

Icen Talberry nocked his arrow, a slow breath entering his lungs. Sunlight danced, splattered with the haze of agitated dust and dry grass from the ground. Beyond his conscience, the roar of the crowd cheered on the combatants. With careful timing, he pulled the string taut, releasing his breath when he let the arrow fly.

“Direct hit!” the marksman yelled with the resounding ‘thwack’ of impact.

He faced his competitor, the only one still standing. Ahn. “Your turn, darling.”

“You’re going to eat those words,” she muttered. Dark as the lake, her eyes glistened in the sunshine, revealing none, if any, of her nervousness. His mouth twitched, anticipating the outcome. Ahn Asaris was a phenomenal archer and he anticipated her challenges with relish.

Icen had yet to lose to her.

She took her stance at his side, her breathing as measured and schooled as his own had been. Long, wheat gold hair flowed like a river down her back. Sinewy strength was hidden beneath her garb, but he knew she was more than any other could guess at. The breeze flitted through the long strands of her hair, draping them over her shoulders and ears, their delicate shape only one of the many aspects he found arousing about her. From the deep velvet color of her eyes, to the soft delicacy of her lips, he’d adored Ahn from afar for ages. She was the Earl’s daughter. Regardless of how perfect her skills or how much he respected those skills, he could never have her.

He traced the edge of her jaw with his gaze, unable to look away from her perfection. She stood to roughly his chin, her youthful face belying her strength of will. She was a formidable woman. Ahn was her father’s daughter. The imagined taste of her skin, of her lips had kept him awake many nights, usually after a meeting such as today, when she would smile at him, or if he should hear her laugh. No other woman could match her.

When she lowered her bow, he blinked. He hoped he hadn’t disturbed her attempt. *Liar*. Icen wanted to do more than disturb the beautiful elf before him. What he wanted shouldn’t even be spoken, but he thought it, and often.

“A wager,” she told him, her voice husky. Lashes lowered over her eyes, though

she didn't look toward him.

Icen nodded. "A wager, though you know you can't beat my mark." What was the point of challenging him now?

"I can," she replied with an assurance that sent a sharp shiver striding down his spine. "Do you accept?"

His breath hitched hard when the merest peek of her tongue touched her bottom lip. He'd give her the world if she would ask.

"I do," he managed, mesmerized by the movement of her lips. "The wager?"

"A kiss."

His heart did stop then. Fearing he hadn't heard her right, he asked, "A kiss?"

She frowned. "Is it that repugnant of an idea?" she demanded. Color splashed over her cheeks.

He leaned closer, whispering into her ear, though it was only he and she at the line. "A kiss would only be the beginning, Ahn, because I would not be able to stop at your lips."

"Then I hope you can handle losing this round, Icen," she informed him. "Because that kiss is mine."

With hardly a second's hesitation, she righted her bow, poised her arrow and let it fly.

He whirled, watching the fluid actions, his heart beating behind his ribs. A split second later, she accomplished the unimaginable.

Her arrow sliced the shaft of his in half! The feathered end waivered then settled in the bale in the distance. His lay in shattered chips on the ground.

Icen stared dumbfounded, gaping. Cheers rolled over them, but all he could hear was the sound of his own heart thudding. "You..."

"I know."

Her calm threw him for a stunned moment. "You know?"

Ahn nodded, pleasure warming her face now as she looked up at him through thick, golden lashes. "I've been able to for some time."

“How long?”

“Long enough to know I was growing impatient waiting for you.”

“What?”

“Icen,” she murmured. The light touch of her fingers on his chin made his heart melt and his body harden. “I love you. This was the only way I knew I could reach you. The only way I knew you’d notice me. You refused to see me as a woman who could love you.”

“Because you are the Earl’s daughter.”

“*Exactly* because I am his daughter.” Her gaze ghosted over him, touching him expectantly. Slowly, the warmth seeped from her eyes. Icen’s world had tipped. Ahn loved him? “Very well, I will not hold you to the wager. It was only a kiss.”

A smile bloomed, and he captured her hand, halting her retreat. “No, you can’t escape your wager. You made it. You must honor it.”

Ahn paused. Wide-eyed, her head tilted. Sliding his bow over a shoulder to hang, he cupped her face in tender palms, thrilling at the contact of her skin to his. How long had he waited just for this moment?

“I’ve known for years that I love you Ahn.” Shock registered in her sudden gasp. Not that he could blame her. He’d hid it for so long. There was an unmistakable elation now to finally tell her. “I meant what I said. A kiss will only be the beginning.” He leaned forward until his forehead rested on hers, staring into the bottomless oceans of her eyes.

Hot pants of desire flowed over his lips. “Icen, please,” she whispered. He groaned. She trembled and he closed the distance between them.

“Never beg, love.” Then he lowered until his lips hovered over hers. “I love you.”

Silk and sweetness, her lips met his and everything he’d ever wanted, ever dreamed about the woman became obliterated by the real jewel he held within his palms.