

Chapter Twenty Seven

I had no idea how long I stumbled through the forest. Time had no measure. Even if I'd wanted to, I'd lost my way back.

I just kept going, into oblivion.

Sam found me.

He gathered me into his arms and held me, murmuring soothingly as I cried against his chest. "They died... happy... in love..." I told him through my sobs.

Sam took me home.

He carried me from the garden, taking the steps two at a time. Leiana was there and she opened the door. I saw the profound relief on her face. Sam didn't stop. He carried me to his bedroom and gently laid me on the bed, pulling a soft blanket over me. Outside his window, I could see night was softly falling.

"Sleep, Tessa," he told me.

"I'll be here when you wake," he promised.

I believed him.

I came slowly awake to Sam's blue gaze. He smiled at me. I smiled back, raising my hand to touch his face. It was not a dream. I could feel him. His warmth coursed through me, chasing all the cold away.

I suddenly stiffened, staring at him, my heart rate picking up with worry. "Are you breaking any laws?" I asked.

He laughed softly. "There are none left to break," he assured me.

"Sam, seriously, are you allowed to be here? You weren't banished or worse?"

The humour disappeared from his eyes and he became quite solemn. "Yes, I'm allowed to be here, and no, I've not been banished. For once I have something to thank Reina for."

I frowned at the Ancient Goddess' name. She had lied to me. She had made me doubt Sam, made a mockery of my conviction to be with him. Never again would I doubt him. Never.

"Sam..." I did not know how I would ever be able to apologise for my terrible mistake. He quietened my distress, murmuring my name, his voice soothing, forgiving.

Then, with a smile, he said, "I'm sure you will feel better after a hot shower and something to eat." He swung his legs off the bed and held out his hand to help me up. "Leiana called over to your place, to collect some clothes and to let Natalie know you were going to stay over so she didn't worry," he told me, pulling me along behind him to the bathroom.

"I'll make us something to eat," he said.

"What time is it, Sam? My watch has stopped." I tapped the glass on the face.

He thought for a moment. "One fifteen, in the morning," he responded.

He pointed to a sports bag on a stool in the corner of the bathroom. "Clothes and toiletries," he said and closed the bathroom door behind me.

I looked in the mirror and was horrified. My hair was wild with leaves and twigs sticking out of everywhere, my shirt was torn where the fabric had caught in the vines. I had a long smudge of dirt on one cheek.

Twenty minutes later, wearing a pair of soft ski pants and an oversized t-shirt, a towel wrapped around my washed hair, I walked bare foot across the timber floorboards to join Sam in the kitchen. Leiana

was sitting at the breakfast bar finishing a toasted sandwich.

Sam ran his eyes over my face and smiled when he was satisfied I was okay. I flushed with warmth at his close inspection.

“Tessa!” Leiana greeted me, taking my hands, then pulling me into her arms for an informal hug. “Are you alright?” she asked quietly. “I am so sorry about Reina. Sam warned me to keep her away from you...” but I cut her off.

“No. I am sorry, Leiana. I should have listened to my heart, not my hurt. Neia helped me see that.” I swallowed hard, the vision of my parents in the lounge room still so clear.

“Come, sit down and eat, Tessa,” Sam said and put a plate with a thick toasted sandwich and a side of salad in front of me. My stomach rumbled appreciatively. I was starving.

“Thanks for getting my gear, Leiana,” I said between mouthfuls. “Was Natalie cool with me staying here?”

Leiana smiled. “Yes. I think she and Jackson were very pleased to have the house to just them,” she said delicately. “As I’m sure you and Sam will be, too. So you can talk in private!” she added with a coy smile.

“I’m going to catch up with Neia and let her know you are okay. She was very worried she had overstepped the boundaries. She forgot you are a *human* immortal and didn’t know that you would lose yourself outside the protection of her sanctuary. You *are* okay, aren’t you, Tessa?”

“I’m great. Tell her thank you for me.”

“Brother,” she said formally to Sam before she departed.

“Sister,” Sam responded inclining his head.

“Sister,” Leiana said to me. Shyly, I gave her the same formal response.

After we had eaten, I went back to the bathroom to get my hairbrush from the bag. I was heading back to the living room when Sam called to me from his bedroom. He was sitting propped up against the pillows, a soft lamp on. He held out his hand for the brush and we smiled at each other, remembering the last time he’d brushed my hair. How much had happened since then!

I sat cross-legged on the bed as he stroked the brush through the length of my hair, gently untangling the knots. We didn’t talk, content just being together.

“What did the Council decide, Sam?” I eventually asked.

Sam pulled the brush through several more locks before responding. "They were not equal in their decision. A bare majority were in favour of solitude for a century."

I spun around to face him, my eyes growing very wide. "Solitude?"

"Solitude would have meant forsaking the world of my family, as well as the world of mankind, for a hundred years."

"But we could have been together?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, our binding precludes the Council forcing separation on us. But you would have had to choose, to come with me, or stay in this world."

"That would have been an easy decision. I would have come with you."

Sam held my gaze. "It would not have been easy, Tessa. Never to have the chance to say goodbye to your Godfather or Natalie? To depart your world for a century, knowing you would never see them again? That you would not recognise anything upon your return? It would have been a difficult choice," he assured me.

I thought about it. He was right but it still would have been my choice. He stroked my cheek, knowing.

“My father had the final decision, however. Davan and Tiana abstained from the vote.” Anger suddenly filled his face, his eyes deepening in colour. “Reina had not reckoned Aian would override the Council. She assumed he would lessen the time, not make his own terms.”

“I should never have doubted you,” I whispered.

“No,” he agreed and his face softened when tears came to my eyes at the reproach in his voice. “I should never have given you reason to think me capable of such a thing in the first place, Tessa,” and he stroked my cheek.

“I’m sure it must have seemed like I would do anything in my power to have you. Reina guessed how you would react. The depth of betrayal on your face told me just how deeply you love me, Tessa. I would exchange two centuries of solitude so you never had to endure that.

“In the few minutes before I realised Neia was gone, that she had taken you with her, I understood purgatory. Outraged by Reina’s lie, my father cast his decision. He decreed my punishment was to find you.” His eyes were almost black as he remembered.

“That was very lenient compared to a century of solitude,” I said.

Sam groaned, closing his eyes for a moment. “I’m pleased you think so! Have you ever tried to find the most precious thing in the world and not known where to start?” he said, taking my hands, raising them to his lips.

“At first, I thought you safe. I guessed Neia had taken you to one of her sanctuaries. Yet, there is not a creature alive who knows where they are. I knew the true meaning of anguish when she came and found me, to tell me you had left her protection.”

“Yet you found me so quickly,” I marvelled.

“Quickly?” He groaned again. “Tessa, in the fabric of time, time is not measured by minutes or hours. It took the equivalent of seven human days to find you! And with every day that passed, I died a little more inside.”

I was shocked. “A week? I’ve been gone for a week! Natalie must be beside herself!”

Sam shook his head. “No, we have stepped back in relevant human time. Your birthday was yesterday.”

I thought about that for a few minutes, trying to get the time lines straight.

“Then tomorrow, or today as it’s already after midnight, is when the fire happens? Or won’t it happen as my parents have already died?” I asked slowly.

“Fate’s threads are woven, Tessa. The decision you made that day, influenced the course of events, either path was open. The path you chose came from your love for your mother. The outcome was always going to be the same, in either reality.”

I thought of the images in the mist. “Neia showed me fate’s paths,” I told him.

“That must have been very difficult,” he said. “I’m sure you did not need to relive those memories, nor see the alternative.”

“I was pleased to, Sam. I saw my parents, happy, laughing for just a few minutes. I lost them so suddenly, it was like I’d been robbed of the chance to look at them one last time, memorise everything about them.”

Neia had given me that.

“They died as they lived, in love. I never thought I’d be grateful for the way they died in the car accident. The alternative is too horrible.”

I stretched out on the bed and Sam lay on his side, his head propped on his hand watching me.

“Sam?” I pictured the image from Neia’s mist, my limp body in his arms. “You couldn’t have healed my injuries and left me mortal, could you? Making me immortal was the only way you could save me?” I

remembered the darkness pressing around me before the wondrous golden light infused me.

“I died, didn’t I?”

“The first condition of immortality is death,” Sam said. “One of your famous 20th century writers wrote that. He was right.”

“So you didn’t save my life but gave me life?” Sam nodded.

“Why didn’t your father do the same for your mother?”

Sam rolled onto his back, lacing his hands beneath his head, his face thoughtful. “My mother refused,” he finally said. “In all the eons since she died, my father never told me that. When he summoned me back from my mother’s island, he thought it was time I knew.”

Sam rolled onto his side towards me.

“He begged her for years to let him give her immortality but she would never agree. She spent fifty human years at his side, growing old, but he loved her nevertheless. Hurt by what he thought was her ultimate rejection, her death, he turned quickly to Reina, seeking solace in her youth and beauty. But Reina always knew she was second best. Her bitterness spawned her malicious temper.”

“Why would your mother refuse? You and Leiana were so young!”

Sam lay looking at me for a few minutes and I watched with fascination as the colour of his eyes changed to indigo blue.

“It was my mother’s gift to us,” he told me softly.

“Your mother’s gift?” I repeated, confused.

“Her decision to refuse immortality, and the consequences of that choice, were threads fate wove, threads that have spanned millennia, leading me to that beach when you were a child, strengthening my conviction over the years I waited for the realignment of events to occur. My father told me he only understood something my mother said on her deathbed, after I intervened with your life the second time.”

“What did she say?”

“I bequeath the gift of eternity to my son’s keeping, his need is greater than mine.”

“Oh, Sam!” I watched the conflicting emotions on his face. He’d lost his mother as a child so his path could be joined forever to mine.

“It will not be so for our daughter,” I told him. “She will know the love of her parents, forever.”

We smiled at each other.

“Poor Reina!” I suddenly exclaimed and sat up. “How must she be feeling now? More resentful than before?”

Sam looked shocked. “Tessa! She is undeserving of your compassion!”

“I disagree, Sam. I know it’s twisted and wrong but if Reina didn’t love your father so much, that she was driven to take her revenge out on us, you wouldn’t be laying in bed with me now! Think about that!” I told him.

“Oh, I’ve been thinking of little else,” he said, his voice was thick like velvet. “The first place I went to start my search for you was my chamber. Thoughts linger long in timelessness,” he told me.

“I thought to hear what you had been thinking while I was away, hoping it might give me some clues.” Sam grinned when I blushed.

I recalled vividly where my imagination had taken me.

“I admit to being a little shocked, my darling girl, at the depth of passion! And in one so young!” I blushed even redder.

“They were private thoughts,” I said indignantly. “Can’t imagine what goes on in *your* imagination, you being such an *old* man!” I muttered.

Sam scooped me into his arms and rolled across the bed, pinning me beneath him. It happened so fast I just stared up into his face. “Not too old,” he murmured and he rolled again so I was on top of him.

I kissed him and he twisted his fingers into my hair, pulling me closer. The taste of his mouth was sweeter than Jorin’s Mead, and far more intoxicating. My love for him burned through me. Knowing he was mine, forever, set my emotions free.

“Sam, I love you.”

“As I love you, Tessa.”

I searched his eyes, looking for any remnants of the hesitation at our binding. Sam grew very still beneath me. “You doubt my love?” he asked, disbelief making his voice sharp.

“No.”

“Then, what?” he demanded.

“You were hesitant to be bound to me.”

“Not to the binding, Tessa. It was always my intent to propose it. A binding is the most sacred vow we make to another, it is irreversible. I did not want to bind you to an uncertain future. You deserve so much more.”

“Show me, Sam.”

My voice was breathless with desire.

“Tessa, we will be lovers for eternity,” he warned.

“Yes, please,” I said.