

Shadow Hunt

by Karalynn Lee

Rianon heard the horns of the hunt calling as she rode through Eyrim Forest. She checked her mare, then dismounted and began disrobing. The only thing she left was a red cord tied around her wrist. The rest she tried to shove into her saddlebags, but the horse snorted and danced aside.

“Stay still,” she said, seizing the reins and forcing it to heed her words. “I need to get there before they find real game.”

The horns again, closer this time. She stretched, skimming her awareness along every inch of her body—to the very fingertips—then shifted.

The mare whinnied this time, alarmed. Rianon streaked away before it could draw someone's attention. Hadn't she warned Lord Nazar that she needed a calm steed?

No matter, now. Her paws carried her swiftly toward the hunt. The forest was rich with aromas and texture, but she didn't allow those to distract her. She had her own prey to pursue.

She broke through the brush to sudden cries.

"A fox!"

"After it!"

And the baying of hounds.

She poured her heart into running. What she had, and no true fox did, was human intelligence. She'd counted on that to be able to outsmart her pursuers. But with dogs on her heels, there was scarcely enough breath to keep moving, let alone notice her surroundings and try to plan a way to use them.

The prince would be in the lead, of course, as was proper. Lord Nazar would be behind him, and he had promised to delay the others at some point—

A crash, the scream of a horse, and men's curses. Rianon spared a moment to laugh the way foxes did, with

lolling tongue and sharp teeth. Then she kept running, hearing a single set of hoofbeats still drumming steadily behind her. But closer: the panting of dogs.

She skidded past a narrow space between two trees, reversed and hurtled her body between. That confused them briefly, while she hurried along a slope toward the sound of water. That was a mistake; the incline and a carpet of leaves caused her to slide down, and when she sought purchase, a root gave her too much of it, and she tumbled into the stream.

Rianon swam frantically, keeping her nose free of the water. Somehow she fought the current and made her way to the other side, where she crawled onto the bank and tried to shake the water out of her fur. Then a horse and rider splashed into the stream. She had no choice but to leave damp pawprints as she ran on.

She lost herself to wind and earth, the heave of air in and out of her lungs. Her senses screamed at her every time a dog came too close behind her or she could feel the thunder of hooves beating against the ground. Thought frayed against these shrill warnings. When she passed a bolt-hole, it took everything in her not to dive into it and escape her pursuers. She needed one to stay on her trail, just one, a particular one.

The prince never gave up a hunt, they said, and he was the first one to reach the game.

Recalled to her purpose, she focused on the sounds behind her. She couldn't hear any horses, just a single hound doggedly on her trail. She could take care of it.

She let herself slow and look tauntingly behind her.

The dog made ready to leap—

She shifted.

The hound scabbled back, whining. She smiled at it, rising onto one knee. “Be careful what you chase, dog.”

Then the prince rode up, and she lost her smile. He wasn't supposed to see her like this. She'd planned to surprise him with her human shape. And—as her hand felt her bare wrist—she wasn't supposed to have lost her garrote. She looked about wildly, seeking a weapon. There was no way to overpower him.

“Back,” he called sharply to the hound, and it heeled obediently. He dismounted, then unfastened his cloak and offered it to her.

She'd half-expected him to cry, “Assassin!” and advance on her with his sword. But of course he couldn't know that. “Thank you, your highness,” she said, wrapping the cloak about

herself.

“What happened?” he asked.

How to explain her naked presence here? “I was waylaid by bandits on the road, and I ran into the woods to escape them.” She was flushed and wet, her hair dishevelled, with dirt on her hands and knees; she looked, of course, just like someone who had fled through the forest.

“You were traveling alone?”

She bit her lip, considering potential excuses. There was no proper reason for a respectable woman to be on her own on the road, so she needed an improper one. “Yes. I was running away.”

“Let me guess,” he said with a hint of exasperation, “marriage to an older man.”

She discarded those very words. Some truth would better flavor her lie. “No. My father—well. He discovered that he’s not.”

“Not?”

“My father.”

His face turned surprised, then thoughtful. She had him caught now. “And he threatened...?”

Hand over hand, she reeled him in. “A life of servitude.

A kinder offer than the streets, but—” The prince loved the hunt, the forest; she spread out her arms, indicating all the space around her. “I couldn’t bear being trapped.”

“What were you planning to do?”

He wouldn’t appreciate utter stupidity. “I had some jewelry I could sell until I could reach some distant relatives of my mother’s. Now...”

He clicked his tongue, and his horse trotted over to them. “Come on,” he said, swinging himself up easily.

This was a man who led his own hunt, even when the rest of his party had fallen back; he would not value timidity. She lifted her chin to meet his gaze. “Will you return me to him?”

“No. But I can’t very well leave you to wander the forest naked. You’ll have to come back with me.”

Still she hesitated. “Some of your lords might know my father. He’s well-to-do.”

“No one will see us,” he said. “Just keep the hood up when we get to the city, and hide that red hair of yours.”

She couldn’t think of a believable reason to refuse him. She mounted behind him. The cloak flared open as he pulled her up, and for a moment her naked breasts were pressed

against him. She heard him inhale. “A moment,” she said, and wrapped the cloth about herself more securely.

He said nothing, but the muscles of his back were tense when she took a more decorous hold onto him.

She toyed with the idea of pushing him off the horse, but there was a good chance he would survive the fall. And it was surprisingly pleasant to have his strength to lean against throughout the rhythm of the horse’s movements. She’d gained some sympathy from him, and she liked the story she’d told him; liked that he clearly wouldn’t have had any use for a more mundane tale. She would play him a little longer, until an opportunity presented itself.

He rode back through the forest to the city. Leaving the cover of the trees made something in her feel tight and discordant, a lute string forced out of tune.

“So how are you called?” he asked.

He wouldn’t know her real name anyway, and it would be one less thing to have to remember. “Rianon.”

“And your father?”

She risked a light tone. “Surely if your highness doesn’t plan to tell him about me, you have no need to know.”

He laughed, and she felt him relax. “Very well. I won’t

ask.”

“My thanks, your highness,” she said, her relief unfeigned.

“And my name is Kiril,” he said.

She felt a slow thrill at that token of intimacy. “My thanks, Kiril.”

They rode into the city to a flurry of courtiers. They were used to their prince riding off without them, but they expected him to bring back game, not a scandalously garbed woman. He laughed them off and insisted on taking her directly to the palace still riding behind him. “We can’t have that cloak slipping, can we?” he asked, and Rianon thought she heard a droll note in his voice that made her wonder if he was so averse to the possibility.

She had learned in the past to lean upon charm when Lord Nazar’s gold didn’t carry enough weight. But she’d never played the game this deep. She had only wanted the prince not to suspect her of anything untoward, until she had a chance to escape and try again.

But Lord Nazar had been among the lords of the hunt who met them in the city, and although he had recognized her, he hadn’t looked displeased. Instead his face had been

thoughtful, and he'd given her a sharp nod when no one else would've seen. She was familiar with his ways. He had a scheme in mind, and it involved her new acquaintance with the prince.

She was glad of it. She'd studied the prince's habits and preferences, but had never bothered learning about the man himself. He wasn't what she had expected. He was intelligent—she had inherited Lord Nazar's impatience with fools, if nothing else—and gallant, not quite the reckless huntsman she had imagined. When they dismounted in the palace stables, she was sorry to lose his warmth.

He saw to his own steed, which made Rianon think guiltily of the mare she'd abandoned in the forest. Lord Nazar would reclaim it, though; he wasn't the sort to waste resources. And then the prince led her into the palace, up a flight of stairs and into a royally appointed suite. He indicated the doorway to a bedchamber. "This is where you can stay."

"These are your rooms," she said, noting the hunting paraphernalia around them.

"Yes. And that is a room I maintain for...my private guests. Only my personal servants come in here, and they'll be discreet about your presence. You might even find some

clothes that will fit you.”

He meant, of course, that this was the room where he maintained an occasional mistress. She let her voice go dry. “I didn’t mean to deprive you of a place where you can stash your women.”

“I’ll survive,” he said, amused. “But I doubt your concern’s for me. Don’t worry, it’s only a charade. It makes for a good excuse to have you here but not introduce you to anyone else in court. I’m not going to require any sort of nefarious service, if that’s what you’re afraid of.”

She met his gaze. “I’m not afraid.”

He cleared his throat, nonplussed for the first time. “Good. I’ll have the servants fetch you some water, if you like.”

All at once she could feel all the forest grime on her skin. “Yes, thank you.”

She wiped off the worst of the dirt with the promised water and took advantage of a hairbrush to work out the tangles in her hair. There were several sets of clothes to choose from, some obviously intended for entertaining the prince in private and the rest rather extravagant, so she chose the plainest of them all.

Even so, when she stepped out, the prince's eyes widened as he appraised her.

“Do I pass inspection?” she asked archly.

“Oh, you did that when I first saw you,” he said. When she had been naked.

Suddenly self-conscious, she looked away. There was a tray laden with food on a table behind him, and at the sight of it, her stomach made a querulous noise.

He laughed. “Come, let's sit and eat.”

“You're supping here?” She had expected him to attend dinner at court.

“It's my habit not to leave my rooms for a few days after a new woman's come into my life,” he said. “I can't raise suspicion now, can I?”

So she sat. “You've been very kind,” she said, gesturing at the food and wine. “I'll try to sort out what I should do and stop imposing on you as soon as I can.”

She had judged that he would leap to reassure her, and he did. “It's no trouble,” he said. “And no hurry. Your father disowned you, a bandit attacked you. Give yourself proper time to recover.”

There was a note of gentle irony in his tone. She studied

him. Did he doubt her story? She probably should have been devastated after a man set upon her and stripped her.

“I escaped before he mis-used me,” she said. “But I thank you for your concern.”

He laughed again. “You’re a lovely puzzle,” he said. “One I’ll enjoy unraveling.”

So he suspected she wasn’t telling him anything, but regarded it as entertainment. She was enjoying herself as well; being around the prince required an alert mind and quick wit.

But the wine loosened her movements, and later when they both reached for the carafe their fingers touched. She pulled hers back and cradled them as though they’d been singed.

“Pardon,” she said, “I was going to pour you some more.”

“And I the same,” he said, his voice deepening. “Hold out your goblet.”

And when she did, he wrapped his hand firmly over hers to hold it steady while he tipped the last of the wine into her cup.

“You should call for some more,” she said unsteadily.

“But there’s yet wine left. See? Drink—”

Helpless, she did, and he moved to her side and took the taste of it from her mouth.

She couldn't tell the difference between the wine and him. Spiced and intoxicating, filling her blood with song. He stroked her hair away from her face so that his lips could slide to her neck.

That jolted her out of her reverie. Cheeks heating, she stood away from him. "No nefarious service, I thought."

The prince took a moment to refocus. "Nothing required, I said. But willingly given..." He moved toward her and she retreated to the doorway of her chamber, matching each of his paces.

Lord Nazar would surely approve of seducing the prince. And the prince himself was an attractive man. But she had never plied her body that way before, and she suspected this would be an affair that would entangle more than the physical. This was not a decision to make on a wine-blurred night.

She stepped backward. "Good night, Kiril," she said, and gently closed the door despite the staccato beat of her heart.

"Sleep well," he said from the other side. She held her

breath until she heard him step away, and only then did her pulse calm.

She needed to report back to Lord Nazar, but she refused to step out that door again tonight. Rianon glanced out the window and noted the buttress nearby. She eyed the distance. It looked manageable, so she shrugged into her fox-shape and hopped up on the ledge. She gathered herself and jumped, then used what purchase her paws could find on the stone to make her way to the ground.

She slunk through the streets, staying to the shadows and away from the occasional men. After having experienced the fresh smells of forest, her nose shrank away the coarse stink of the city. But she was no stranger to roaming here at night as a fox, and in due course found herself behind Lord Nazar's house.

As usual, her window was uncovered. She scrambled through, changed, and pulled on the clothes laid out on her bed behind a standing screen. It was as though she were returning from any normal errand.

Lord Nazar must have heard her arrival, for he awaited her on the other side of the screen. He smiled when he saw her emerge, which was rare. "Returned from the palace?"

“Yes, my lord.” She came forward and knelt in front of him, bending her head submissively.

“And the prince is still alive?”

“Yes, my lord.” She didn’t bother offering excuses. He would have deduced what had happened.

“This is even better,” he decided. “You’ll gain the prince’s trust. He might let slip information about his allies. Do you need any resources for whatever story you fed him?”

“No, my lord.”

“Clever girl.”

His praise brought a flush to her cheeks. She sternly told herself to keep that approval by staying focused on her task. “Is there anything in particular my lord wishes me to find out?”

“Find out why Lord Rolan has so much influence over him.”

“Yes, my lord.” She hesitated. “It’s difficult to leave the palace unobserved, so I’ll return once a week at night.”

“Very well. But should you need anything, come sooner. You know your window’s always left open.”

“Yes, my lord.”

He laid a curiously tender hand on the back of her neck.

“Sometimes I wish you truly were my daughter.”

The words shocked her so much that she did not speak as he rose and left the room. She regathered her wits and pulled off her clothes. On four feet, she fairly flew back to the palace. Sleep was too slow to come; she was eager for the sun to rise so she could begin questioning the prince.



He continued to dance attendance on her, but to her frustration, the prince rarely spoke of the court and its nobles. “You needn’t worry about these people,” he said whenever she tried to veer their conversations in the right direction. “You’ll never meet them.”

“I’m just curious,” she said. “If but for a quirk of birth, I might have been among them.”

“You,” he said, “are far more interesting than any of them. Don’t regret that world.”

“You’re part of it,” she pointed out, and from the warmth in his regard, realized the connotation.

They’d laughed over that night as drunken foolishness, but there were times when their gazes met and tension hummed between them. She would look elsewhere and he

would excuse himself to his duties, but the knowledge danced through them of what might have been.

She surprised herself by enjoying his company even without learning anything. She returned to Lord Nazar several times with nothing to report except that the prince seemed to hold an honest respect for Lord Rolan. He fretted over the time she was spending, but she reassured him that she was content serving him in this fashion.

It took her laughably long to realize what she truly pursued.

He was sharing a meal with her again, telling her some anecdote to amuse her. Although more than a few days had passed, he still often skipped court dinners in favor of spending the time with her. But always afterward he was careful to leave her be, flawlessly courteous and often citing somewhere he had to go.

She wasn't really listening to him, although that was what she was supposed to be doing here. She was watching his face, from the merriment in his eyes to the way his mouth shaped words. She did not think she could ever mistake anyone else's face for his.

He stopped in mid-sentence and she blinked.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I got caught up in a tangle of thoughts.”

“I should go,” he said, and she rose with him. Before he could turn, she said, “Kiril,” and he looked at her questioningly.

“Will you not stay?” she asked simply.

He went very still. “Is that truly what you wish?”

“Yes.”

He drew closer to her, almost unwillingly. His head bent. She thought he might kiss her. Her breath hitched.

Then he thrust her away from him, almost angrily, and paced to the far side of the room. When he turned, his visage was grim. From his belt pouch he drew out a red cord and let it dangle from his fingers.

“Foolish,” he said, “to fall in love with an assassin.”

She gazed at him, wondering how long he’d known. There was no triumph in his expression, though, only a tension in his jaw as he waited for her response. He had known...and still he felt this way. She released a long breath, feeling something wild and ragged burgeon in her breast. It felt like hope.

“Even more foolish,” she said, “for the assassin to fall in

love.”

His face didn't change. Why would he believe her? She'd lied to him from the first time they'd met.

She crossed the room and offered him her hands. Brow furrowed, he cradled them in his own.

“Tie them if you want assurance that I won't kill you,” she said. “Take me prisoner.”

He laughed savagely. “Is that what you want?” With quick movements he tangled the cord about her wrists, then used his body to herd hers to the wall, trapping her there. He stretched her arms overhead and pressed hard against her.

She struggled for an even voice. “I want you to believe me.”

He covered her mouth with his own to silence her. His tongue moved against hers, demanding. She couldn't help responding.

When he pulled back to leave her gasping, he said, “You'd like me to believe it because you discovered that the role of temptress suited you better, isn't that right?”

She started to protest, but he kissed her again. This time there was a desperation in him made her tremble.

“Gods!” he said when he tore himself away from her

again. “Why do I want you? You tried to kill me, you lied to me, you torment me with every smallest movement...”

Rianon closed her eyes. “You’re right. I was supposed to assassinate you. Then I became a spy. But now—”

“Now?” he breathed into her ear.

“Now I ask you questions not because I want your secrets, but because I want to hear your voice. Now I stay in your rooms not to report on your movements, but to be in your presence. And now I want to touch you, but I have always wanted to touch you...”

“Then do so,” he said roughly, and he brought her hands down to feel the hard ridge of his need.

A sound escaped her. His hips jerked once before he brought himself under control. Then he began gathering up her skirts. She couldn’t seem to move, even when he lowered his mouth to the juncture of her neck and shoulder and bit her. It flashed through her body like storm-fire, quick and relentless. When he pressed himself to her, flesh to flesh, she could feel her ready slickness.

No, she thought in sudden panic. She flung herself away, falling to the floor without any grace.

He stood over her, breathing heavily. “You love me and

yet you refuse me?”

She curled into herself. “I love you. But I don’t want you to take me like this. Not if you think I’m trying to ensnare you.” Her voice broke. “I don’t want you to hate me even more.”

He didn’t say anything. Then she felt him slowly crouching over her. She closed her eyes and tried to think of nothing at all.

He unwound the cord from her wrists.

Shock made her lie still. His fingers were gentle as they soothed the marks on her skin. She dared to look at him.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Are you all right?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered.

So he kissed her, tenderly this time, taking the time to explore her lips from one corner to the other before delving just as thoroughly into her mouth. And her hands were free to rise to his face and touch him wonderingly.

They undressed each other with unhurried movements, exploring each span of skin uncovered. She felt heat where his hands moved upon her, and chills when the paths he licked were left open to the air, and she strove to return each sensation to him threefold, tracing each muscle and scar.

Whenever he stiffened or groaned, she knew she succeeded.

And when he finally moved into her, it felt as though the breath he took was the same one she released. She clung to him throughout each steady stroke, until he shifted just so and she couldn't help crying out and arching against him, released into a burst of sharp pleasure. He quickened his pace then, until he too reached his apex in a long, deep push.

"I love you," she said, and he murmured, "I believe you," words that took her into a bone-deep peace while they lay against each other.

Cradled in his arms, their scents still mingled, she dared ask, "How did you know?"

He shifted them onto their sides so that they could see each other's faces. "Lord Rolan became separated from the rest of the hunt and rode into a different part of the forest. He found a horse without a rider and a woman's clothes in the saddlebags. When he told me, I guessed they were yours, since a bandit wouldn't have bothered to fold the clothes. Which meant you had planned to be there, in the guise that would tempt me most." He stroked a hand down her side. "Gods! I wanted to take you right there and then."

She shivered in pleasure at the thought of it, under the

open.

“The other thing he found was the garrote,” he said.

This time her shiver was born of dread. If she had managed to keep it on...

“Why were you going to kill me?” he asked.

“The other princes are more biddable,” she said.

“To whom?”

She swallowed against the lump of dread in her throat. She’d made her choice. “Lord Nazar.”

He mulled over this. Then he asked abruptly, “How did you come under his power?”

She’d grown up knowing the sordid tale, but had never told it to anyone before. “My mother was Lord Nazar’s consort. She met a man on Mayfly Night,” she said. The one night when rules were abandoned to music and wine and pleasures exchanged with masked partners. “When I was born, Lord Nazar condescended to have me raised as a servant. I grew up knowing that he could cast me out anytime. But later, it occurred to him that I could be useful, and that I was indebted to him.” That had been the first time she had shifted. He had demanded that she use her ability for him in return for keeping it secret. The shape-changers who dwelled in the

forest were loathed as even worse than animals, and she had feared what would happen if it were discovered that her father had been one—and that she had inherited his abilities.

Kiril was silent for a long moment. “Nazar is a hard man,” he said finally.

“When he learns I am here, he will tell you lies about me, I’m sure,” she said. *You are harboring a filthy fox, your highness.* “Don’t believe them. Know only that I love you.”

He touched her face. “I love you, too.”

She closed her eyes. He did not know he loved a beast.



As Kiril had promised would happen, they didn’t leave the bedroom for days. His merest touch brought her to fever, calmed only after another frantic coupling.

When he finally rose from the bed and her spent body, she murmured only a half-hearted protest.

“I’ve some matters to attend to,” he said reluctantly, hands lingering on her skin. “Get some rest.” He grinned down at her. “You’ll need it.”

When he returned, though, far later than she’d been expecting, his visage was somber. He took her hand and said,

“I’ve arranged a private meeting with Lord Nazar. We’re to meet him in the forest.”

Her fingers tightened on his. She forced them to relax. “Wouldn’t it be better to let him think I still work for him?”

“It might be easier,” he said, “but I won’t stoop to such tactics. He and I have much to discuss, and I want him to know that you’re with me now.”

There was a hollowness in her stomach. “Very well.” He had to learn at some point.

So they rode into the forest at the appointed hour, pretending to be stealing time with each other outside the palace. Rianon was dreading the meeting too much to enjoy the freedom, though, and as soon as she caught sight of the figure waiting for them, her heart shrank.

Lord Nazar’s gaze took in the two of them. He looked hard at Rianon. “So,” he said softly.

She tensed. She had not gone to meet him last night, and he would know what her presence here with the prince meant.

He did not even deign to speak to her. “Your highness,” Lord Nazar said instead, “do you remember the hunt on which you found her? Where you chased a fox?”

“Yes,” Kiril said slowly, not yet following.

He nodded to Rianon. “You caught her.”

Kiril’s laughter caught in his throat when he swung around to share his mirth with her and saw her frozen and terrified.

Behind him, Lord Nazar watched her calmly. “They call themselves Miirazenu,” he said. “They pretend to be men, but they hold another shape, that of a beast.”

Kiril took a step toward her. “Rianon?” Something in his eyes had changed. It was terrible, the sense that he no longer recognized her.

She changed and fled.



The run, the chase, the hunt. No horns this time, only a hoarse voice calling her again and again.

“Rianon!”

Let me go, she thought. Her name anchored her to her human side, the one so suffused with shame and despair that she wanted it sundered. She could live a fox’s life in the forest: dig a burrow, prey on hare and bird, watch each season claim the trees.

But still there was the drumbeat of a horse's hooves and her name, even closer now. Driven to panic, she turned about and leapt directly toward his steed.

It whinnied shrilly and reared in surprise. Its rider cried out and fell heavily to the ground. *Kiril*, she thought in agony.

Rianon tore out of her fox-shape and knelt over his still form. "Kiril? Kiril, are you hurt?" Her hands fluttered over him, searching for broken bones. She could not live with herself if she'd caused him injury.

He groaned and opened his eyes. "Oh, gods," he said. "I'll never hunt another fox again."

She laughed and wept at the same time.

He reached up and brushed the tears from her cheek. "Don't leave me. I might still be direly hurt."

"Never," she swore. How had she imagined that she could ever forget him? "I only meant to frighten your horse—not harm you—"

He drew her down to him and, kissing her, proceeded to demonstrate precisely how hale he was.



"You truly don't mind?" she asked as they combed the

leaves out of each other's hair.

"I've heard horrible things of the Miirazenu," he admitted. "But I can't believe any of them of you. And even more, I don't want to be without you."

"They'll never stand having a shape-changer in your court," she said. "It's the first thing Lord Nazar will tell everyone."

His face turned grim. "Lord Nazar killed his consort. He won't be around to make any accusations."

She stared at him. "She died of illness." She had never known her mother, but the household servants had still remembered the lady's long nights of misery before she succumbed.

"She died of poison. I found the apothecary who ground the compound himself."

With a shock, Rianon remembered that there had been an apothecary whom she had visited several times on Lord Nazar's instructions. Had that man truly mixed a poison to kill her mother?

"When you told me about him, it struck me that Lord Nazar didn't seem like the kind of man to tolerate his consort's indiscretion. And she had died so suddenly, so young. I

remember the court wondering at it.”

She was careful to take a measured breath. “What will you do?”

He looked at her sharply. “I planned to confront him with it while you were watching, so that his face would give you proof. Then hold a trial by combat.”

She seized his arm. “Don’t execute him.”

He looked at her in surprise. “He murdered your mother. And if he’s let free, he’ll surely spread word about you.”

“Exile, then,” she said. “Far enough that his rumors won’t be heard, and if they are, they will seem no more than pettiness. I’ll never change shape again, and no one will be able to prove I’m other than human.”

It hurt unexpectedly, that promise. She had longed many times to cast off her heritage, separating her as it did from normal folk. But there was a joy to being a fox that she would miss.

“It’s what you truly want?” he asked.

She nodded. She still owed Lord Nazar something for those years he had raised her in his household.

They rode back together, she behind him in his cloak as

she had been that first day in the forest. To her surprise, Lord Nazar was waiting in the same place and had even dismounted. No doubt he had wanted to see how his revelation had played out. When he saw them approaching, his expression turned to resignation.

“So you accept her as she is?” he asked.

Kiril gave a short laugh. “Yes. And you’ll never speak of it to anyone else.”

“I don’t mean to,” Lord Nazar said, taken aback, but Kiril pressed on.

“You won’t have a choice. You’re now exiled.”

Lord Nazar didn’t move. “Without a trial?”

“Truly, you want one? I’ve already had it announced in court that you’re a murderer. Your consort’s family is still quite powerful. Even if you somehow vindicated yourself, I’m sure they would seek their own justice.”

Lord Nazar was quiet as he contemplated the paths of his future. “How did you find out?”

“The apothecary was too useful to you to dispose, wasn’t he? But you left him as a witness.”

“Careless of me,” Lord Nazar murmured. “But I despise waste. Very well, your highness. I shall leave.”

But just when it seemed he would swing himself into the saddle, he turned toward Kiril. “I would have a brief word alone with Rianon,” he said.

Kiril glanced at her, and she nodded, steeling herself. She owed him this much.

She and Lord Nazar moved off a short ways. The urge to kneel before him was powerful.

“I had your mother killed after she tried to run off with you,” he said. “To her forest lover, no doubt. I didn’t think she would stop trying.”

“Because you were angry at her for meeting him.”

“I let her do as she wished on Mayfly Night. I couldn’t father children, you see.”

She lost her breath. He had encouraged her mother’s infidelity?

“I would not have told anyone else about your heritage,” he said. “I would not have betrayed you like that.” *The way you betrayed me*, his gaze accused her. “But the prince had to know. I could not let him discover your true nature the way I found out. They say that the most brutal thing a Miirazen can do to a man is take his heart and shred it.”

Her eyes prickled. He was no innocent—he had killed

her mother and plotted to do the same to the prince. But she had always known that he valued her. As a tool, she had thought. But it had been more. “Good-bye, Father,” she said.

“Farewell, Rianon.” He mounted his steed, wheeled the horse around, and rode away without looking back.

Kiril came up to her. “‘Father’?” he asked.

“Your ears are as sharp as a fox’s.” She sighed and leaned her head against his shoulder, tears falling freely now. “He was all I had.”

“You have me now,” he said. He kissed away each tear and tightened his arms around her.

“He says I will take your heart and shred it,” she said.

“No, love. You shred his heart. You’ve taken mine.”

Rianon listened to the sound of it in his chest, as compelling a beat as that of a horse’s hooves during a hunt. She had already been snared, but she thought there would always be some of that thrill with this man. She kissed him, feeling that beat rise faster under her palm, and vowed to live by its rhythm.



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