

*In the Shadow
of a Wish*

By Maci Aurora

A Fareview Fairy Tale

A decorative black and white floral border with intricate scrollwork and leaf patterns, framing the central text.

Maci Aurora Books

In the Shadow of a Wish

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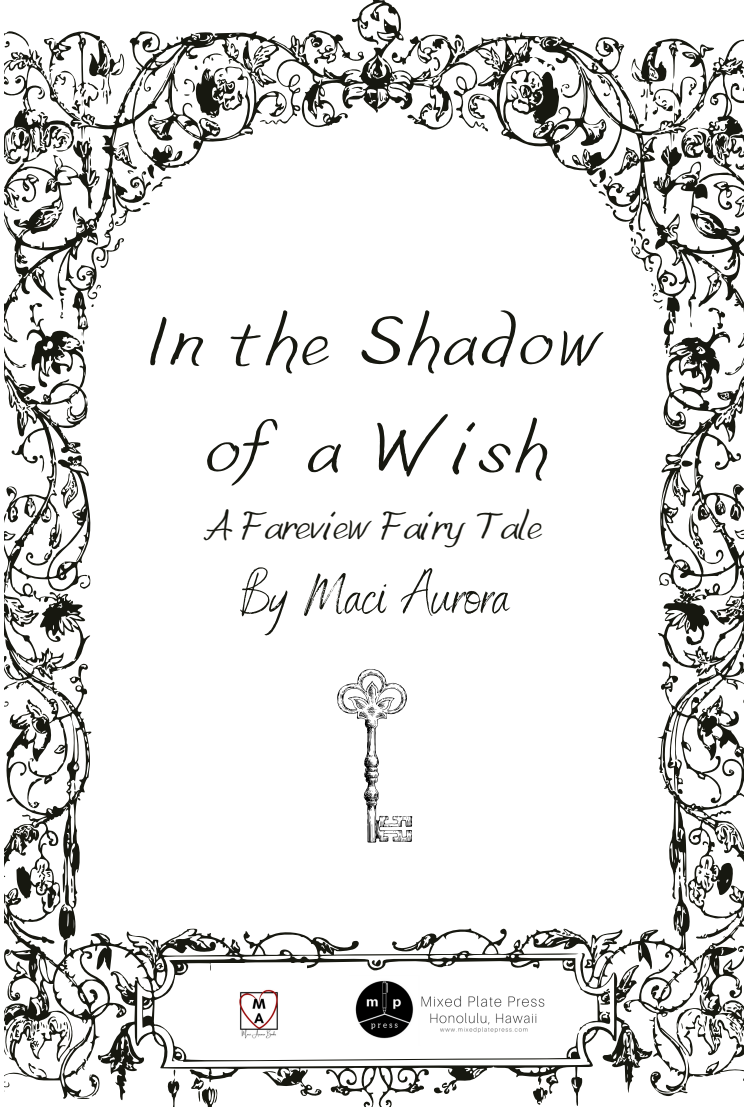
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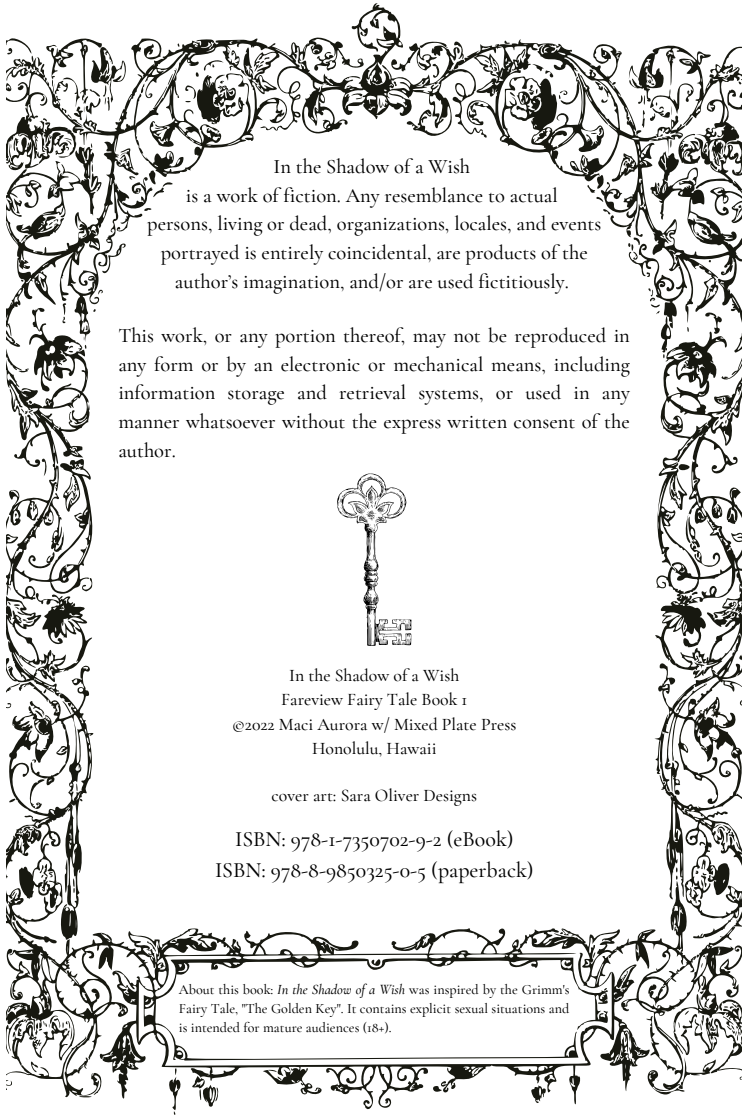
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A Fareview Fairy Tale

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About this book: *In the Shadow of a Wish* was inspired by the Grimm's
Fairy Tale, "The Golden Key". It contains explicit sexual situations and
is intended for mature audiences (18+).



*The first wish is dedicated to the doers; thank you
for keeping the dreams in forward motion. Auri is
for you.*

*My husband is a doer. Thank you for keeping me in
forward motion. I love you.*





Author's Note

In the Shadow of a Wish is a reimagined fairy tale, but even fairy tales travel down dark roads and battle scary monsters. This story—while a romance—does focus on that happily-ever-after, but that doesn't preclude the protagonists from facing some very real and possibly disturbing obstacles. I felt it was important to share what could possibly be triggering for those who wish to know. *If you don't, please stop reading here and begin the story.*

Auri Fareview and her sisters live in a land dominated by men, where women are subjugated to them. What Auri wants more than anything is freedom and agency for herself and her sisters. There are several instances when this agency is stolen from her. She is attacked by a character named Crossbie (this assault is not graphic, but it is intense) and her first wish-obligation also steals agency from her, which creates a tense and uncomfortable situation (also neither graphic or glorified). I have done my utmost to care for Auri (and my readers) and hope both scenes are presented with that caution in mind.

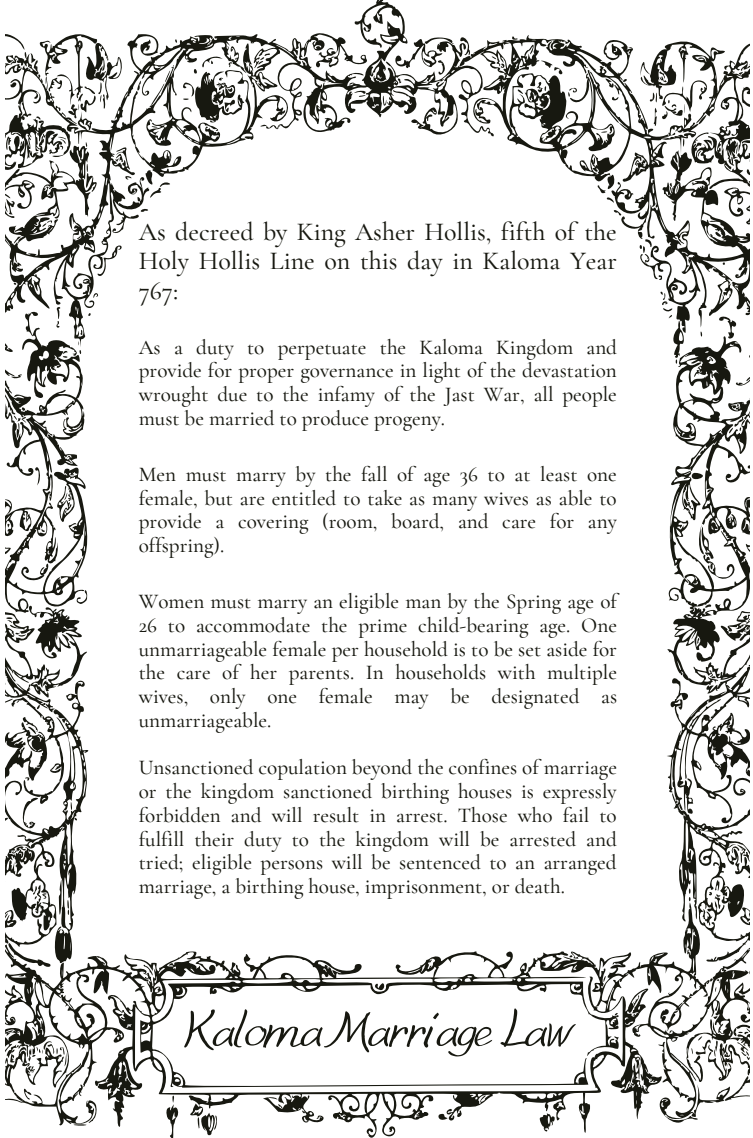
Thank you so much for being willing to take a chance on a new author. I hope you love this story as much as I enjoyed writing it, and I hope all of your wishes for love come true.





Once upon a time ...





As decreed by King Asher Hollis, fifth of the Holy Hollis Line on this day in Kaloma Year 767:

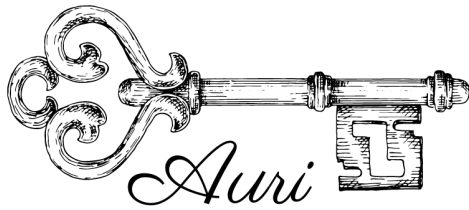
As a duty to perpetuate the Kaloma Kingdom and provide for proper governance in light of the devastation wrought due to the infamy of the Jast War, all people must be married to produce progeny.

Men must marry by the fall of age 36 to at least one female, but are entitled to take as many wives as able to provide a covering (room, board, and care for any offspring).

Women must marry an eligible man by the Spring age of 26 to accommodate the prime child-bearing age. One unmarriageable female per household is to be set aside for the care of her parents. In households with multiple wives, only one female may be designated as unmarriageable.

Unsanctioned copulation beyond the confines of marriage or the kingdom sanctioned birthing houses is expressly forbidden and will result in arrest. Those who fail to fulfill their duty to the kingdom will be arrested and tried; eligible persons will be sentenced to an arranged marriage, a birthing house, imprisonment, or death.

Kaloma Marriage Law



Aurielle Fareview, fourth daughter of Tomas and Scarlett Fareview, stood in the marriage market booth next to her sisters, Brinna and Tarley, waiting for the prospective husbands she weren't sure would ever arrive. She leaned over the balustrade separating them from the aisle and noted the nearly empty corridor. Instead of feeling upset about the lack of eligible marriage partners in attendance, relief fluttered through her like a refreshing summer breeze.

The building was quiet but for the sparse and sporadic conversations being had between traders echoing in the cavernous space between the wood planked floor and the roughhewn beams crisscrossing the space above. Mullioned windows offered additional light though the rustic, round chandeliers shining with lit candles, hanging at even intervals from one end of the building to the other, were the primary source of light.

Auri and her sisters were currently the only women in the marriage market waiting to be looked over by eligible men. It was usually the case. Aside from booths selling wares, food, rations, and supplies to hunters and fur-trappers, there weren't many who were looking for wives. Those who lived in their village were already married, widowed, or weren't yet looking to comply with the law. The young trappers and hunters would come by their booth to flirt with them, which was a fun way to pass the time, but those young men didn't have the same impending deadline concerning their duty to the Marriage Law. They had ten additional years before needing to take a wife and could buy permits to attend the birthing houses if they wanted.

Auri turned from the corridor back into their dark booth, the flame waving under the glass chimney. Brinna, her older sister by a year, was pushing a needle strung with blue thread through the taut fabric stretched between wooden embroidery hoops. She squinted in the lowlight, but it didn't seem to bother her. She insisted she'd rather keep her mind busy than

be idle dreaming up the worst. Tarley, on the other hand, hated embroidery and everything else for that matter. She folded the months-old Kaloma bulletin she'd been reading and set it in her lap. "Can you see what the weather is like?"

"I don't think it's snowing. Poppa and Mattias should be on time," she said, wishing this thrice-weekly endeavor was over.

Tarley, her older sister by two years and in danger of being collected that coming spring, frowned. Tart Tarley might not have wanted to marry, but the impending deadline was a horrific reality offering equally horrifying consequences if she didn't. She sighed. "If I could hide away in the woods and avoid this ridiculous law, I would, but I'd never survive the blasted snow." She leaned forward and looked up and down the corridor. Tarley's brown hair was drawn up into a loose bun that sat like an egg in the puffy nest her hair made around it. Tendrils curled down her neck. She sat back down and sighed again.

Auri noted her sister's hand wrap around her wrist. Probably finding comfort in the ribbon tied there like Auri so often did herself. She'd seen Brinna do the same thing, and Jessamine, their oldest sister, as well. They all found comfort in the simple gift their mother had given them before any of them could remember. Auri now knew it was because their mother had tied it on when they were babies; she'd watched her mother gift Mattias, their younger brother, his when she'd been seven.

“There’s an idea,” Auri said. “What if we found a cave?” She leaned forward to try and catch Tarley’s eyes. Discussing ways around the law had become a standard practice to pass the time. They’d considered dressing as men and becoming hunters. They’d imagined seeking out a Whitling witch to invisibility spell them, which brought about gales of laughter at all the things they could do while invisible.

“Too bad the kingdom sends out hunters,” Brinna replied, offering the flaw. This was always a part of the game. For example, finding a witch was impossible; magic didn’t exist.

“But if we found it when the snow thaws, stashed away inside before the first snow, then we could avoid being tracked,” Auri said, hoping to make Tarley feel better.

“Bears,” was all her older sister said, then with a puff of her cheeks, blew out a puff of air. A tendril of hair fluttered around her face. It was clear she wasn’t getting the enjoyment from their schemes as she usually did. Of course, of the three of them, she was at immediate risk. Auri had the horrible impression her usually unflappable sister was on the verge of crying and wasn’t sure how to handle it. Tarley fluffed her burgundy skirt—the finest she owned—which Auri thought was more of an exercise in spending energy to keep her emotions corralled than concern over her appearance.

Auri wished she could take away her sister’s immediate concerns, but even more wished she could

change the circumstances for them all.

“Maybe we could escape to Jast,” Brinna whispered so no one else would hear. Bring up Jast in such a way could be construed as treason, not that there was anyone there to hear them. After the war, there was no love for the kingdom directly north of Sevens that had decimated Kaloma, though it had been long before any of them had been born. All that separated Kaloma from Jast was the Whiting Woods and the treacherous peaks of the Jast Mountains.

“No collection there,” Brinna added. At twenty-five, she was in danger of collection too if she couldn’t find a match in the next year.

“No Marriage Law either,” Auri said.

She was right behind her sisters having turned twenty-four, and though she had a little more time than Tarley or Brinna, in a provincial village of Sevens, it wasn’t likely. They would all face the collector’s wagons that rolled through the village each spring filled with unmarried men and women and surrounded by armed guards carting them to Kaloma’s capitol city, New Taras. There, they would face a forced marriage arrangement to a stranger’s household, placement in the King’s or some Highlord’s harem, assignment to a birthing house in the kingdom, or death.

Tarley snorted with derision. “Escape to the kingdom who forced the king to sign the Kaloma Marriage Laws in the first place?” Her tone was biting. Auri figured Tarley would probably choose death if given the option. “Brilliant, Brinna. Seriously. Who

knows what kind of terror awaits women in the kingdom that decimated ours over a slight? Your imagination will get you into trouble one day.” She took a breath. “Besides, I hear those mountain passes are treacherous.”

“I don’t know that he *had* to sign that law,” Auri observed, smoothing her green skirt, then twisting her red ribbon around her wrist. She’d read about the pressure put on the king to sign the law when she’d explored the old bulletins stacked in the loft of the barn. Neither of her sisters responded to her observation. It didn’t matter now, anyway.

“Fareview girls!” A crackly voice grabbed ahold of their attention.

Auri leaned to look past her sisters at Mr. Cobble, who traded leathers and dried goods a few booths down. He smoothed the five gray hairs he had over his speckled, bald head and smacked his gums with a mostly toothless grin. “There’s some fellows wandering this way. And since you all are the right, prettiest girls inside these woods, I reckon they’ll stop.”

Auri didn’t have the heart to tell him that besides the Fareview sisters, the only other unmarried girls in their village, other than the women at the Birthing House at the edge of the village, were the two Pennington girls who were ten and twelve, and the Jenzas, whose twin daughters were still toddling about. Any other eligible maiden traveled outside of Sevens to attend the larger marketplaces for better prospects.

Auri's family didn't have that kind of income.

Mr. Cobble's intentions were kind, however, so she held her tongue. His one and only wife had died some years prior. They'd never had children, and he'd taken a fatherly liking to their mother, Scarlett, who provided him with her homemade tinctures, that helped with his joints, along with baked goods and jams she sold on non-marriage market days.

"Maybe I should just offer to marry Mr. Cobble," Tarley remarked late one night in their bedroom as they prepared to sleep. "He's a single man—old as the tree at the center of Sevens, but kind—and it would get me off the market to avoid collection. I could help him."

Jessamine had smiled in that normally subdued way she did, while Brinna and Auri had collapsed into a fit of laughter.

"Mr. Cobble wouldn't allow it," Jessamine said while brushing her long dark hair. "He's too honorable a man."

"You think there are honorable men," Tarley remarked her eyebrows high over her hazel eyes. She barked a laugh. "He would do it because he's a man like all the rest, and I'm being serious," Tarley said. "I'd rather do that than face collection."

"You'd lie with Mr. Cobble?" Brinna scrunched her nose and glanced at Auri.

While they were all aware of the mechanics of what happened between a man and a woman to get children, they weren't exactly sure of the specifics. It was against the law to know beyond the confines of marriage or

birthing houses, anyway.

“He’s too old,” Tarley stated.

Jessamine smiled and chuckled. “Momma has a tincture for that. She makes it all the time.”

Brinna giggled.

Auri frowned unsure why one would need a tincture. “Tarley. You’re going to want children one day. Besides, that’s the point of the law in the first place, and Mr. Cobble probably isn’t eligible anymore.”

“I don’t know that I will. Would you want to bring a daughter into this world? To face this?”

They all grew serious understanding her reasoning. She had a point.

Now, the old man used his head to indicate there were men moving down the aisle at the market toward them. Their boot falls echoed in the large building like the sound of an ax hitting a tree trunk as they walked across the wooden floor. When one of them stopped at Mr. Cobble’s booth, the old man pointed in their direction.

The men—three of them—approached the booth. Auri’s stomach clenched with dread at the realization that there was one for each of them. One man was tall and wiry. His light hair was thin and sparse on the top of his head. He had kind eyes, however, though that didn’t always reveal truths.

Old Mrs. Flimm on the other side of the river had married a man with kind eyes, but he’d been violent with drink and had met a violent end in the woods with a bear. Or so it was said. The explanation didn’t save

Mrs. Flimm, who'd been accused of being a witch who cast spells on the bear to get rid of her husband. She'd been weighed down with rocks and thrown in the river to keep her spirit from casting more spells.

Another of the men was dressed rather elaborately for someone in Sevens. Auri figured he was a lord flaunting his status. He was rotund, which hinted at his wealth, and older, which meant he wasn't looking for a first wife. She didn't like his look—a little too eager—and it made her wary.

The third man was handsome-ish if a little unkept—his red beard, his hair, his haphazard homespun attire. He reminded her of a skittish animal, and his eyes were disconcerting, jumping between her and her sisters as if they were horse flesh. She had the impression he wanted to inspect their teeth and feel the width of their bones.

While the romantic idea that one of these three strangers might prove to be a love match darted through her mind like a hummingbird, Auri was a realist. Love matches like their parents were hard enough to come by. Most likely, these men were desperate. Sevens wasn't a marketplace that enticed noble men, so those that came through, if not desperate, were hard-boiled and practical, or worse, depraved. Unfortunately, the latter were more common in a remote marketplace like Sevens where they could get away with it. Women in a small marketplace were desperate to avoid collection, desperate to avoid a birthing house or a harem. Like

Tarley. They couldn't afford to be choosy. It was easier to gamble with what could be seen rather than what couldn't.

Tarley sighed heavily again. "Gods, I hate this," she muttered, and it made Auri sad for all of them. Auri looked down at the table and fought the tears climbing up the back of her eyes, clogging her throat.

Brinna reached over and grasped Auri's hand.

Auri ran a thumb over the ribbon tied around her sister's wrist, then met her sister's watchful gaze.

Brinna's smile seemed to say: *It's okay. We've got each other.*

Auri wanted to reply, *but for how long?* Instead, she returned Brinna's smile, lifted her chin, and felt comforted by the feel of her sister's hand in her own. But it couldn't alleviate the discomfiture and unease regarding the marriage market. She was practical enough to know that three men didn't just drop into Sevens every marriage market day. She'd been forced into being at the marketplace too long and knew better. Giving these men time was the right course, even if every part of her was screaming that she needed to run.

"Good day, maidens," the ostentatious man said. He offered a bow then straightened, tugging on the bright purple jacket stitched with golden thread. He smiled, his gaze started with Tarley and lingered as he said, "I'm Midlord Buteress." He had a strange mole on his chin with a bunch of stubby hairs growing from its center that Auri couldn't stop watching as he spoke. It was horribly distracting. "My companions are

Lowlord Gromley.”

The tall, thin man with the easy eyes inclined his head but didn't smile, then his gaze stuck to Brinna.

“And this is Mr. Crossbie, a farmer.” The skittish man grinned showing his stained teeth, but the smile didn't reach his eyes, so it looked like a grimace. Auri noticed his eyes were a color like the sky on a hot summer day. When his intense gaze met hers, she looked away.

Tarley spoke for all of them. “I'm Tarley Fareview. These are my sisters, Brinna and Aurielle.”

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” the pompous one said.

A silence stepped in between them and stretched its arms, the span of awkwardness stretching with each passing moment. Auri watched the men exchange glances, either unsure themselves, or unsure what protocol dictated, for it appeared they weren't familiar with one another.

Gromley stepped forward into the silence and filled it. “Miss Fareview,” he said to Brinna and smoothed a hand over his drab, brown jacket, seeming to check to make sure all the clasps were closed properly. Auri's gaze caught on his hands as they moved over his clothing, thin, soft, and supple. So different from their father's wide hands, course and calloused from work.

“I'm looking for a first wife. I have a modest manor several days travel from Sevens to the southeast. It makes a healthy living, and my deadline is approaching.

I'm thirty-four. Perhaps, you would consent to consider my suit? I need a wife to help me with running the home. And—" he paused, his skin pinkening as his lips puckered at whatever he'd been about to say.

"Offspring," Crossbie finished his eyes darting from Gromley to Auri. His gaze ran from her face across the bodice of her dress to the hem and back up. "We're all here for that."

Mr. Crossbie was very off-putting, Auri decided. She didn't like him or his manner.

While Gromely appeared a good sort, his pragmatic approach wouldn't appeal to her dreamy sister. Of course, Brinna was wise enough to recognize a safe option, but Auri figured she might hold out a bit longer for a love match they all wanted. Having parents who adored one another made it difficult to accept anything less.

Before Brinna could respond to Gromley, however, Butress interrupted, stepping up to the railing. "I should think that perhaps my expansive estate could provide for you and your fair sisters. One and all."

Gromley and Crossbie looked nonplussed by Butress's insertion, their heads snapping in his direction, confusion marring their foreheads with lines.

Butress continued, "It's to the south, near Fulstrom."

His gaze swept over each of them, Auri noticed, taking in not only their faces, but skimming the bodices of their gowns. He lingered on Auri, and lifted his gaze

to hers, smiling with yellowed teeth. It made Auri feel like she needed to rush home, lock the door, and bathe. The fact he was looking for another wife and had just offered for all three of them sent disgust rioting through her body. It made her think this man was the deviant sort. He could have gone to the Fulstrom market but had probably over shopped his welcome and was now forced to the outer kingdom markets.

She shuddered.

“Now, come man,” Crossbie said, his voice as sharp as his gaze. “We agreed this would be done civilly. Three of us. Three of them. One for each.” His gaze jumped back to Auri. “I’m nearing the arrest mark,” he told Auri. “I need a woman, and I need her with a child. I don’t want the older one.” His head tilted in Tarley’s direction. “I need a younger one.” He pierced Auri with that disturbing gaze before looking at the men next to him. “You have children Buteress, and you have two years, Gromley. I’m in a hurry, here.”

Auri’s face opened with shock at the man’s bluntness. He was hard and cold. Perhaps his pragmatism would have spoken to her normally practical nature, but there was a difference between being a realist and just being rude. She was right in her assessment that she was nothing more than horse flesh to this man.

Tarley cleared her throat, pressed her lips together in frustration and narrowed her eyes, a tell of her sister’s impatience. If there were a queen in Sevens, then Frosty Tarley would take the office, that is if

women were allowed to do so.

“Let us be clear, gentlemen, we are sitting here in compliance with the law. Nothing more.” She looked down her nose at all of them, and Auri loved her sister’s spirit despite the circumstances.

Auri wanted to be more like Tarley: brave and bold. She found often that she imagined she could be brave, but then wilted when she faced something she was afraid of, like these men.

“We haven’t deigned to agree to any one of your suits, nor are we obligated to, so perhaps you should be on your best behavior rather than your worst,” Tarley concluded.

Buteress’s fisheyes jumped from Auri to Tarley and assessed her in a new way. His smile indicated he liked something he saw in her. “Ah. Miss Fareview.” A lecherous glow lit his pudgy face. “I’m delighted by your spirit.” He interlaced his leather-gloved hands in front of his heart and bent slightly at the waist. “But you are nearing collection, are you not? Perhaps you would consent to my suit.”

Auri watched Tarley blink slowly, but nothing else gave away the disgust she could tell her sister felt at the prospect of marrying this man. Auri could see the wheels spinning in Tarley’s head. She was twenty-six. Did she take the gamble to be collected and possibly assigned to a birthing house, or consent to marriage with such a man? Knowing her sister, she’d stand up, walk over to Cobble’s booth and tell him they were about to marry, hightail it out into the woods to hide

there, or she'd run herself through with a weapon from Mr. Dennig's table.

"Do you have a wife, Midlord Buterness?" Tarley asked.

His smile deepened. "I do, Miss Fareview. I am acquiring a fourth." He said this with pride, as if it was in his favor because he had the economic means to support all of them, which would be the only way he'd be allowed to marry repeatedly. He looked well fed, which revealed he had enough to provide, but Auri knew that didn't mean he did. She'd overheard stories told between trappers and traders of things they'd seen and heard.

Auri watched Tarley tense and could sense her sister's disgust as clear as if it were stewing in the bottom of her own gut. A deviant. This man was a collector—not the same as the spring collector, but a different kind. A collector of women and he had the means to do it legally in Kaloma. There were rumors about these kinds of men and how they treated their wives. The dark things they did to them behind closed doors, and sometimes even to their children.

Auri shivered.

The clanking sound of the marketplace bell rang out signaling the close of the day.

Her father and brother would be along shortly to escort them home, which brought Auri relief. Though Sevens didn't get dark—it hadn't since Auri's childhood—it was far safer to have an escort. One couldn't predict what sorts of unsavories or dangers

were lurking about in the woods.

“Perhaps I could call upon you next market day?” Gromley asked Brinna. “Will you be here then?”

“I don’t have much of a choice now do I, Mr. Gromley,” Brinna replied.

“Lowlord.”

Brinna glanced at Auri. She squeezed her sister’s hand with frustrated understanding, and turned back to the stoic man, who now just seemed austere and unfeeling. “Forgive me, Lowlord Gromley, for my mistake.”

His face turned hard and grim, and his eyes flitted from Brinna to Auri as if trying to measure their complacency. His already thin lips tightened and puckered a moment, then he said, “I don’t like mistakes, Miss Fareview. I want propriety in my wife and offspring. They will need to know their place, and I would discipline them when necessary.” He slapped his leather gloves against his thigh.

Brinna squeezed Auri’s hand harder.

“Daughters,” their father’s voice interrupted with a congenial shout as he entered the building. It was his usual greeting on market days. Usually there weren’t any suitors.

Auri turned her head toward him and watched Tomas Fareveiw walk up the wooden walkway with her brother Mattias a pace behind him, their steps loud and even. They arrived as if they carried safety with them like a blanket.

Both were large men, imposing, even if their

personalities weren't. Her father's brown beard was full, his dark coat covered a dark homespun shirt, stretched across a broad back built from years chopping wood and farming their small patch of land. He had a dark hat on his head, a walking stick in his hand which he didn't need, but always carried when it wasn't holding an ax.

Mattias, the youngest Fareview, who at eighteen still had many years before he had to worry about this endeavor, resembled their father with giant body and his brown hair, though his eyes were lighter like their mother's. Her brother would have had a beard if he could grow one, but as it was, it looked rather patchy. They teased him incessantly for it. He, too, had on his dark winter coat with his hat pulled low over hair that needed a trim. His hands were shoved into pockets of his pants as he walked toward them.

"Are you ready," their father said, then noticed the men standing outside their booth. Auri watched her father's warm molasses gaze jump between the faces of the strangers to his daughters. His smile faded, eyes narrowed—a Tarley-look if Auri had ever seen one—and the sugar glaze inside of them hardened.

Mattias was also frowning. He pulled his hands from his pockets and took his hat off his head.

For some reason, Auri thought about how her brother had once expressed his desire to go to second school in New Taras to study law and repeal the Marriage Law for his sisters. As sweet as the sentiment was Tarley pointed out, "While the thought is noble,

brother, it's not like it will do much good for us by then."

Auri noted Buteress's greedy gaze sweep over Mattias. "Mr. Fareview? You have lovely daughters. And a son? He looks strong and like a good worker." He licked his lips.

She wanted to jump over the table and stand in front of her brother. There were rumors about these kinds of men, too. Those who would pay the poor for their boys and girls for their servitude to their land, only that wasn't what became of those children. Using children in such a way was against the law, of course, but Kaloma officials did an excellent job of looking the other way when enough coin was involved.

Mattias grip on his hat tightened, and his knuckles turned white. Instead of speaking to the older man as rules of propriety required, Mattias ignored him. "Come on, sisters. Let's get home."

"Now, wait a moment," Crossbie said, stepping closer to the rail. "I need a wife. I'm going to have one of these women. I want this one," he said and like a striking snake, snatched Auri's wrist before she saw what was happening, yanking her toward him.

Auri's hip slammed against the handrail; it creaked and wobbled, threatening to topple. "Unhand me!" She wrenched her arm out of his grasp and scurried backward away from him.

Mattias—stars bless him—intending to help her though she extricated herself before he could, placed himself between Crossbie and Auri on Crossbie's side

of the rail. Crossbie had her brother by several stones even if Mattias had height and youth on his side.

“Try and touch my sister again, you prick,” Mattias said, his voice low and dangerous.

Tomas stepped between Mattias and Crossbie. “It doesn’t work that way, and if it did, I wouldn’t allow you to take my daughter,” her father said. Auri could see that the diplomacy he usually employed in situations that involved bartering was nonexistent. He was seething, his jaw tight as he spoke.

“It does. Law says so. I get the wife of my choice,” Crossbie said.

“As long as she accepts your suit,” Gromley added. He was very in tune with rules and regulations.

“Why wouldn’t she?” Crossbie’s eyes were still on Auri, looking around Tomas and Mattias, who were blocking the farmer’s line of sight to her. “She’s unlikely to find a better prospect up here in the boonies.”

She had the horrible feeling he would toss her over his shoulder, run, and rut her like the bull she’d seen with the cows if he could. There’d been a story one of the women from the outer region shared when their mother had gone to help with her birth about a woman her father had found on his land, attacked, and left for dead in the river. She’d been returned to her family, but then forced to marry her attacker.

Her father lifted his walking stick, so it rested on his shoulder. “The law provides for a woman’s choice.”

That wasn’t exactly true, but it didn’t seem prudent

to correct her father. Auri didn't want to argue the point, rubbing Crossbie's touch from her wrist and checking the ribbon, surprisingly still tied there.

Mr. Cobble shuffled over from his booth.

Auri liked that the old man cared enough to see what was happening but didn't think he'd be very effective helping her father or Mattias if it came to it. She glanced at Brinna, whose eyes were the size of cream saucers. Then at Tarley, who was frowning. She glanced at Auri, watched Auri rub her wrist, and shook her head in disgust.

A few of the other men they knew in the marketplace, Mr. Hemmis—a woodworker—and Mr. Dennig—a metalsmith—wandered over as well, standing to the side should her father and brother need assistance.

Midlord Buteress, recognizing the odds had shifted, offered a nod of his head, and reached out to block Crossbie from stepping any closer. "Please, accept my apologies for Mr. Crossbie. He's not familiar with the marketplace, given this is his first attendance. I shall endeavor to help him with his approach for tomorrow's visit."

"See that you do," her father said, his affability now a winter's day. "The market is closed." He lifted his chin toward the exit. "See yourselves out."

Two of the three men—the lords—bowed but Crossbie stabbed Auri with one more stare before turning and walking away.

Auri shuddered another breath of relief when the

sound of their footfalls on the wooden walkway had disappeared altogether.

Her father turned to look at them, his face drawn and bleak with frustration. He ran a hand over his face. “Gods.” He looked up and glanced at the other men and nodded at them, offering his gratitude for their support. “I’d hoped for more time,” he muttered more to himself than anyone else.

Auri didn’t understand her father’s strange comment, but then he was prone to random thoughts at strange times. Perhaps he was referring to Tarley’s coming deadline? She didn’t have an opportunity to ask because Mr. Dennig interrupted her curiosity.

“We’ll see you folks out. Make sure there isn’t anything unsavory beyond the doors of the marketplace.”

“I’d appreciate that.” He paused and took a deep breath to clear away whatever bitterness he was feeling. “Come. Let’s get you safely to the cottage.”

Auri, Tarley and Brinna, led by their father and hemmed in from behind by their brother were flanked by the village men. They started from the market house.

“That was rather dramatic,” Brinna said as they moved down the walkway. “I can’t wait to tell the story to Mother and Jess.”

“They aren’t home. Mrs. Grenden’s baby is coming,” Mattias said.

“Pray for sons,” they all said in the common blessing upon learning of a pregnancy or a birthing.

Her father glanced around to make sure the men were truly gone. “Let’s get home before the sun falls. Don’t need to be traveling in the woods after dark.”

“It won’t get dark,” Brinna said. “We should see anyone coming.”

“There are clouds,” Father said. “Storm coming. It will be dim enough in the woods to hide in the shadows. We won’t be safe until we get to the cottage.”

Once they were settled in the wagon, they started toward home. The trees from the forest thickened the further they traveled from the village, the bushes, brambles, and trunks outlining the snowy roadway. When they were beyond the village, their father said, “None of you will go to the market tomorrow.”

“What will we do?” Tarley asked.

“We’ll stay close to home. Work about the cottage.”

“Not that. About the marketplace. The men. The collection.” Tarley worked the ribbon around her wrist.

“Isn’t there anything we can do?” Mattias asked.

“Got a magic spell that can whisk you all from Kaloma?” Their father asked. He snapped the line to get the horse moving a little faster. “We’ll figure something out. Mama and I always do.” He looked over his shoulder at them, then refocused on the rutted road ahead. The wagon lurched over a divot but rolled onward. “I promise.”

Auri wasn’t sure what could be done. She looked up at the dark, gray sky and wished she could change things. She didn’t hold any illusions that that magic

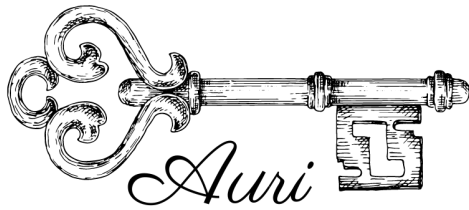
existed to change their circumstances, however.

“Auri?” Her father’s voice drew her from her wishes.

“Yes, Father?”

“You’ll be in the woods collecting tomorrow. Jessamine and Mother will be with the Grendens a while, I think. Mattias and I will be in the woods with you, cutting.”

“Yes, sir,” she said. Maybe she was supposed to hate that he’d given her that tedious chore but rather than being a drudgery—like sitting in the marriage marketplace—foraging for winter herbs felt like being granted a wish: freedom.



The next day, Auri tucked one hand into the pocket of her coat, and pulled on the cart's rope with the other, listening to the slice of the sled's runner through the snow. As she high-stepped through the knee-high fresh fall, her wool skirt dragged, collecting snow, she groaned with frustration, yanking the fabric, wishing she could don pants like her father and brother. Despite the cold seeping through her clothing and boots, she was warm with the exertion of walking and grateful to be anywhere else other than the marketplace where she and her sisters were stuffed like jarred fruits waiting for some suitor to come along

and select one of them from the shelf.

She noticed a flash of sunlight against the fresh white powder. It was beautiful, as if the sun dropped dollops of golden syrup on the trail making the snow sparkle a moment before fading. She didn't ponder the fact the sky was overcast, and the snow wasn't melting under the heat as it should. Content, she hummed as she continued through the forest.

A noise—something subtly different from the slice of the sled runners through the packed snow—captured her attention. She stopped and looked about the woods. It was quiet. No animal sounds. No tree-falling from her father and brother, who she knew were also out in the woods. The thwack-thwack of their axes in a syncopated rhythm resounded in the distance. The stark white of the new snow against the black, leafless branches of deciduous trees mixed with the evergreens obscuring her view of what might be out there.

She squinted at the shadows, imagining she saw a play of golden sparkles in the dark recess, but blinked, and it was gone. Nothing new caught her eye. Nothing moved but snow slipped from a low hanging branch causing it to snap back into place. Her imagination. She continued forward, unable to go home yet, and blamed the unnerving shivers that danced up her spine on the incident with Crossbie and Brinna's stories.

Brinna loved to tell stories about the Whitting Woods. Monsters that roamed to eat, wizards and witches trapping people in the bodies of wild animals or trees and flowers or kidnapping them for their

spells, crazed men on the run from the government, pirates, thieves, and sometimes saviors bent to save the women of Kaloma. But that was all they were: stories.

Auri suppressed a smile at her sister Brinna's insistence that magic once led her to a meadow "...full of kindling and cleared of snow as if it were spring. Touched by magic," Brinna, the dreamy sister, had whispered to Auri in the dark.

"Why didn't you bring any proof home?"

"I blinked, and it vanished," Brinna said, her whisper just a touch louder in her exuberance. They'd been squished together in the bed they shared, in a room they shared with Jessamine and Tarley, where no one could have a thought without the other one knowing.

"Oh hush," Tarley said from the dark. "Don't be daft. Magic isn't likely to touch the lot of us, just like love. Neither of which will ever find us in this gods-forsaken hovel."

"Be nice, Tarley," Jessamine's sweet voice contrasted with Tarley's acerbic one. "It's okay to dream, Brinna."

"Easy for you to say, Jess. You don't have to marry at all," Tarley replied to their oldest sister who had chosen to be their families one unmarried female and would care for their parents. Tarley's bitterness was at their circumstances rather than their older sister.

"We should go to Sparrow City," Auri had offered. "Or Fulstrom."

"With what coin?" Tarley asked. "And in the

middle of winter? Beggars can't be choosers now, can they?"

Leave it to Tarley to offer a heavy dose of reality. Auri understood Tarley's pessimism even if she longed for optimism. And she knew she couldn't let herself get caught up in her imagination like Brinna might. Allowing herself a place to dream and imagine, wish and hope was too painful when their only options for a future were the likes of Crossbie or Gromley or Buteress. With Jessamine, Tarley, Brinna, Auri, and Mattias, still unmarried and at home with their parents, there were a lot of mouths to feed and very little income to do it. It left little room for dreaming.

With a sigh, she continued forward, enjoying another dollop of sunshine glistening in the snow, then another as if she were following woodland fairies, deciding there wasn't any harm in imaging here, for now. She smiled when the snow cleared, offering her a path which was so much easier to traverse. When she sliced the sled across the cleared pathway through another copse of trees, she stopped short and stared. A giant bank of snow blocked the path forward. It rose like a fortress, though there was a narrow space that allowed passage through the frozen wall, which, at the moment, seemed to be illuminated by sparkling golden light.

Everything about it said, "This way!"

Awareness wrapped a sensation around the back of her neck and drifted down her spine, but it wasn't foreboding exactly, but something less tangible which

made her feel foolish. Brinna's stories were getting into her head, Auri decided. Anything to take her mind off the perils of what happened the day before at the marketplace, she supposed.

With a glance up at the gray sky through the bones of the brittle trees trying to poke holes in the thick clouds, Auri knew it would snow. The air was heavier and reminded her that the brisk cold would become life threatening. She'd have to return home soon, but with a glance back at her wagon, a little too empty yet, she needed more. It wasn't so surprising that the snow would have drifted into such a structure, she reasoned. *I can go a little farther*, she decided and started forward. Maybe the wood sprites had more in mind for her today, she thought with a smile.

She slid through the narrow opening of the snow bank, pulling the sled behind her, and once through, halted with mouth-open awe. Despite being the dead of the winter, she stood in an awakening meadow with golden sunlight dappling the surface of the forest floor. There were clumps of melted snow scattered throughout the glen, mixed with grasses and early blooms, along with scraps, herbs, and spring fruits to collect. Trees of all kinds, evergreen, deciduous with spring blooms, thin reedy saplings, giant, fat trunks of hearty oaks with the first suggestion of green life surrounded the glen. Every so often, she could see the wall of snow beyond through the shadows. It was as if she'd walked into a private room of the woods. Brinna's magical spring meadow.

Auri laughed aloud with surprise and delight, deciding that Brinna's imagination was more astute than they gave her credit for. Even if Auri didn't believe in magic, it was hard to refute it when this meadow looked enchanted. She blinked, wondering if it would disappear like Brinna's story, but when she opened her eyes, she was still standing in the springtime glade.

Leaving the sled, she collected twigs, fallen branches, and whatever else would be useful for the family's winter work. There were herbs and supplies for the medicines to be made in her mother's kitchen. And springtime ones at that! Wild carrots! Wild strawberries! It was a treasure trove. She began to hum again, now so happy that she could help her family in this way, and before long felt the heat of the work.

Auri removed her coat and laid it on a large slab of basalt taking residence in an outcropping of rocks near the narrow entrance. She stashed the sled near it, still in the snow. With a glance up, she noticed the clouds had broken apart revealing a patch of icy-blue sky hovering over this spring patch of earth. Curious and curiouser. She leaned down to inspect some plants growing near the base of the boulder, and something on the ground glinted in the sun, catching her gaze. Tilting her head, she bent to search the loam for the glittering object. After moving some detritus of a forgotten winter, she uncovered a gleaming, golden key.

She gasped and picked it up. A quick, pleasant

pulse of energy surged through her hand when she did, the gilded object was warm to the touch. Strange. The blade, the length of her thumb, coalesced into an opulent bow curled and inlaid with what looked to be five jewels while at the opposite end rounded with two equidistant prongs. The key was heavy, as if made from solid gold. It had to be worth a fortune!

“Where do you belong and what are you doing here?” she asked the key. She turned and looked at the ground as if there might be a treasure chest or a trap door nearby to change her fortunes. Then she scoffed at her silliness, studying the key once again.

“Do you always talk to yourself?”

Auri twirled at the voice, hiding the priceless treasure in a tight fist behind her back.

Standing at the edge of the forest’s shade was a stranger. His face was obscured in the shadows that seemed to undulate around him, but she could see he was tall. He wasn’t wide like her father, but shaped with a hint at his strength, somehow. He was dressed to match the shadows as if he wore the darkness, which she found disconcerting.

Her heartbeat was frenetic. She lifted her chin to appear braver than she felt, channeling Tarley, afraid her voice might fail her. “Were you following me?”

He chuckled and took slow steps toward her, leaving the shadows of the trees behind. “No. I have only just entered the meadow, and there you were, talking to air.” He waved a hand, the darkness pulsed with his movement as if it were stitched to him. Auri

realized the shadows were following him.

That couldn't be.

She shook her head of the thought and focused on what was tangible. His clothing—unlike the garments she'd seen on the menfolk in her village or that her father and brother wore—adhered to him. A shirt, not a tunic, with buttons—actual buttons!—open at his neck so she could see the hollow at his throat. A dark wool coat stopped at his thighs covered in black trousers that weren't homespun but tailored. They fit his frame so she could see the strength of his thighs, the length of which disappeared into polished black boots that hugged his calves. No hat. No gloves. He must have been rich, from the city with a carriage nearby to be dressed so. Maybe even the royal city, New Taras.

He was standing in the shadows which rippled around him.

Impossible.

She looked up to find the sun, to understand what was happening with the shadows, but realized the meadow was darker. The blue slice of sky was gone replaced by a twilight sky, dark with thick clouds once more. No sunshine. She looked down at her feet. No shadows.

When she looked back at the stranger again, the shadows still billowing around him as he moved across the meadow, a snowflake landed on her cheek and melted. Her heartbeat was frantic. She turned, and picked up her coat, knowing she needed to leave the

meadow.

Her grip tightened around the key, the prongs digging into her palm. She knew this trinket could provide her family a tidy sum even without a treasure chest, and this well-dressed man didn't need it, obviously. They could go to Sparrow City or Fulstrom for a proper marketplace and a proper match. They could have what seemed a better choice.

"In a hurry?" the stranger asked.

Instead of answering, she asked him her own questions. "What are you doing here? Where are you coming from? Where are you going?" She glanced over her shoulder at the white wall of snow behind him for another opening but couldn't locate one. Then shrugged into the coat.

He stopped and tilted his head. "That's a lot of questions all at once."

He was so much closer, and now she could see his features. Her breath caught. He was beautiful, objectively, and though she had limited experience to compare his beauty to, she knew it to be a fact. His hair was raven black and curled around his face shaped and gentled with day-old shadow. His eyes were dark and framed under thick, dark brows. His nose was perfect and straight. She wasn't sure she'd ever seen such a perfect iteration of a nose before. It led to a proportional mouth with lips that gentled his angular jaw.

She had to look away, reminding herself to draw a breath as her body betrayed her. Being drawn to his

exterior when she knew nothing about his interior was misguided and dangerous. Her mind told her she should be afraid of a stranger with her racing heart and muscles tense, ready to dart away like a frightened hare. She understood fear and Crossbie's face flashed through her thoughts, but this wasn't fear. Not exactly. Her body wanted to step closer and inspect this man like they did to the women at the marketplace.

When he didn't answer any of her questions, she supplied one. "The marketplace?"

He took another slow step toward her. "No. I'm not sure why I'd go there." He looked her up and down, inspecting her, then glance around her at her wagon. "Is that where you're going to?" He continued across the clearing toward her, in no hurry, his steps assured.

She shook her head and swallowed again, hoping it would calm the mutinous nerves that were now breaking all her defenses down and stealing her bravery. His question was an honest one. She could have been—should have been—at the marketplace. At twenty-four, it was a good assumption to make. But it was clear he wasn't from Sevens. This gave her pause as she considered her experience at the market the day before with Buteress, Gromley, and Crossbie. What was a stranger like him doing here, in the Whitting Woods?

Fear knocked on the door of her heart and made a grand entrance which made her stammer. "It isn't my day for the market. I'm collecting kindling and winter

herbs.” She glanced at her pile near the boulder, then hurried to put them in her wagon.

“That’s what you sell at the market?” He followed her gaze to the pile, then returned to her. He looked at her skirt again, which made her feel self-conscious about her own threadbare clothing, the patches on her skirt and coat announcing her peasantry.

“Sell?” She shook her head. “I wasn’t talking about the normal market, but we sell my mother’s jams and medicinal tinctures.”

He tilted his dark head and continued his walk toward her. “There’s another kind of market?”

“The marriage market.”

He stopped moving for a moment, his shadows billowing like sheets hung out to dry, and his confused look startled her. The impossibility of those shadows struck Auri again along with his confusion.

“Marriage market?” he asked.

She looked from his shadows to his face and struggled to maintain her gaze. “You don’t—” she stopped speaking, even more confounded. Everyone in Kaloma knew of the marriage law. “Where are you from?” She stepped back. “Jast?”

If he was from Jast, he might have nefarious intentions, or perhaps he was a marauder, which put her in danger of kidnapping. Except he didn’t look like she might imagine a marauder, and one this far in the northern woods and without quick passage to the sea? It didn’t make sense in the whole series of events thus far, but she couldn’t make sense of this man. Even

if he was attending the marketplace, what was he doing so deep in the forest?

He shook his head. "I'm not from around here." He continued toward her.

Auri realized how close he was now, the darkness reaching toward her, surging around her ankles. "So I realized." She lifted her feet as the darkness wrapped around her; it wasn't any different than fog, wisps of it moving with her movements.

"What is this marriage market?"

"It's where women go to find prospective husbands. It's the law." She stopped stomping and looked at him.

His brows shifted over his dark eyes with an incredulous look. "That's barbaric." Now before her, he stopped and looked her up and down again. "I bet you've snagged yourself a husband." He grinned, but it wasn't filled with humor. Something heavier and darker.

He was so close, Auri took quick, frightened-hare steps backward and got caught between him and the rocks. *Snagged?* The metal of the key seemed to grow even hotter against her skin.

She shook her head. "No. My sisters have to...not snagged...they're trapped. I don't want—" but she stopped and clamped her mouth shut. "Are you a collector?" she asked. She'd never known one to come through before spring, but her mind wanted to cling to something that made sense.

"Collector of what?" he asked and moved even

closer. “What don’t you want?”

She lost her fight with the boulder and thumped hard against it, having to sit down because her knees gave. She looked up at the man, close enough to see that his dark eyes glittered.

And suddenly her fear made her angry.

She thought of Crossbie the day before and how afraid she’d been, of his hand grabbing ahold of her and yanking her to him. Of how powerless she’d felt. The powerlessness and trepidation she felt about this stranger now, though not a Crossbie, made her furious.

She rose, gripped the key harder, and stepped toward him like she was the Queen of Kaloma, or Queen Tarley. She wouldn’t be cowed. “You are being rude. You frighten me, make accusations, then stalk me across the meadow.”

“Frighten and stalk? What am I, a wolf?”

She made an irritated noise. “What do you want from me?”

He crossed his arms over his chest, and her traitorous mind noticed the way the fabric of his coat stretched around his arms and shoulders. “I was just interested in learning a bit more.” He waved a hand about. “Of being here. A new place.”

“Learning what?”

“About you. We will be together for a while.”

She resisted the urge to shrink away but couldn’t exactly dart past him since he was blocking her path. “You’re an enforcer? I’m twenty-four. I still have two years! I don’t have to go anywhere with you.”

“You speak in riddles. An enforcer? Of what? Two years until what?”

It made her even angrier. If she were thinking clearly, she might consider the why of her emotion. The need to rationalize each of the inexplicable things happening around her. But she wasn’t and instead snapped, “The law!” clinging to what she knew. What was real and explainable.

Auri picked up the lead for the sled, and moved around the man. Had she thought it through, she might have skirted around him and taken a wider birth to avoid being within his reach. Except the sudden panic rushing through her had taken over, so she took the quicker path straight past him.

As she did, his hand grasped her arm. A bright heat flashed through her like the fireworks she’d once seen in Sparrow City to commemorate the birth of the new princess, burning through the fabric of her clothing to her skin. Whereas Crossbie grasping her felt invasive and repulsive, this touch didn’t. This touch seemed to hold a promise, though of what she couldn’t say. When she looked from his hand on her arm to his face and saw perplexity carved between his eyes, she wondered if he’d felt the effervescent heat, too. Though her heart was pounding, she understood the heartbeat wasn’t afraid. It was anxious for something. This touch felt dangerous in a different way from Crossbie’s. Something else entirely.

This close she could see the glittering in each of his dark eyes. Gemstone colors with striations in his irises.

Otherworldly eyes. Brinna's stories resounded in her mind. She wanted to dismiss them, but now it was harder to do so. She glanced around the meadow touched by spring and back to his eyes.

"Magic? You're a wizard? A witch?" she asked and hated how timid she sounded.

He smiled then; a smile that made her think of a predator. It wasn't unkind, but chills raced across her skin nevertheless. "Not a wizard or a witch. I am the night. I am every dream you've ever had, and I carry answering nightmares for good measure."

"Let me go," she said, but it came out like a whisper.

"You have touched what is mine," he said, and she couldn't stop looking at his mouth.

This smile he gave her awoke something else deep inside of her, flooding her with heat.

She tore her gaze away from his smiling mouth to his face and wrenched her arm from his grasp. "I don't have anything of yours. I don't even know your name."

"Oh, but you do."

Auri had the impression that he moved closer, even though neither of them had moved. It was as if the darkness emanating from him was wrapping around her, drawing her closer.

"You're a stranger. What could I possibly have that is yours?" she asked with as much disdain as she could muster. "Look at me. I have nothing. I am in the forest collecting twigs and weeds so my family won't freeze to death." She looked the length of him.

“You don’t understand,” he said, his voice no longer easy and companionable but not exactly threatening. Bitter perhaps?

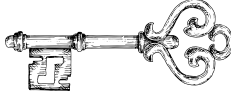
“I don’t.”

His eyebrows shifted over his eyes as if offering her the opportunity to challenge his claim and he looked down at her coat pocket where she gripped the golden trinket. “The key,” he said.

She shook her head and felt the metal burning hot against her skin. She had picked up the key. As she searched his face, the shadows moving around and between them, his touch and now the darkness holding her captive, she noted the colored striations of his dark eyes. They reminded her of the gemstones on the key. “What? How can that be?” she asked, feeling foolish for even thinking it. And still, she voiced her question out loud, “You’re the key?”

He scoffed with very little amusement and shook his head. Then he leveled that gemstone gaze on her and said, “No. I’m the god the key trapped.”

Set the trap
Bait the trick
Entice the fly
With honey thick



Hold it down
Pluck its wings
Make it feeble
It's power to glean.

Touch one jail
Touch two play
Three wishes with
Prices to pay.

Make wishes thrice
Pay three times.
Loathe the wishkeeper
Trapped inside.

Choose a vice
Pure and worthy
Cast it blood

An oath sacrifice
Candles and fire
To open the door
Pernicious flood
To pay the price

“With this blood
I call forth here
Imbue the vice
With malice adhere

Ensnare entrap
Entreat Imbibe
The price of blood
Locked up inside.”

Freedom gained
Or prison renewed?
A single choice
The End imbued.

Heed the spell
The cost is great
Blood oath to swear
Blood price to fate.

Completion:
One begins
Seven to call
A feast to End.

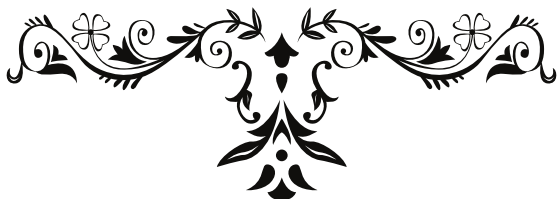
End the spell.
One to start,
Seven to complete
No magic to restart—

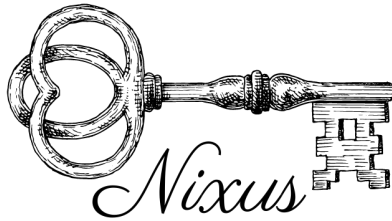
—Open doors
Realities transcend
Freedom and Power
A Feast to End.

The Spell



The Key Keeper's 1st Wish...





Stars, he had a terrible headache starting behind his eyes. He was confident he looked like death warmed over. If he were well and truly dead, however, it would mean being reunited with Lexa, his older sister, in her realm of the dead and out of this hell of an enchantment. A boon. That wasn't the case, of course. His pounding headache, disheveled appearance, and day-old shadow was because he'd imbibed too much scotch and was wallowing the pain of a hangover. Within the spell, and because he was a god, he could conjure whatever he wanted, smooth away the consequences of excess, avoid the pain and

perils of the body, but it made his imprisonment and isolation worse. The hangover reminded him he was still alive, and still sane. Whatever it took to keep his shit together, he supposed.

At the moment, he was struggling to string together thoughts, which meant he might have to negate the hangover's effects sooner rather than later. The new key keeper—who was rather pretty—was talking about marriage laws, or some such nonsense. What the fuck? One moment he was brooding with a bottle of scotch in front of his fireplace and two willing conjurings going down on each other, and the next, he was standing in a meadow watching a peasant woman look around as if she'd lost something. He knew, however. This was the seventh time, so of course he knew. She was the new key keeper and the key was, predictably, in her hand.

How long had it been since the last key keeper, he wondered? At least ten years for him, give or take, though Luc, his twin brother, would insist it had only been one. There were rules to the spell, and that was one of them. Time functioned differently. He'd lived for a century within the confines of the spell while Luc claimed only ten had passed beyond it.

Spells were fixed, and it was impossible to deviate from the rules. He'd tried, but like anyone else, god or otherwise, he was beholden to the pattern set forth by the spell's language. It didn't matter how much he ranted or raged. It didn't matter how much he pleaded or fought. It didn't matter how much he manipulated

or cajoled. The spell was fixed.

A key keeper as the wish maker.

Three wishes were granted.

Three consequences were paid.

And a sacrifice was offered for his freedom. Unless the key keeper chose the sacrifice at the end of their allotment—and not a single one had—he would remain imprisoned by the spell placed on him.

Hence his continued entrapment.

Fucking Luc.

Nix blinked to reorient himself from his brooding and the impending hangover, shook his head to alleviate the pain, and it melted away as if it had never existed at all.

“You’re the key?” The key keeper asked.

The new key keeper was lovely, though Nix wouldn’t allow himself to continue to consider that fact. The braid of her dark hair hidden under a knitted, green cap and draped over the shoulder of her ivory homespun tunic, the gray woolen coat haphazardly donned, the vibrance of her angry-sky eyes, the lucidity of her skin-tinged pink by the winter air, and the way her generous mouth frowned at him were things he wouldn’t allow himself to ponder.

“No. I’m the god the key trapped,” he replied. There wasn’t any reason not to be forthcoming. He couldn’t lie to her anyway—a rule of the spell—but equivocation and omission weren’t off limits. He’d tried that to procure the outcome he wanted.

She had a job to do. He had a role to play. No

matter the circumstances or the way it played out, there were factors involved he couldn't control like the fact this rotten predicament always ended the same: the key keeper with their wishes and Nix left behind, still imprisoned by the spell. He didn't have any hope this one would be any different. In the end, humans and gods were all the same: greedy, self-centered jerks. Gender hadn't changed this fact, and he was sure this key keeper wouldn't be any different despite her beauty.

Though, Nix noted, that spark he'd felt when he'd touched her still burned his hand. That was different, but he refused to ponder that either. Whatever might be the same or different, they both had to play by the rules of the spell moving forward.

"I guess I should be thanking you," he told her and offered a placating smile while releasing her arm. He swiped his hands over his thighs and returned them to the pockets of the coat he'd conjured upon entering the glade. He couldn't feel the cold, but it was certainly easier for her if he looked the part. He also knew he was more likely to get what he needed from her—which was her out of his hair so he could go back to drinking himself into a stupor and conjuring sex fantasies—by being accommodating. Especially because the moment she made her first wish, she would hate him. She'd rush to be rid of him.

That was a pattern too, though maybe not a rule.

She lost her footing in her rush to move around him, and he reached out to steady her with both hands.

Ebullient warmth shot through his hands, straight up his elbows to his shoulders and danced down his spine once more, leaving pleasant tingles in its wake. She yanked herself from his grasp, her eyes flashing like lightning in a storm.

A bad sign, Nix thought. Perhaps when she learned about the treasure offered with the key, she'd be more inclined to be friendly.

But did he need her to be friendly?

The question stopped him and clogged his breath for a beat.

He didn't.

He refused to examine why he'd initially wanted it.

"You're trying to tell me that you were inside this key?" She held it up.

The gold glowed with the spells enchantment even though Nix had taken most of the light from the meadow. His darkness moved around him, spreading out into the expanse of glen as he commanded it to drift toward its edges. It was time to get things moving.

"I understand your incredulity," he started with the deference he provided all the prior six keepers. Each of those wish makers had undergone the same pattern of emotions. First came incredulity. They doubted him and the truth of their circumstances. Next was the bewilderment that such an occurrence was even a possibility. This led to their curiosity about the situation and the details of the bargain. Finally, the key keeper would invariably accept the position in which they found themselves and make their first wish.

He allowed himself just a moment to look at her. She was studying the key, then her gray eyes flicked to him. Awareness buzzed the base of his spine and he looked away.

“I speak the truth,” he told her. “It is the only thing I’m allowed to speak.”

“Then why would you need to be locked up in a key?”

He shrugged, not inclined to tell her any more than he needed to for the moment. Truth and conversation were two distinct endeavors. He didn’t have to talk. He didn’t want to get to know her. He didn’t want to consider her beyond her role, and he didn’t think she should want to know him either. She’d make her wishes and be gone.

“I’m going home.” She started across the space but stopped and turned to regard him when he said, “It won’t allow you to leave.”

Her jaw set, that ire on her pretty face again that he found amusing. Mortals were so quick to feel things. “Here, then.” She held out the key to him.

This was a first. He’d never once had a key-keeper offer to hand the trinket back to him. But he didn’t take it; he couldn’t. He might be able to see the golden key, but only a key keeper could touch it. He could feel the spell’s power in it, though he could feel the sensation of her touching the ornate key. He looked from it to her face.

“I’m giving it back,” she said, shaking it slightly in front of him as if that might entice him.

“I can’t.” He slipped his hands into the pockets of his coat. He wished he could. Wished he could wish himself from the spell, but he wasn’t the wish maker. And while she would endure the temporary discomfort of the consequences of the wishes she made; she would ultimately return to her life. He wouldn’t, remaining behind. Stuck. The understanding left an awful taste on his palate—sour and metallic. He thought about conjuring a drink to wash it away, but now wasn’t the time.

“But I can’t leave with it?”

He shook his head.

Her eyes narrowed. “Then you’ve lied.”

“I didn’t.”

“You said I had to give it back to leave.”

“I didn’t. I said ‘you have something that is mine,’ and ‘it won’t allow you to leave’. I never said anything about you returning it to me. First lesson of the spell: words matter. You found the key. You won’t be able to leave. You’re tied to me, and I to you until you have fulfilled the bargain of the spell.”

“Bargain? What bargain?”

“As the key keeper, you will be granted three wishes, but each wish will exact a price from you for making it.”

“What? Why can’t you—”

“I’m trapped by the enchantment. I can grant wishes through the spell’s power but am equally bound by them and the consequences they bring. You are the wish maker.”

“Let me get this straight. I have three wishes and have to pay three penalties for the wishes I make. Then I can leave?” Her hands were on her hips, and she was leaning toward him, slightly. Nix could feel the heat of her frustration. When he didn’t answer her hands flew out to her sides. “This is ridiculous,” she said and dropped the key at his feet, turned, and stomped away, fixing the fit of her gray coat as she went.

This was very new.

He conjured snow to fall in the meadow, as he looked down at the ground where she dropped the key. It wasn’t there. When he looked up, she was looking for the entrance that must have brought her here. He wasn’t sure how she’d found it, considering the entire space was enclosed behind a tall snowbank, but it had been ages since the last key keeper, so he wasn’t going to question it either. He watched her pick up a stick while attempting to dig through the snow to escape. As soon as she achieved a divot, it refilled with fresh snow.

He slid his hands into the pocket of his own jacket. “That won’t work.”

“I am getting out of here,” she said, continuing her efforts at escape.

Nix found this curious. She’d been told she had three wishes. All the key keepers at this point had found that prospect enticing, but this one had dropped the key, walked away, and was trying to find a way out. Different.

“Check your pocket,” he said.

She turned from the wall and looked at him, breathing heavily with the exertion. He didn't like that his mind immediately imagined her straddling him, riding his cock. He blinked to clear the vision and his skin heated, embarrassed by the direction of his thoughts which was even more disconcerting. Gods didn't get embarrassed. Where the fuck had that come from?

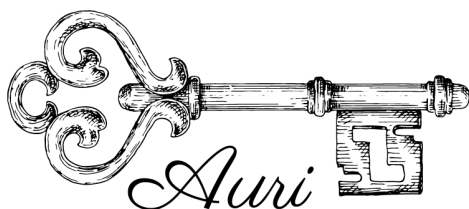
She glared as if she could read his mind. "What for?"

"Just humor me." The sooner he got her through these stupid wishes, the sooner he could return to existing in his alcohol induced stupor at least until the next key keeper arrived.

With an exasperated and incredulous roll of her eyes, which Nix found amusing, she slid a hand into her pocket. He felt her skin caress the metal as she took ahold of it and chills danced across his skin. When her hand reemerged from the pocket of her coat, key in hand, she looked up at him, eyes wide. "What the--?"

"You are the key keeper. It will not let you go."

"I don't want it!" She yelled and threw the key at him.



A golden flash of sparkling light flared between her and the godman across the glen, the key disappearing. Just when she thought it was gone, the weight returned to her pocket. Auri fished inside her coat again, only to find the key. She wrapped her hand around the warm metal and pulled out the magic implement once more.

It won't let you leave.

She looked up at him. "I'm trapped here?"

"Until you make your wishes."

Auri wrapped her arms around herself and looked up at the metal-gray sky, which was even darker now that snow began to fall in earnest. She shivered, looked down at her booted feet, scuffed with wear and worn with use, and closed her eyes. “This isn’t happening. This isn’t happening.” She muttered the chant as if it too were magical and would override everything else to send her home. Then, because it didn’t make sense to fight against what was, she sighed and made a deal with herself to accept whatever fate was offering, even if it was magical; too many things had happened in the last hour to make a very good argument for its existence. By the time Auri opened her eyes and looked around, still in the meadow with an enigmatic stranger watching her, she bowed her head, resigned.

“What about my family?” she asked. “They will worry. I don’t want them to worry.”

“Key keeper,” the man said. “This is temporary for you. You will return to your family and what you gain from the spell could be a fortuitous favor rather than a trial. You could wish for wealth, long-life, or the deepest love. You are limited only by your heart’s desires.”

She raised her head to meet his dark gaze. Deepest love? Had it only been the day before that she’d longed for her and her sisters to make love matches. If all this were real, could that be something she wished for? “Have others made those sorts of wishes?”

He walked across the meadow away from her to the opposite side of the glen. “Yes, among other

things.” As he walked, he left behind sparkling gold dust in his wake like stars in the night sky.

“But what about my family? Will they know I’ve gone? Will they think I’ve run away?”

The meadow changed, the trees dissolving behind in a golden glow of starlight, the forest floor turning to stone as he walked. “I don’t have those answers for you,” he said.

As he approached her, she realized the meadow was changing around them. The trees were disappearing in the golden swath of light that seemed to eat them with its fire. Left behind was opulence Auri had never known. Walls painted a deep blue were marked at intervals with glowing sconces flickering with light. An ivory coffered ceiling, painted with colorful reliefs she wanted to study. Gilded framed artwork stacked along walls and ornate furnishings that spoke of leisure and time filled the space: two chairs, an ottoman, a love seat, a fireplace. A dark plush carpet, elegant with golden whorls and swirls in contrasting colors rolled out over the stone floor. A fire flickered in the massive hearth.

She moved out of the man’s way so he could continue with the transformation, but he stopped in front of her, while the changing meadow continued without him. The sparkling light of the magic passed around them, enclosing them both in its golden embrace. Auri chased the transformation with her eyes, turning her head to watch the magic do its work until

the meadow was well and truly no longer there, and they were standing inside the dazzling room.

She turned to the man. “Who are you?”

“Perhaps the more accurate question more relevant to you is what,” he said. “If you need a name, I am Nixus, but you may call me Nix.”

I'm the god the key trapped.

Auri leaned away from him and bumped into a high-backed chair behind her. “As in the god, Nixus?”

This couldn't be. She knew the stories and worshipers of the gods: Lucian and Nixus, Myna and Janor, Sapo and Lexa—light and dark, revelry and contemplation, life, and death—along with a plethora of other deities and their legends. Her family weren't worshipers. She'd spent the whole of her childhood listening to her mother expound on the indecency and idiocy of subscribing to the idea that any deity was omnipotent rather than flawed. But zealots ran rampant through Kaloma even at the highest levels of government who claimed that when the night stopped falling, Nixus had removed his favor from the human realm because of their faithlessness.

Auri's unbelief was rooted in her struggle to reconcile how difficult it was to have faith in something when putting food on the table was a toil or being stuck marrying out of obligation rather than love was one's only option. And these injustices were wrapped up in pretty packages by the faithful claiming it was deigned moral and righteous while their hearts were seeping with sins of greed.

“The god of night?”

“I have been called that, yes.”

“If you’re a god, then you can use your power to let me go home.”

“I wish it worked that way.”

“Why doesn’t it?”

He nodded at her; his eyes dropped to her hand.

“The key. The spell on it.”

“This key?” She held it up and threw it across the room.

It smacked into the frame of a bed and fell to the floor with a thud. Auri straightened when she realized she was standing in a bedroom, and that bed was one of the most magnificent things she’d ever laid eyes on in her life—besides the man near her, who she refused to look at just then. It was enormous, stretched out against one of the walls, and dark velvet curtains with gilt edging and tassels hung over it, reaching out across the ceiling, framing it as if it were a throne in a throne room. Her entire family could have laid side by side on that masterpiece. Having shared a room with her three sisters her whole life, the idea of sleeping in something like that masterpiece seemed like a dream.

“Have I died?” she asked.

“Why? What? No. I told you the truth.”

She believed him, sort of, she supposed, as much as her brain would allow her to believe anything that had happened in however long since she’d touched the key. She was losing track of time.

“Why would you think that?”

“The bed.”

“The bed.” His voice offered the words slowly with a tone of skepticism.

She glanced at Nix, and upon realizing what she’d said, where she was, she closed her mouth as heat raced across her skin with mortified embarrassment. Suddenly at odds with her upbringing and her baser nature, she realized she’d been staring at a bed. With a man. She was in a bedroom. Alone. With a very beautiful man she found intriguing. She was supposed to maintain her composure. Having been tempted so easily by the illusion of comfort was shameful. Tarley would never! Her heart sputtered to a stop, afraid suddenly, though not necessarily of him. Of all that being alone with him here implied.

“Why are we standing in a bedroom?” Her heart compacted into its smallest form, worried. Her experience with men, despite her initial belief that she wasn’t afraid of this one, led her to shrink away from him anyway.

He shrugged. “Are you afraid I’m going to try to get you into it?”

“It’s against the law.”

“What law? Laws don’t apply to gods or enchantments.” He removed his coat and laid it over the back of one of the wingback chairs.

Right, she was talking to a god. “It’s just that laws apply to me. I’m a woman. A mortal. I’m not supposed to...” but her words died away, and she swallowed. Then she raised her chin to grasp onto the bravery she

wasn't sure she felt, channeling Tarley. "I'm not—" but her bravery melted away because she wasn't exactly sure what to say in the current circumstances. "I don't...I mean—" until she finally said, "I could get arrested and sentenced to a birthing house or to death for being alone with you. Just for the implied loss of my virtue."

He smiled and laughed quietly at that. "Loss of virtue." He laughed harder, then as if it were a joke, shaking his head.

"You think that's funny?" *Oh goodness*, Auri thought at the sight of his smile that reached into her chest and tugged on her insides. Like all of him, his grin was beautiful in a way that was enticing, and perhaps that was what he was supposed to be. Tempting.

He shook his head. "I'm not sure loss is the right description." He glanced at her. "Rather, the better perspective is what is gained." He let that comment linger, his eyes jumping up to meet hers, and Auri felt the weight of the words, her heart unfurling in her chest as if it too wanted to grab ahold at that kind of promise. She hadn't thought of it that way before.

"If done right, that is." His grin deepened, drawing a dimple out in his cheek, and his eyes jumped from her to his hands. "Don't think it escaped my notice that you are a woman." He unbuttoned his shirt at the wrists. "You are safe from me. My bedroom wasn't a ruse to trick you. On my virtue." He chuckled.

Her cheeks heated watching his display, hearing his words that did more to her than she liked. It was

alluring to watch him undress. She could imagine him unbuttoning those buttons on the front of his shirt as she watched him pull his sleeves up to reveal his forearms. “Do you have virtue?”

He smiled and she liked the way the edges of his eyes crinkled with it alighting his whole face. “Not much.” He finished tugging on his sleeves. “What is your name?”

“Auri,” she said. “Aurielle.”

“Aurielle.” His gaze flicked over her once more. “Auri. It suits you. Now, why can’t you be alone with a man? Or specifically, me?”

“The Marriage Law forbids it.”

“Right.” He shook his head. “The mortal realm and their barbaric stupidity.” He crossed his arms over his chest.

She noticed the way the fabric of the shirt stretched across his shoulders. She noticed the shallow hollow at the base of his neck with a tiny smattering of hair visible just below.

“You have nothing to fear here.”

Her eyes slid from the bare skin to his face.

His dark eyes seemed to be cataloguing everything she did, and she wondered if he could read her mind. “Laws want to keep you in cages,” he added. “Like this spell cages me.” He quirked an eyebrow at her. “Women in cages are dangerous.”

“Like you?” she asked.

Nix grinned at her again, and she had the impression he was enjoying himself. Then as if he

remembered something, the grin faded, he looked away and straightened.

She noticed he didn't reply, she said, "I thought you said I have nothing to fear."

When his eyes met hers again, the gems in his eyes glittered brightly. It carried a weight she could guess at. She wasn't ignorant about the mechanics of bodies and babies. She'd helped her father in the barn enough to have seen animals procreate. Though it was against Kaloma law to engage in pleasure activities outside of the marriage bed except by permit in the birthing houses, she'd once read (and reread if she were being honest) a kissing scene in a book that made her heart quicken and run away with the thrill of her imagination. She'd had kissing dreams or woke up with her hand between her legs needing something. So, she understood the reaction of her breath quickening, her heart racing, her stomach tightening, and her spine tingling, the very reactions moving through her body at that very moment. She tried not to put too much emphasis on her physical response to this beautiful man. He was a god after all. It probably wasn't an anomaly.

"Yes. Well," He took a deep breath, as if to reset himself- "You don't. But there are terms of the bargain we need to discuss. Let me show you to your quarters and provide you some time to take care of your personal needs. I will see to some food."

"Gods eat?"

It seemed such a mundane thing.

“Love to.”

He led her to the door of his room, and she followed him into a hallway. It stretched in both directions so that she couldn't see either end. Wall sconces flickered at even intervals and there were doors upon doors. “What is this?”

“The labyrinth.”

She looked at him. “You mean, we could be lost?”

“No. Never fear being lost, only found.”

It was a strange thing to say, the idea of being afraid to be found. “How do you know?”

“You only need to say my name, and I will be there.” He turned down another hallway, then it moved of its own accord, racing past them as they walked. Disoriented, Auri reached out to grab ahold of a wall, but couldn't, and grabbed Nix's shoulder instead. It was sturdy under her hand, warm with his life force. Heat raced along her arm, down her spine, pooling low in her belly.

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