Dee who made such a remark, she would have rolled her eyes. This guy must be something for her friend to wax so girlish over someone’s looks. “Blonds aren’t my type,” she said.

“You’ll be a convert after this.”

Dee didn’t exaggerate. As Andor narrowed the distance between them, Claire tried not to let her jaw bang on the floor. There were many types and interpretations of beauty; she saw all aspects of it in her job at the museum. That which was earthy and coarse could be as pleasing as that which was refined and classical. Ugly was beautiful to some and beautiful, flat and boring to others. It truly was all in the eye of the beholder. Sometimes though, universal appeal reigned, and in this man’s face resided the manifestation of perfect geometry and aesthetic appeal. Had this Andor lived a few hundred years earlier, Da Vinci would have painted him.

Claire’s objective admiration for him gave way to a strange unease when he stopped before them and shook Dee’s hand. “Good evening, Delilah.”

His voice, warm and faintly accented, triggered vague recollections for Claire. Or maybe dreams. She frowned, her mind reaching for will-o’-the-wisp memories of a hazy figure bathed in shimmering light that asked her a question. “*What do you see?*”

“Hey, Andor. I don’t think you’ve met Claire, one of our archivists. Claire, Andor Hjalmarson. Andor, Claire Summerlad.”

Claire held out her hand, still distracted by the odd notion she'd once heard Hjalmarson's voice a long time ago. Her distraction evaporated, chased away by the pleasant tingle that raced up her arm when he clasped her fingers and gave them a squeeze.

She withdrew her hand from his. His fingertips lingered on her palm before he let her go. She cleared her throat. "It's nice to meet you, Mr. Hjalmarson. We can definitely use the help." She silently congratulated herself on the normal pitch of her voice.

"A pleasure, Claire, and please call me Andor." He smiled, and Claire swore she heard Dee sigh.

He had the bluest eyes. Not lapis or sapphire or cerulean. More like deep winter ocean with a starburst of yellow and amber surrounding his pupils. Dark brown eyebrows and eyelashes contrasted with his much lighter hair. She might have compared him to an angel, but there was an earthiness to him that ruined the ethereal.

Dee knocked her in the side with an elbow. "You're staring," she murmured. She offered Andor a bright smile and rubbed her palms together. "So where's this crate you called me about?"

A heat wave scaled up Claire's chest, over her neck and flooded into her cheeks. She was staring, and by Andor's knowing half-smile, it was as obvious as the blush threatening to set her face and scalp on fire. The smile she gave him felt thin and stiff. "It's nice meeting you. I'm sure we'll see each other again soon."

He nodded, his blue eyes flaring hot as a star. "I look forward to it."

Dee's faint gasp mirrored her wide-eyed expression. Claire pretended not to notice her friend's speculative look as she glanced back and forth between her and Andor. "I gotta go. I'm already twenty minutes late getting out of here. Elise is going to have my head on a plate. See you tomorrow."

She gave a casual wave and fled, Andor Hjalmarson's gaze heavy on her back. If anyone later asked, Claire would lie through her teeth and say her jog out of the loading docks was because she had to relieve her son's caregiver. Nothing more. Nothing less. And nothing at all to do with the striking preparator who mesmerized her with only a handshake and an evocative voice.

Houston's typical evening gridlock was in full swing by the time she got on the road. After thirty minutes and an apology-laced phone call to the babysitter, she pulled into the driveway of her tiny rent house and burst through the door.

"I'm so sorry, Elise," she said for the twenty-seventh time since leaving the museum parking lot.

The babysitter gave her a casual wave. "No worries. Nothing planned for tonight, and I'm sick of studying." She placed a bowl of pasta with pesto in front of the small, dark-haired boy seated at the dinner table. "He finished shredding the chicken tenders I fixed him, so we're on to the pasta."

She glanced at Claire. "I'll stay until you can change, run to the bathroom, all that before I head out. Jake and I are going to work on table manners." She pulled up a chair next to Jake and coaxed him to take a plastic spoon from her. "Come on, little dude. You can't be eating with your fingers all the time."

Claire skirted around the table and dropped a kiss on the boy's head. "Sorry I'm late, kiddo. I'll be right back." He didn't look up from the tablet Claire had bought him a year earlier. His favorite children's video played in a loop, the same three minute scene playing over and over while he held his spoon in a half-hearted grip and tucked pasta into his mouth.

Claire tossed her purse on the couch and disappeared into her bedroom to change into her favorite evening wear—sweats and a T-shirt. She'd wash away her makeup later. Elise was already well past her usual time.

She didn't know what she would do without Elise. The college kid looked after her son for the few hours after his bus dropped him off and Claire got home from work. Tattooed, pierced and impressively tall in a pair of heeled combat boots,

the girl possessed endless patience and a sixth sense for knowing how to deal with an autistic child. Claire considered her a blessing for Jake and herself.

After Elise left for the evening, Claire sat down next to Jake and finished off the remainder of the lukewarm pasta and pesto. Jake pushed his half-eaten portion aside and turned his full attention to his video. He made odd noises, some Claire could translate, others she couldn't; high-pitched yips combined with snatches of songs and the odd line or two from other movies. They almost never made sense in context, but the words he uttered were clear and well-articulated. Claire tried to think of those noises as progress. Two years ago, Jake was completely silent.

After their dinner, she tucked him into his favorite corner of the couch and sat next to him, sharing a blanket. Except for the TV's low volume and Jake's movie on his tablet, the house was quiet.

Most every evening was like this, even the weekend. Claire didn't mind the lack of a social life too much. She'd always been introverted. Even when she was in school, single and Jake not even a gleam in her eye, she'd found nothing appealing about hanging out in bars and pubs packed with people and virtually bulging the walls with a cacophony of too-loud music and couples shouting at each other to be heard over the din. Sometimes though, she missed a night out with friends, talking over dinner or spending an hour at the local coffee shop.

Andor Hjalmarson's handsome features rose in her mind's eye. Claire didn't try to suppress the image. Dee was right. One brief meeting, and he'd made her a convert to liking blonds. He'd been a perfect gentleman during their introduction, but Claire still felt the residual tingle in her arm from when he'd shaken her hand and the heaviness of his gaze on her back when she'd left the loading dock. And she still couldn't shake the strange sense that he was somehow connected to the hazy childhood memory of shimmering light and a beguiling voice.

"What do you see?"

Jake suddenly leaned to the side and pressed his lips to her arm, startling Claire out of her reverie. She smiled, hugged him to her and kissed his forehead. “Thanks for the kiss, buddy. Time for a bath, and since Elise gave you pesto, I’ll probably have to boil your teeth instead of just brushing them tonight.” She patted him on the knee. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Once she had Jake in bed and his backpack ready for school the next day, Claire finished her own bedtime preparations. She slid under the covers, set her alarm and stared wide-eyed into the darkness. The holidays were bearing down on her like a train. She and Jake didn’t go anywhere or do much for either Thanksgiving or Christmas, but the museum was in high gear with two Christmas exhibits and the upcoming benefit dinner dance and charity auction. She had a lot of long hours ahead of her.

She smiled. At least she and Dee had something more to admire than miles of garland and forests of decorated Christmas trees. As Dee said, Andor was primo eye candy, and while Claire might be divorced, overworked, and socially clueless when it came to dating, she wasn’t blind. She’d just have to be a little more circumspect in her admiration of the new preparator.

“I can do calm, cool and suave,” she said aloud, trying to convince herself. She snorted. Yeah right. She turned on her side and closed her eyes, happy to fall asleep to the memory of deep-ocean eyes.

THE GANGLY SUNDAY'S Child with straggly hair and a missing tooth was gone. Claire Summerlad had grown into a woman of elegance with fine, somber features and guarded eyes. Their very first meeting, when she'd seen through his glamour and entranced him with the discovery that Sunday's Children were still in the world, had also been the last between them.

Nicholas's magic was different from ljósálfar magic, bestowed by a divine force unrelated to the Ljósálfheimr realm and resistant to Claire's deep Sight. The saint could visit the girl's house each year unseen if he wished. Andor couldn't, and Nicholas had been adamant that the elf avoid any children like Claire, no matter how rare, at all costs.

"This is a century that ridicules magic, Andor. Claire's Sight isn't a gift. Because she's a child, people will think her just highly imaginative and indulge her. As she grows older, that indulgence will become concern and suspicion. Claire herself will question the soundness of her mind if she sees and hears things no one else does. It's better that she let her Sight fade and her memory of you become the dream of a childhood she'll set aside."

For some odd reason, that last part had turned Andor's stomach, but he did as Nicholas counseled and never saw Claire again, until their meeting on the Carmichael's loading docks. She had stared at him with a weary gaze that no longer saw wonder or the ljósálfar elf whose pointed ears she once complimented. He hadn't missed the puzzled flicker of recognition in her eyes—as if the shadow of that distant

Christmas Eve teased her memory—or her embarrassed blush at being caught staring at him with very womanly admiration.

Andor watched her surreptitiously this morning as he and another preparator opened boxes and filled out condition reports on one of the long tables in the conservation lab. Claire, Dee and one of the conservators unpacked boxes at another table. Their nitrile-gloved hands looked like doves as they checked each illuminated manuscript sent from the Matenadaran for damage and cataloged their contents.

Despite time and her maturity, Andor recognized Claire instantly when they met two days earlier on the loading docks. Her Sight had faded just as Nicholas predicted, and she didn't see past the glamour that humanized his features and disguised the distinctive shape of his ears. He'd worn this particular spell so often and for so long while among humans that it rested as comfortably on him as an old shirt. Still, it wasn't enough to lessen his vague disappointment that while Claire might admire him, she didn't truly see him. He disagreed with Nicholas that her Sight had not been a gift.

“Uh oh.” Dee frowned at the box in front of her.

The much taller Claire leaned over her shoulder. “Missing the bill of lading?”

“No, it's there. But just the Armenian version. Either the English translation got lost or someone forgot to put it on.”

Claire shrugged. “E-mail the curator and ask for another copy. They're what, eight hours ahead of us? By the time you get in tomorrow, they'll have replied.”

Andor approached their table. “I can read Armenian.”

Three sets of gazes settled on him and stayed. Claire and the conservator each raised an eyebrow. Dee tilted her head to one side. “Well, aren't you just full of surprises?”

If she only knew. Andor smiled, not at all offended by their doubts. Houston was a huge metropolis with a diverse population that encompassed numerous linguistic families. English, Spanish, and Vietnamese were the most commonly spoken. Armenian was considerably more rare.

“I’m fluent in several languages.” A thousand years of exile in Midgard had provided ample time to learn the many tongues of the humans.

Claire slid the list to him, her mouth tilted in a faint smile. “What does it say?”

He translated the bill, pausing only when Dee held up her hand. “We’re convinced,” she said. “Read it again, and we’ll report and catalog as you go.”

An hour later, Andor left the lab for one of the exhibit halls where another team of preparators worked to set up an exhibit of 19th century art glass. The sound of footsteps paced on a long stride drifted to his ears. His heartbeat sped up. Claire.

“Mr. Hjalmarson, wait.”

He stopped and turned. She offered him a wider, friendlier smile than the one she gave in the lab. It transformed her features in subtle ways. The hollows below her cheekbones filled out, and her eyes sparkled, reminiscent of the young girl who saw an elf for the first time, standing in her mother’s living room. The refined angles of her face softened and warmed. Andor thought her lovelier than any ljósálfr woman.

“Just Andor is fine,” he said. “The only people who address me by my last name are my accountant and the police.”

Her eyebrows shot up and the smile wavered a little. “Do you often deal with the cops?”

He grinned. “Not in the way you’re thinking.” Her skin pinked at his teasing. “Two speeding tickets is the extent of my life of crime.” At least by the definition of 21st century laws. He chose not to mention that caveat.

She chuckled. “Oh, well then, I’m a more hardened criminal than you. Two speeding tickets and an expired tag.”

Curious as to why she sought him out, Andor didn’t continue their banter. “What can I do for you, Ms. Summerlad?”

Her blush returned a little rosier this time. “Please call me Claire. I hope I didn’t insult you with my doubt about your claim to read Armenian. It just seemed too convenient to be true. Our temp preparator helping us at just that moment and also fluent in a language not at all common in this city? No one gets that lucky, you know?”

Andor shrugged. “No offense taken. And maybe it was more fate than luck.”

Claire laced her fingers together and clasped them in front of her. “Paul will be back and you at the Menil before Dee gets started on the main work of her exhibition. However, I’ve already begun work on research and provenance for some of the illuminated manuscripts we received from the Fitzwilliam and the Morgan. I’ve located texts that describe the manuscripts in more detail. Unfortunately, some of the descriptions aren’t translated.” She took a breath and continued. “I can hire out a translator, but having someone in-house who can do it would be a lot easier.”

“You want me to translate for you?”

She nodded. “I do.” Her hands came up in a gesture that warded off argument. “I know you’re as busy as the rest of us with the Gallé exhibit and the upcoming benefit dinner, but if you can carve out any time to do a little translation, I’d be grateful. Weekends even if that’s all you have. We’ll expense it through my department, and I’ll deal with accounting later.”

Time with Claire, grown to adulthood and no longer aware of magic. This was definitely fate more than luck. Andor had a wary respect for the Norns and sensed Verðandi’s weave in this scenario. If the jötunn giantess were here now, he’d thank her.

“Have lunch with me today,” he said.

She backed up a step, and her arms crossed. Her eyes narrowed. “You’ll help me with translations if I have lunch with you?” A touch of frost glazed her voice.

Since his exile, Andor had lived amongst humans, immersed in their ways and behaviors. Nicholas only required

his presence a few days out of each year, and he'd embraced the saint's suggestion that he learn more of Midgard and its people, disguised as a human himself. Nicholas didn't voice what they both knew: a bored elf was a troublesome one.

Andor had at first protested against Nicholas's single restriction on his plan, but the saint had been adamant. "You will not engage in their wars as a fighter, Andor. If I find out you have, I'll send you back to Ljósálfheimr where you can fight for your life against Dagrún and Alfr."

Andor had reluctantly agreed, and in the centuries that followed, he didn't take up a weapon as a warrior for someone else's war. That didn't mean he didn't take up a weapon or end up in war. Time, magic and curiosity had set him on many paths, and he learned many things. He'd been a battlefield medic, Bow Street Runner, wagon train scout, and a bodyguard. He pursued other occupations and vocations as well, some far more peaceful, like the current one as a preparator.

Humans lived short, intense lives, compressed into a handful of years the nearly immortal Ljósálfar considered less than a breath of time. After almost ten centuries, he probably knew more about humans than any of his kin, and they still puzzled him mightily. He gazed at Claire, with her stiff posture and cool expression, and wondered what had made this previous child of magic into such a cynical adult.

"If you have lunch with me today, I'll pick up the tab," he said. "As far as the translations, I will be happy to help you regardless of your answer to my invitation."

She winced. "I'm sorta clumsy at this—"

He held up a hand to forestall the apology hovering on her lips. "It's fine, Claire." He liked the feel of her name on his tongue. "Have you been to Paulie's?"

Her eyes lit up. "Every chance I get. Great food."

They settled on a time to go. Claire gave Andor a small wave before she headed back to the lab. "See you in a couple of hours."

He inclined his head. "Claire." He watched her walk away, her long strides carrying her out of his sight in moments. A hint of the soap she used on her skin still lingered in the air, a touch of spring in autumn. A tide of heat in his blood.

CLAIRE WAS certain she'd made a terrible mistake. She could argue that asking Andor Hjalmarson for translation help had simply been a request rooted in the pursuit of professional efficiency.

A louder, more honest part of herself called bullshit on that.

And it was. While Andor's fluency in Armenian certainly came in handy in helping her with some of her provenance research, it had been a far more convenient way for her to spend time with and get to know him without ever mentioning the dreaded, painfully awkward word "date."

A good plan, but it didn't take long for her to see the major flaw—Andor himself. Handsome, intelligent, well-read and charming without the arrogance and hubris that often came along with the positive traits, he seemed too good to be true. Claire entertained more than a few stray thoughts that she was meeting a serial killer for lunch or a man who harbored a secret, unnatural affection for livestock.

A week of lunch meetings every day blunted her paranoia but did a fine job of escalating the gossip among her co-workers. She shrugged off the sly glances and smiles that followed them anytime she and Andor met, whether for lunch, in a meeting or just passing in the halls. Once the rumor mill cranked up, it was hard to stop it. Trying to stop it just fueled the speculations, and she refused to feed that monster.

She succumbed to her own suspicious curiosity today. It was their fifth consecutive lunch meeting (she refused to call it a date), and Andor had driven her to a Vietnamese noodle house perched on the edge of downtown Houston that locals praised as having the best pho and banh mi sandwiches in the city. Andor placed their order in Vietnamese, surprising the woman behind the counter.

Unlike her, Claire no longer gaped at Andor. She had learned from their previous outings that he was fluent in several languages beyond Armenian. They placed their order, found seats at a table and settled into one of the easy conversations that had Claire trying not to check her phone or the clock on her PC every five seconds before lunch time.

At least that's what happened before this lunch. This time, Claire strangled two napkins into mangled wads of paper under Andor's curious gaze. "Can I ask you a question?"

His broad shoulders lifted in a shrug. "Of course." He sipped from his water glass.

"Have you ever killed anyone for fun or had an affair with a sheep?"

Andor sputtered and choked. His glass hit the table surface at the same time his knees knocked the underside in reflexive shock. The action rocketed the glass across the slick surface. Claire caught it in one hand, her quick reflexes the only things that saved her lap from an ice water dousing. She thrust one of the crumpled napkins at him. He snatched it and coughed into the crinkled folds until his eyes streamed tears and a flush reddened his face and neck. He motioned for his glass. She handed it back to him, wincing as he struggled for enough breath to sip the water and calm the cough. If he walked out right now and stranded her at the restaurant, she wouldn't blame him.

Instead, he wiped his eyes and leveled a baffled look on her. "No to both questions," he said between shallow gasps.

Claire didn't need to look in a mirror to know the heat blooming on her face turned her as red as Andor. She didn't

know which was the worse blush—hers for mortification or his for near-asphyxiation of which she was the culprit.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “That came out wrong.”

“That came out odd.” Andor took a cautious swallow of water. “I don’t think I can imagine a way such a question might come out right.”

He had a point. Claire sighed and prayed her effort to dig her way out of this self-created awkwardness didn’t end up digging her deeper. “Gossip is flying left and right at work. Everything from us having wild monkey sex in one of the supply closets...” If her cheeks grew any hotter, she’d combust. “To you being a psychopath living the double life of a nice, handsome museum preparator while keeping your mom’s mummified corpse in your attic.”

Andor’s eyebrows had slowly ratcheted up his forehead during her recitation, accompanied by an ever-widening smile. By the time she finished, he wore a full grin. “And where does the sheep come in?”

“That’s just the icing on the cupcake.” No way would she admit to the sheep conjecture.

The server’s arrival with their food delayed his response. They spent the next few minutes in silence, Claire doctoring her pho, Andor taking bites of his sandwich.

“What do you think of the pho?” he asked her after she took a few sips and ate some of her noodles.

“Excellent.” She dabbed her mouth with her napkin. “You have amazing radar for places that serve good food.” She didn’t flatter. While they took turns picking up the bill—at her insistence—he chose the restaurant, and he chose well every time. Greek dolmades in lemon sauce, grilled tuna steak sandwiches with wasabi mayonnaise, ropa vieja with white rice smothered in black beans accompanied by a side of sweet plantains. Andor knew where to eat well and not break the bank for the indulgence. Accustomed to a quick lunch of a sandwich from home or a bag of chips from one of the

vending machines near her cube, Claire had eaten better this week than in the past year.

She twirled a bundle of noodles from her soup bowl onto her chopsticks. Andor paused in wolfing down the second half of his sandwich and wiggled his eyebrows at her. “Don’t tell me you pay attention to office gossip?”

Claire squeezed more sriracha sauce into her broth and stirred vigorously. “Not usually, but I’ve never been the center of it before, and it’s driving me crazy.” She looked up at him, her spoon halfway to her mouth, and paused.

A shaft of sunlight, partially guillotined by the aluminum blinds covering the windows, bathed the side of Andor’s face, casting his profile in high relief. His was an aesthetic visage, beautifully constructed but unyielding, as if he’d been created from marble instead of clay, his creator a sculptor instead of a potter. The only nod to softness in his features was his mouth, with an upper lip as wide and generous as his lower one. A mouth that smiled easily and often. Surely, whoever first wrote the definition for sensual kissing was inspired to do so after they kissed someone with a mouth like that.

“Such deep thoughts, Claire. What’s going on in there?”

She blushed and spooned soup into her mouth to keep from answering right away. “Sorry to startle you with my weird questions.”

Andor grinned. “To answer both, I’ve never killed anyone for fun, nor have I harbored an unhealthy fascination for anything remotely ovine.”

Claire waved her spoon at him. “That’s good. You don’t live in your mom’s basement and keep her mummified corpse in a rocking chair, do you?”

“No. I live in a garage apartment that I rent from a landlord named Sal Hopkins. He looks nothing like my mother, who, as far as I know, is alive and well. And while I’ve experimented in different professions, mummification hasn’t made it to the list yet.”

His levity faded. “If the gossip disturbs you that much, Claire, we don’t have to meet. I’m at the Carmichael temporarily. You work with these people long-term. I don’t want to cause you problems.”

The thought of no more outings with this lovely man soured the soup in her stomach. She put down her spoon. “Don’t be silly. Just because I’m not used to being the focus of gossip, doesn’t mean I’m going to let it dictate what I do. Besides, this is fun.” She gave him an uncertain look. “Are you enjoying it?”

Tiny flames kindled in Andor’s eyes. “Very much. I want to keep meeting, even if you have nothing for me to translate.”

She’d have to be thick as a brick not to read his not-so-professional interest. Dread and anticipation brewed a roiling potion inside her. It had been a long time since she even considered courting a man’s interest. She didn’t want to get her hopes up and have them shattered later, and she had her son to consider in every dating equation. In her experience, few men were willing to entertain more than a couple of dates or a one-night stand with a woman who parented a special needs child.

She liked Andor—a lot—but lunch was all she’d be willing to risk, no matter how tempting the company.

They finished their lunch with a much more mundane but enjoyable conversation between them. Claire waited by the door while Andor left the tip. His hand on her back as he guided her out of the restaurant sent a pleasurable wave of heat through her body.

On their way back to the museum, Andor turned down the radio and asked the one question Claire hoped he wouldn’t. “Have dinner with me tomorrow night.”

She groaned inside, sick with disappointment. “I’m sorry. I must decline.”

NEARLY A THOUSAND YEARS living in Midgard had not dulled Andor's fascination with humanity. The basic behaviors didn't change much over the centuries, a reason he believed history tended to repeat itself. Humans, however, were a curious, restless lot. The ljósálfar lived countless years, content to let one day, one year, one century remain the same as the many before it. Sometimes there were battles with the dökkálfar, sometimes with a jötunn bent on mischief, but the long lives of both light and dark elves were but ripples on the surface of a still pond compared to humans. Short-lived, contentious, often chaotic, humanity raced and lurched by turns through time, desperate to experience everything it dreamed before a Norn cut short its existence.

When he began his exile with Nicholas and moved among the men of Midgard, Andor had disliked the frenetic ignorance that seemed woven into the very fabric of the human spirit. His opinion changed over time. His kin would say he'd been corrupted or tainted by his long exile. Their verdict might be true. With his glamour in place and generations of experience behind him, he could easily be mistaken for a human—except for one small unconquerable puzzle. He'd never understand the minds and hearts of human women. Then again, from all the moaning and groaning he'd heard across centuries and countries from human males, that complaint was hardly a singular ljósálfar failure.

Andor smiled to himself. Claire Summerlad, the Sunday's Child who had captured his memory and forgotten her magic, proved to be exceptionally confusing. He didn't think he'd

ever met a more guarded woman, human or ljósálfar, and he'd courted many of both during his life.

Their lunch dates, initiated by him to satisfy his long-standing curiosity about her, had become something far more. He watched the clock for the noon hour, his eagerness to see her palpable in the rising beat of his heart and the restlessness in his limbs. The job at the museum kept him interested and busy, but always, always, Claire's elegant features and rare smile lingered in the back of his mind.

Reserved and business-like during their first lunch meeting, she had slowly opened to him as he helped her translate documents from Armenian to English and joked that some of the commentary in the margins of a few manuscripts she'd researched were anything but religious.

She didn't bring her laptop for lunch date number three, and he didn't ask. They spent a too-short hour chatting of inconsequential things—favorite movies, favorite food, favorite songs. She was far more fascinating than research notes on medieval hymnals. During lunch number four she spoke briefly about her son Jake.

Andor recalled that part of their conversation, short as it was.

"I overheard you tell Delilah yesterday you had to pick up Jake. Your son?" He crossed his fingers in his lap and hoped Jake wasn't a boyfriend or even worse, a husband.

Claire nodded, a softness entering her eyes along with an odd wariness. "He's ten. I have a babysitter look after him once school is out and until I get home."

She said nothing else about her son after that. No stories of childhood antics, sports events or personality quirks. No bragging of grades or tales of trips to friends' houses. Just his name, his age and the fact he had a babysitter who watched him after school. Andor wanted to ask more, but the look in her eyes warned him he'd get nothing else. He smoothly switched subjects and watched, confounded, as she visibly relaxed.

He thought a few meetings and a few conversations would satisfy his wonderings about Claire. His interest would wane, and he'd move on to his next flight of fancy before Nicholas called him to his annual duties. Instead, his interest had deepened to fascination then to enchantment as he came to know the woman who'd first captured his attention one Christmas past.

When he invited her to dinner, Andor had been sure she'd say yes. Cautious and reserved she might be, but she had expressive eyes, and he hadn't mistaken her attraction to him. She accepted every invitation to lunch. So when she declined his invitation to dinner, Andor felt like he'd been sucker-punched. He'd grown overconfident, seen an interest that wasn't there and made wrong assumptions.

He was good at hiding his emotions, but it took effort to relax his hands on the steering wheel as he drove back to the museum after lunch. "May I ask why?"

Claire fiddled with her purse strap, her gaze alighting briefly on his face before flitting away. "I won't be able to get a babysitter for Jake on that short of a notice."

Was that it? Not an insurmountable obstacle, and the tightness in his chest eased. "You can bring him with you," he said. He wanted more time with Claire, and if that included her son, so be it. Her child was a part of who she was. Besides, after ten centuries of acting as Santa's bodyguard, delivery boy and overall helper, he'd grown to like human children. They saw magic in everything. "I'd like to meet him. He can even pick the restaurant."

Claire's shoulders sagged a little, her faint smile rueful. "Thanks, but that won't work. Jake's not..." She trailed off, her gaze drifting to some point in a middle distance he couldn't see. A frown creased her brow for a moment before smoothing away, and her back straightened. Andor didn't miss the sudden death grip she held on her purse strap. "We can have dinner at my house if you want."

Judging by the look of dread on her face, he was sure he'd misheard her. She looked like she just invited him to a public

hanging, and she was the condemned.

“An excellent idea,” he said before she changed her mind. Something warned him—a flicker in her eye, the twitch of her eyebrow maybe—this was more than just another alternative to dinner out on a Friday night; it was a test of some sort.

Andor mentally shrugged. So what. A dinner, a hanging; he was fine with whatever she planned. He’d either end up helping her wash dishes or saving her from the noose. He was quite capable of doing both. “I’ll bring the food. Just tell me the time and what you two want to eat.” He waited, hoping she wouldn’t rescind the offer.

She uncurled her fingers from around the purse strap—a good sign. “How about 7:30? Don’t worry about Jake. He’s a picky eater. I’ll have something for him at home.”

They pulled into the employee parking lot. Andor found a parking spot but kept the car running a moment longer. “What should I bring for you?”

“Surprise me.” Claire smiled, opened her door and unfurled her tall frame from the seat. Andor unapologetically admired the view for a moment before killing the engine and joining her on the walk back to the building.

He escorted her to her cube, greeted a slyly grinning Delilah—he’d never think of her as Dee—who had peeked around the corner of the wall separating her cube from Claire and left with a brief promise to see Claire the next evening. His sensitive ears caught the follow-up conversation between the two women.

“Sooo, how was lunch?” Delilah’s voice rang sing-song down the hall, followed by Claire’s more exasperated “Not another interrogation.”

“I just asked how lunch was.”

“Yeah, and then you ask me how he licks his spoon and if I’ve seen him naked yet.”

Andor held in his laughter until he made it to the loading dock, certain Claire wouldn’t appreciate his amusement.

He spent the following day, thinking of Claire's fleeting smile while he and two other preparators wrapped and packed the fragile ceramics that would be shipped to another museum for exhibition in New Mexico. Evening couldn't come fast enough, and after a quick text message from her at the end of the day assuring him they were still on for dinner, Andor bolted from the museum.

Now, at 7:30 on the dot, he stood at the door of a small home fronted by a modest porch with a swing on one side and potted plants on the other. Claire answered the door on his second knock. Dressed in a black blouse and jeans that highlighted the length of her legs, she stood within the golden corona cast by the porch light, as beautiful and luminescent as any ljósálfar woman under moonlight.

"Sunday's Child," Andor said softly.

Her eyebrows rose. "Pardon?"

He held up two bags of fragrant take-out. "You said surprise you. I brought Indian."

She gave a delicate sniff, and her eyes widened. "That smells marvelous. Come in!" She directed him to a modest table set in a part of a main room designated as a dining area. The table was set for three. A votive candle sat in the middle alongside a bud vase holding two carnations.

Andor set his packages down and turned to survey the room. Small and modest, the living room/dining room combination reflected Claire's muted tastes. The colors, the lighting and the furniture gave a sense of peace and calm, along with an unspoken invitation to have a seat, prop your feet up and stay for a while. Even the music, played low, and piped softly through speakers against one wall added to the home's cozy ambience.

Claire's gaze rested heavily on him. "Welcome to the manor. Not grand, but it's home."

He'd lived in soaring palaces built of starlight and gemstones, where moonbeams striking the water spilling from fountains resonated like the chime of exquisitely tuned bells.

He preferred this. “I like it. It feels like a sanctuary from a hard day.”

Her entire demeanor eased, and her wide smile deepened the tiny lines at the corners of her eyes. “Thanks. That’s a lovely thing to say.” She gazed at him a moment longer before giving a start. “I’ll get Jake. I told him we were having company tonight.” She disappeared for a moment into a short hallway, returning with a young boy who clutched a tablet in one hand.

Dark-haired where his mother was blonde, Jake had inherited her refined bone structure and arched eyebrows. His gaze was focused on the tablet screen, and he didn’t look up when Claire nudged him closer to Andor. “Jake, this is my friend Andor. Say hello.”

“He-wo.” Jake’s gaze flickered briefly to his mother, but he still didn’t look at Andor, and his greeting sounded ... young, the vowels broad and the consonants blunt as if spoken by a toddler instead of a ten-year-old.

Andor crouched down to eye level with the boy. He didn’t hold out his hand to shake, suspecting he’d get no response. “Good to meet you, Jake. I work with your mom at the museum. She’s amazing, but I bet you already know that.” He glanced at Claire, whose cheeks had gone rosy at his compliment, and winked.

She patted Jake on the back. “Go sit at the table, please. We’re about to eat.” He did as she instructed without protest or any verbal response at all. Claire’s eyes were shadowed, the wariness returned full force in both her gaze and her posture as she turned to Andor. “Jake’s autistic,” she said softly. “So don’t be too weirded out if he does odd things at the table while we’re eating. You’re a stranger, and having someone over for dinner who isn’t the babysitter is out of routine. He might act out.”

Andor watched Jake sing to himself, a wordless tune. The boy rocked in his chair, occasionally flicking the back of his neck with his fingers. “This is why he couldn’t go out with us?”

“Yeah. I don’t keep him trapped at home all the time, but a loud, crowded restaurant on a Friday night would be a nightmare of overstimulation for him. See how he’s snapping his fingers against his neck? That’s stimming behavior, a coping mechanism he uses when something is out of the ordinary.”

The fabric of her blouse was smooth across his fingertips where he touched her elbow. “He’s a lot more polite about it than I would be. Usually by the end of dinner in a noisy restaurant, I’m ready to stab someone with my fork.” Andor winked at Claire once more. “Yours is a better idea. Nicer place, better music, great food, and I won’t have to shout at you across the table to be heard. And I was able to meet your son.”

She eyed him speculatively. “Are you sure you’re not a psychopath?”

He laughed. “Stabbing someone with a fork in an eating establishment would get me not only jail time but probably a mental health evaluation. That being said, I can assure you I’m harmless.”

That wasn’t true in many contexts, but Claire was infinitely safe with him. He protected what he cherished. The thought brought him up short. How had this woman—once a child blessed with magic now lost—embedded herself so quickly and so deeply into his soul?

Something of that breath-stealing realization must have revealed itself in his expression. Claire’s eyes widened. “Hey, you okay? You just went pale.”

He nodded, still trying to recapture his mental footing. “I’m fine. Just hungry. We should eat. Passing out on your floor isn’t how I want either of us to remember our first dinner together.”

Dinner started out as an exercise in endurance. At first tense, nervous and obviously resigned to the idea Andor would bolt for the door the second her son did something odd, Claire had given lengthy explanations for everything from why Jake could synchronize two separate videos on his tablet to play the

exact thing at the same time but couldn't easily handle a fork to eat to how he used a particular program to help him communicate.

"He's echolaic too," she explained. "So if you say something, and he repeats a portion back to you, it isn't mockery."

Andor laid his hand over hers, feeling the twitch of her slender fingers against his palm. "Claire. Relax. I'm not a therapist; this isn't an interview for either you or Jake. It's just dinner. He's fine. I'm fine, but I'll take another beer if you have an extra."

It was a not-so-subtle ploy, but she grasped it like a drowning person clutching a lifeline. "Of course! I'll be right back."

The kitchen was no more than five steps from the dining area and separated by a wall, but Andor guessed a few seconds away from the table would give her a little time to breathe. He glanced at Jake whose fingers flew over the tablet's screen, opening videos and games and closing them just as fast, as if the brief flashes of pictures they presented were far more entertaining than the content in its entirety.

"Jake, can I hear that song you played earlier from the two videos?"

Jake didn't look up, but his fingers danced across the screen, opening up files faster than Andor could track. Soon the two videos played together in perfect synchronization.

"Well done, child." Andor toasted him with his empty bottle. His heart stuttered in his chest when Jake suddenly looked up to meet his gaze. His face, still soft and rounded with youth, grew animated for a moment. "Elf," he said. His eyes returned to his tablet as if Andor had suddenly winked out of existence.

Andor gawked at Jake for a moment before breaking into a grin wide enough to squint his eyes shut. Claire had passed her gift of the deep sight on to her child. Jake, who didn't speak or

hold a fork easily, could see the ljósálfar elf sitting at his mother's table.

Ah, Nicholas, he thought. Did you ever meet this boy on Christmas Eve?

Claire returned to the table, two bottles in her hand, her equilibrium restored. She gave him and Jake a puzzled look. "What were you two up to while I was in the kitchen?"

Andor clinked his beer against hers. "Plans to conquer the world. Jake will be my general."

The remainder of dinner was a far more lighthearted affair. Claire told stories about the Carmichael and some of the exhibit catastrophes that had turned the museum director's hair prematurely white. "I keep waiting for some of the exhibits to come alive at night, like in those films. I'm just afraid our security team would shoot first and ask questions later."

Andor regaled her with tales of his travels. His only permanent point of place, where he was required to appear annually, existed in another realm. When he wasn't at Nicholas's service, he lived a mostly nomadic existence in Midgard and had traveled its length and breadth many times over. Claire listened wide-eyed as he described the places he had visited for days or weeks, sometimes a month or two before moving on.

Jake had grown tired of their company during Andor's recitation and disappeared into his room with the ever-present tablet. Andor adopted a crestfallen look. "I think I bored him."

Claire chuckled. "Unless you can sing the song 'Hot Potato' six hundred times in a row, he probably won't find you that interesting. I, however, am hooked. If I hadn't heard you speak at least four different languages myself, I'd think you were trying to feed me a load. Have you really been to all those countries?"

"Every one." He didn't mention he'd visited most of them multiple times across the centuries, seen them rise, fall, change names, change governments, change religions. He went for the mundane instead, something Claire's practical thinking would

accept. "It's doable if you're very wealthy or willing to work any odd job for the travel money."

"I imagine you have a very interesting resume."

Andor grinned. "An understatement, trust me."

After dinner, he only had to help her throw away cartons and load the dishwasher instead of rescue her from certain death. Claire made coffee, and they took their cups out to the back patio. The bench set in the middle of the plain concrete pad was just big enough for two and faced out to a back yard fenced from the neighbors. Claire's hip was warm where it pressed against Andor's. He wished this was more than just the awkward first date, and he could stroke the length of her long thigh through her jeans.

Early November in Houston was one of the best times of the year. Cool enough to feel a snap in the air, but the mosquitoes that made a meal out of everyone during summer and early fall were gone. The dark silhouettes of two live oaks spread even darker shadows across the ground. Through the gaps between their branches, the sky glittered with a sprinkling of pale stars, occasionally obscured by scudding clouds.

Claire pointed up. "You don't see that too often. It's either a humid haze or light pollution that blots those out. One day I'd like to take Jake out to the George Ranch observatory. If I can coax him to look through a telescope, he can see the Milky Way."

Andor glanced behind him at the partially open back door. "Will he be okay in there?"

She nodded. "Until last year, I couldn't turn my back for a second, or he was into something or destroying it. Imagine the terrible twos lasting for seven years." She snapped her fingers. "Then it stopped all of a sudden. I don't know if an internal light bulb came on or what. I didn't dissect it, just counted my blessings." Her gaze followed Andor's to the door. "He might join us in a little bit. He likes to watch his shadow move. In the summer, before the mosquitoes get too bad and the city starts to spray, we'll come outside and he'll follow fireflies."

Andor could hear it in her voice, a joy tinged with melancholy, at her son's antics. Claire chose to see the wonder in Jake's reactions to such things as his shadow and fireflies. Her deep Sight might be gone, but Andor had been wrong. She still saw magic, just a different, very human kind of sorcery.

"Where is Jake's father?"

For a moment, she stiffened next to him, and her face tightened. "In Germany on business I think." She glanced at him from the corner of her eye. A rueful smile hovered on her mouth. "I know what you're asking. We divorced four years ago. We were only married for five. Bad choice on both our parts. Special needs children can be tough on even the strongest marriages. Ours was already in trouble. For Lucas, I think Jake's diagnosis felt like the key that locked him in a prison. He served me with divorce papers two months later."

Andor scowled. Lucas sounded like an idiot. "Who'd leave a woman like you and the child you made together?"

"That's very sweet of you." Her eyes glittered in the moonlight.

He shrugged. "It's true."

She fiddled with the handle of her coffee cup. "It's tempting to demonize him, but he isn't a bad person, and I'm no saint. I have custody of Jake, and Lucas has visitation. He pays child support on time, every time. Not a dead-beat dad, just a distant one. I try to encourage him to spend more time with Jake, but honestly I think the autism scares him."

Andor frowned even harder. "He does know it isn't contagious, right?"

Claire chuckled. "He isn't quite that dumb. He's like a lot of people I guess. They avoid what they don't understand. Humans are odd ducks sometimes."

"No truer words," Andor said. He finished his coffee and set the cup down by his feet. "Do you miss him?"

The question earned him a full laugh. "Good God, no." She sobered a little. "That's not true. I miss having help with Jake or someone I can share a rant with when one of us has a

bad day. An evening watching a show we both like. But that's less about the specific person and more about the perks of living with someone you love. Even when Lucas and I lived together, we rarely did the things I just mentioned."

He had nothing to relate to those moments she listed. They appealed to him greatly, made him wonder what it would be like to live a life waking up each morning with this woman in his arms, to spend evenings like this evening with her and Jake—not as a single date with the hopes of another to follow, but the expectation that the two would be waiting there, happy to see him when he came through the door.

It was such a human thing to crave. He'd been too long among them.

Andor rose from the bench and helped a startled Claire stand. "I have to call it a night, Claire."

Her features went blank, and her arms crossed in a protective gesture. "Was it something I said?"

It was everything she was and everything he wanted. The craving for her and the life he imagined with her left him reeling. He needed to get away, to think.

He grasped her elbows and tugged her closer to him. Her arms stayed crossed, a barrier between them. Light from the living room spilled from the open back door. He and Claire stood in the wedge of luminescence it cast across the patio.

"It was everything you said." Andor stroked her stiff shoulder. "It was how you looked, the way your house felt, the way Jake smiles."

She jerked in his grasp. Her eyes rounded. "Jake smiled at you?"

He caressed her other shoulder. "While you were in the kitchen." He didn't mention it happened when Jake called him an elf. "I want to spend the day with you tomorrow. Both of you."

Claire blinked. "But..."

“I’m leaving for the night, Claire. I’m not running away. There’s a difference.” Her shoulders loosened a tiny bit under his hands, though her arms remained crossed. “Besides, despite what you may think or how spineless Lucas might act, you and Jake just aren’t that scary.”

That made her laugh and drop her arms to her sides. “Oh well then, that’s a game changer. And we worked really hard at being terrifying.” She reached up to flatten her hands over his where they rested on her shoulders. “Sounds like fun. We’re yours for tomorrow.”

Her words sent a hot shiver of anticipation down his spine. Andor wanted to enfold her in his arms, kiss the soft mouth that smiled at him now. But he held back. One goodnight kiss wouldn’t be enough, not for him.

They made plans to visit Hermann Park and the grassy hill above Miller Outdoor Theatre. Jake could enjoy the outdoors and open space where the noise was distant and people spread farther apart.

Before Andor left, Jake came out, and at his mother’s coaxing, told him goodbye. Claire missed it, but Andor caught the flicker of the boy’s gaze on him and the small upturn of one corner of his mouth, as if to remind Andor of the secret they shared between them.

Claire followed Andor out to the front porch. While he refrained from kissing her mouth, he did avail himself of her slender hands, raising both to his lips in a courtly gesture. “Thank you for dinner, Claire.”

“You brought the food. I just provided the table and the microwave. I should be thanking you.”

She kept her hands in his, and her eyelids dropped to half-mast over her eyes. The tip of her tongue peeked between her teeth to swipe at her lower lip. Andor inhaled sharply at her unconscious invitation. He leaned toward her. Such a sweet mouth, shaped to fit perfectly against his.

He pulled away and dropped her hands. Claire backed up a step, the sleepy look gone; her usual guarded expression in

place. Andor bowed. "I'll see you tomorrow, Claire. Goodnight."

Her gaze on his back burned hot on his skin, but he didn't turn around as he strode down her walkway and slid into his car. She waved once and disappeared back into the house. Andor leaned his forehead against the steering wheel. The memory of a long ago conversation he'd had with Nicholas came back to him.

"I wouldn't want to be human. Such short lives in which to try and do something."

Nicholas tucked his pipe stem into the corner of his mouth. Wisps of smoke curled out of the pipe bowl, shaping themselves into stars and horses, sailing ships and planets. "Don't be so quick to judge, son. Forever is a notion. You can live it across centuries or in a single hour. It's how you choose to spend the time given."

At the time, Andor hadn't understood Nicholas's cryptic remark. He did now. A thousand-year exile of nomadic existence. One evening with Claire Summerlad. He had just glimpsed Forever.

CLAIRE PAUSED in logging information into the database that held the files on Dee's upcoming illuminated manuscript exhibit. "Dee, come look at this. Did you get documentation on this latest manuscript lot?"

The curator rolled her chair into Claire's cube and peered at the screen. A scanned copy of a manuscript filled Claire's monitor—An angel with black wings holding an unconscious or dead woman in his arms. An illuminated border of gold leaf and red pigment surrounded the illustration. Below it, flowing black script executed in a steady hand told a moral lesson on incurring the wrath of a vengeful God.

Dee frowned at the screen. "Damn, that's grim. I don't recognize the manuscript. It isn't from the Matenadaran lot."

Claire clicked several screens back and scrolled through a typed list. "No, private owner—anonymous. This is that lot Dr. Vecchio brokered for us. Remember? Thing is, I have nothing more on it or the other six manuscripts that came in with it. Just a lot numbers and dates. No provenance, no point of origin, nothing."

"That's weird. Giovanni Vecchio is very meticulous. He's brokered stuff for us before, and we always get a mountain of information with the lots. Are you sure it wasn't scanned to another database?"

Claire tapped her keyboard. "Positive. I've checked and double-checked." She clicked back to the manuscript with the black-winged angel and then through subsequent files

depicting more angels, some wielding swords, others on their knees begging for mercy. “These are markedly different from the Matenadaran group. Same style but the content is...it looks almost Enochian. When was the last time you saw an illumination depicting an angel embracing a woman like that?”

“Never.” Dee’s voice sounded thin and strained. Claire glanced up and caught an odd look on her friend’s face. Terror, sadness, a strange yearning. The expression faded as quickly as it appeared, but for some reason, the fine hairs on Claire’s nape stood on end. “You all right?”

Dee, still pale around the mouth, nodded. “Yeah, I’m good. Just wondering how I could have missed that gap. I’ll e-mail Vecchio to see what’s up. Probably won’t hear from him until after the holidays. I think he’s visiting family in Italy.”

Claire gave an appreciative whistle. “Must be nice.”

Dee’s voice had lost its strain, returning to the teasing tones with which Claire was familiar. “Which one? Family or Italy?”

“Italy of course.” Family was nice too. Claire’s was very small. Just her and Jake. But the holidays in Italy? Maybe one day—when she won the lottery.

“Invitation still stands if you want to come to my parents’ place for Thanksgiving.” Dee wheeled her chair back to her cube. “Mom promised she wouldn’t serve the turkey raw this year.”

Claire laughed. Dee’s mom was notorious for her epic culinary failures. “Thanks, but Jake couldn’t handle a combination of strange place, strange people and noise for several hours. Besides, I have company that day.”

The words were barely out of her mouth before Dee zipped back into her cube. “I’m not much of a betting person, but I’d lay money down company is the hot preparator you’re attached to at the hip these days.”

Ignoring the suggestive eyebrow wiggle Dee gave her, Claire sniffed. “Maybe.”

Dee disappeared behind her cube wall once more. “I’ll want details.”

Claire rolled her eyes. “You always want details.”

Andor had accepted her invitation to Thanksgiving dinner two days earlier. Claire had set herself up not to be disappointed, fully expecting him to decline for any number of reasons—family out of town, another commitment with friends. She didn’t even want to imagine he might spend the holiday with another woman. Claire had no claim to him. She had lunch with him almost every day, and he visited her house for dinner several times a week. They’d even made it to the symphony once and a play, with Elise threatening to kill her if she called the house twenty times to check on Jake.

“Don’t even think about it,” the babysitter warned. “I know my job. You know I know my job. Jake and I will have fun eating all the toppings off the pizza and watching Total Drama Island. Have a good time. Stay out late. You won’t be missed.”

She closed the front door on Claire and Andor and turned off the porch light. Claire had glanced at Andor. “Elise is a little blunt.”

“And obviously very capable,” he said. “I like her, especially her eyebrow piercings.”

While Claire couldn’t imagine how Andor might be seeing someone else when he spent so much time with her, she was far too fearful of engaging her heart more than it already was by assuming they were now a couple. He hadn’t mentioned it; neither had she. Hell, they hadn’t even kissed yet, something she hoped to remedy very soon.

When lunchtime rolled around, she left the office space she shared with Dee and sought out Andor. She found him in one of the lower-level workrooms. The screeching blast of multiple power saws cutting wood made her clap her hands to her ears. She spotted him in one corner of the room, ripping boards on a table saw. He wore a long-sleeved sweater that hugged his torso, delineating muscle and the width of his

shoulders. His hair was tied back in its usual ponytail, and he'd donned safety lenses and ear muffs while he worked.

Claire waited by the door until he finished ripping a board. She didn't want to wave and distract either him or the two other preparators working at the saws. He glanced up, saw her and shut the saw down. Claire motioned she'd wait for him in the hallway.

The hall was silent as a crypt compared to the noise in the workroom. Andor emerged, sans ear muffs and lenses. His slow smile warmed her down to her bones. "Hello, Claire."

She liked that he didn't address her as "babe" or "beautiful" or the numerous terms of affection so many people used. Claire didn't have a problem with them per se. While she and Lucas were still married, she often called him "babe." But Andor had a way of uttering her name as if he savored something sweet, letting it glide slowly off his tongue to breathe across his lips. Never had she been so glad to bear that simple, one-syllable name.

The chilly hallway had suddenly grown stifling. She plucked at her sweater and returned Andor's smile. "Working through lunch today?"

He glanced at the clock on the opposite wall. "That time already?" Regret darkened his eyes to cobalt. "I'm afraid so. We're building the display bases for the gala decorations so we can just snap them together and move them when the designer says it's time."

"The Ainsley Hall is gorgeous already. I can't imagine how much more you can add for the gala."

She'd stood in awe along with the rest of the employees and gawked at the miracle the preparator and design teams had wrought. The Carmichael always created a holiday exhibit of huge trees decorated with ornaments from cultures around the world as well as themes based on movies, history and literature. Preparators and designers worked through the day and night to complete the exhibit, unveiling it first in the early morning hours to the rest of the staff. Andor had given her a

bow at her applause, the only hint of fatigue from a laborious all-nighter, the faint shadows under his eyes.

“Are you going to the gala?” His gaze searched her face.

Claire sighed. “Not if I could help it, but it’s mandatory that staff goes. So I have a too-expensive dress that I’ll wear once hanging in my closet, along with a pair of heels guaranteed to cripple me by the end of the evening. I just hope the caterer doesn’t serve cardboard chicken and cold asparagus.” Bad food never bothered her before now. Andor was turning her into a picky gastronome.

“What about you?” she asked. “You’re on loan to us, so I’m guessing you don’t have to go if you don’t want to.” She crossed her fingers behind her back, hoping he would go. Hoping he’d go with her.

“That depends.”

“On what?”

His slow smile could have melted glass. “If I’m invited.”

Claire’s heartbeat jumped. She could feel her pulse thrum in her neck. “You haven’t gotten an invitation yet? A handsome guy like you?” *Please say no. Please say no.*

Surely it was illegal for a smile to have that much power over someone. “Not one. At least not the one I want.”

“Maybe I’ll invite you.”

They were suddenly no more than inches apart from each other. Andor’s breath ghosted across her forehead and hairline. “I’d be very interested in that invitation,” he said softly.

She touched his arm, the hard bicep flexing against her fingers. “Do you dance?”

“Invite me and find out.”

Claire was cautious; she wasn’t stupid. “Would you like to go to the benefit gala with me next month?”

Andor leaned down, and Claire’s eyes closed at the sensation of body heat, the smell of sawn wood, and the cool

winter scent clinging to the sexiest shirt she'd ever seen on a man. "Ah Claire, I thought you'd never ask."



THANKSGIVING DAWNED overcast and cold with the threat of rain. Claire had risen when it was still dark outside to start dinner preparations. She was an adequate cook, but for four years, she'd only had to cook for herself and Jake. Chicken tenders and fish sticks for him, spaghetti, salad in a bag, or the occasional pan-grilled steak for her didn't exactly expand her culinary skills. She prayed her efforts today wouldn't see Andor driving them to a 24-hour greasy spoon just to get an edible meal.

Andor arrived at noon. Claire met him at the door holding a chef's knife in one hand. He backed up a step and held up a bottle of wine. "Surely, an Old Vine Zin can garner me some mercy."

Claire huffed a strand of hair out of her face and waved him inside. "I'm glad you're here."

He eased passed her, gaze steady on the knife. "I can see that."

She chuckled and gestured for him to follow her into the kitchen. Andor paused when he saw Jake sitting at the table winding and unwinding a skein of yarn around his hand. "Hi, Jake. Enjoying time off from school?"

Jake didn't look up from his task, but he smiled a little and without any encouragement from Claire said "Hi, Dor."

Claire almost dropped the knife. She choked back an excited yelp and glanced at Andor. He set the wine on the table and crouched near the boy but not so close as to crowd him. "Have you been helping your mom with Thanksgiving dinner?" This time only silence met his question, and Claire answered.

"He cleaned off the table and helped me set it."

Instead of ruffling Jake's hair or patting him on the shoulder, Andor knocked gently on the table. "Good job, Jake."

That's a nice thing to do for your mom."

He stood and gave her a smile. "How can I help?"

She led him into the tiny kitchen, fragrant with the scent of herbs and roasted vegetables. All the counters except one were covered with an assortment of grocery supplies and pans. A turkey breast, still in its wrapping, rested in one pan near a cutting board layered with chopped vegetables.

Andor sniffed. "It smells good."

Claire scraped the vegetables into a waiting roasting pan. "Thanks. It's the stock for the gravy and a pan of dressing."

"Dressing?"

She mentally backed up. "Stuffing. This part of the country, we call it dressing." She paused. "Is this your first Thanksgiving?" She sort of hoped it might be. He couldn't compare her food to someone else's then.

He snagged one of the aprons hanging on a hook attached to the pantry door and tied it around his narrow waist. "No. It's my third. I'm still trying to decide if the bird they served at the last Thanksgiving I went to was actually a turkey or an ostrich. It was enormous." He cracked his knuckles. "Now, how may I act as sous chef?"

Trying not to gawk too much at how a man could look that sexy in an apron, she passed him a boning knife from her knife block. "I don't suppose you can de-bone a turkey breast?"

Much to Claire's lack of surprise, he could, and he was scarily efficient. "You were a butcher once, weren't you?"

Andor grinned as he tossed the bones into the trash. "For a little while."

Not only did he de-bone the turkey, he butterflied it on her instructions, stuffed it with the roasted red pepper and goat cheese filling she'd prepared, rolled and tied it into a roulade, slathered it in duck fat and slid the pan into the oven. Fast, efficient, capable, and sexy beyond belief.

They worked together, teasing each other about Andor's jack-of-all-trades skills and Claire's assurances that the poultry

in the oven was definitely turkey and not emu. She left him alone in the kitchen a few times, whipping egg whites or stirring cranberries in a saucepan, while she checked on Jake, took him for bathroom breaks and fed him snacks.

When the cooking was done and the table groaning with food, Claire surveyed their handiwork, propped her hands on her hips and grinned at Andor. "We make a good team."

His smile wasn't as wide but far more intense. "Yes, we do."

That euphoric tide that always rushed through her every time he complimented her or even stood near her, struck her again. Stronger this time. Harder. It left her tongue-tied for a moment. She tried for a lighthearted response instead of the one she really wanted to give. "I still have a hard time believing you're not married or in a relationship."

As quickly as that rush of joy struck, it abandoned her at Andor's suddenly grim expression. What had she said?

"I'm not married, Claire," he said softly. "I do consider myself in a relationship." Those blue eyes burned like gas flames. "With you."

Claire crushed her apron in her fingers. Her "You do?" came out as an incoherent squeak. She tried again. "You do?" He nodded. "But you haven't even kissed me yet."

The hard angles of his face softened. The faint smile returned. Claire's "Ohhh niiice" made him chuckle into her hair as he slid his arms around her and pulled her tightly against his body.

He bent his head and Claire inhaled sharply as he nuzzled her neck just below her ear. Powerful shoulders flexed under her hands. "Patience, Claire," he whispered. "I will kiss you, and when I do, I won't stop with a kiss." Deep laughter tickled her ear. "Or maybe I will, but it will be the first of a thousand, along with all the caresses that will accompany them."

Her knees gave out, and she sagged in his arms. Andor caught her up, one hand sliding down to cup her butt. "Don't faint," he teased.

“It’s more like I’ll combust,” she countered in a strangled voice. Her body was on fire. If Jake wasn’t there and likely to walk in the room any minute, she’d wrap her legs around Andor’s waist and demand he carry her to her bedroom. Forget Thanksgiving dinner.

She twined his ponytail around her hand instead and kissed his neck in the same place he’d tickled hers. He groaned at her touch and squeezed her harder. “I’m not very patient,” she said.

Andor slowly peeled her off him, his breathing shallow and a blush riding the high ridges of his cheekbones. His eyes had gone that same cobalt color she’d seen earlier. “Call it Neanderthal or antiquated, but I don’t want to share you with someone else, Claire.”

Her cheeks heated at that. “Not a problem, since you’re the only guy I’ve dated in almost three years.”

“I want to be the only one for the next twenty.”

Claire hoped she didn’t have a coronary brought on by sheer excitement. “That’s rather fickle of you, don’t you think?” She winked and was rewarded with Andor’s deep laughter. She gave his arm a light stroke as she passed him on the way to the bedrooms. “Get the wine; I’ll get Jake. While we’re growing hot, the food is growing cold.”



DINNER WAS A FEAST, and Claire was certain she’d be eating enough leftover turkey to sprout feathers. And that was after she sent most of it home with Andor. The weather outside had gone from dreary to miserable, with a steady drizzle making a murk of the last bit of daylight. A damp cold hung in the air, defying every attempt to layer up and keep it from seeping through clothing and skin. Claire disliked such days when she had to get out in it to go to work or run errands. Today, however, she loved it. Her house was warm and smelled of coffee and pumpkin spice. She sat on her comfortable couch, sandwiched between Jake who played his favorite game, Dumb Ways to Die, and Andor, whose acerbic commentary

about Santa's outfit in the movie they were watching on TV made her laugh.

"I hate that red leotard. Nicholas was a bishop. He would have worn vestments."

Claire gave him a puzzled side-eye and tried not to nestle too hard against the arm wrapped around her shoulder. Who knew someone got that worked up over a Santa suit? "I thought it was a Kriss Kringle thing. It's not?"

"No. Kriss Kringle is the Anglicization of the Austrian and German word Christkindl. The red suit is a modern element. Saint Nicholas is a lot older than that. A bishop of Myra, now Demre in Turkey. He was Greek. Some called him Nicholas Wonderworker or Nikaolos ho Thaumaturgos. He's the patron saint of sailors, children and pawnbrokers."

Claire almost choked on the coffee she just swallowed. "Are you serious? Santa protects pawn shops?" Somehow that just didn't fit with jolly, merry and ho, ho, ho.

Andor's expression was enigmatic as he stared at the TV screen. "Saint Nicholas is a lot more interesting than the rotund man we think of now in the red suit."

"I'll say. I'm guessing you came by your Santa knowledge while working on an exhibit?" God knew she'd stumbled across all kinds of bizarre and interesting things during her research projects.

Andor danced around her question. "You're an archivist. I'm sure you've discovered unusual things in your research."

Claire casually slid one hand over Jake's ear and nestled him close to her side to muffle his other ear. He'd put up with that for all of four seconds, so she spoke fast. "Oh, yeah. So I guess when I say I don't believe in Santa, I need to qualify that since he did exist."

Something flickered in Andor's eyes. It spoke of melancholy and regret. "When did you lose your belief?"

She released a squirming Jake and shrugged. "I don't remember exactly. Later than a lot of kids. I think I might have been twelve."

“That is later. Most are younger.”

That was true. She'd held onto her beliefs, even in the face of the cynical scorn dished out by her peers. Her certainty that Santa existed had been fueled by more than her mother's assurances. “I think it was because I had this really vivid dream of meeting Santa one Christmas Eve. I was sure it was real and that I was wide awake. He was standing by this sad little tree my mom bought at a garage sale. I loved that tree.”

She frowned, clawing at the hazy memory of a childhood she'd put behind her long ago. “He was wearing long robes.” She glanced at Andor, who no longer stared at the TV but watched her with a stoic face. “Bishop's vestments I bet. He was standing next to an elf. A really tall one wearing armor of all things.” She shook her head. “I thought Santa's elves were little like the Keebler elves. And they don't go in armed to the teeth.” She was getting a headache and tucked the memory back into the recesses of her mind. “Then again,” she joked, “if Santa is the patron saint of pawn brokers, he probably needs a bodyguard elf.”

Her smile faded when Andor didn't return it, and his eyes had a faraway look. She really needed to stop making jokes. She sucked at it. Serious was more her speed. “When did you stop believing?” she asked.

He came back to her with the question. His tempting mouth curved into her favorite expression. “I haven't.”

“Haven't what?”

“Stopped believing.”

Claire eyed him suspiciously. “Really?”

“Really.”

Andor was handsome, intelligent, funny and good with her son. He was also a little odd about all things Christmas. Claire celebrated the last. Finally. The guy wasn't perfect. She leaned into his side. “That's nice. I like that you believe in magic.”

Andor's fingertips combed through her hair. “The world is filled with magic, Claire. Jake is proof of that. You just have to look a little deeper.”

Claire was falling hard for him. Falling hard and fast. She almost broke the sound barrier at his words. She had chosen so badly with Lucas. Did she actually get it right this time with Andor?

Her cell phone's ringtone knocked her back into reality. She grabbed it off the coffee table. "Speak of the devil," she murmured. Lucas's name and phone number flashed on the screen. Andor muted the TV.

Claire answered on the third ring. "Hey, Lucas."

"Hey yourself, gorgeous," her ex said. "Happy Thansgiving." He slurred the words, and Claire suspected Thanksgiving dinner had been a buffet of double martinis or several shots of expensive single malt.

She raised a staying hand as Andor stood. "You too, Lucas," she replied. Leave it to her ex to spoil a perfect evening. "Do you want to speak to Jake?"

"Yeah. Wanna wish him Haffy Thansgif."

Claire rolled her eyes. Jake was more articulate than this, and he had speech therapy three times a week. "Hold on, I'll get him." She pressed the mute button and grasped Andor's hand. "Do you have to go?"

He nodded, his fingers caressing her knuckles. "I have to stop at the museum and check a few things. We were having trouble with the lighting on three of the trees in the Christmas exhibit." He lifted her hand to his mouth. Claire made a strangled sound when she felt the tip of his tongue glide across her fingers. His gaze was gaslight blue, full of heat and promise. "You beguiled me into staying longer than I meant to, Claire."

"Sorcery," she teased.

"The best kind," he replied. "I'll see myself out." He released her hand, waved to Jake and gestured to the phone. "Your ex will wonder if you've forgotten him."

She watched him disappear around the corner of the short hallway, heard the front door open and close, and listened to

his car back out of her driveway. “I did that the moment I met you,” she said softly.

EVERY YEAR, on December sixth, Andor joined the throng of worshippers who entered the Basilica of Saint Nicholas in Bari, Italy and found a pew near the back of the church where he sat beside its namesake. This year was no different.

Nicholas, dressed in the garb of a twenty-first century gentleman, leaned over and whispered, “I wasn’t sure you’d come.”

Andor kept his gaze on the altar and the steady parade of people looking for places to sit. “You say that every year, and I’m here every year.”

He’d balked at attending the saint’s feast day the first twenty years of his exile. This was ground sacred to a deity whose existence he acknowledged but didn’t worship. He was ljósálfar-born and sensitive to the warp and weft of the magic woven into the air and ground peculiar to Midgard. It pulsed in sacred wells, grass-capped kurgans and temples like these. In this church built in Nicholas’s honor, it resonated heavy in his bones, a power colossal beyond measure and ancient beyond comprehension. The first time he crossed the church’s threshold, he’d nearly bolted right back out. It had taken sheer will to hold his glamour in place and keep his feet planted on the floor.

Nicholas muttered near his ear again. “This year is quite different. Someone else occupies your time and thoughts.”

“Spying on me?”

The saint gave an affronted sniff. “I’m also the patron saint of one wayward ljósálfar.”

An elderly woman sitting on the other side of Nicholas leaned forward, glared at them both and made shushing noises.

Andor almost broke a rib trying not to laugh out loud at the idea of Nicholas being ordered to be quiet by a congregant in a church built in his honor on a day that celebrated his sainthood.

A mortified Nicholas hastily apologized in Italian to the woman and motioned for Andor to follow him outside the church. Andor didn’t need to be told twice.

Once outside, the elf glanced back at the church doors; they were closing, a signal that the mass was about to begin. “You’re going to miss the mass.”

Nicholas waved away Andor’s concerns. “I’ll attend the Thursday hymnals or an all-night vigil at one of the Eastern Orthodox churches. There’s also the Departure celebration in the Coptic church on the nineteenth. You’re welcome to attend that.”

“Humans certainly throw you a lot of parties.”

The saint sighed and offered a rueful smile. “I get a lot of requests for intercession.”

Andor shifted restlessly, the rhythmic surge of power moving like high tide under the church steps, sending arcane vibrations through his legs. “What did you want to tell me that’s so important, you’d miss the biggest celebration in your honor?”

“You found Claire again.”

Andor frowned, sensing more to Nicholas’s brief statement. “I did. And what strings did you pull to make that happen?”

Nicholas shook his head. “Not a one. I might suggest you look to your Norns for such machinations, but I’m a Christian bishop and believe something greater is at work there.” He began to pace, and Andor’s unease ratcheted up a good six

notches. The saint was typically a calm, good-natured presence. “If you hadn’t come, I would have sent for you. The queen has summoned you to audience at the Ljósálfar court.”

Andor didn’t think his spine would freeze any colder if someone had poured ice water down his back. His exile wasn’t yet finished, yet Dagrún summoned him home. “Why? I still have a dozen years left to my exile.”

Nicholas’s pacing sped up. “I don’t know, but I received a message from Ljósálfheimr. Dagrún and Alfr both want to talk to you.

The elf instinctively reached for the sword he no longer wore at his hip. “If Alfr wants my head, he’ll have to fight me for it.” He wouldn’t surrender to his own execution without a struggle. He had too much to live for. One woman, one child. He’d slaughter his way across Ljósálfheimr if he must to stay alive.

“Peace, son.” Nicholas laid a hand on Andor’s arm. “I don’t think you’re being summoned to die.”

Every muscle in Andor’s body had gone tight, readying for battle. “When do we go?”

“Now, if you’re ready.”



THE ROYAL PALACE was unchanged since he’d last seen it a thousand years earlier. The fact shouldn’t have surprised him. A thousand years was merely a breath in time to the near-immortal Ljósálfar. Yet, Andor paused before entering the soaring structure whose crystalline walls gleamed in the shifting, multicolored light from far-off Asbrú. The static sameness weighed down on him, a claustrophobic stillness that had watched time pass and never blinked. How had he ever lived in such stagnancy and not been driven mad by boredom?

Beside him, Nicholas cast an admiring gaze on his surroundings. “I will never adjust to how beautiful this palace is.” He glanced at Andor. “Are you glad to be back?”

“No.”

The saint's eyes widened in surprise. The king and queen's arrival forestalled any reply. Elf and bishop bowed before the ljósálfar monarchs who took their seats on the two great thrones set on a raised dais.

"Rise." King Alfr's single-word command formed icicles on the windows lining the throne room.

Judging by his tone, the king had not summoned Andor back to share ale and good company. Andor glanced first at the elf king. Tall and striking, he was an equal counterpart in appearance to his blindingly beautiful queen, except for the reptilian coldness she lacked. That alone had always made Andor's hackles rise anytime he was in his king's presence.

Dagrun spoke, her voice the sweetest music. Beside Andor, Nicholas sighed. "We have missed your presence at court, Andor." The king snorted and was ignored.

She was his aunt and his liege. And a thousand years earlier, she'd been his judge and savior. Andor loved her as much as ljósálfar could love each other and prayed that whatever spurred this unexpected meeting between them, it remained peaceful.

"I treasure your affection for me, my queen," he said.

She smiled, and where ice had hung on the windows at Alfr's voice, crimson roses grew and spiraled around the columns. "Nicholas tells me you've been exemplary during your exile with him."

Andor glanced at Nicholas who winked. "He has been a mentor of great wisdom." And unstinting patience for the elf under his charge.

"Do you regret the actions that sent you to him in the first place?" Alfr's serpent gaze did its best to strip the skin off Andor's bones.

He could say he didn't regret them in the least. Alfr's favorite concubine was a lusty *mara* between the sheets but hardly worth a thousand-year punishment. Midgard, with its joys and its struggles, its short-lived humanity that embraced chaos, pondered the existence of gods and strove to conquer

the stars, had bound him in both heart and spirit. Those tethers had drawn tight and fast when he met Claire for the second time in her life and fell in love with her. He regretted nothing of his actions.

That long answer would see his head separated from his shoulders.

“Yes,” he said. “I regret them deeply.” No doubt Alfr’s colossal vanity would blind him to Andor’s blatant lie.

Nicholas coughed and cleared his throat but otherwise stayed silent and kept his gaze on Alfr and Dagrún.

The king settled back in his throne, his approval of Andor’s answer written in his posture and the relaxing of his mouth. He still made Andor’s blood run cold. “I can be forgiving,” he said. “You may return to Ljósálfheimr.” His eyes narrowed. “My mercy isn’t limitless. Another mistake like the first one, and death, not exile, will be your punishment.”

Having offered his judgment, Alfr stood and strode out of the throne room. When Andor straightened from his bow, he discovered Dagrún still seated on her throne, watching him. She motioned him and Nicholas closer. “Welcome back, nephew.”

Andor didn’t want to come back. Not any longer. A decision loomed before him, one that would change the course of his existence. He’d pondered the question in the darkness when he was alone in the bare garage apartment he rented as simply a roof over his head while he stayed in Houston. Then he’d assumed he had another twelve years of exile. In human terms, it was a long stretch in which anything could change, and he’d grown to see time in the way humans did.

He’d forgotten that ljósálfar could be fickle in many ways, as quick to forgive as to punish. Alfr’s anger had cooled a little sooner than anticipated, and his pardon had caught Andor off guard. He would have to leave Claire and never see her again. The thought made his chest burn and his stomach roil. If he stayed in Midgard, he’d sacrifice something just as important.

Andor inhaled slowly, exhaled just as slowly and made his choice. “You have my gratitude, Your Majesty, however; I have no wish to return to Ljósálfheimr.”

Nicholas’s robes sent a draft swirling up from the floor as he spun to gawk at Andor. Dagrún’s surprise was less obvious—the twitch of her hand where it rested on the throne’s arm.

“Why ever not?” she asked. The roses on the soaring columns began to wither.

Andor edged closer to the throne. “I’ve grown to enjoy Midgard and all it offers.”

The queen’s upper lip curled. “There is no comparison between Ljósálfheimr and Midgard.”

“No, there isn’t. They are too different, but exile has taught me the charm of other realms, and I am content in that one. I wish to stay.”

Nicholas grasped Andor’s arm. His dark eyes held both wonder and desperation. “Andor, because I move freely among men, you could too as my ward. It’s a dispensation granted to you during your exile. You can’t live them among them elfin and immortal now.”

Andor nodded. “I know.”

The saint’s fingers dug into his bicep. “Do you understand what you’re saying?”

“Yes.”

“It isn’t just Midgard, is it, Andor?” Dagrún had abandoned her throne to stand in front of her nephew.

Andor bowed to her. “No, my queen.”

Where before her mouth had curled in contempt, it now curved in a knowing smile tinged with sadness. “I will hold you to exile a little longer so you may help Nicholas one final year. And to give you more time to consider your decision. If you don’t return to Ljósálfheimr by the dawn of *Solis Invicti*, your grace will leave you. You will be mortal, human, and without magic. Our realm will be forever closed to you. You will age, and you will die.”

Nicholas's eyes glistened with tears. "Andor."

Andor didn't share the saint's sadness or the queen's melancholy. The smothering dread that had draped itself on his shoulders the moment he crossed into Ljósálfheimr was gone, replaced by euphoria and a restless need to fly from here and return to the world and the woman he'd grown to love. He grinned at the saint. "Forever is a notion, Nicholas. You said so yourself."

CLAIRE CHECKED her appearance in the mirror one last time and pronounced herself ready. Andor was on his way to escort her to the Carmichael's benefit gala. The program in her purse had promised an enchanted evening of holiday fantasy among the Christmas exhibit in the Ainsley exhibit hall. Dinner, dancing, an open bar and most importantly, a silent auction. The last garnered a lot of money every year from the wealthy museum patrons who attended the gala and bid on luxury items from first-class trips to rare antiques.

She presented herself to Elise and Jake who sat at the dining table gluing pieces of felt to construction paper for an art project. Jake kept licking glue off his fingers, and what he missed, he rubbed in his hair. Elise patted him on the back. "Dude, it's bath time after this, or I'll be able to stick you to the wall."

She whistled when she saw Claire. "Damn, you are seriously hot in that dress."

Claire pivoted slowly, hoping she didn't wobble too much in the heels. "Look okay? No panty lines? Pulled threads?"

Elise wiped a smear of glue off Jake's cheek. The boy flashed a glance at his mother. "Hot," he said.

The two women laughed. Elise gave her another once-over. "You're good. Better than good. You look great." She covered Jake's ears with her hands. "Mr. Andor sex-on-a-stick is gonna be sporting a boner all night."

“Elise!” Claire laughed, secretly admitting to herself how much she hoped that was exactly what would happen.

The dress she wore was a classic formal black sheath. Long-sleeved, with nude netting stitched in black lace across the collarbones, it hugged her body in sleek lines that ended in a short train. Both modest and sensual, it had appealed to Claire’s sense of style and contrasted attractively with her hair and skin.

Her shoes were the work of Satan’s minions. Created and engineered to cripple the wearer in the most painful manner, they made any pair of legs look fabulous and every dress look haute couture. Claire had promptly succumbed to temptation and sold her soul, as well as her arches, to the demon posing as a sales clerk in the shoe store.

When the doorbell rang, Elise rose from her seat and pointed at Claire. “You just stand there and look—” She lowered her voice. “Fuckable. I’ll get the door.”

Claire shook her head. She adored Jake’s babysitter, even if Elise’s word choices took her aback sometimes.

Andor’s comments when he saw Claire mirrored Elise’s admiration if not the vulgarity. His gaze slid over her, slow as honey, hot as a bonfire. “I don’t think there are enough of the right words in any language to describe how you look.”

Claire blushed. “Good or bad will do fine.”

“Sublime,” he said simply.

“Thank you. I can say the same for you.”

She could say a lot of things if she wasn’t virtually tongue-tied with awe. A tuxedo worked like her Satan shoes. It made just about anyone look good. Andor, however, went beyond good, beyond striking or sublime to jaw-droppingly beautiful. His features were too hard to be called angelic, unless one compared him to an archangel—that celestial warrior who engaged demons in battle. Preferably those like the one who designed the shoes she wore.

He wore his hair in its usual ponytail, and the casual look somehow gave the formal tux more pizzazz and interest. It was

positively criminal to look that lickable in a bowtie.

“Are you two going to stand there all night staring at each other, or are you going to your party?”

Elise broke the spell that held them in place. Claire grabbed her purse and shawl, kissed a sticky Jake on the forehead and listed off instructions and phone numbers to Elise for the fourth time.

The babysitter scowled at her. “Go away, Claire. Jake and I got this. We’re going to decorate that height-challenged Christmas tree you bought, eat junk food and watch cartoons. I’ll see you later.”

Andor guided Claire out the door with a wink at Elise. Once inside the car, they fell into a comfortable silence. Andor drove smoothly through the snarl of traffic, steering with one hand while he sought Claire’s hand with the other and entwined his fingers with hers.

Since Thanksgiving, they’d grown ever closer, touching constantly when they could capture a moment of privacy. A brief caress down her back, the glide of her hand along his shoulders. Claire didn’t ask him to kiss her, though the delicious anticipation of knowing he would soon—and wouldn’t stop there—sometimes made her break out in a sweat.

Over the course of weeks and numerous dates, he slowly revealed bits and pieces of himself, telling her of his family, a mother and father with whom he wasn’t close, a friend with whom he was. His travels had taken him all over the world, giving him a unique insight into people in general.

He was funny and affectionate but always respectful to her as if he sensed the wariness she was fast tossing to the curb. After her divorce, Claire had guarded her heart and her son against all comers. Except for one awkward, disastrous date six months after she’d reclaimed her maiden name, she had turned down every offer. Until Andor. She hadn’t abandoned her caution entirely, but he’d found a way through her armor, worn her down like river water over stone, only so much faster. When he suggested they see each other exclusively,

Claire had wanted to shout her joy from the rooftop of her house.

She lifted their joined hands to her mouth and kissed his knuckles before setting his hand on her thigh. They still said nothing to each other, but the tension in the car jumped, and Andor's eyes had gone the gaslight blue Claire now recognized as his desire for her manifested.

At the gala, they joined co-workers at one of the tables set up in the Ainsley hall. Thousands of fairy lights woven into the tall trees and strung through the garland that wrapped around columns and was pinned to stair banisters cast the room in golden light.

Servers passed out champagne and offered hors d'oeuvres to the guests. A string quartet played from an upper balcony, a mix of Christmas and dance music. Claire looped her arm through Andor's as they left the table to circulate among the crowd. "I think you've been stripped naked at least a dozen times since we walked through the door." She would have to be blind not to catch the admiring stares Andor received when they arrived, and even now as they navigated through clusters of guests. She was guilty of doing it multiple times herself.

Andor met her gaze, his expression grim. "I hope not. I'm wearing Scooby Doo boxers." His expression never changed, even when Claire's eyes widened, and she glanced automatically at his crotch.

"Seriously?"

He broke into a laugh and spun her so she faced him. "No." He captured her right hand and settled his other hand on her lower back. "Dance with me, Claire."

She stepped into his embrace, happy to hold onto his broad shoulders. "So you can dance."

"I told you, if you invited me, you'd find out. How brave are you?"

"Not very, but if you step on my toes I won't feel it. My feet have gone numb."

They glided across the room, Andor guiding her unerringly over the floor and around other dancing couples. Claire felt like she was flying. Only this was better than flying, better than breathing even.

They danced straight through four more songs, stopping only when the quartet changed tempo to something less suitable for a waltz or simple box-step. Andor guided Claire to a semi-secluded alcove at the perimeter of the hall.

The heat pouring off him was matched only by the fire inside her. She caressed the side of his face, tracing the angles of his cheekbone and nose, the sharp line of his jaw. He turned his face into her hand, his lashes dark and thick on his cheeks as he closed his eyes and kissed her palm.

“Do you think anyone will notice if we make out right here?” Claire’s other hand busied itself wandering under Andor’s tux jacket to stroke his narrow waist and the contoured muscles of his back. She felt the curve of his smile against her palm before he raised his head.

“Probably. And if you didn’t like office gossip before...” He trailed off, his teasing expression sobering. He traced the line of her spine and curve of her hips, leaving trails of fire on Claire’s skin. “We can leave if you wish.”

She could hear it in his voice, that subtle coaxing that almost beguiled her into saying yes. “I’d love to but we can’t. We have to stay through the dinner.”

“And eat the cardboard chicken.” Andor drew invisible designs on her neck with a fingertip. Claire leaned into his touch with a sigh. “Let’s go back to our table. At least the conversation with others will distract me.”

Claire huffed and slid out of his embrace. “Speak for yourself.” She intended to learn the shape of his upper thigh under the shrouded protection of the tablecloth.

His low chuckle seduced her as much as his touch did.

The dinner lasted for years. At least it seemed that way to Claire who, if she were ever asked, couldn’t remember what was served on her plate. She ate a little, chatted with her co-

workers, including Dee who often cast her and Andor knowing looks, and played with Andor's thigh under the table.

When dinner ended, Andor rose, helped Claire out of her seat and wished everyone goodnight. The weight of a dozen curious stares followed them out of the hall. She didn't care.

The return trip home was as quiet as the one to the gala. Andor took his turn learning the shape of Claire's thigh through her dress, and Claire tried not to squirm in her seat at the electric sparks that shot through her body at his touch.

They stood close together at her door, Andor looming behind her. Claire turned to him, her heart pounding from a combination of anticipation and dread of his answer. "Will you stay the night with me?" *Will you stay a lifetime with me?*

He stared down at her for long seconds, his somber, handsome face dappled in shadow. "Yes," he said in a tone that made Claire believe he not only answered the question she uttered, but also the one she did not.

She fumbled the key in the lock until Andor took it from her and unlocked the door. Elise's surprise at their early return morphed into a sly grin. She gathered her purse and jacket as if racing to beat the ticking of a stopwatch. "Jake's passed out in bed. I left his tablet charging on the table, so he can reach it in the morning if he wakes up before you do." She waved as she sailed out the door. "Have fun!"

Claire locked the door behind her, tossing the key on the hall table along with her purse and her shawl. Andor stood in the middle of the living room, his gaze hot enough to scorch cement as he watched her.

"Do you want something to drink?" Her voice rasped like sandpaper, and she cleared her throat.

"No."

She pointed to the hall leading to the bedrooms. "I want to check on Jake. I'll be right back."

Elise had left the closet light on for Jake and the door cracked to allow a sliver of illumination into the room. The boy lay still beneath his covers, and didn't so much as twitch

when Claire kissed his forehead and ran her fingers through his hair. “Goodnight, sweetie. I’ll see you in the morning.”

She found Andor as she left him, a beautiful statue gracing the middle of her living room. Claire grasped her courage with one hand and his fingers with the other and led him to her bedroom.

Andor placed a hand on the door before she closed it. “Don’t you need to listen for Jake?”

She pointed to a monitor, one meant to listen to an infant, set on a nightstand by her bed. “Got it covered.”

He smiled and closed the door for her.

Claire raised her face to his. “Can I have that kiss now?”

Andor eased her into his arms. His lips brushed hers, the faintest touch. Once, twice. A little harder—a lot hotter—each time. He lifted his head, and Claire uttered a wordless protest. “That was two kisses.”

She grasped his coat lapels and dragged him down to her. “You promised me a thousand,” she said and nibbled at his lower lip, gratified by the deep groan her caress elicited. “Don’t be stingy.”

The memory of intimacy had dulled over time. Claire hadn’t slept with anyone since her divorce from Lucas. Grief over her failed marriage, fear of being a single parent to a special needs child, moving to a different house, all the other smaller, but equally stressful details that had nearly overwhelmed her, pretty much killed her interest in pursuing a relationship, casual or otherwise.

Andor had changed all that, and the desire coursing through her now made her quick, clumsy and eager. He was as enthusiastic as she. Clothes were pulled away, regardless of snapped buttons or stretched seams, and thrown into the corner.

Andor kept his promise, kissing Claire until her head spun, his tongue slick and hot in her mouth; his teeth gentle as he nipped a path from her neck and across the top of her shoulder. His hands skimmed her body, cupping her breasts, learning the

curves and slopes revealed when he'd peeled the dress off her, his eyes darkening at every inch of skin revealed until they were nearly black.

Claire returned his passion, muttering words of admiration between soft moans as she mapped him with her touch, beguiled by all that he was—sleek muscle and winter pine scent, his obvious affection for her and acceptance of Jake. She wished she'd met him sooner; she was profoundly grateful she knew him now.

They stumbled to the bed, unwilling to let each other go for a second. Andor made love to her amidst a tangle of sheets and the caress of shadows. Claire's soft moan echoed his deeper groan when he slid inside her. The thrust of hips, the bite of a harsher kiss, the grip of her knees on his sides as he rode her deep and hard: Claire reveled in all of it. Her climax skated the edge of her senses, sparking every nerve ending until she bucked against Andor and cried out his name in a carnal prayer. He followed her, his hands clenching the sheets on either side of her head as he groaned his pleasure into her neck.

Their post-coital torpor didn't last long, and this time it was Claire who clenched the sheets in white-knuckled hands.

They lay entwined afterwards, sweaty and replete. The sheets had been kicked to the end of the bed, the comforter shoved to the floor. Claire outlined the slopes and valleys of Andor's face with a fingertip, tripping lightly over the high bridge of his nose before tracing the arch of his eyebrows. His beautiful mouth was swollen from her enthusiastic kisses, and he nipped at her when she ran her thumb across his lower lip.

She was tired and wonderfully achy, as if caught in a kind of carnal hangover. For all practical purposes, she should be ready to pass out. Her emotions had other ideas. Claire considered herself a woman possessed of a healthy sexual appetite, but she'd never been able to separate her emotions from physical intimacy. Sex never was, and never would be, casual for her. She gave her heart and her affection as well her body to her lover, and with this lover, she feared she'd just given her soul. The thought terrified her, and she batted it back

to the corner of her mind. She refused to regret this night, or any other that might come after it. If it all ended in a broken heart, she would consider it worth the tears shed. Comfortably numb was no way to live.

Unaware of her inner turmoil, Andor slid a hand down the curve of her waist and swell of her hip, returning to her waist to repeat the same stroke over and over. His eyes were heavy-lidded and still more black than blue. “What do you want for Christmas?”

His question, asked while she struggled with her darker musings, made Claire stumble a moment. “Christmas?”

“Yes. Christmas. You know, that day of gift giving and such? It’s a week away.”

Except for the gift cards she exchanged with Dee each year, Claire didn’t receive Christmas gifts. She bought a few for Jake—toys with textures that might appeal to his sense of touch, puzzles to help him remember colors and letters, an app for his tablet that made funny noises he’d listen to over and over and laugh at with every repetition.

You in my home; you in our lives. She wanted to say it but opted instead for the safer, more lighthearted answer. She grinned and wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. “Didn’t I just get it?”

Andor didn’t share her amusement. His face darkened, turned pensive. Claire reared back a little, suddenly frightened. She hadn’t answered the way he hoped. That was obvious, but she didn’t know what answer he wanted from her. She asked a question of her own. “What do you want for Christmas?”

He stared at her for so long, she wondered if he planned to ignore the question altogether. “I want you to love me, Claire. To share your life, and Jake’s, with me. Not just this Christmas, but for every Christmas afterwards. For a lifetime.”

The fact that she didn’t physically shatter into a million tiny pieces at his words made Claire an instant believer in miracles. She blinked away the sudden burn in her eyes easily

enough, but it took three tries to clear the tightness from her throat so she could speak.

She twirled a lock of his hair around her finger. “Is that it? I thought you were going to ask for something a lot more difficult to give—like a real shrunken head from the Aguaruna tribe or El Cid’s Tizona sword.”

She squeaked when his arms tightened around her hard enough to thin her breathing. Andor loosened his hold only a little. “I’m serious, Claire.”

Claire’s teasing grin faded. She cupped Andor’s face in her hands and stared into a pair of eyes as blue as an ocean, and oddly enough, almost as ancient. “So am I.” She kissed him, savoring his return kiss. “I will love you for a million lifetimes, Andor. Even into forever.”

His expression changed, turned beatific as if he’d been lit from within. He rolled them across the bed until Claire lay beneath him. “Forever is a long time,” he said after several drugging kisses.

She wrapped her arms and legs around him to hold him close. “No it isn’t. It’s just a notion.”

EPILOGUE

ANDOR HAD FINISHED his last Christmas delivery for Nicholas well before dawn. While he couldn't be with a disappointed Claire on Christmas Eve, he had promised nothing would stop him from being with her and Jake on Christmas Day.

He'd returned to her cozy house in the small hours and found her sound asleep, curled around his pillow. The monitor by her bed emitted shuffling noises, but she didn't awaken. Andor padded to Jake's bedroom and found him sitting up in bed, stopping and restarting a favorite section of a cartoon video someone loaded onto a popular video site. The tablet's screen flickered in the otherwise dark room.

Jake's gaze slid briefly to Andor before returning to the tablet. "Hi, elf," he said.

Andor grinned and sat down on the bed beside the little boy. In a few hours, Jake's deep Sight, inherited from his mother, would no longer see the accentuated elfin features and pointed ears Andor hid behind his glamour. "Hey, Jake. You're up early."

Jake didn't answer, just continued the repeated play of the single scene. Andor pulled Jake's coat and a pair of sandals out of the closet adjacent to the bed. "Come on, Jake. Let's go outside. I have something to show you."

Dressed in Christmas-themed pajamas, socks, sandals and a light coat, his tablet clutched in his hands, Jake followed Andor quietly through the house and out the back door. The

sky was still dark, a thin line of gray edging the eastern horizon. Claire's backyard though was ablaze with light.

Tiny fairy sparks shot through the trees, swirling and diving across the lawn before curling around Jake in a luminescent spiral. The boy looked up from his tablet and pointed. The glowing lights bounced off his fingers before flying out into the yard once more. Jake followed, pointing and grasping at the lights by turn, his young features wreathed in a rare smile.

Andor sat down on the patio bench and watched. Firefly season was long past, but it was still dark, and he still possessed his magic for now. He could give Jake fireflies in December.

"That's a fine thing you did. He may never tell you so, but he'll remember this all his days." Nicholas sat down next to Andor. His vestments were travel-stained; there was a crack in his crosier, and sometime during the night he'd lost his mitre. His white hair stood out in all directions, as if he'd been caught in a whirlwind.

Andor looked him up and down. "Did you get in a fight with a jötunn during your deliveries?"

The saint settled back on the bench with a tired sigh, his gaze following Jake who still hunted Andor's fireflies. "No. A djinn."

"Ugh. Nasty piece of work."

"Always."

The two men sat silent for a moment before Andor spoke again. "You're finished early. Don't you have a few million more houses to visit?"

Nicholas spun his cracked crosier in his palms. "Eh, I'm not worried. I'll make it. Besides, this is your last time acting as my overgrown nisse. We should have a few commemorative words, don't you think?"

"Twas the night before Christmas—"

“Stop. I hate that poem. My stomach doesn’t roll like a bowl full of jelly.” Nicholas patted his belly. Despite modern popular depictions, Nicholas was a slight, diminutive man. He did possess a luxurious white beard—something to counterbalance his balding pate with its fringe of spiky, windblown hair. What he lacked in stature, he made up for in presence—a blaze of power, magic and wonder all combined into a compassionate heart and soul that shone brighter than any star.

Andor couldn’t resist a final dig. “Your dimples are merry.”

Nicholas’s eyes narrowed. “Son, don’t make me close our time together by turning you into a slug.”

They both laughed. Nicholas held out his arms. The two men embraced briefly. “Are you sure you want to do this? I can get you to Ljósálfheimr well before dawn and with plenty of time to deliver my last gifts.”

“I’m very sure.” Andor had never been so certain of anything in his long existence.

“It’s been a good thousand years for me, my boy. I wasn’t too sure at first, but I’m glad Dagrún sent you to me.”

Andor rubbed his neck. “And I’m fond of keeping my head attached.” The gray line in the east had widened and was now edged in pink. Christmas dawn. The rise of *Solis Invicti*. “You’ll still visit? Remember, Claire may no longer believe, but Jake and I do.” He turned to the saint and watched, a little saddened, as his mentor’s figure began to fade.

Nicholas grinned. “Every year, my boy.” He grew more translucent every second, his words softer, fainter. “Look for me beyond the gloaming.” Firefly lights danced behind him, lending a halo to his fading image. “When the darkness falls and the moon sails high...”

Andor touched the air where the saint disappeared completely. One firefly light lingered. “And all the stars look down,” he replied. “Until next year, my friend.”

~END~



THE KING OF HEL

a short story

GRACE DRAVEN

USA Today Bestselling Author of *RADIANCE*

PROLOGUE

My dearest friend,

It's been long months since I've felt the warmth of the sun. Many would envy my position—a queen, and one who will soon bear the heir to a throne. But this place...it is desolate. The baby leeches the strength from me. My consolation is I no longer have to suffer the king's touch. You know my heart. I want to go home but cannot. I implore you, Castil, travel north. You are the sister of my heart, and now, more than ever, I need you and your laughter. Don't wait to reply. The last ships leave for Helenrisia at autumn's waning. I've sent coin to speed your journey. I await you with hope.

Kareena

THE WIND SPUN hard off the sea as the ship neared the jagged coastline, buffeting Castil il Veras as she huddled within her cloak's meager warmth. In the distance, a small village clung like lichen to the sloping face of the cliffs. Beyond the quays lay the white lands and the fabled fortress of the snow kings. And there Kareena resided, a lonely queen.

Sails flapped hard above Castil's head, giant wings beating restlessly from the wind gusting off the water. It was much more comfortable in her tiny cabin, but at the first sighting of Helenrisia's far shores, she tossed her cloak around her shoulders and ran up to the deck. Weeks of endless sailing, its monotony broken only by periodic bouts of sea sickness, had finally come to an end.

Kareena's letter, tattered at the corners from multiple readings, lay safely within the depths of Castil's satchel. A messenger had delivered it and a letter of credit to her father, who frowned at the sight of the Helenese royal seal. Castil, fearing the worst, breathed an audible sigh of relief when she saw Kareena's sweeping scrawl. That relief quickly evaporated as she read the missive, the despair and loneliness in the words. There had been little to mull over. They had been best friends since childhood despite their difference in rank, and Kareena needed her.

Devilos Veras read the letter and turned a troubled gaze on his daughter. "If you go now, you'll be trapped there for months, and they say Helenrisia is an inhospitable place in winter."

She shrugged. "I would stay that long regardless, Father. It's a long trip, and Kareena will want me with her for more than a few days."

He said no more about it, only made arrangements with the captain of the *Estarta* to transport his daughter safely north.

The ship sailed ever closer, and it seemed to Castil as if the lay of the land remained obscured. Shore met sky in an endless expanse of snow-laden gray, the icy water reflecting the color of a dulled sword blade. No wonder Kareena, always a lover of the long Caskadanian summers, called her new home desolate.

Castil missed her despondent friend, alone in a strange land and bound to a man many considered cursed. The marriage between Kareena il Marcam and Doranis of House Alisdane had been arranged since before Kareena was released from her nanny's lead strings.

Sons and daughters of the greater boyars were regularly married off to royalty and aristocracy of other countries. Kareena was no exception. Marital ties to the Helenese royal family promised profitable returns in trade as well as political influence in two courts.

Castil recalled the wedding and its subsequent celebrations. Kareena, raised to understand her duty as the only child of a powerful nobleman, had been stoic regarding her fate. Only as the time neared for the wedding and her first meeting with her future husband did she voice any concerns to Castil.

"They say he is cursed. Marked by the Wastelands and their magic." She shuddered. "What if he is a hideous, misshapen creature? And I will have to bed him."

Castil patted her arm, offering whatever comfort she could. "No one has seen him, Kareena. You know how rumor starts. And if he is unhandsome but kind, will it be so bad?" The words sounded patronizing to her ears, for it wasn't she who would soon be sold into the marriage. Yet her words soothed Kareena who smiled weakly and nodded.

“No, not so bad. And I can always close my eyes and imagine that it’s Farnoush Salbata who beds me.”

“Kareena!” Castil laughed and soon they both forgot the upcoming nuptials and the arrival of the mysterious Helenese king.

None of their conjectures prepared them for the reality of Doranis of Helenrisia. When the Caskadanian court assembled to greet the Helenese delegation, no one knew what to expect. The Great Hall settled into a waiting hush as the visitors filed in to stand next to Caskadan’s overlord. The Helenese delegation consisted of men of great height and slim stature, who wore their black hair long and loose. Their dark eyes scrutinized the staring crowd from pale faces showing no emotion.

Castil thought them a handsome people with their refined features and dignified demeanor. While regal in their bearing, none bore the stamp of sovereignty on either their somber clothing or their features.

Her assumption that Doranis had not yet entered the chamber was confirmed when the herald announced his name, and all bowed in respectful greeting. Wedged between her father and the sour-smelling Dame Nibs, Castil wasn’t able to move closer for a better look. What she did see took her breath away, and her eyes widened at the sight of the magus king from the far north.

Astonishingly pale, with hair so white it gleamed in the torchlight, he surveyed the gaping crowd in a measured silence, his nearly colorless eyes narrowed, measuring. He was tall like his kinsmen, with the long, muscled thighs of an experienced horseman. Latent power radiated from him, an aura of stately grace that emphasized his odd beauty and lent his sharp, elegant features a haughty cast.

Castil managed to drag her gaze away long enough to search out Kareena, who stood closer to the king. Her pallor matched his, only hers was of horror instead of birthright. No fantasy of the handsome Farnoush could possibly blot out the

reality of the nuptial bed that awaited her with her soon-to-be husband.

The sudden notes of music played by the musicians who took their cue from a frantic minister broke the hall's gravid silence. The crowd of boyars breathed a collective sigh, their surprise transforming into a morbid curiosity as they jostled each other for the first opportunity to present themselves to the visiting monarch.

Castil knew it futile to try to reach Kareena in the milling crowd. She managed to catch her eye briefly, offering what encouragement she could with a smile. Kareena gave a grim nod before turning away.

The evening passed in an endless line of introductions. As lesser boyars, Castil and her father were nearly the last of the families to be presented. She tried to still the butterflies that fluttered madly in her belly. Like everyone else, she had been unable to take her eyes off the king. Unlike them, she didn't find him ugly or strange. He was, in all ways, a striking individual, the air of leadership resting heavily on his broad shoulders.

When they finally reached the dais where the king sat, the herald announced their names in a hoarsening voice. "Devilos Veras and his daughter, Castil il Veras."

Doranis's bored expression shifted when he noticed Castil staring at the embroidered insignia on his tunic.

"Blood of fey kings," she translated and immediately clapped a hand over her mouth, mortified at speaking out of turn. The king's pale blue gaze sharpened.

Devilos's fingers dug into his daughter's arm as Doranis straightened in his seat, then leaned forward, renewed interest glittering in his eyes. "You read *doa Enrai*?"

She tried to answer, but stopped at the increasing tightness of her father's grip. He spoke for her. "Yes, Your Majesty. My daughter and I are scribes. We're familiar with the old languages such as *doa Enrai*."

Castil's lips thinned at the scornful mutters around them. Aristocracy engaged in trade was a thing viewed with contempt. Judging by Doranis's intrigued regard, he didn't hold the same opinion. She found herself admiring the flawless alabaster face with its long thin nose and prominent cheekbones.

"Fascinating," he said. "I have in my possession a set of scrolls written in *doa Enrai*. They are accounts of the last days of the Elder cities before the advent of the Wastelands. I've translated some of the writing. Perhaps I'll send copies to you." His gaze slid over Castil, curious and measuring. "My compliments, Madam il Veras."

Castil blushed, surprised by his remark. She heard the restless murmurings of the boyars waiting behind them and bowed with her father before leaving the king and merging with the crowd.

That brief meeting irrevocably changed her, for in the days that he and his delegation resided in Caskadan, Doranis sought her out numerous times. It was the cause of raised eyebrows and speculation among the boyars and warning glares from the Marcam family.

Their concerns were baseless. Castil posed no threat to Kareena or her family. When she spoke with the king, it was of scholarly things: ancient scrolls, and books they both read. Dowerless and low-ranking, she should have been far beneath the notice of a monarch, and most treated Doranis's interest in her as an amusing foible—one odd creature's fascination for another.

The union between the Marcams and House Alisdane commenced without incident, though Kareena looked pale and ill as she held Doranis's hand and spoke her vows before overlord and country. Castil watched the exchange with a mixture of pity and envy—pity for her friend who had been sold into marriage to a man she found repulsive, envy because Castil would have gladly traded places with her.

Kareena refused to look beyond the white mark of the Wastelands, seeing only a man disfigured by the old magic.

She didn't know of the remarkable mind and dry wit that lay behind that severe visage. But Castil did, had watched, enthralled, as the days passed in celebration and Doranis revealed aspects of himself that would have surprised his new wife.

On the day the king and his new queen were to return to Helenrisia, Castil made her way to the docks and waited amidst a crowd of onlookers as the Helenese royal couple and its retainers gathered at the pier. Tears clogged her throat. She and Kareena had said their goodbyes the previous night, crying as they hugged each other a final time. She couldn't help but be here for a last glimpse at her friend.

Doranis was unmistakable among his escort. Mounted on a big bay stallion, he rode robed and hooded against the summer sun's bright light and sat tall in the saddle.

As if sensing her eyes upon him, he maneuvered the horse in her direction, the slow turn of his head revealing his search for the watcher.

Castil's eyes widened as the bay suddenly trotted toward her, sending bystanders scattering out of the way. She froze in place, squinting as she peered up into the shadows of the king's hood. The light eyes, ringed in heavy smears of protective black kohl, shone with pleasure at her presence. King and scribe eyed each other on the small section of pier.

She committed his face to memory. He was, in her eyes, the most beautiful creature she'd ever beheld. Distracted by her fascination with him, she almost forgot to bow, and he laughed gently as she blushed and bent at the waist.

"There's no need for ceremony here, scribes woman." That low, silky voice slid over her skin like scented oil, deep and rich with the promise of decadence.

Her thighs clenched in reaction, and she crossed her arms to hide the pinpoints her nipples made against her bodice. "Fair journey, Your Majesty," she said, just loud enough for him to hear.

He seemed to still for a moment before bending down close enough that she became ensnared in the glitter of his eyes. "All men wish to be gods, madam, even fey kings. Were I granted such power, this would not be farewell." He straightened again, his sharp face drawn with an emotion that made her stomach flip. "You would have made a worthy queen, Castil il Veras." She gaped at him as he wheeled the bay around and trotted back toward the ship. He dismounted and crossed the gangplank, following Kareena as she descended into the hold. The retainers filed aboard behind her, leading the horses onto the ship. The sun dipped low on the horizon as the ship took sail, easing out of the harbor toward the open sea. Castil stood at the docks, watching until it was nothing more than speck, taking with it a forbidden wish and a treasured friendship.



"THEY'LL BE LOWERING the dinghy soon, madam. You'd best get your gear together."

Castil was startled out of her musings by the rough, friendly voice of the *Estarta's* captain. She smiled, hoping he hadn't been standing there long, watching her moon for something far beyond her reach.

"Will there be an escort to take me into the interior?"

Captain Lizera claimed a spot beside her and leaned against the railing to stare at the closing shore. "Aye, madam. You'll travel with us to the trading houses. From there, we'll set up an escort for you to the Frozen Maiden." She raised an eyebrow in inquiry and he smiled. "The fortress of the kings."

The cold of the northern sea faded as memories of a morning in a ruined temple surfaced, and she pushed them down again. Therein lay a dangerous path, one of forbidden dreams. She turned to watch as the gray mist blanketing the shore thinned, allowing a view of ramshackle huts and nets hung on poles for mending.

The captain's voice, hard with a black humor, sent shivers down her arms. "Madam il Veras, welcome to Hel."

“SHE HAS ARRIVED,” the royal steward announced. “I’ve instructed the servants to take her to the queen’s solar.”

Doranis nodded once and placed his son into the arms of the waiting nursemaid. The baby squirmed for a moment before nestling contentedly against the woman’s breast. Tiny and fragile, he looked much like his father, save for his coloring. The king still gave thanks to whatever deities listened that the curse of his blood didn’t pass to his offspring. He looked to his steward, finding the other man regarding him with hooded eyes. Marcilun always had more to say.

He didn’t disappoint. “The news of your wife’s death will come as a blow, Your Majesty. What do you wish me to tell Madam il Veras?”

Doranis thought for a moment, wondering if such tidings would be more merciful coming from a stranger or from him. In the end, it mattered little. Kareena was dead, and Castil il Veras didn’t know it. The pain would be no less, no matter who delivered the message.

“I’ll tell her. Kareena would have wished it, I think. She adored her friend. And if Madam il Veras was willing to travel so far, the sentiment was reciprocated.” He kept silent of his wish, his need, to once again speak with the woman who had haunted his dreams these many months.

“She will fear you, as Kareena did.”

Doranis’s light eyes narrowed. “Mayhap, but something tells me otherwise.”

Marcilun's tone became diffident. "Forgive me, Sire. I meant no disrespect. I only wished to warn you that your meeting with this Caskadanian may not be pleasant. Like the queen, she may also consider us barbaric."

Marcilun didn't know Castil il Veras, but Doranis did, after a fashion. The idea that she might react to his people in the way Kareena did seemed ludicrous. He contemplated his son, content in his nursemaid's arms. Kareena had despised most everything about her new home. Had she been a more forceful personality, her displeasure would have manifested itself in endless harping and screaming tirades. As it was, she was a stoic, withdrawn woman, one who shut herself away in her chambers as the weeks and months passed, and neither Helenrisia nor her son grew dearer to her.

Doranis didn't mourn her, at least not in the way a husband might mourn a beloved wife. He and Kareena had remained distant strangers to each other, coming together only in the darkest hours of the night to beget an heir. Such couplings were always brittle, tense, no matter how gentle or coaxing he tried to be. His wife simply lay beneath him, colder and more rigid than a corpse, until he finished. Her disgust was palpable in the bedchamber's heavy silence, though she accepted his touch without argument. Despite the parody of lovemaking in which they engaged, she soon quickened with child, and he left her to her solitary bed, as relieved as she that neither of them had to suffer the forced intimacy they both hated.

It was during those dismal moments, when he would rise from the bed, shivering with cold and a dull emptiness, that he thought of the fascinating Castil. Had the irony not been so harsh, he might have laughed at the turnings of Fate. But for her dowerless state and low ranking, she would have been a better match for him. She had lured him to her with her scholarly ways and ready laughter. There was about her a vibrancy, as if the heat of a Caskadanian sun burned in her blood. Unlike Kareena's exquisite blonde beauty, Castil was nondescript in appearance—small and dark haired, with a smattering of freckles across her nose. He had barely given her a second glance at their first meeting. Until she recited the *do Enrai* verse stitched on his tunic.

From that moment, she grew progressively more beautiful in his eyes as he came to admire her intellect and easy humor. During the wedding celebrations, he sought her out several times to dance, uncaring that such attention drew conjecture. Castil fascinated him as no other woman had before, and as she swayed in his arms during the numerous pre-wedding revels, they spoke of old texts and ancient civilizations, laughing at each other's quips concerning the oddities and quirks of court life.

He remembered the morning of his wedding day, when he slipped past the ever constant vigilance of his retainers and explored the city's streets as the sun plated the buildings' façades in gold. Servants already ran errands, preparing for the day's work ahead. He moved among them, cloaked and hooded, gazing at the sights with casual interest. Doranis pulled his hood forward, protecting his sensitive eyes from the sunlight and hiding his face from passersby. None paid him any heed as he strolled by, nothing more than a tall man in a good cloak. Even the pickpockets left him alone.

A side street caught his attention, and he turned onto the narrow path that ultimately led to a small grotto partially hidden by vines and untended hedge. Its cool, dappled shade drew him in, and he discovered the ruins of a temple dressed in trailing veils of ivy.

He ascended the roofless rotunda's steps on soundless feet and paused, surprised to find another had found her way here before him. Castil il Veras sat cross-legged on the floor, weaving a small garland of flowers with nimble fingers. Doranis watched her for a quiet moment, admiring the play of early light on her face, the way she chewed her lower lip in concentration while she worked.

She sucked in a startled breath, stumbling to her feet, when he made his presence known. He raised a silencing finger to his lips to halt any cry, and she blinked at him in bewilderment before tilting her head in question.

"Your Majesty?" The disbelief in her inquiry made him smile, as if it was far too strange a thing to find a king

wandering among the city without a parade of servants and retainers in tow.

Doranis pulled back his hood, and Castil dropped her garland and bowed. "Rise, madam. We are not at court." His smile widened to a grin when she straightened and looked past him as if searching for an army of retainers lurking in the hedges. "Tell no one," he said in conspiratorial voice. "I have run away." She laughed at his teasing, shaking a finger at him in a gesture of disapproval. He bent to retrieve the garland, handing it to her with a curious look.

Castil thanked him, threading the half-finished piece through her hands. "A garland for Kareena. These flowers represent good fortune. I've only found them growing here, at this temple."

Her gray eyes were thoughtful, and he wondered what words were forming behind her lips. He didn't have long to wait for the answer. Her shoulders stiffened with an internal resolve, her features becoming set and determined. "You will be kind to her, Your Majesty?" Her fingers plucked nervously at the garland, but she plunged onward. "Kareena knows her duties, but she's frightened, as any new bride would be in such circumstances."

Anxious she might be, but Castil didn't lower her gaze.

Doranis admired her fortitude and devotion to her friend. Castil was brave in her way, speaking in support of someone she cared for, knowing she risked offending him with an impertinence.

He stepped closer. She refused to give ground, though he didn't miss the slight shiver that shook her frame. "Madam il Marcam doesn't fear becoming a bride. She fears becoming *my* bride." He raised her chin with one long finger. A stray beam of sunshine passed across her eyes, making her blink. "And you, Madam il Veras, keeper of dead languages and old tales, would you fear me were you mine?"

Images flashed in his mind, the result of his concentration and touch upon her. A bright, full moon, blankets of snow on the Laybet Mountains. Things cold, beautiful, bound in winter.

It was how she saw him in her mind, and his breathing slowed even as he felt hers speed up.

“Would you fear me, Castil?” he repeated.

She closed her eyes, dark lashes like fans on her cheeks. “No,” she whispered against his descending mouth. “I would welcome you.”

He kissed her, swallowing her sigh. She tasted of tea sweetened with honey, and her lips were soft under his, welcoming. His spirit despaired at the knowledge that the wife chosen for him would never respond to him the way the wife he would have chosen for himself did now.

His hands settled on her hips to pull her closer when the sound of familiar voices calling his name brought him to his senses.

Castil also heard the calls and wrenched out of his arms. Doranis’s frustrated groan at the unwelcome interruption and her sudden withdrawal carried through the small temple. She stared at him, her gaze anguished. Bright flags of color raced across her cheekbones, and her lips were damp from his kiss.

The voices grew louder, closer, sharp and alarmed as they searched the streets for the missing king. Doranis resisted the temptation to pull Castil back to him.

“This is wrong,” she whispered, her voice and face stricken with remorse. “You are marrying Kareena.”

And how unfortunate was that for both him and his future bride? “She and I would have it otherwise.”

She clasped the small garland to her chest and backed away from him. “It cannot be otherwise. Today is your wedding day, and my closest friend will be your wife.”

His gaze strayed to the token of good luck. “I won’t apologize for something I don’t regret, Castil. Such a thing rings false, and this is no love match. Why do you suffer such guilt?”

Tears edged her lower lids, and she blinked them back. “Because I would rage at this, were I Kareena.”

He reached for her, but she held up a hand to ward him off. “Your people call for you, Your Majesty. May the gods bless your union.”

She peeked around him a second time before scampering down the steps of the temple to disappear among the overgrown hedgerow. Her scent—of sunshine and salt air—remained, teasing his nostrils and lingering in his memory even as he bound himself to a woman who despised him. Even as he sailed homeward the following day.



DORANIS STRETCHED out a hand to gently stroke his child’s dark hair. The baby lay against the wet nurse’s breast, nearly asleep. Marcilun shifted impatiently behind him, awaiting his next command. “See to it that her possessions are placed in one of the south chambers. There’s more light in those rooms.”

He glided his fingers through Joris’s wispy hair once more before leaving the nursery for the icy corridors. His steps barely whispered on the flagstone floor. Cold wall torches lit with green witchfire, lighting his path to the solar.

Kareena’s solar still held all her possessions. Servants had arrived earlier to light the fire in the hearth and deliver in a pot of tea and cups. The solitary occupant in the room had her back to him, and Doranis paused to enjoy the peaceful tableau of her warming her hands at the hearth fire. By custom, it fell to a lowly minister to greet guests and see to the their initial comfort. But he wanted to see her again, gaze upon her smiling face and discern whether or not the longing he had for her was returned.

She was even lovelier than he remembered, with the firelight playing across her flushed features and her dark hair tamed in a bun at her neck. He closed the door behind him, the snick of wood on wood alerting her to his presence. Hot blood rushed into his groin at her wide, welcoming smile. Her eyes revealed a hunger quickly smothered behind a more guarded gaze, but he had seen it, felt its caress before she bowed and greeted him a deceptively cool voice.

“I am honored, Your Majesty.”

He closed the distance between them and clasped her warm hand in his. Her fingers twitched in his grasp when he brushed a delicate kiss across the back of her knuckles. She gently pulled her hand free, but not before he felt its tremble.

“Welcome to Helenrisia, Madam il Veras,” he said. “You honor us with your presence.”

She laughed. “I’m so glad to hear it, Sire.” Her next words, uttered with such heartfelt eagerness, were a harsh reminder for why she had traveled so far, and why they stood in this particular room. “I’m looking forward to this visit. When may I see Kareena?”

EVEN CUT SO DEEPLY into the mountain, away from the hard biting wind and squalls of snow, the burial vault of the kings was frigid. As if pulled by an invisible lodestone, Castil walked past the line of marble effigies. Ancient Helenese kings and queens, immortalized in stone, lined the walls, their features captured in timeless repose. Among them, a delicate woman of the south rested in eternal sleep.

Castil halted at the line's end, and a sob caught in her throat. Were it not for the size and color of the statue, she could almost believe she faced a living Kareena. The sculptor had performed magic with his chisel—the stone woman who faced her was the perfect avatar for the queen. Like the other statues, Kareena's wore the ceremonial burial robes, standing with her arms crooked, elbows against her chest. Her hands faced outward, cupped to hold a gold urn containing her ashes.

Castil traced the hard edges of the statue's robes with one finger. "My friend," she whispered, "how I miss you." A small draft, cold and sweetened with sea rose blossom, buffeted her gently, blowing strands of her hair across her face in a light caress.

She wasn't a superstitious sort, though she did believe in spirits who lingered among the living for a short while until some task was completed or a grieving loved one comforted enough to resume the task of living. If asked, Castil would swear the companion of her youth hovered near her, glad for her company.

“Again you find me here, pestering your sleep with the dull details of my day.” A faint faraway laughter chimed like bells. “I visited your son moments ago. Joris is a beautiful child, Kareena. I see you and Doranis in his small features.” A mournful sigh replaced the laughter, and Castil grew ever more certain she was not alone among the monuments of the voiceless dead.

Such knowledge didn’t frighten her. She found comfort in knowing something of her friend lingered here, not yet beyond the reach of the living. That comfort was mixed with no small guilt, and Castil drew back from the statue.

“I’ve been here two months now. The ships return in two more, bringing their goods to trade. I return home then.” Again, that ethereal sigh drifted to her ear, and she shivered. “’Tis a good thing, for I must confess my failure to you.” Remorse made it difficult to speak. “I have fallen in love with the king, Kareena.”

Somehow she expected a bitter howling, an angry blast of frigid air that would spin her off her feet. But her statement was met with silence, a deepening quiet that waited for her next words. “He is a...” She spread her hands, palms up. “...a man like no other.” She sensed amusement at her words and smiled in return. “Beyond the obvious, of course.” Her smile faded. “He consoled me when the news of your death nearly brought me to my knees, opened his library to me as a way to distract me from my grief, allowed me to hold your sweet son and visit you here.”

Castil began to pace, the brush of her gown against the floor sounded loud in the vault. “I confessed to you my indiscretion at the temple. I did our friendship a disservice. But this is worse, far worse.” She faced the statue again. “I think of him constantly, look forward to his company when he joins me in the library. He’s a hard man, Kareena, but kind beneath that cold exterior. I’ve seen him with Joris, and he’s a proud, loving father.”

The scent of sea rose blossom teased her nostrils once more. “I will miss you when I return to Caskadan, but it’s been hard to resist his allure, and I long for the peace of my dull

existence at home. You're gone, and Joris is in good hands. I'm not needed here."

Silence gathered around her and Castil swiped at the tears trickling down her cheeks. "I am so sorry, Kareena. I haven't been much of a friend to you lately, dear one. He was yours." She turned away from the effigy, her steps dragging as she made her way to the stairs, so lost within her thoughts that she didn't hear the otherworldly whisper behind her.

"And now he is yours, my dearest friend."

Castil returned to the fortress's upper levels, both relieved and troubled by her confession. It felt right to say aloud what had weighed heavily in her thoughts—an acknowledgement of her feelings for Doranis. Such feelings changed little. Not long from now she would board a trading vessel bound for Caskadan, and forget her time here with the pale magus king.

The corridors leading to her room were almost temperate compared to the temperatures of the vault. Her cheeks were numb with cold, and she hurried to her chambers, eager to change into heavier clothing and linger by a roaring fire. She passed one of the many closed doors lining the cloister and paused at the sound of familiar voices and the ring of metal on metal.

"Come, old man. I could match you in my sleep." Doranis's deep tones reverberated through the wood, causing Castil's hands to curl in reaction. Again the sound of steel striking steel echoed, and she could picture the scene, having once stumbled upon it when she first arrived in Helenrisia.

The king engaged in swordplay with his weapons master. Her mouth had fallen open the first time she witnessed Doranis sparring with Etane. Both were stripped to the waist, skin glistening with sweat as they circled each other like wary cats, the curving blades of their swords flashing in the torchlight as they came together in a mock dance of death.

Castil had paid no attention to Etane, her eyes riveted to the arresting sight of a shirtless Doranis. Though tall and slim, he was a study in hard muscle and sinew, his chest and abdomen flexing as he dodged the swinging arc of his

opponent's blade or attacked with his own. Silvery lines of perspiration streamed off his skin, and his white hair lay tangled on his shoulders.

She knew if she opened the door this time, a similar sight would again greet her, and Doranis would smile in that smug way when he caught her ogling him. An abrupt hiss of pain, followed by Etane's gloating response of, "Old man, am I?," made her lips twitch in amusement, and she continued on her way.

Her maid awaited her, clucking her disapproval as she helped Castil remove her thin cloak and dress. "Down in the vaults again, I see. If you insist on lingering there, you should at least dress for it."

Castil chuckled at the admonishment. "I didn't think I would be so long."

The maid, a young girl named Thesla, tossed her dress in a basket for laundering. "That is the coldest place within the fortress. You would be warmer standing out in the courtyard in your shift." She stripped Castil down to a thin chemise and handed her a fur pelt to wrap around herself. Castil huddled within it, standing as close to the hearth fire as was safe to stay warm.

A mischievous glitter entered Thesla's eyes. "Do you know the way to the mineral baths?"

She did. Numerous natural hot springs dotted the landscape, most of them dangerous because of the boiling temperatures of the water. There were a few, however, that were no hotter than bath water. Two lay just outside the fortress and the Helenese were fond of frolicking in them on days when the weather was clear. This wasn't one of those days. "That holds no temptation for me today, Thesla. The wind outside would freeze armor."

The maid shook her head. "No, not the common baths." She raised the lid of the chest at the end of Castil's bed to pull out a thick cloth and a heavy frock trimmed in fur. "There's a small spring here, in the depths of the fortress, like the vaults. But it's warmer there and reserved for the royal family."

The idea of relaxing in a pool of heated water not exposed to the outside elements had its appeal, especially now as she continued to shiver beneath the fur pelt. Still, Thesla said it belonged to the royal family, and she was not one of its members.

“I think not. I don’t wish to cause offense by intruding where I don’t belong.” She gestured for the frock. “It would be best if I just dressed.”

Thesla held the garment out of her reach. “You’re a guest of the king, madam. The springs are open to you.” Her voice turned coaxing. “Try them. You’ve been here two months now and never experienced the baths. Trust me. It’s something not to be missed.”

A little more cajoling from the maid and Castil soon found herself back out in the corridors, her dry cloth and frock in hand. Following Thesla’s directions, she found the chamber housing the spring.

The cloister wound downward and back, cutting deep into the heart of the mountain. Green witchfire flickering in the torches lining the walls lit her way, giving the hall a ghostly, iridescent glow. This was the product of magic, and the light gave off no heat as she paused, passing her hand over one of the emerald flames.

She had seen such things in her time here in Helenrisia. The country bordered the Wastelands, its warped magic an awesome, living thing felt by all the denizens of the north. Nearly everyone she met could perform some small enchantment as the residual effects of ancient forces bled across the forbidden borders, touching upon anyone living nearby. Hel’s king was the most obvious recipient of its power.

Unlike her own people, the Helenese didn’t find his appearance so strange or frightening. Castil had wondered about it until a few conversations enlightened her. It was Thesla who revealed the cause of Doranis’s coloration, or lack thereof, and his skill with the many enchantments he could perform.

“His mother was abducted, you know.” She worked with Castil to fold back the bed linens and run the warming pan across the cold sheets.

“Abducted? By whom?”

“The Bahauran, when she carried His Majesty in her belly. My mother says the old king went nearly mad with rage.”

Bahauran. Legendary denizens of the Wastelands. Descendents of the vanished Elders, they lived in the frozen, ruined cities, surrounded by the magic that twisted their bodies over eons of time. But where it took, it also gave back. There were tales told in scrolls and around campfires as far south as the Sedbar Islands, of the great sorcerers who lived in the ancient and forbidden Wastelands.

“Why would they kidnap the queen?”

The girl shrugged. “No one knows. She was returned four days later, her memory of her time among them gone. But you see what that sojourn did?”

Castil nodded, her brow knitted. The prince had been marked before his birth by his mother’s capture. He was a magus king now, like and yet unlike the Bahauran. Leached of all color as they were, with the power of the Wastelands coming easily to him, he was neither misshapen nor mad. His people, who lived within the shadow of the forbidden territory, accepted him easily enough. It was only outside their borders that the fear abided, the uneasiness at gazing upon a man so obviously graced with an ancient and mysterious force.

The green light brightened when Castil neared a door surrounded by numerous small torches. The hinges squeaked in protest as she opened it and stepped inside. Her delighted inhalation echoed in the chamber at the sight of a large bubbling spring, nearly hidden within swathing veils of steam drifting off the water. Narrow steps cut into the floor descended into the pool to disappear from view under the water.

The chamber housing the spring was vast, with sloping tunnels that disappeared farther into the belly of the mountain.

A skilled painter had depicted scenes of Helenese life on some of the smoother walls, and heavy tapestries covered portions of the floor to cushion one's feet. It was a sumptuous place, especially among the more austere surroundings of the Frozen Maiden.

Castil placed her dry cloth, tunic and shoes in a neat pile on one of the rugs before shrugging out of her robe and chemise. Without the protection of the garments, she shuddered from the damp chill. The water looked inviting, and she dipped her toe in to test its warmth. It was hot, but not so hot as to scald, and the effervescent bubbling tickled her feet. She descended the steps and sank into the water with a happy sigh.

An amused, throaty voice shattered her assumption that she was alone. "That certainly took you long enough."

Castil yelped, startled by the unexpected company. Her heart pounded in her chest. She sank lower into the water and discovered Doranis swimming lazily toward her, his white skin flushed a pale rose from the heat. His light eyes were narrowed with laughter and something else as he waded closer to her.

"You-you-your Majesty," she stammered, "you scared me. I thought I was alone."

He circled her in a lazy lap around the pool, the motion emphasizing his muscled back and arms as he slid through the water. "Forgive me, Castil. It wasn't my intention to frighten you."

She tracked his movements, pivoting so she always faced him. The water was cloudy, but offered very little modesty. And he certainly got an eyeful when she undressed, unaware that he lurked in the pool, watching. His eyes, lit with a faint, mocking humor, assured her of that particular truth.

"You should have spoken sooner." She scolded him, her voice severe. "Sire," she added in grudging tones.

Doranis laughed, swimming ever closer to her in diminishing circles. "Indeed? And why is that? I was treated to

the most beautiful sight. A lovely woman descending into a bath is a blessing of the gods, Castil il Veras.”

A hard ache settled beneath her ribs at his words. She knew her strengths. Intelligent, practical and friendly; these were all the things given to her at birth, traits of which she was proud. But beauty was not among them. “Plain as an unfinished door,” some of her less sensitive relatives had said, and she had come to accept that a lack of beauty combined with a lack of wealth would leave her locked from the marriage market. For who among the boyars would want a homely, dowerless scribes woman? Such a future had never bothered her. Until now.

She looked beyond him to the ripple and slope of a rock wall at the chamber’s far end, her voice tense. “Why do you say these things?” She felt the water still.

Small waves lapped gently around her as he drew close, his chest to her back. He leaned down to caress her throat with his fingertips, tendrils of his long white hair ghosting over her shoulder to leave rivulets of water trickling past her collarbone. A roiling flutter of heat erupted in her belly, spreading to her thighs when he curved his hands over her shoulders.

“I say them because they’re true. You are the grace of all women. I have wanted you since you first translated my insignia.” His hands dripped water into her hair, and she felt the wetness of his cheek as he bent to kiss the soft skin at her temple. “I watch you, dream of you. Shall I tell you of my dreams? How I awake in the night, covered in sweat, my thighs wet with my own seed because I was lost in the illusion of thrusting between your sweet thighs? Tasting your skin?”

The slide of his tongue along the curve of her ear sent heat sizzling through her blood, and Castil jerked forward, an involuntary response to the sensual caress. Doranis snaked an arm around her waist, splaying long fingers across her belly to steady her. She stared downward, hypnotized by the sight of the narrow white hand resting against her skin.

“You have beautiful hair,” he whispered. His fingers fluttered against her abdomen while his other hand wrapped tendrils of her hair around his wrist, bringing it gently to his nose to inhale its fragrance.

Castil didn’t move, transfixed by the softly spoken words and the knowledge that he was slowly making love to her through the husky vibrations of his voice and the deep sounds of his breathing against her flesh. His free hand released her hair, only to skim along her hip and down her leg, making her shiver.

The weight of his scrutiny rested heavy on her, measuring, assessing the shape of her body, partially concealed by the hazy water. His lovely words made her reel, yet she wondered if he compared her plainness to memories of Kareena’s beauty or to other lovers who once shared his bed.

He put her silent musings to rest when he traced a finger down her spine, leaving chills in its wake. “My dreams were as nothing to this reality. You are more beautiful than I could have imagined,” he murmured.

Castil’s eyelids slid shut, her ability to reason, to think, even to talk, obliterated by the touch of his hands on her body, the whisper of his voice in her ear.

So aroused by his seduction, she jumped when his hands gripped her hips, pulling her hard against him. Whatever doubts she had regarding his desire for her evaporated. His erection nudged the cleft of her buttocks, unmistakable proof that he wanted her with the same desperation she craved him. She responded by parting her legs and rubbing against him. He rewarded her with a drawn out groan, his fingers digging into her flesh.

Her breathing shortened to pants as one of those graceful hands slid upward, across her ribs, to stroke one of her breasts. She gasped, arching her back as he lightly abraded her nipple. Oh sweet Mother! She wouldn’t survive this!

He soothed her with slow caresses, all the while running his tongue along the outer curve of her ear. “Shh, fair Castil. This is only the beginning.”

Whether threat or promise, he followed through, teasing her until she danced on the edge of an orgasm and begged him for mercy. He scooped her into his arms and waded up the steps and out of the pool. The rug under her back was rough, but she didn't care. Doranis loomed over her, big, aroused, desire written in every line of his body and every sharp angle of his face. The lines bracketing either side of his mouth deepened, and his pale eyes gleamed like banked coals. Her lips parted instinctively as his head tipped towards her, giving silent welcome as his tongue slid into her mouth, invading and plunging, even as he ground his hips against hers.

She felt more than heard the heavy groan emanating from his chest as she slid her hands around his back and down to his buttocks, curving her hands over the tight muscles. He continued to ravage her mouth and she was lost in wet, suctioning heat as he sucked on her tongue and nibbled lightly on her lower lip.

Doranis broke the breath-stealing kiss to lower his face to her breasts. Castil moaned and rocked against him as he teased her nipples with his tongue, making her arch upward in a silent appeal for more.

His voice painted spells on her skin. "You like this?"

She buried her hands in his wet hair, cupping his head to hold him closer. "Yes," she murmured, the word becoming a rhythmic chant as he suckled her with rapacious greed. He dragged her into a whirlpool of frenetic desire and sexual frenzy where nothing existed save the feel of lean muscle, the wetness of a ravening mouth and the swell of his erection riding between her thighs.

Doranis slowly pulled away from her, breathing in slow, deep gasps. He wrapped an arm around her hips, tightening the embrace between them that melded her pelvis to his. "Gods," he breathed, "you cradle me well."

She whispered his name when he slid inside her, implored gods when he set a rhythm that had her clutching his shoulders. His sounds of pleasure mimicked hers, gaining in volume until his back arched and his eyes rolled back, and he

held still against her as his climax rolled through him. The sensual rub of his pelvis on just the right spot insured she followed him soon after, her legs squeezing his hips so tight, he grunted in protest.

Wet with water and sweat and gasping for breath, he eased his full weight onto her before rolling them both to their sides. Castil scraped away the hair stuck to his forehead while trying to calm her own breathing. She mapped the planes of his face with one finger, noticing for the first time the way his pupils dominated his irises, turning his eyes almost black.

“I think my maid suspected this might happen when she sent me here,” she said after a few moments of contented silence.

Doranis grinned and tilted his head so he could kiss her fingertip. “Who is this maid so that I may reward her wisdom and elevate her to grand lady?”

Castil chortled and pressed herself against him, luxuriating in such an indulgence. “That would set the tongues wagging in your court.”

One muscular shoulder lifted in a shrug. “I am king. Whom I choose to raise in status is my prerogative.”

“Being monarch certainly has its rewards,” she teased.

“And its punishments.” He cupped her buttocks to nestle her even closer, and his features sobered. “You will come to my bed, and there will be no sleep for either of us this night.”

She traced the thin bridge of his nose. “Are you asking or commanding, Sire?”

Doranis’s eyes narrowed. “Which will bring you most readily to my chambers?”

“What do you think?” Castil was confident in his answer. He was neither tyrannical nor stupid.

His eyes drifted shut for a moment. When he opened them again, she swore she saw eternity in their depths. “Will you share my bed, Castil il Veras?”

“Yes,” she said and captured his mouth in a brief kiss. “I will. This night and all nights that you will welcome me there.”

EARLY MORNING DARKNESS still blanketed his bedroom when Doranis woke the first time from a deep sleep. He rolled onto his side, reaching for the sleek, warm body of his lover. His eyes snapped open when his hands found empty space, and he peered into the shadows of his room, trying to locate Castil. Shuffling noises from his bathing room reassured him that she had left his bed only to answer nature's call. He dragged her pillow close and pressed his face into its softness, content simply to inhale her scent while he waited for her return.

Some might say he was obsessed, consumed by a craving for a plain, unremarkable woman who didn't compare with the stunning beauties of the Helenese court, or even the foreign infantas who vied for the position of second wife and royal consort. Doranis paid no attention to their puzzled conjectures. Castil il Veras was the summer sun to him—warm, beautiful, sometimes painfully intense.

He jealously guarded the brief, private hours he reserved for her during the day in the library, and all soon learned that to disturb him during those moments incited an icy, formidable anger. She was good company, lighthearted and quick to laugh when he told her a humorous tale or offered some caustic, witty comment that sometimes made her gasp or choke on a giggle. She handled herself with confidence among the nobility of his own court, as much at home there as she had been among the Caskadanian boyars.

After their heated interlude by the spring, their relationship took a decided turn. There was no returning to the guarded,

simmering longing that always lurked beneath the surface when they dealt with each other. Doranis knew of her continued visits to the burial vault, the shadow of guilt that sometimes lurked in her gray eyes, but it didn't stop her from embracing him with the same insatiable hunger he felt for her.

In the weeks that followed their first coupling, he took her numerous times, introducing her to the many joys of lovemaking. Long days of craving her were punctuated by even longer nights of loving her. As the winter days lengthened with the approach of spring, his need for her remained sharp, lingering. It went beyond the realm of the physical, for he thrived in her presence, was cheered by the simple pleasure of her sitting next to him in the library, reading through a scroll. And there was no doubting that she loved Joris, as much for the fact that he was a sweet child as that he was Kareena's son.

Doranis drifted off to sleep again, waiting for her to return, and it was much later that he awakened, the sun having risen at least two hours earlier. Castil was not beside him, but he shrugged off the uneasy feeling that began to blossom. It was likely that she'd returned to her rooms.

His disquiet only increased as the hours passed and he caught no glimpse of her in his daily routine. And when she didn't appear for their usual meeting in the library, his disquiet became full-blown alarm. He strode out of the room and headed for the burial vaults, praying he'd find her there. It was silent as always, no living soul to keep the dead monarchs company on that day. The two nursemaids jumped in unison when he burst into Joris's nursery, his eyes bright with rage.

"Have you seen Madam il Veras?" he snapped and they stared at him in confusion and no little fear.

One, a woman named Ursa, placed the baby gently in his bed and turned back to the angered king, her expression bewildered. "I thought you knew, Sire. She stopped here this morning to say goodbye to the babe before joining the caravan leaving for the docks."

Doranis turned abruptly on his heel, closing the door quietly behind him so as not to frighten his son.

The servants weren't spared. They flattened themselves against the walls as he passed them, frightened by the savage anger on the king's pallid features.

The caravans! He wanted to bellow his rage, slam his fist into the nearest door, or blister the ears of the woman who suddenly decided this morning to rip his heart out of his chest and carry it off with her.

A servant, suffering from unfortunate timing, crossed his path as he strode to his chambers.

"You," Doranis snarled, and the man blanched in terror. "Get to the stables and have them ready Peresil." He didn't bother to watch the man sprint down the corridor as if demons snapped at his heels.

Minutes later the king slammed into the stables, cloaked and hooded, his eyes outlined in the customary kohl to protect them from snow blindness. "Where is Peresil?" he roared, growing more furious and panicked as time slipped through his fingers, and the trade caravans rolled ever closer to the docks.

A groom rushed out from the safety of one of the stalls, the big bay stallion trotting behind him. He barely had time to leap out of the way before the king vaulted into the saddle and kicked the horse into a hard gallop through the open stable doors.

Peresil flew across the snow-covered terrain, sure-footed and quick. Soon, the tail end of the caravan came into view, a straggling, haphazard line of wagons and shaggy mountain ponies dusted in a light snowfall.

Surprised exclamations and welcoming cries greeted Doranis when many of the Helenese recognized their monarch racing toward them. Wagons slowed to a creaking stop, ponies brought up short on their reins as the tradesmen halted to bow their respects. Doranis gave a quick nod, his kohl-darkened

eyes sweeping the line of carts in search of a small, dark-haired woman.

“Castil il Veras!” he shouted. “Show yourself!”

A short, uneasy silence reigned before Castil, wrapped in her thin southern cloak and scarves, jumped down from the back of one of the enclosed wagons and walked slowly toward him. Her eyes were both sad and questioning. She bowed briefly.

“To what do I owe this honor, Your Majesty?”

He guided Peresil closer, leaned down and lifted her into the saddle to sit in front of him. The caravan leader gawked at them for a moment, then shrugged and set the wagons to moving once more. Whatever went on between the king and his foreign consort was no concern of his. He had goods to deliver.

Doranis rode a short distance away before stopping. He dismounted and reached up to help Castil off the stallion. She stood before him, clutching her shawl tightly around her, unwilling to meet his eyes. He huffed out an impatient exhalation and whipped his cloak off to shroud her in its warmth. “You have no business wearing that useless scrap of wool in weather like this. This isn’t Caskadan. You would have frozen before you reached the docks.”

She snuggled into the heavy garment. A tiny smile touched her lips before fading. “So you’re rescuing me then.”

“From your own wrong assumptions? Yes.” His fury swelled once more. “How dare you,” he said, the words bitter and pained.

She paled, and tears made her gray eyes glossy. “I never wanted to hurt you, Doranis, but I don’t belong here. My home is to the south, my place at a scribe’s table.”

His frustrated growl made Peresil shy away from him. “Your home is here, your place with me.” He flung out a hand toward the distant fortress. “Why won’t you make your peace with Kareena? She is dead, Castil,” he snapped. “I meant

nothing to her. Why do you persist in this unwarranted guilt? In thinking you've somehow betrayed her?"

"You're her husband!"

"I'm her widower!"

They stared at each other, locked at an impasse until Castil blew out a resigned breath.

"This isn't just about Kareena, Sire," she said in much gentler tones. "This is about you." His eyebrows shot up. "You are a king, widowed yet still bound. To your country and your station. As I am to mine. You must marry again, a woman of high status. I can't bear to see that. I refuse to."

Doranis gaped at her, the relief surging through him so euphoric, it almost made his knees buckle. So that was it. Foolish, foolish woman; one he loved more than life itself. He grasped her shoulders, torn between the need to embrace her and the desire to shake her. He cupped her face instead, her cheeks warm under his cold hands, her expression anguished.

"You're partially right. I am bound to Helenrisia, but as king, I've fulfilled my duty to the line. I married for my country, gave it another heir. The woman I next take to wife will be of my choosing, and she's an untrusting sort. Lovely but quick to judge and find me wanting." He offered her a wry smile. "Still, I find myself loving her despite her doubts impugning my character."

The tears welling on her lower lids spilled over to drip down her cheeks. Doranis gathered her into his arms, and she sobbed. He stroked her back, talking to her while she sniffled into his shirt. "We're going to freeze out here in no time. You'll return home with me to the Maiden," he said in his most imperious tones.

That did exactly what he hoped. The crying stopped and the tears dried. She stepped back, sniffled some more and raised her chin in a defiant gesture.

"Are you asking or commanding?"

His lips twitched. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying, the tip of her nose equally crimson. He had never

known a more beautiful woman. “Which will most readily bring you home with me?”

This time it was she who drew him into a fierce embrace and pressed an equally fierce kiss to his mouth. “Either one,” she said when they came up for air. “Home is where you are.”

EPILOGUE

CASTIL COULD HARDLY CONTAIN her excitement when the *Estarta* sailed into the harbor, her hull sitting low in the water with the weight of her goods. From her vantage point on the pier, Castil spotted a figure standing on the deck, waving frantically. She waved back, laughing with joy as her father greeted her from his place at the ship's.

“He won't approve of our current arrangement.”

She glanced over her shoulder at Doranis who stood behind her, his features half hidden by the hood he wore. Despite the protective covering, he still squinted against the bright sun flashing off the surface of the water.

“You are king,” she said. “What can he say?”

He snorted. “And he is your father. Were I him, I'd insist that you be moved to another bedchamber entirely until we are wed.”

She laughed. “Well then, mayhap you will finally awaken in *my* bed for once.”

His smile was mischievous, full of promise. “I am certain that can be arranged.” He rested his hand on her waist, pulling her back until she leaned against him, and they both watched as the *Estarta* cut through the waves toward them. The sea air was cool, heavy with the scent of salt and fish. Doranis stiffened for a moment, surprised by the gentle breeze that seemed to swirl around them. He sniffed audibly. “Do you smell that? It's familiar, though I know no such flower grows here.”

Melancholy danced with joy inside Castil. “It’s sea rose blossom,” she said. “Kareena’s favorite scent. A blessing and a farewell, I think.” She flared her nostrils to catch the fast fading perfume.

“Fair journey, my beloved friend. And thank you.”

~END~

ABOUT GRACE

Grace Draven is a Louisiana native living in Texas with her husband, kids and a big, doofus dog. She has loved storytelling since forever and is a fan of the fictional bad boy. She is the winner of the Romantic Times Reviewers Choice for Best Fantasy Romance of 2015 and a USA Today Bestselling author.

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