

Prologue

It was the dream, the merciless attack on his sleep Morgan couldn't avoid. Unconscious, he craved it, though he silently decried it and its meaning when awake in the light of day. The nameless goddess had plagued Morgan for over a month. A woman of uncommon beauty, with eyes the color of the darkest green, like the dew-kissed nettles of a mountain fir tree. Helpless in his sleep, he tossed restlessly as the image of the woman enthralled him, made his blood sing, creating sparks of flaring desire that never really faded.

Within the hidden secrets of his dream, the silken sweep of her lustrous hair seared his thighs. The long ebony tresses defied its own darkness, glinting a red and gold fire in the full moonlight slicing into his room, as though there were flames hidden within the heavy fall of midnight. A wild, untamable fire flowed through her, moved with her. Even in a dream, the surging heat lingered under his skin, everywhere she caressed and teased him. He tasted it in the air. When she moved, her hair swayed with a scalloped motion, a natural wave that called out to him to touch, to worship. He followed it hungrily, feasting on all of her like a starving man.

This woman had become an enticement, a temptress of unfulfilled desire as he slept. She beckoned to him, calling to him not by name but by a word—*mine*. The one word was all she ever said, a seductive whisper winding over his ear, a sultry sound that made him ache and reach for her.

His goddess would appear slowly, only her eyes, as if his vision were panning out, opening wider to enjoy her completely. Her features focused until he could see her entire face, smooth fair skin crowned with the full, rich midnight and fire of her hair. Delicate features, high cheekbones forming to a lush mouth, parted with the promises of passion. She glided over him with a graceful presence as he hungered for the next moments of the dream. After so long, he knew what to expect, and she didn't fail him.

Her body was long and lean, supple hot flesh, arching and writhing beneath his fingers. She brought the same burning hunger he carried when she invaded his dreams. Long red nails, sharp but purposely teasing, brought him to a fever pitch, stroking, holding, tempting. The sensations were electric, tightening his skin until it was almost painful to breathe. He never questioned her weight as she rose over him, taking him deep inside of her heat, like a velvet caress. It was a dream but it was so good. She would cry out and he would moan in pleasure as they met, the length of her hair singeing the heated skin of his thighs with her rocking movements. He quivered when she raked his stomach with her nails, her green depths blazing with possessive ecstasy, daring him, challenging him. Demanding he fulfill her every wish.

Morgan would exist in his dream, fall into the between world of real and make-believe willingly. Regrets would be for later, when he lacked sleep and the cold stab of deception mocked him. Right now, he imagined every word, every caress, every desire he knew he wanted. Desires she wanted from him, that together they wanted to share. Her cries filled his ears, her spine bowed tight, moonlight streaking over luscious breasts like a beautiful offering to the gods. Rocking over him, he would revel in the fire burning between them. Smooth skin would flow like heaven beneath his fingers, heat roaring up his arms to settle in his chest with every caress.

Until he couldn't take any more. Until he was thrusting his hips, dying to feel her rapture. Needing to bury himself inside her silken sheath, wrapped intimately by her. An ecstasy in itself.

Morgan awoke, snapping straight up in bed, the images crystal clear in his mind as his body finished what had started in the dream. He groaned thickly as a fierce orgasm ripped over him, his hips clenching in release unable to stop the result of her nightly visit. Clutching cool sheets in shaking fists, snarling his frustration with a loud echo into the dark room, his head reared back at the cruel misleading vision of passion.

Because he was alone.

The green-eyed vixen who had tortured him for over a month was not there, and never had been.

He tore the twisted, sweat-soaked sheets away from heated, naked skin, the keen disappointment like a scorching, stabbing knife. A heated blade he was familiar with and wished he weren't. Rising, he stalked to the open window of his bedroom glaring out into the unforgiving Oregon sky.

His heart pounded behind his ribs. If he breathed deep enough, Morgan could find the scent of her skin, of her heat surrounding him. On him. He gripped the window mercilessly, wanting to throw his head back and howl with rage.

None of this made sense to him. Morgan had never met the woman of his dream. There was no name for the goddess of seduction who came to him with an unerring nightly appearance. A woman who tortured him with an unbelievable body and a voice that spoke of promise and pleasure. With one word, she invited him. With only one word, she seduced him. Every night.

He breathed deeply of the late summer air flowing over him, the cooling breezes of the night's darkness soothing his stressed sex. Gradually, his reaction to the dream faded. His tensed muscles relaxed until he could stand at his full height without animalistic need clawing through him, without the desire to be sated spearing him with a viciousness never experienced in his lifetime. The breeze entering his home through the window danced over cooling skin, teasing shoulder length black hair, raising a ghost of the sparking touch he had yet to experience, yet knew too damn well regardless.

Morgan was the last of the four. Roman, Selene and Brooke were all either married or bonded. He was the lone wolf, remaining single by choice. His head sank forward a fraction, his gaze unfocused as adrenaline continued to resonate through his blood with the hunger of his unsatisfied sexual dreams. He wasn't disappointed that of the women he'd shared an occasional interlude with, none had met his long term expectations or his deepest desires. What did bother him was this unknown vision who tempted him, drawing him into a world of seduction and sex, every night.

Since her initial invasion of his dreams, no other woman had raised even a whisper of attraction or appealed to him. Even the thought of slackening the lust with another woman was impossible. Any woman other than his dream induced siren left him cold and disinterested.

His seductress was mystery, desire, hunger, and maybe something more he couldn't put a finger on. Something that called to him almost as strongly as her voice and scent, a hidden element that he knew he recognized but couldn't place. And with just a dream, she could make him experience things he'd never felt wide awake and in bed with a flesh and blood woman.

Needing to escape the torment of his dream, Morgan stepped away from the wide window and called the heat of the change. Craved the rush of blood, the changed tempo of his heart pounding in his ears. He needed the change like a dying man needed forgiveness. The lupine form standing within his room a moment later was as well-known to him as his own human one. Anyone in his family would have recognized him.

He leaped through the window with a fluid movement, sprinting into the starry night. His long, harried gait carried him miles into the woods where he slid to a stop in the complete stillness, breathing heavily, trying to leave his misery behind, and knowing he failed. He let out a long, piercing song hearing the reverberation of his voice combined with the echo of nature. Gradually, peace calmed his erratic pulse, though he knew it was only temporary, until he slept again.

For nearly thirty-two years, he'd lived a contented life, living and sharing with his family and pack, having never really sought out his own mate. Never compelled to be proactive for the one woman who would be his.

Evidently, she was tired of waiting.

Chapter One

Morgan glanced up from his plate to find both his sisters waiting expectantly. “I’m sorry. Did you say something?” he managed to mumble around the mouthful he chewed. He swallowed the chunk of meat, wincing as it slid to weigh heavily in his ungrateful stomach, and waited for the coming storm.

Selene waved an impatient hand at him. “See? That’s what I’m talking about. He’s oblivious to the entire world.” Facing her brother, she placed a hand across her growing abdomen. “Morgan, you’ve been in a serious funk for weeks. What’s going on?”

He shrugged, setting his fork beside his plate, avoiding his sisters’ contemplative gazes, glancing at his dinner with longing instead. Somehow he didn’t think he’d get to eat more anytime soon. “I don’t know. Nothing I can think of,” he replied innocently. Too bad Bram and Mitch had stepped outside for some brotherly bonding when they’d finished dinner. Morgan felt outnumbered two to one.

Selene’s gray eyes flashed at him with irritation, her brow taut with her frustration at his answer. Morgan knew that stare. He had the exact same storm-gray eyes, just as capable of slicing a person in two. She’d learned it from him. Maybe too well.

“You’re lying. You never used to,” Selene scolded coolly.

“Maybe he needs a change of scenery,” Brooke suggested with a teasing pitch in her voice.

Morgan didn’t think so, but he knew her exuberance usually meant something he wasn’t going to enjoy. He waited to be proven right.

“Hey, I know! Mitch and I are going south for a couple of weeks. There’s a Faire we wanted to wander through before he starts with the fire department here.”

“A Faire?” Morgan echoed with a sour burn. Yep, just as he suspected. It might have been his dinner making that ache in his stomach, but he doubted it. “Why a Faire?”

Brooke’s whole face lit up with the idea of a new adventure. “Something different. Malls are boring. It’s near Sacramento, I think. Autumn is right around the corner. It’ll be beautiful with all the trees. Summer days and cooling nights,” she told him.

“Call Roman,” Morgan suggested with a firm ‘no thank you’ tone.

“Oh, come on,” Brooke cajoled with a winsome smile. “It could be fun.”

“It could also be the most nauseating time of my life,” he muttered. “I don’t want to go.”

“Morgan,” Selene said with a sharp undertone. “You need to do something. You’ve been haunting the woods like a damn ghost for weeks. You’re restless.”

“So? Since when has it ever mattered?” He didn’t restrain the cold chill in his tone. He didn’t need his sisters needling him over this.

Selene drummed her fingers over the table in a rapid rhythm. Morgan knew she was aggravated with him, and he wasn’t making it any easier on her. She was seven months pregnant with Bram’s child. Except for the annoyed frown she wore between her brows, she glowed with the pregnancy. Both his sisters did. Brooke was barely six weeks pregnant herself.

Brooke and Mitch had returned from Belgium a few days before after a stay with Aunt Jerry. Except for the absence of Roman and Delilah, the quadruplets were at Selene’s for dinner. It was a regular gathering, and silently, he wished he could have missed this one.

Selene's voice lowered with anxiety for her brother. "You may be the oldest Morgan, but we do have the right to worry about you." Her face smoothed, her hidden concerns out in the open. "And right now, I'm worried."

He controlled the black thunder pulsing under the surface of his skin, raking over sensitive nerves, the urge to snap painfully close from too many restless nights spent first enjoying, then suffering, his dream seductress. His sisters weren't the meddling types, but being family, both were more than capable of getting under his skin. He tempered the impulse to a simmer with deliberate effort. His lack of sleep wasn't their problem.

Brooke leaned toward him, pulling his attention in her direction. "I know we're going," she said, her brow twisted with her own worry. "We put a bid on the old Victorian on the outside of town. Mitch wanted to be closer to town than this for his shift duty. We've got a lot of work ahead of us if we get it, and I'm looking into the vacant corner shop off Main to open an apothecary. So this is probably going to be the extent of our travels for at least a year." She rose from her seat at the table and settled a comforting hand on his shoulder, her warmth flowing over his soul. "If you want to go, you're welcome to come with us." She started to leave but peeked at him with a devilish grin. "And before you ask, we're driving." She gave him a big wink and left them sitting at the table, vanishing through the front door to go outside to join Bram and Mitch.

He snorted. "Well, I would hope she wouldn't transport." Selene didn't twitch a ghost of a smile. He grabbed his napkin from his lap and tossed it on the table, completely giving up on eating more of his steak. "All right, Selene. It's just you and me. Say it."

Selene's fingers stopped tapping on the tabletop abruptly. He wasn't surprised when she didn't hedge her feelings any either.

"Our birthday is right around the corner. You're the last of the pack without a mate. Don't you think you should at least think about it?" she prodded.

"Why?" he objected, though able to force his tone to a disinterested level. He planted his elbows on the table, kicking his plate forward from the edge, ignoring the gnaw of hunger in his gut for the moment. Aside from sleep, he hadn't been eating enough either. "First of all, it isn't exactly a requirement. Second, I don't need one." This really wasn't something he wanted to talk about.

She uttered a discouraged sound, stretched, then sat taller in her chair to get comfortable. "If you honestly think that, then you haven't been paying attention. I'll be the first to admit, having to share all of me with someone never appealed to me either. It terrified me and you know it. None of us knew how to react when we met our mates, but each of us has found theirs. Except you." She paused, narrowing accusing eyes at him. "I would go so far as to say you've avoided it."

Cupping his hands above the table, he wanted to shout prove it, but knowing any of his family, they probably could. It was no secret he liked his single status, his privacy. "I haven't thought about it," he evaded instead. He tossed his head, wanting his sister to leave it alone. He wasn't going to find, nor did he want, a mate. The last thing he needed was a wife, a woman to interrupt his life. He had enough responsibilities without that being added to the long list. "Look, I know you and Brooke are completely happy, and you should be. Roman was lucky."

Her fingers started drumming again, her tone musing. "Ah, so you don't think she's out there, do you?"

His chest tightened, remembered ecstasy striking him blindly. He swallowed, hiding it behind a menacing scowl. No, he knew she was. That was the problem. He didn't want to have anything to do with her. What kind of a woman would torment and torture him nightly the way his unnamed goddess did? What kind of a woman could infiltrate his deepest sleep and awaken him with a craving that left him roaring into the night, every night, with unfulfilled desire and need? Not any woman he wanted to know. He managed to produce a bored expression instead of letting his frustration leak through. "Selene, whether she is or isn't, the matter isn't relevant. I am perfectly capable of managing myself and my life without the interference. I don't need a wife, or a mate."

"No, I imagine you, of all of us, don't," she conceded. She tried a different tact, weaving sisterly caring through her voice. "Morgan, we all love you, but lately you've become withdrawn. You need to find the source of this problem and face it. If you never find your mate, if that is what is causing your restlessness, then that is an arrangement made by fate, but your black looks and pissy attitude need an adjustment." Her gray eyes flashed at him as her impatience got the better of her. "And if I wasn't pregnant, I'd give it to you!"

He smacked his hands to the table's edge, gripping it, answering her challenge with bared teeth. He shoved the rising snarl down his throat, his jaw burning with the ache of restraint. Selene was pregnant and not up to a brawl, which, he hated to admit to it, was exactly what he wanted, from any of them. A release, any kind.

"Don't pull any punches! Why don't you tell me how you really feel," he almost shouted. A fight would definitely help take the edge off, but not with his sister.

She didn't so much as flinch, merely continued to study him with an imperious stare, one he knew came straight from their mother. He blinked and slouched, the depth of his sigh sounding throughout the small cabin as the fight in him evaporated.

"Aw, hell," he said, rubbing tired eyeballs with the heels of his palms. "You're right. Damn it! Why do you always have to be the right one?"

"Annoying, isn't it?" she purred with a little gloat thrown in, but in the next instant her voice wrapped around him, filled with a sister's concern for her older brother, soothing as it filled his ears.

In this, some things never changed. The four stood as a pack, supporting each other no matter the need. He knew he loved his brother and sisters, and times like this reminded him why.

Reaching, Selene curled a hand over one of his, giving him anything he needed. "Morgan, whatever this is driving you, you can't avoid it. Roman was first with Delilah and he survived. This last year alone, both Brooke and I have found mates." She lifted her hand from his to stop his popped mouth. "It doesn't count that they're brothers. Brooke was still in Belgium when I first met Mitch through Bram when he came to fly over the fires. That was nothing but chance and coincidence for them and you know it." She folded her hands lovingly across her abdomen, a thoughtful pause falling between them. "I think Brooke is right. You do need a change of pace, something away from here. You need to go with them."

"I don't want to," he repeated. "It's not my thing. A Faire?" He punctuated his declination with a disinterested flip of his hands. At least he hadn't left finger marks in the wood where he'd gripped it a moment before. His frustration was getting to him. Not a good thing.

“Something new and different. That’s what it means to make a change, Morgan.” She rose carefully from her chair, albeit with a little waddle. “Now, finish if you want. I’m going outside.” She took two steps and changed direction. “After I pee,” she muttered.

His lips twitched at her grouched tone. Pregnancy was difficult in different ways but Selene was holding up. He was honestly thrilled for the lives and loves both his sisters had found. He couldn’t fault her for wanting the same for him. Morgan knew Selene had never been happier, married to Bram. He was the perfect compliment to his logical, steadfast sister. Morgan was thankful both his sisters had found mates who appreciated their specialness as much as Morgan and Roman did. And that didn’t take into account the family secret they now protected with their very lives. Both men, and even Delilah, Roman’s wife, were spectacular beings in Morgan’s book.

When the door clicked around the corner, he let his head sink to the top of his chair to stare aimlessly upward. Selene was right. Whatever was going on, he was going to have to face it. Whether it was something to do with the green-eyed vixen of his dreams he couldn’t say, but he’d bet his entire house on it.

The ethereal beauty still visited him nightly, with the same arousing sensations, the same carnal incompleteness when he awoke. Could insanity be induced by subliminal sexual torture, he wondered. He sighed, the wall of frustration swelling and crashing over him with an overwhelming punch that reverberated through his chest until it settled below his waist with a known ache he couldn’t cure. Morgan had tried, with zero pleasurable results.

“Who are you?” he whispered to no one as he blocked out the world, piercing the cloud of desire fogging him with a determined shock of reality. “I don’t need you.” He lifted his arms and cupped behind his head with his palms. “I don’t need anyone.”

When he heard the bathroom door open a moment later, he stood to clear the table. No sense in being caught talking to himself. He smiled at Selene and saw her affection in her return smile as she passed to join the others on the front porch. She wouldn’t stay mad with him. None of them could, not with another sibling. They were too close. They had survived so much together, all of them. They were all connected, standing as one. He placed the plates on the counter, bracing his hands on the edge, collecting himself.

So he didn’t have any choice. Whatever waited for him wasn’t here. It was out there, somewhere. He doubted anything would come of this trip with his sister and brother-in-law, but it would get him away from everything else for a while, and Selene would quit breathing down his neck. Maybe if he simply left home, the dreams wouldn’t follow him. He doubted that too, but he could hope.

Morgan cut off a chunk of his uneaten steak before he walked out to join the others in the cool night. Two happy couples and himself. It never bothered him personally that his brother and sisters had found their mates. He was the oldest, even if by only minutes. The gap of time didn’t matter to him. Morgan wouldn’t turn his back on the pack for anything or anyone. He wouldn’t call himself alpha—it wasn’t realistic considering their birth, but he wouldn’t ignore his responsibility either. Especially now that they all were mated and with child. Delilah and Roman were the first with his nephew, Adrian, and now his sisters were expecting. Family was all the Aiza’s had. There were no other shifters they knew of, except for their eccentric Aunt, but she was a wolf of a different color. Aunt Jerry was also perfectly capable of handling anything short of Hell on her own. His vow to protect them all would never waiver regardless.

He tore off a bite with sharp teeth and chewed as Brooke tossed colored bubbles of glowing light into the air with a flick of her hand. About the size of large oranges, they bounced and swung over the porch.

“Those are beautiful,” Selene said with wonder as the spheres spread colored light over everything.

“Wait, I’ve been working on this one,” Brooke told her with a grin, then waved her hand through the air.

“Oh my God! Is that...polka dots?” Selene cried through a childish laugh at the impromptu show.

“Yep,” Brooke said with a satisfied smile. “Took me over a week to get it right.”

“That’s really good,” Bram said, admiration rumbling in his deeper voice.

“Hey, honey, show them the other one,” Mitch urged with a nudge.

Brooke ducked her head. “Oh, I couldn’t. It’s not perfect.” Mitch tenderly coaxed and prodded her until she blushed.

“Oh, all right. Just remember it’s not quite right,” she warned. Mitch leaned to give her room and winked at Morgan. Mitch was a horrible influence on his sister, in a good way. He was always pushing her to improve her casting and spell ability.

When the bubble formed and began to develop indents and points, Morgan paused for the beauty of the creation. “You can make shapes?” he asked in quiet surprise. He couldn’t recall anyone in the family with that talent.

“I’m learning them as I go along,” she answered him as she moved her hands with delicate, concentrated motions, like a sculptor as she cut and patted the air.

“Wow,” Morgan breathed. “That’s gorgeous.”

“I know,” Mitch agreed. “I’m so proud of her.” He followed his wife’s hands as she finished the shape.

Brooke stretched her arms, sliding her palms over the now near full-sized shape, making the last motions mid-air. “That’s it. I got the idea from Mitch’s carvings.” She leaned into her mate’s chest, her grip clasped around her bent knees as she tucked into his embrace.

“That is truly remarkable,” Selene whispered, as awestruck as the rest of the group.

Morgan gaped for a silent moment at the black-hued wolf head hovering above the ground. A chill snaked around his spine. “Is it one of us?” he asked, swallowing once when he sounded rough. He almost prayed it was. Studying it closer, there was something about it... Something that he should know, should recognize. The unwelcome chill on his spine refused to go away.

“No, not really. Why? Do you think it looks like one of us?” Brooke shifted to study him from her seat.

Morgan rolled his head on his neck, an odd sensation settling over him staring at the floating image. He had seen that wolf...in his dreams...maybe.

“No. But it seems familiar, somehow.” He shook himself free of the recognition notion and released a small grunt of dismissal. “Probably nothing.” Catching his sister’s attention, he told the couple, “By the way, I’ll go. If you still want a grumpy older brother along for a wet blanket.” He didn’t miss Selene’s satisfied smile before she managed to tuck her face away from him against Bram’s supporting arm. Inside, he saluted her for a battle well fought and well won.

Mitch smiled. "Cool! We asked Selene and Bram too, but she's too far along for a long road trip now." Mitch kissed Brooke's temple. "We've got a few months before this one gets that way."

For the first time, a pain hit Morgan close to his heart. His day had been long and his nights too exhausting to want to think about it, or why. He attempted a smile in answer, ignoring the twinge instead. It was probably closer to a grimace, but it was dark outside now. "And Roman?"

"When we called, he said they were flying to Japan for a week to visit," Brooke said.

"Oh, I completely forgot," Selene murmured. She offered an apologetic shrug to the group. "Pregnancy amnesia." Bram chuckled, holding her closer.

"Well, time to kill the lights," Brooke joked and snapped her fingers. The floating balls popped with little bursts like cascading fireworks.

"You're such a kid," Morgan teased her.

"Yeah, so sue me," she said, her lilting laugh filling the air.

Morgan popped the last of his dinner into his mouth, grinning easily at her antics. "Well, I'm heading home. Thanks for the food." He stopped on the steps and glanced back at them. "When are you guys heading out?"

"Saturday morning, early," Brooke said. "It's a good drive but we can be there by the open of the gates."

"I'll be here." He crossed the gap to his truck, waving to them when he turned it around and headed for the bridge out of the cabin's clearing. His last passing thought as he left his sisters behind was maybe tonight, he would sleep. He wasn't holding his breath to find out.

* * * *

They arrived at the Faire grounds not long after the gates opened and joined the milling crowds as they perused the booths and activities. There were strolling minstrels, town criers, jugglers and jesters, and of course, Faire attending guests in costume—all kinds. Morgan could only shake his head when a Jedi passed him going the other way. Scents and sounds swarmed over him—smoked meat, perfumes, herbs, shrieks of laughter, the sound of metal being pounded. The entire grounds were in constant motion as they ambled through them.

Morgan resisted the urge to roll his eyes when a woman with the thrusting bosom of the era tried to grab his attention and body parts a scarce ten minutes inside the grounds. She spoke with an old English accent as fake as her red hair, but she was enjoying herself. She eventually left for better game when he proved too difficult.

"See? I told you," he grumbled into Brooke's ear. "Nonsense." He was not in the mood to play along. He'd spent another restless night with his nighttime seductress and sleep wasn't kind to him. Unable to fight it, he'd slept on the drive. The continued interruption of his nights was making him more and more irritable.

Brooke glowered at him in exasperation. "Try to have some fun, Morgan. You don't have to jump in feet first, but Selene is right. You need to shake it up."

Morgan ranted under his breath and kept pace with the other two who were obviously enjoying the frivolity of the activity a hell of a lot more than he was, pointing and exclaiming over every little detail.

"Hear ye! Hear ye! Lord Duncan is in need o' a swordsman o' uncommon ability," came the shout ahead of them as the crier marched the road winding through the specialty booths, reading from a long scroll spread between his hands as he paced his

words. "A swordsman o' uncommon valor and strength. Ist there a man 'ere today who can provide 'is Lordship with fair entertainment?"

With a sinking feeling, Morgan knew what was coming and dug in his heels. Hard.

"Right here!" Brooke shouted. "He'll do it!"

Morgan glared over his shoulder and cursed plainly enough for her to hear him, discovering her arm raised and a devilish gleam dancing in her dark eyes.

"Brooke! Behave yourself! I don't know a thing about a broadsword." He bared his teeth at her when she refused to acknowledge his reticence. For a bare second, he hated his sister.

"How hard can it be? You're a guest. They'll be gentle with you, I'm sure," she informed him. She stood on her toes, waving to get the crier's attention. "Over here!"

"Brooke!" He ground out her name through clenched teeth. She continued to ignore him. Running wasn't an option. They'd drawn a crowd.

"I say, sir, are ye willing to agree to Lord Duncan's challenge?" The crier and about a dozen people closed in to listen.

"I'll do it if you will," Mitch egged him. Morgan groaned.

"I'm going to kill the both of you," he threatened for their ears only. He was too damned tired to play knight. Brooke fluttered her lashes up at him in all feigned innocence and Mitch laughed. Morgan stopped arguing and made a shallow nod, wishing he was anywhere else.

The crier faced the crowd and announced with lifted hands, "Lord Duncan's search is completed! We 'ave not one, but two worthy opponents for 'is Lordship's battle training for this afternoon."

The crowd cheered and Morgan wanted to snarl at all of them.

"Great! An entire day down the drain," Morgan growled.

"Quit your bitching," Brooke said. "How much more different can you get than this?"

He didn't bother to grace her with an answer as he fell into step behind the crier with his brother-in-law. They followed the man in dark green tights and an emblazoned red tunic to the roped off areas of the Faire grounds. The over-large feather in his gold trimmed velvet hat flounced with his movements.

"We will first make thy introduction to Lord Duncan, the Master of Swords for this grand tournament and then begin thy training."

"Training? Can't he just beat me up and get it over with?"

The man in costume gave Morgan an amused smirk and kept walking. A few minutes later they stood outside a large blue canvas tent with a pennant of a broadsword held in a bird's claw hung on a pole raised from the supports of the tent.

Morgan's exasperation hit a new level as they announced him and Mitch, but he managed to not say it out loud. The crier in the green L'eggs let him pass through as he held the opening wide.

"My pleasure," boomed the bass voice from the corner of the tent. "Gentlemen, I thank thee for thy, eager," he drawled with a rolling chuckle, "participation in our fun and games."

"Pressed into service," Morgan muttered. "But I'm here."

Lord Duncan's brow lifted. "Was he pressed into service?" He stepped before them, clasping his hands behind his back. He was a large man, almost as tall as Roman and as big across as Mitch.

“By his sister,” Mitch said, biting off a laughing grin, and failing. Morgan wanted to run a fist into him *and* his grin.

“Ah, for the honor of a lady,” Lord Duncan mused.

“No. She is my wife,” Mitch said instantly, standing taller, his attention pinned on the man before them.

Lord Duncan summed them up, humor making his body shake with suppressed laughter. “Impressive, the pair of ye. Honor and loyalty roll from ye both. Ye shall be worthy in the ring this afternoon. Have either of thou ever fought with steel?” They both shook their heads. “Good, I will not have to correct stupidly learned skills.” He stepped to the side and shouted. “Cale! Find armor and two swords. Give them a run. Let us see how ye fair.” Duncan did a once over on Mitch. “I want to see thee first at arms.” Then he turned his focus to Morgan. “Thee,” he said on a dragged out breath. “Thee have a fire. I can see it in thine gaze. Thee have an anger. This is not a blood match.”

Morgan’s lip lifted at the assessment, making the leap to guess at what the man meant. “It won’t be.” But he could dream. Now, *that* kind of fight, he was more than willing to jump into.

Both Mitch and Morgan complied when Cale called for them. The pair were helped out of their shirts, replaced with soft undershirts and padding, which was then topped with leather chest armor and buckles, while gauntlets covered their hands and wrists.

“Is all of this necessary?” Morgan said.

“Morgan, I swear you are whiney today,” Mitch told him. “Go with it for once. You’re fine, no one is going to get hurt and the last time I checked, no one is after us.”

Morgan pictured his hands around Brooke’s throat as a buckle on his shoulder was tugged tight. He glared at Mitch who simply offered his back to ignore him. “Not yet.” He cursed as another buckle was yanked and locked. He didn’t pay attention to their new squire’s confusion.

Morgan followed Mitch and Cale to the plain dirt, baled off area set apart with ropes and stakes, waiting as Mitch got a run down on broadsword fighting.

“Thine friend has strength,” Lord Duncan said casually, leaning on the hilt of a long sword with a foot propped on a hay bale to hold his weight. He followed the fighting pair closely.

“He’s a firefighter. He has to be.” A strong clash of steel screamed through the air. The ring of steel vibrated through him. It held a savory echo. It felt almost...familiar. He stood a little straighter, watching more attentively as the pair circled each other in front of him. Mitch’s swings were untutored but more than sufficient to make a person ache under the power of the blow.

“What are you?” came the reserved question.

“I’m with the forestry division of the North Pacific Rim Environmental Protection Agency. A Ranger.” The silence stretched between them. Morgan assumed it was because Mitch was kicking Cale’s ass, but it wasn’t.

“Just remember, this is for the crowd’s entertainment, and yours, hopefully. We don’t fight to the death.” Duncan’s lowered voice held no remnants of his lord’s accented character.

Morgan wanted to laugh at the assumption. “I’ve never killed.” *Not on two feet.*

Lord Duncan twitched his dark blond bearded head as if in answer to his words and Morgan saw a flickering shadow of doubt in the other man. “I don’t believe you.” Duncan returned his attention to the fighting pair. “Halt!”

Mitch was drenched in sweat and wore a huge grin. "Damn, that's fun!" he crowed, tugging and lifting the helmet they had loaned him for the practice run. He jogged up to the bales and slipped under the rope divider, clapping Morgan soundly. "You are so going to love this, Morgan."

"Kiss my ass," he muttered as he stepped forward, sliding on an identical helmet, a black steel face guard that covered his face to his neck.

Morgan took the first position Cale showed him and copied the fluid motions, rising and falling with the weighty blade. The ear-splitting clash of steel reverberated through his palms and his heart jumped like a defibrillator had jolted him clear through.

"Again," came Cale's instruction. Morgan steadied his hands and prepared for the next swing.

Five minutes later, halt was called, except when Cale jumped to leave the ring, Morgan faced Lord Duncan. "I want to test thee myself. I may take thee into the knights as well as you fight!"

"Hey, I'm only here for the weekend," he interjected, taken by surprise as the larger man attacked.

"Rise and defend, sir!" came Lord Duncan's war cry and suddenly, Morgan was rushed by the steeled edge of Duncan's long sword.

* * *

N'Réa heard the grunts and the sting of steel through the buzz of the grounds when she neared Duncan's World and wondered who Duncan had cornered. She needed to return to her tent. The longer she was out of her tent investigating the grounds, the more money she lost, but the sound of clashing steel and the loud rumbled curses captured her attention.

"Foul smelling beast of Hell!" Duncan roared before another crash jangled like a vicious ringing gong ahead.

Disbelieving eyes snapped open in surprise. Oh, she had to know who he was fighting! Duncan never swore outside of the tourneys!

"Beast of Hell!" came the enraged shout. "They wouldn't spare you a glance!" A cheer rose from the crowd as steel colliding against steel shrieked through the mid-morning air. Wedging herself a spot between bodies in the gawking crowd, she glimpsed a peek of a thick black mane from beneath the collar of a steel combat helmet and a solid body as the two met and sparred in the center of the practice ring.

"Who is that? He's not from Duncan's camp," she wondered aloud.

A man in training leathers holding a petite blonde in his arms made room as she neared. "No, he's my brother," she said with a vivacious grin. "And he's giving Lord Duncan a run for his money."

"I'll say," she said with a wince as steel rapped and vibrated. "Duncan never swears in practice."

"Swine son!" Duncan shouted in a brusque roar, drawing his full height over his opponent.

"At least I had a mother!" the man in the training leathers shouted without a second's hesitation. The crowd gasped, then cheered as they met and their swords slid together.

They were magnificent, the pair sparring and blocking, the clash and ring of steel reverberating with a depth of real effort. He was in leathers, but he wasn't fighting to train. He fought with a heat she'd never seen in training. N'Réa winced as Duncan

cursed vividly. She'd seen a lot of his duels over the years and knew his vocabulary was well rounded. Calling his opponent a puny ill-breeding foot-licker only enraged the man in leathers more. Duncan met his swing with an oath and pushed with straining effort until N'Réa was sure a sword would snap.

In craned fascination, she followed as they circled. N'Réa didn't recognize his opponent with the wall of bodies in front of her and the safety of the armor, but a few seconds later, it ceased to matter. It was over when Duncan literally yanked the sword out of the other man's grip. The crowd erupted and surged forward. N'Réa managed to inch toward the outer edge of the crowd, not wanting to get trapped in the congratulatory mass.

Lord Duncan's harsh breathing voice overrode the crowd's excitement. "Here I test the opponent of the day, and have found the most worthy Sir Morgan! Arise, honorary knight and welcome to the Kingdom!"

Her mouth fell open. He knighted him on the spot! Good lord, he must be incredible.

The crowd swarmed the pair as they moved to congratulate them on a good duel. Oh crap! How long had she been standing there listening and trying to see? She needed to get to her tent. She picked up her skirts and fled to the aisles of booths and tents.

When she finally sat in her chair and fluffed her skirts, her hands were shaking and she couldn't place why.