



The fog eddied from the darkness to cocoon me in a soft haze. Something niggled at the back of my mind as I glanced down at my bare feet. They were swallowed below my calves by the mist, but the crunch of sand under my toes felt familiar. The hiss of waves slapped against the edge of a nearby shore.

The rolling scent of brine slipped past on a tattered breeze. Drawn toward the sound of water, I pressed forward, an uneasy chill sending clammy fingers skittering over my skin.

Wrapping my arms around my shoulders, I realized I was naked.

And yet a moment later, a silk dress draped over my limbs, falling to midcalf. It should have felt strange, to know the merest of thoughts took shape here . . . but it didn't. My feet brushed the edges of the wet sand and I paused. I could see nothing beyond the darkness, but the warmth of the water lured me, beckoning with a soft whisper.

Flickers of memory flared up and slid away, the bar-

est hint of scales and a cradle of blue luminescence taking form, but I shook my head and the thought swirled out of reach. Ridiculous idea, anyway. I'd never even seen a mermaid.

Another step and the foam crested past my ankles.

I hesitated.

*Abby.* A name, whispered upon the breeze. The waves rushed forward, the sudden undertow sucking me into the sand as though it might drag me into its depths. I stumbled, only to be pulled back by a hand upon my wrist.

I glanced over my shoulder, frowning as I made out the features of a man. Ebony hair whipped about his pale face; he gazed down at me, eyes haunted and aching and terrible. I didn't recognize him, and yet his presence radiated like a beacon of comfort in the darkness.

Immediately the waves receded, leaving us in guarded silence. He stared at me a moment longer. When I said nothing, something like grief creased the corners of his mouth.

"If you enter the sea you will be devoured," he said finally.

"Devoured?" I could only watch as the fog lifted at the slight motion of his hand. I saw fins cutting through the surf; the moonlight shattered the darkness to reveal the sharks, shining like living blades in the murk.

I swallowed hard at my own folly. "Thank you," I murmured, my fingers finding his in the shadows to squeeze them. Abruptly he pulled away, his breath hissing as though I'd burned him.

"Who are you? Do you know where we are?"

"You're dreaming, Abby." His lips pursed mock-

ingly. "And I am but a shadow." At my puzzled look, he sighed. "It will be safer for you away from here. Follow me."

Before us lay tall cliffs and a worn path of sand and sea grass, a series of rocky switchbacks leading to somewhere.

"Do you have a name?" The words slipped out before I meant them to, but I dutifully trailed in his wake, bunching the dress at my hips to climb up the bluff.

"If you do not know it, I cannot tell you."

"I don't understand."

"I know," he muttered, a hint of irritation in his voice. "Believe me when I tell you this is not the way things were supposed to have been, but we have no other choice." He glanced over his shoulder at me. "And we have very little time left." As though to emphasize the point, he reached to take my hand, helping me over a piece of driftwood. Now his fingers entwined with mine. A wash of heat swept through me.

"I don't ever remember having such a lucid dream before," I said.

His grip tightened, but he said nothing in return, leading us up the cliff and down a winding path until we came to an iron gate. It was overgrown by high weeds, shut tightly with a lock.

My inner voice was strangely silent. If it knew something, it clearly wasn't planning on saying anything. I frowned at the gate, reaching out to stroke the rusted flakes with a curious finger. The metal chilled my hands to the bone and I got a sense of unhappiness from it.

Which was ridiculous. This was a dream, wasn't it? Inanimate objects didn't have feelings.

"Knock it off," I told it, blinking when the gate

snapped open, letting out a long-suffering creak.

“One problem solved.” The man’s eyes slid sideways toward me as I gazed up at the dilapidated house.

A once-stately Victorian construct, the place had seen better days. The shutters hung haphazardly and the paint peeled from the siding like strips of tattered paper. The rotting steps made a dubious whimper as we mounted them and headed for the outer porch.

“What a dump,” I said.

The stranger flinched, releasing my arm, and an unexplainable sorrow lanced through me.

“I just meant as far as dreams go,” I amended hastily, somehow wanting his approval despite myself. “I mean, I live in a friggin’ tree palace right now . . . you’d think I’d be dreaming with slightly higher standards.”

“You’d think,” he retorted. Abruptly he turned toward me. “Who are you?”

“You already know my name. You said it back there. Which reminds me, how *do* you know who I am?” It seemed like a fair enough question for a dream.

“Name tag.” He pointed to my chest. Sure enough, I glanced down to see it—a simple little plastic rectangle, the letters spelling out ABBY SINCLAIR in lopsided relief.

I frowned. “That wasn’t there before.”

He gestured about us. “Dreaming, remember? Shall we go inside?”

I shrugged, intrigued. “I guess.” I doubted there would be anything of interest in this run-down piece of crap, but I couldn’t remember another dream taking hold of my mind so vividly. Might as well let it play out.

The door opened beneath my touch and I crossed the threshold with a slight twitch of nervousness. For all my brave thoughts, it was still a creepy old house, not counting the stranger, who shadowed my steps with an aura of expectancy.

Inside was nothing special—hardwood floors and dusty shelves, lights flickering as though they might go out at any moment. “I wonder if there’s a fuse box somewhere.”

“I doubt it.” He glanced at me with a ripple of amusement and I flushed.

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered. Ignoring him, I continued walking until I stood in what looked like a family room. The fireplace was choked with old ashes, the dying embers banked into dull sparks. A record player perched on a narrow table in the corner, a stack of records before it. Something about them seemed so familiar, but I dismissed the albums when I read the titles. Who the hell still listened to Tom Jones anyway?

Snorting, I circled the rest of the room, noting the tattered quilt on the faded sofa and the bowl of strawberry potpourri. The man leaned in the doorway, his arms crossed as he watched me.

“This is all very lovely,” I said finally. “But there’s nothing here for me. It’s so . . . empty.”

He didn’t speak, but his gaze strayed toward the mantel of the fireplace. “Who are you?”

“I thought we already established that.”

“I told you what your name was,” he countered. “I never heard it from you.”

“Abby . . . Abby Sinclair.” I tugged on the name tag. “For all that this is apparently some sort of *Alice in Wonderland* moment.” A smile drifted over my face. “I’m a princess, you know.”

His voice darkened. “A princess? Surely that seems like a lofty achievement.”

He brushed past me to the mantel, taking something from the top and tossing it to me. I caught it without a second thought, staring down at the bundled pair of pointe shoes bemusedly.

“Ballet slippers?” My brow furrowed. “What am I supposed to do with these? I’ve never danced a day in my life. Hell, even my betrothed admits I have two left feet.”

He halted as though I’d slapped him. “*Betrothed* is it?”

“Of course. To be handfasted, anyway.” I stroked the satin of the slippers. They were no mere decoration. The well-worn toes were proof enough of that. “I’m not really a princess, though. Not yet. But I will be. A Faery princess, in fact.”

“Oh, a fine thing, I’m sure,” he said sarcastically. “It seems your fiancé neglected to mention *that* particular detail when he asked me to come here. Typical elf.” He fixed me with a thin-lipped smile. “I suppose you truly have forgotten, though the Dreamer in you has not.”

“Forgotten *what*? You talk in riddles.”

“It doesn’t matter.” He sighed. “I had hoped things might be different here. This complicates things immensely, but I will make the best of it.”

I threw the slippers onto the couch. “You can try, you mean. I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, but I think it’s time I left or woke up or whatever.” I glanced up at the ceiling as though I might will it to happen.

“Stop,” he whispered, taking my hand. “Don’t leave yet.”

Slowly, I turned toward him, a flare of heat sliding up my arm like a welcome friend. I knew this touch. This feeling. His finger brushed my cheek, tipping my chin toward him. A dull thrum beat in my ears, the blood pulsing hot with sudden desire. A hint of gold encircled his pupils, flaring into a brilliant nimbus.

"I . . . know you," I said hoarsely, my knees going weak.

"Yes." And then his mouth was upon mine, and I knew I wanted him. Dream or not, stranger or not, the wanting of him burned the edges of my skin, flooding my limbs like liquid fire.

"What is this?" I gasped, letting him wrap his arms around me, his hand snaking down my hips to cup my ass.

"A gift. The last I can give you." He kissed me again and my eyes shut against the intensity, even as his tongue swept deep. He captured my soft groan. "Look at me, Abby."

I blinked in surprise. We were no longer in a house at all . . . but a ballroom? I gaped as a cluster of masked dancers twirled by us in a rush of spirited laughter and hazy silks. Beneath my feet gleamed a black-and-white marble floor, tiled in a dizzying pattern. Soft light shone above us from a great crystal chandelier.

"I don't understand."

"I owe you a wooing of sorts, I suspect. Consider it a parting memory." He flicked his fingers, and the soft strains of a violin echoed from the far corner of the hall before I could ask him what he meant. I caught a dim glimpse of a cloaked player, but my would-be suitor had other plans than allowing me to discover

who it was, for he turned me neatly, his hand upon my waist.

A moment later and I was dressed the same as the other dancers, but in pastel blues and silver threads. “A corset?”

He shrugged. “You might as well get used to it, *Princess*. Besides, I’ll enjoy trying to get you out of it.”

“Easy for you to say,” I grumbled. “You’re wearing pants.” Which he was. Tight, low-slung leathers and a scarlet lawn shirt. “You look like some sort of ridiculous vampire.”

A genuine laugh rolled from his chest. “Can’t have that, can we?” He dipped me low and I realized he was now dressed in shimmering blue to match my dress. “Better?”

“Still cliché, but I’ll manage.”

“That’s my girl.” He pulled me close again as the music took on a sultry tone, something slower and seductive. “There’s only time for one dance, I’m afraid.”

“Well, then, I guess we’d better make the most of it.” His lips curled into something predatory, but he clung to me harder in a desperate motion that didn’t quite touch his eyes. Unaware of anything but the delicious way he swiveled his waist, I let my feet go where they would. Strangely, the steps flowed into each other as though I’d been doing them forever, graceful and unhesitating.

Odd things, dreams.

And my partner was no slouch either.

Our skillful movements soon turned the dance into something else entirely. Fingers stroked over my neck, my shoulders, tracing down my spine. His hips ground

into my mine, his mouth upon my jaw. And all of it was subtle enough to seem as though it were part of the dance itself.

We'd done this before.

Halfway through the piece, I realized my stays were coming undone. Struggling to keep the corset from sliding off my chest, I paused, catching a smirk upon his face.

"Charming." I snorted, wondering if he'd been undoing them by hand or by other means. Not that it mattered, really. Dreams were dreams and I was enjoying the hell out of this one. Immediately I stopped squirming and lowered my hands, leaving the corset to slip off as it would.

Spinning away from him, I swayed my hips enticingly. The other dancers faded away, and even the music became nothing more than a distant echo. My bare feet touched the softest of carpets, the lights retreating to only a dim glow.

The dream had changed again.

I glanced demurely over my shoulder at him, one brow arched in challenge. My heart hammered in my chest at the thought of what I was about to do. Whatever was happening here felt terribly right, even if my head couldn't quite wrap itself around the concept.

My dance partner stood several paces behind me, the rise and fall of his chest suggesting a severe lack of oxygen. "When you look at me like that, I forget why I'm here," he said hoarsely.

My breasts were about to slip free of the corset—the barest of motions would send it tumbling past my waist.

“And why are you here exactly? Assuming you aren’t a manifestation of prewedding jitters?”

“Hush.” His mouth compressed at my words and I arched my back in apology. His hand casually stretched up to push my hair behind my ear. His gaze became half-lidded and hot, drawn to the taut nipple that had escaped its confines.

“Now how did that happen, I wonder?”

“The mind boggles,” he purred. “I suppose the only thing to do is to make a matched pair.” He found the other breast, his thumb rolling it behind the corset with the faintest of pressure. “It might get lonely.”

“Can’t have that . . .” I tipped my head as though to expose more of myself to him. Soft heat pooled at the base of my throat and I realized he was kissing me there, his tongue tracing hot circles at the pulse. Something about the gesture niggled at me, its familiarity ringing true, and I said as much.

He grunted in reply, too caught up in my squirming reaction to care, but a moment later he had pulled away. “Change in plans, Abby.”

My body shuddered with disappointment. “I wasn’t aware there was supposed to be an agenda. This is *my* dream, right?”

He let out a humorless chuckle, shaking his head. “As much as it ever was, I suppose. Don’t worry about it yet. I’m going to ask something of you shortly. There isn’t any time to explain, but I need your word that you will do it.”

“Is it going to hurt?”

“Not exactly. Not you, anyway,” he admitted. “Promise me you will do what I ask? I’m not going to get another shot at it if it doesn’t work.” The intensity

of his expression became despairing and I could only nod in answer.

“And until then?” There was nothing glib about my words, but my body continued to thrum with thwarted desire.

He leaned forward to kiss me, even as he gently laid me upon the bed that had mysteriously appeared behind us. “I’d think that would be obvious,” he murmured. “I take what is mine.”

As though this last interchange had freed him from whatever thoughts had been tormenting him, he tugged at the top of my corset, growling with approval at the newly revealed flesh. “Gods, but I’ve missed this.” He went silent, suckling at the nipples until I jerked toward him, an electric pulse of pleasure shooting to my groin. I rolled my hips at him, but he was already there, one hand rucking the skirt up to my waist.

If I’d been wearing underwear, it was gone a moment later, his hand sliding between my thighs. I scissored them wide and bucked up to meet his fingers, letting out a gasp of relief when he slipped one inside. I tore at his shoulders, pulling the shirt away from him like paper. My palms stroked his naked chest and down the muscled ridge of his abdomen.

With a groan he laid claim to my mouth. The motion of his fingers grew bold. I rocked in time to the movements, feeling them echoed in the way he slid against me. He chuckled at my whimper.

“Too easy.” His eyes glowed brighter still. I caught the flicker of what might have been antlers sprouting from his brow, but he turned—and they were gone.

“You talk too much.” I brushed my lips over his

jawline, grinding harder against him. Small ripples of pleasure radiated with each clever stroke. “And what’s too easy?”

One dark brow arched in amusement, his fingers crooking up as his thumb pressed down. “This.”

Rational thought fled as I tumbled over the edge, the orgasm hitting me fast and hard, leaving me almost sobbing with its intensity. A satisfied croon rumbled from his chest. Was he laughing? My body continued to vibrate happily along, not caring.

“Delicious,” he sighed, his lips parted as though he was . . . drinking? His face lowered, gaze burning at me. “Whatever happens, Abby, I have no regrets. About any of it.” Confused, I frowned at him. “The mechanics are going to be too difficult to explain right now . . . just do as I ask. You have the power, Dreamer. Please.”

“What are you going to do?” I shifted as though to roll out from under him, but his hands tightened around me. A tremor ran through him, but it wasn’t desire.

It was fear.

Clasping me to him, he pulled me onto his lap. His erection remained beneath me, but it seemed to be an afterthought for him at this point. One hand stroked my cheek, the other cradled my head. “I’m going to kiss you now, Abby.”

“All right,” I said slowly. He hesitated for the briefest of moments, a bitter smile crossing his face as he lowered his mouth to mine. It was strangely chaste, hovering and light as though he couldn’t quite find the right rhythm.

What the hell. I’d make it easy for him.

My fingers twined through the dark locks of his hair.

He stiffened slightly, but I tugged him closer, opening myself to him as well as I could. He nipped at my lower lip, our breath mingling hotly.

“All of me I give to you,” he whispered, the words slipping away into the darkness, and his eyes flared painfully bright like golden waves in an infinite sea. He shuddered, his exhalation filling my lungs until they burned. “Now drink *my* dreams.”

I struggled, but his hands held me firmly in place. I heard the distant chimes of bells as visions darkened my sight, wrapping me in the memories of an . . .

. . . *Incubus* . . .

. . . *I was crouched in the darkness outside a white picket fence with thorny edges, my hands bleeding from my failed attempts to scale it. Anything to get back to the place of my birth, the warmth of the Dreaming womb, and the inadvertent love of a mother who never knew me . . .*

. . . *I was learning to feed, gleaning off the dreams of others, taking all that I could and leaving only a hollowed longing for an unobtainable sexual perfection . . .*

. . . *I was singing on a stage, holding the attention of everyone. So easy to let my power roll out, lust and desire curling through the room like the flicking tongue of a snake. I could taste the scant edges of their dreams, the weight and the measure as I decided who I would visit tonight, what Contract I would make . . .*

. . . *I was wrapped in her arms and the darkness, her Dreaming Heart welcomes me like a beacon of light in the shadows. I would never belong there, but for a moment I could pretend . . .*

“Ion.” The name fell from my tongue with an easy roll. He uttered a low cry, his form seeming to waver,

his body vibrating in my arms. A rush of energy pulsed through my limbs once. Twice. And then he faded, a ghostly shadow slipping away.

*Remember me . . .*

His voice echoed in my mind, even as the white bed seemed to open up, swallowing me into darkness. The scent of rose petals and earth and decaying leaves assaulted my senses. I was falling, my fingers scrabbling at nothing as I hurtled into oblivion.

I'd been crying in my sleep. The damp trace of tears still clung to my lashes. Dimly, I rubbed at them with my hand as I sat up in my bed, trying to remember what had happened. My body thrummed uncomfortably and I knew it had been an arousing dream of sorts, but more than that I couldn't say. I would have to ask Talivar about it in the morning.

The elven prince had a way of being able to see to the heart of my thoughts, even when I couldn't quite understand them myself. Not that he was here now. For propriety's sake we had separate bedrooms. I'd never slept with him before. At least, I didn't think I had.

There'd been some sort of accident in my recent past, one that had apparently taken my long-term memory. No one seemed to want to elaborate on the details. Considering I was supposed to get married to the man, it was a bitch of a thing not to remember the actual proposal.

Perhaps my dream was just a manifestation of wedding jitters like I'd guessed, or even pent-up hormones. But tears? Flopping down in frustration, I stared out the carved window at the moonless night, a rustling of branches the only sound. Usually I found

it comforting, but right then it mocked me with its secrets, as though it knew more of me than it cared to tell.

I shifted onto my side in irritation, something hard digging into my hip. Puzzled, I reached beneath me to find several small, round somethings. They jingled, a lost and lonely chime that made my heart ache. I lit the bedside candle and held the objects up to the flickering glow, swallowing hard when I realized I was holding a set of bells, tangled in red thread.

