

Chapter Sixteen

Collecting My Due

I GRABBED my duffle bag from Dersuss and found my pants and shirt wadded up inside with the boots thrown on top.

At least they hadn't really burned them back at the Holding like I'd thought. Someone must have smuggled them back out.

"Don't tell anyone about Holding," Dersuss said in a sudden turn to seriousness.

I paused with my back turned to him, deerskin dress halfway over my shoulders.

"Why not?" I asked, continuing to take off the dress. I could feel his eyes on my back. "Can you turn around while I'm changing, please?" I wanted to change out of these ridiculous clothes, but not so badly that I'd do it with him watching.

He sighed and I could hear him shifting positions. When he spoke, I knew he'd done as I'd asked.

"Because no one knows they're there. I might still need to do business with them in the future. If ARSA finds out they're there, they'll round them up and put them into the system."

If I didn't know better, I'd have thought he cared about those people. Nah. It's just that he needed them. He probably wouldn't have cared one way or another if not for that.

I didn't know what I planned to do or say during my debriefing. After all I'd been through since starting this job, I wondered if I could ever return to a normal life again.

If normal even existed.

"What would happen if I just quit? Packed up and went back to my dreary little life waiting tables?"

Now that I had my old clothes back on, I turned around to face him.

He hadn't answered me yet.

"You can turn around now," I said. He did. His eyes searched mine for a few seconds.

"You could try that," he offered.

"But?"

"Most likely they'd have you killed. If not that, then possibly implanted and reassigned so they could kill you when the timing worked for them."

I sat on the ground and pulled my backpack over to my lap as I digested that nugget of information. Unzipped the main compartment.

Ah. There was my blow gun, just as I'd left it, disassembled and zipped into its own little bag. When I pulled it out and held it to my chest, Dersuss stood.

"We need to get moving. This is just inside the fade zone."

"And that means?"

"Remember when we went through the field and you stopped to rest on the rock and had your first encounter with the ... thing?"

I nodded.

“The air was ... wavy. Did you notice?”

Slow nod.

“Between the two realms, where one bleeds in to the other, is what I call the fade zone.”

“You seem to be breathing just fine now,” I said.

“I am,” he agreed. “But that’s not the issue. Anything from this world, like that monster, can still get us here.”

Oh I got it now. He was worried about the monster. No matter that I’d single-handedly dispatched the thing. The thought that I might have hadn’t even crossed his mind.

“No worries,” I said, and left it at that. I put the dart gun pouch back inside my bag and rummaged around until I found the washcloth I’d packed. After wetting it with a little of the water from my canteen, I took a sip, capped it and tossed it over to him.

Then I scrubbed my face. When I was done, I stood and shouldered my pack. Dersuss adjusted his and we started walking toward the field where we’d first seen the creature.

No. I couldn’t just leave it at that.

“You know. I killed the thing.”

“The dust and bone monster?” The incredulity in his voice was priceless. It made me want to slap him.

“The Oscala.” I corrected. The thing had a name now, thanks to Achmed.

“How? I mean. Well,” he stumbled over his words. “I didn’t expect you’d kill it. I just hoped you’d survive the thing.”

I nodded.

“Yep. I just so happened to have the very thing I needed to kill it with. And Eli was there too. So I also survived him. He tried to kill me. He probably thinks he was successful.”

“Well, this changes everything, Treya. We have to go back to the Holding. I have to call the drone to make a report. To dismiss the backup. Noach has curare stashed away in there, I’m sure of it. He owes it to you now. He owes you a lot more than that.”

I balked at that and stopped walking.

“I’m not going back inside that walled off lunatic house.”

“But if we do, you can get your second hit in before your debriefing. That’ll make a big difference in your future, believe me.”

“What do you mean?”

We started walking again, a little slower now.

“If you aren’t showing enough progress, they’ll reassign you. When they took you captive, I didn’t know what else to tell them, so ...” He stopped walking again. “I told them you’d fallen into a sinkhole.”

“You what?” I couldn’t believe what he was saying. The man was incorrigible.

He sighed.

“I knew you were on the other side. I knew they couldn’t just go in there to retrieve you.”

“Who couldn’t? ARSA?”

“Right.”

“And why not?”

“Well, I didn’t know about the breathing issues on the other side. But I knew the monster would consume anyone who entered.”

I couldn’t stand anymore. I stepped closer to him and this time I did slap him. He didn’t even try to stop me. My handprint began to redden on his face and he rubbed it, pursing his lips.

“You just didn’t want your precious Holding revealed. My well-being was secondary. That’s the truth of it. Admit it.”

“You’ve got me all wrong. Yes, I wanted to preserve the Holding –”

I knew it. The bastard.

“Just take me back to the Jeep. I’m going to tell them everything. I don’t care if it means they’ll kill me or implant me with whatever shit they can think of.”

I stomped off toward the end of the fade zone. Tears pricked at my eyes and I didn’t want him to see me crying so I walked harder and faster to stay ahead of him.

It didn’t do any good. I could hear him catching up with me and now the tears were flowing freely. I swiped my sleeve across my face to get rid of them. Dammit the man made me furious.