



Romance Divas Ebook Challenge

Meeting in Darkness



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by

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It was her voice he heard first, coming light and sharp across the hotel lobby.

“No ground floor rooms? But Uncle Kerian, you *promised*.”

As Chris came out of the open bar area, where he'd been setting out trays of pre-dinner canapés, he suppressed a curl of his lip. Another too rich, too indulged young woman, who would demand to see the fat content of every item on the menu, before demanding steamed chicken breast and a depressingly naked green salad.

It would be safer not to look over towards the reception desk at all, lest the contempt show in his face. Generally, he'd perfected the bland, polite look of the perfect waiter, but sometimes—like now, with money heavy on his mind—he'd like, just once, to let them see what he really thought of them...

“Oh *gods*. All *right*, Uncle Kerian. But can I at *least* have a balcony?”

Then a man's voice, answering. “Good heavens, Saskia, anyone would think we'd brought you to a prison. Yes, you can have a balcony. Excuse me—?”

Amusement impelled Chris to do what irritation hadn't. He looked over at the little group by the desk. And stopped dead.

He was looking at quite the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen.

She was obviously still too rich, too spoilt, too lucky. Her black trousers clung perfectly to the line of her legs, and her shirt was crisp, spotless white cotton, unbuttoned to show a v-shape of smooth olive skin and the glint of a gold necklace that lay flat against her collar bone.

Her hair was black—so shiny he could see the chandelier reflected in it—pouring straight down her back like a shadowy waterfall. She had dark eyes, emphasised by smudges of make-up, and her mouth, stained deep red, lay in a sulky curve.

She was nothing like girls he'd liked before, nothing like anyone he would have thought he'd ever notice, and he couldn't stop looking at her.

As he watched, she bent to pick up her bag—an oversized designer thing on a ridiculously long strap. Her hair swung down in front of her face and as she pushed it back, long strands clung to the smooth line of her cheek and throat and slid inside the collar of her shirt.

He found he could hear his heart beating in his ears, and his hands were damp. *Oh for the gods' sake—what a cliché*. Sweaty-palmed teenager lusting after someone so far out of his league she

might as well be on another planet. Not to mention all that job-losing potential.

He swung on his heel and pushed through the double doors that led to the kitchen corridor. Back to his own world.

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Saskia hooked the strap of her bag over her shoulder and shoved her hair out of her face. Despite the air-conditioned lobby, her skin was sticky with perspiration and she was dying to get out of her clothes and into a shower—or a pool.

She wasn't good with cities. The journey from the castle hadn't been that long, but the moment they'd left the motorway and got in amongst the buildings, she'd felt her skin start to prickle with an awareness of all those people, and vehicles, and hard paths that hurt her feet. She needed grass—cool damp grass, and the shade and the scent of pine trees. And Uncle Kerian had *promised*; he'd promised this time they'd get ground floor rooms. At least with a balcony she'd get access to some real night-time air, but it wasn't the same as being able to go out.

“Saskia, come along.” Uncle Kerian had moved away from the reception desk to follow the porter with the luggage trolley containing their cases. Next to her, her other guardian, Tarenath, was scrawling his signature across the last form the receptionist had given him. Both of them, tall and dark, dressed in quietly expensive suits, commanded instant attention. Even though, when out like this, they preferred to keep their identity a secret.

The time when their people had been thought of as animals, or demons—unclean, taboo—was long in the past. But sometimes Saskia thought the old fear and disgust must be a human instinct—passed down through blood. As they went up in the lift, the porter moved so he stood further away from the three of them. She'd seen that edginess so many times before.

The lift door opened. They stepped out into the soft scent of luxury—lilies, expensive carpeting and the shine of mirrors polished to smear-free perfection.

Again, as if unaware of what he was doing, the porter manoeuvred the trolley around Saskia so he still didn't come any nearer than was strictly necessary.

It was easier not to admit to it, though—to let people carry on feeling that edge of half-conscious discomfort without knowing why. Once they knew, you'd catch them looking in horrified fascination at your teeth or fingernails—as if you were some kind of primitive who had no control over when and where you *changed*.

“Room six six eight? Saskia, this is you.” Kerian handed her the room key. “We're just along the corridor, all right? Come along when you've changed. We'll go and get a drink before dinner.”

He smiled at her, and, half-unwilling, she smiled back. The gods knew he'd done his best since she—a resentful ten-year-old—had

been left to his guardianship. The protocol that fenced her life wasn't his fault, either, no matter how much she complained about it to him.

The porter carried her case in, setting it by the bed. She smiled at him too, deliberately charming, and watched his discomfort seep away.

Left alone, she lifted one foot, then the other, letting her shoes drop off to lie on the deep cream carpet. Then she padded across to the bathroom, unbuttoning her shirt as she went.

Thank the gods, the temperature of the shower went all the way down to cold—really cold, almost like the mountain lakes back in her own country. She tipped her face into it, letting the sharp spray sting her skin and sink through her hair, making it as heavy and slick as water weed.

Then, wrapped in a towel, she padded back across the bedroom to check out her balcony.

Okay. That she could work with. If she *changed*—she narrowed her eyes, mentally measuring the distance—she'd be able to leap to the next balcony down, and from there climb to the ground.

Excellent. She grinned, and turned back into the room, letting the towel fall. That sorted, she was perfectly prepared to enjoy their stay here. Great food—ooh, she'd just remembered the steak—and, of course, she'd been promised shopping. Now she knew she could get out when she needed to, she expected to have a *lovely* time.

*

So she hadn't ordered steamed chicken after all. That was something. As Chris slid unobtrusively through the hotel restaurant, collecting empty plates and refilling glasses, he glanced back to where she sat.

She was cutting into a steak, laughing across the table at one of the men with her—were they both her uncles? Her hair was up in a ponytail, falling in a gleaming arc down the back of her dark red dress.

Someone summoned him then, and he snapped back to attention, silently cursing himself. That was no way to get tips, damn it, and he *needed* those tips.

Hours later, he loosened his tie and undid the top two buttons of his shirt, his head throbbing from the smoke of the bar where he'd spent his last hour on duty.

He was starving hungry, too. Thank the gods, he lived on site. His room was tiny—just space for a bed and a lamp and the hideous old table where he kept all his books—but to get to it he only had to walk across the hotel gardens. At night, that was. In the morning, when his first shift started, he had to go all the way around through the staff corridors. But at this hour, half past midnight, the gardens were quiet and empty, filled with the cool scent of roses and long patches of black shadow under the bushes and willow trees.

He walked with his shoes and socks in his hand, the grass damp and cold under his feet. He went across the lawn, under the tickling sprays of the rose arch, and down the steps leading to the lower gardens, planning to skirt the swimming pool and from there go past the children's play area, down to the staff quarters.

Once again, he heard her before he saw her. As he went by the pool he heard a soft splash, and a sudden spreading ripple lapped against the tiled side. He looked, and there she was: a dark shape in the water, lit by a glancing edge of light from a window somewhere far above.

Was she *insane*? Without thinking, he called across to her. "What are you doing? For the gods' sakes, are you out here *alone*?"

The dark shape paused, then the ripples swirled as she turned and swam towards him.

Exasperation lent an edge to his voice. "Don't just swim into my reach! I could be *anyone*. I suppose this is why you wanted a ground floor room—or a balcony. But of all the stupid things—"

Her silhouette came nearer, and resolved itself, as he'd known it would, into the girl—Saskia—her wet hair flattened against her head, her eyes reflecting the light in little points like fire.

"You *know* who I am?" she said.

"I saw you checking in—" He stopped. Out there, she'd been nothing but a half-lit figure, mostly submerged in water made opaque by darkness. Yet he had known who she was, had known it without doubt or hesitation.

She braced her hands on the edge of the pool and pulled herself up to stand, dripping, in front of him. She wasn't naked—at least, not entirely. She was wearing something that might have been a discreetly cut bikini. If it wasn't just her underwear. He swallowed.

"*When*?" she asked, and the tone of her voice surprised him. "When did you know? When I was out there?" She pointed across the dark expanse of the pool.

"I suppose..."

Even in the half-light, he could see how her eyes widened. But all she said was, "You're one of the waiters."

She'd noticed him. She'd recognised him. "How did you know? I didn't wait your table—"

She shrugged a shoulder. "I'm very observant. And I can look after myself—you don't need to worry about me being out here."

"You think you're safe because you're inside the hotel grounds? This is the *city*—and those walls aren't that high. Seriously, you shouldn't be out here by yourself."

She laughed, the sound sharp and bright, a little brittle. "*Seriously*, I can look after myself. Now why don't you go away and let me finish my swim?"

Anger licked up through him. "Because there aren't any *life guards* and there's no light and it's the middle of the *night*. Come back in the daytime—"

“When it’ll be full of people! Listen, I want some peace and quiet—that’s why I’m here. I know about the safety rules but, really, I’m okay—”

“Because they don’t apply to you? Because you’re just a poor little rich girl who needs her *peace and quiet*?” He forced his voice up, savagely, to mimic hers. “You don’t get to choose to break the rules—”

“Who do you think you are, telling me what I am?”

“Well, aren’t you?”

“A poor little rich girl? *No.*” And she laughed again, mocking him. “No, I’m not poor at all. I know I’m very lucky, and very privileged—a lot more than you realise, as it happens. Now go away, and let me finish my swim.”

Her gaze held his, her chin up, defiant. Short of calling security, what was he supposed to do?

He turned away, and as he did his foot knocked against something. He looked down. A pair of high-heeled shoes, jumbled carelessly in the wet grass. He remembered them from the restaurant—dark red, to match her dress and accentuate the long curve of her legs.

Spoilt little... He swung his jacket over his shoulder, marching away across the lawn, then two at a time down the steps. Thinking she was—what, untouchable? Wherever she came from, she needed to learn that thinking like that was the way to get badly hurt—

“Baby Face!”

Chris stopped with a jerk, a sudden feeling like lead in his stomach. *Oh gods, not again.*

Three shadowy figures peeled out from around the entrance to the staff building. There were security cameras of course, but by the time they’d picked up there was anything wrong it’d be too late, it’d be over.

“I don’t have anything,” he said. The familiar, futile words. It never did any good. He kept on trying, and it was never any good—

“Yeah, you do.” That was Gaian, of course. He was short—not even as tall as Chris—and scrawny, with a thin chest and narrow, long-jawed face. But he hunted with the big boys, oh yes, and—the gods knew why—*they* did what he said.

He came forward into the faint light slanting down from the sparse overhead lamps. “You’ve got a key, haven’t you, Baby Face?”

“A key? To the hotel?”

Gaian stood, looking at him, and with a shock Chris realised what he meant. The key to his room. Oh no. Last time it had only been money. And no way—*no way*—was he going to go out of range of the security cameras, into his room with these thugs.

“No,” he said.

Gaian laughed. “What, no key? Where’re you gonna sleep, then, Baby? Out on the grass?”

“You’re not going in my room. It’s hotel property—they’ll call the police—” As always, pride rose up in front of the fear, stiffening his

face and voice. But still, he was afraid—cold with fear—and they all knew it.

Gaian's smile disappeared. "You owe me money, remember. You don't get to tell me what to do."

It wasn't true, of course. It came from two years ago, when they'd all worked in the burger bars, before Chris got the hotel job. They'd all stolen before—growing up in the dark back streets of the city, you did what you could to survive—and they'd thought that Chris's new job was nothing more than an opportunity to get richer pickings.

But he couldn't afford to lose this job, and he wouldn't go along with their suggestions to leave windows open or unbar fire doors or get duplicate room keys. And that was the problem. To Gaian's mind, Chris's scruples had lost them money. Money he was determined to get back from Chris—one way or another.

Chris consciously stopped his gaze from creeping downwards to his right shoe. At least his key was there, rather than anywhere more obviously accessible. He swallowed so that he'd be able to speak again. "I can't let you in my room. They don't let us have outside visitors. They've got cameras—the minute you go in—"

Gaian's eyes didn't even flicker. "Your security guards—you think they're watching these cameras? You think they're bothered about what happens down here? I don't think so, Baby Face. *Key*, now."

There was space behind him, and the darkness of the gardens, but he was damned if he was going to run away. "No," he said, forcing his gaze to hold Gaian's.

The fist came before he'd expected it, slamming right in his stomach, under the ribcage. He jack-knifed, choking, trying to breathe, and one of them hit him in the face. Pain splintered up through his front teeth and nose, red and black fireworks that blocked out thought. He heard himself make a desperate wheezing sound that if he'd got any breath would have been a scream.

Gaian took hold of the front of his shirt collar, dragged him up to a half-standing position. His eyes looked blank in the darkness, catching nothing more than a glitter of reflected light.

"*Key*," he said.

Then out of nowhere something came. Something like a solid shadow, a shape that rushed through the darkness and into Gaian. He did scream—a short scream that cut off with a gasp as he hit the ground. Released, Chris staggered backwards, bewildered, his eyes still blurry with pain. There'd been no sound, only warmth brushing past him. And now Gaian somewhere on the ground—

The pain receded a little. Chris's eyes cleared. A cat. A huge cat, a shadow amongst shadows, standing over Gaian where he lay prone. Its muzzle was inches from his face, and a growl, so low it was almost inaudible, hung like a tremor in the air.

Then it moved, drawing itself back in an elegant, sideways movement, paws soft and soundless on the ground. It sat down just

by Gaian's feet, between him and Chris, eyes shining in a flat gleam which seemed to reflect every scrap of light. It was suddenly, obviously, entirely bored.

The others stayed frozen at first, afraid to move. Then, as the cat—*panther? puma?*—did nothing more, they backed cautiously away. Gaian scabbled backwards, getting to his feet, his pale face fixed on the motionless silhouette. Then they went. Chris heard the scrape and thumps as they climbed back over the hotel wall.

He sat, hunched over, trying to breathe normally. He hadn't lost any teeth, although his lip was cut and his nose was throbbing. He spat blood out on the ground, waiting until he was sure they were gone. Then, "A *shifter?*" he said. "That's why you were surprised when I recognised you? You were in *this* form?"

The panther's muzzle turned towards him. Its fur slid, sleek, over its body as it moved, impossibly graceful. Then its muscles bunched, it flowed upright like dark flames, and it was her.

"How on earth," she said, "how on *earth* did you know? You recognised me in the pool, and now. How could you? How did you know?"

He opened his mouth—his lip pulled and split further with a sharp twinge of pain—to say he didn't know any more than she did, that it made no sense to him either. Then he stumbled over the words. He did know. It was because it was her. And he knew, too, he'd recognise her anywhere, whatever form she took. Because he loved her.

That's ridiculous. It's impossible. You don't know her. And no one falls in love that quickly—

He'd paused too long. He saw her eyes widen.

"Oh gods," she said. "I've heard of that—people talk about it. But I—no, you *can't* be. You're not even one of us. And I don't *know* you." She put her hands up to her head—slim hands, with long fingers. He saw them slide up into her hairline and unexpected desire stabbed at him, overriding the pain from his lip and nose.

"What are you talking about?" he said, his voice rougher than he intended. *I don't know you*, she'd said, so she couldn't be feeling the same as him. And here he was, aching for her, feeling that if she never loved him he'd die—

She took her hands down. "I need my dress," she said. "Come with me a minute."

She slid into the dress, then zipped it up and wrung out her wet hair, twisting it into a knot at the nape of her neck. Then she picked up her shoes and went to sit on one of the benches. Light pooled around her, bleaching her skin, driving the shadows down to lie in the folds of her dress and between her fingers.

He stood, watching her, waiting for whatever she was going to say that would make sense of this, make sense of how he was feeling.

She pulled her shoes on, bending over so he couldn't see her face. "We have this legend. The heirs of my people—some of us are supposed to have a destined—a—a—destined—" For the first time the

assured voice faltered. “A mate,” she said. “And I know, I *know* that sounds crazy—”

“No it doesn’t.”

Her eyes flashed up to him, and suddenly she smiled. His breath caught. “Really? It doesn’t?”

“No.”

Her gaze held his. “Well, it sounds crazy enough to *me*,” she said, but she was still smiling, and his breath caught again, as if his heart were beating in his throat.

“You’re the heir of your people—your country?” he said.

Her chin lifted, proud. “I’m the queen.”

“*Gods*.” He dropped onto the bench next to her. “And according to this legend I’m your destined...” Like she had, he couldn’t bring himself to say the words. *Mate, lover, husband*—they all seemed too loaded, too significant. He leaned his elbows on his knees, his shoulders hunching. “Well, how’s *that* ever going to work?”

Next to him, she laughed. “I don’t know. I’m supposed to marry one of my own kind—another shifter. I’ll be eighteen next year—my guardians are already arranging tests to find the strongest, or the most talented...” She stopped, and he felt, rather than saw, her gaze slide sideways. “But you—it’s all right. You’re not one of us. Destiny or not, *you* needn’t take any notice. I realise there’s no reason you should even want to *see* me again—”

“But I do.”

Their eyes met. Her mouth opened as if to speak, but she said nothing.

“I do,” he said again. “It’s not just recognising you. I—the minute I saw you—”

“Oh *heavens*.” She jerked to her feet. “Oh no, this is just too weird. You’ve seen me what—once, twice? And you—no, I can’t do this. I’m not even eighteen yet. You’re not even a shifter. I only came because I smelled the blood and I can’t stand cruelty and I—” She looked down at him, a swift glance that seemed to brush past without really touching him. “This shouldn’t be happening to you. I’m sorry—it must be some magic gone wrong, fastened onto the wrong person. I’m sorry. I’m *sorry*.”

And she was gone, melting into the darkness, disappearing into the shadows as if she’d never been there at all.

Chris sat still on the bench, his head resting on his hands, for a long time after she’d gone. Then he got up and went slowly back to his silent bedroom.

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Saskia got back to the grass beneath the windows and *changed* in order to make the leap from balcony to balcony. Then she slipped, soft-pawed, into the darkness of her room.

Her fur was on end all along her backbone, and her spine prickled where it joined her tail. She twisted her head around so she could lick her back, smooth the jangled nerve endings.

She'd never believed in that part of the legends. She hardly believed in them now—except he'd recognised her, in this shape. And he—oh gods, it was all too weird—he hadn't only recognised her, he was in love with her. She'd felt it as she sat there next to him, the desire coming off him in waves. Desire and pain. No wonder her fur was up on end.

"Saskia."

She jumped, *changing* back with a snap, so quickly it hurt.

"Ow," she said, and blinked, focusing into the dark and onto the motionless figure sitting across the room. "Uncle Kerian?"

His hand moved and a light flicked on. Her pupils, already shrinking from cat to human, shrank further, blurring against the light.

Kerian stood, a tall dark figure. "Who were you meeting?"

"No one."

"Don't lie to me, Saskia." He didn't move, but his voice deepened very slightly to the suggestion of a growl. She crossed her arms against her body, tension stiffening her spine.

"I'm not lying. I-I did meet someone, but I didn't plan it. It just happened—"

"What happened?"

She told him, her voice too high and hurried, stumbling over the words.

He interrupted her halfway through. "You let him see you change? Do you want all that attention—the press, photographers staking out the hotel? Didn't we talk about being discreet?"

"I *didn't*. I mean, I did, but I'm telling you, he knew who I was *before*."

"What?"

She swallowed. "He recognised me. In my other form. He—" Tears pricked her eyes. "Oh, Uncle Kerian, it was awful. I don't know what's gone wrong. It's that destiny thing. It's *him*, and he's all in love with me and stuff, and it's no good, he's not even a shifter—"

"Stop right there."

She stopped, her words jerking to a halt. She'd seen her uncle *change* a hundred times before, seen him take the form of the huge predator that he was, seen him hunt...but she'd never been afraid of him. Never, until now.

"What are you telling me?" he said. "That you've found your destined mate, your husband, and he's a *full human*?"

"I know it doesn't make sense—"

"Of course it doesn't make sense. That's because it's impossible."

"I *know*. But—"

"*I'm talking*." And again, her words dried in her throat. She stood mute, watching him.

“He’s not your mate,” he said. “You’re seventeen. It’s a crush, and you’ve let yourself think it’s real, that it’s forever.”

“No. I don’t even—”

“That will do. I thought we could trust you, Saskia. That’s why we’ve let you have so much freedom. Good gods, when I think of your mother at your age, how she was guarded and protected... And you repay us this way. You forget your position, and your duties, and you slip out for clandestine meetings with—who is he, anyway? A gardener?”

“A waiter.”

“A *waiter*. And a human.” His lip curled. “Well, that’s it. We’ll be leaving in the morning.”

“But our business?”

“We’ll change some appointments. And go to another hotel for a night. One with no balconies. In less than a year, Saskia, you’ll be reigning queen. You need a husband who can help you rule, who understands our people. You’ve always known things have to be that way.”

“But I—”

“That’s enough. You’re not seeing that boy again.”

And that was when it hit her. She felt herself go stiff: her face, her wrists. Even her fingers seemed to go numb. *You’re not seeing him again.*

Kerian said something else, but he might as well have been only miming speech. She couldn’t hear, she couldn’t think. *I do*, he’d said, and she’d walked away. And now, ten minutes too late, she remembered his face as she’d left him and the pain on it struck through her as if it were her own.

She’d heard the legend but, even if she’d believed it, she would never have expected it to be like this, a feeling that if she never saw him again she’d die of grief.

“*Saskia*.” Kerian’s voice got through to her and she looked at him, focusing as if from a distance.

“You think I’m cruel,” he said. “But it’s for the best. You can’t afford this sort of distraction.”

She stared at him, and after a moment his expression changed. She knew she must look frozen, stricken.

“You can see him in the morning,” he said. “Once, for ten minutes, to say goodbye.”

She managed to nod, but her lips wouldn’t move. When he’d locked her window and gone, taking the key with him, she walked over to the bed and sat on it. The numbness dissolved and feeling crept back, thawing her cold lips and wrists. But still, it was ages before the tears came.

*

In the morning Chris’s mouth was bruised and blood had dried in the cut. The skin over his ribs had darkened, too, and was sore

when he moved. He was grateful for it. The way his lip stretched and cracked when he tried to eat, the sting of the hot coffee cup against it, how it hurt to lean over the sink when he washed—it was all a distraction from the real pain. The pain inside—in his stomach, in his chest—that made him feel he was bleeding invisibly, bleeding from a wound that wasn't going to heal.

In the night someone had thrown a bottle over the wall, and it had smashed at the top of the steps near the play area, scattering broken glass onto the lawn. After the early staff breakfast, the restaurant manager sent Chris out to clear it up. "You can't wait tables with that bruise," he said. "You can take a pay cut and do odd jobs today instead. Maybe you'll remember that next time you decide to get in a fight."

Chris went out into the cool early morning sunshine and across the lawn. Hardly any of the guests were around, but a few parents had brought their early rising children out to the play area. Their voices rose, shrill in Chris's ears as he swept up the debris and searched in the grass for the tell-tale glitter of hidden glass fragments.

No, I can't do this, she'd said. *And, you're not even a shifter*. Sun winked off the glass, straight into his eyes, making them sting and water. He gathered up the last pieces, tipped them into the dustpan and turned to go.

Saskia was standing, all splashed with dappled sunlight, on the lawn under the trees. She wore a long white dress that floated down to just below her knees, and her arms were bare. Gold glinted in the hollow of her throat, on her wrists and in her ears. She was poised, groomed, expensive...then he looked into her eyes and saw despair like howling emptiness.

"We're leaving," she said.

Chris put down his brush. The noise from the play area was suddenly far too loud, jangling unbearably in his head. "Now?"

"I told my guardians about you. They're furious. They're taking me to another hotel, and cutting our business short to go home early. They—" she leaned against the tree trunk, wrapping her arms around herself, "—they wouldn't listen to me at all. It's because you're not a shifter, of course—"

"Then why are you here?" The noise was so loud he could hardly hear his own voice, could hardly tell whether he'd spoken or not. She was leaving. For good. She must have thought she owed him this explanation. And he should be grateful. It would have been worse to look for her and not see her and not know—

Her fingers tightened against her arms, whitening the flesh. "They told me it was a crush. They told me it couldn't be destiny, that I was imagining it. Then my uncle—he said I couldn't see you again." She lifted her eyes to Chris's. "And I knew," she said. "I knew if I didn't see you again I couldn't bear it."

The noise died. He couldn't speak. When he reached for her his hand was shaking.

She came into his arms, her skin sun-warm, her dress blowing softly against them both. Her eyes were huge, reflecting tiny spots of sunlight and specks of leaf-green. A little tuft of dark down grew on the tip of each of her ears.

When he kissed her the last traces of noise faded away into silence. There was nothing apart from her, standing there in his arms, her lashes black crescents against her cheeks, her arms tight around his neck.

After a moment she opened her eyes and drew back a little to look up at him. "I'm sorry," she said. "Last night—it was so unexpected, and I didn't realise."

She felt small against him—narrow rib cage, slim wrists. But not fragile, even in this form. And as a panther she'd been amazing, all sleek strength and speed... He went dizzy, remembering.

Her hands tightened on his shoulders. "Listen. They said I could say goodbye. That's why I'm here. But I don't have long. Those men, last night, will they come back?"

"Yes."

"Okay." She pulled an envelope out of her pocket. "Listen, this is the address of another hotel. It's small, family run, but it's out in the suburbs—it's a nice area. You can disappear from here—they'll not find you. And we've stayed there before, they'll remember us. This letter is a reference for you, from my uncle."

"A—you got him to write me a *reference*?"

She laughed. "No, of course not. I wrote it. He's got the easiest signature in the world to copy. Take it. And here—" She put a hand up, fiddling with the clasp of her necklace. "You'll need to rent a room near there. If they decide they like you they'll move you in, so only pay for a month to start with—"

"No." He caught her wrist. "No, I'm not taking money from you."

"Don't be stupid!" She glared up at him, a flush rising into her face. "I can't *leave* knowing those men might come back. I can't bear it. Please, please, take it. Call it a favour to me, or call it a loan—I don't care. But please—" There were tears in her eyes. The flush wasn't one of anger after all.

He let her go, let her undo the necklace and drop it into his hand. The links were warm from her skin. But she'd only come to say goodbye, and then she was leaving. And this was all just wasting time.

"Saskia," he said, and her eyes came back up to his. "I can't just let you go. I can't just go off to this new job and not see you."

"We might sometimes come there to stay—"

"And that's supposed to *do*?" Anger shook him. "I'm supposed to be happy with that—with taking your money and the job you got for me and seeing you sometimes, twice a year? Can't you stay—can't you run away with me?"

She shook her head. "I can't. Really, I can't. They'd track me in twenty minutes."

“Or I’ll come to your country, your castle. I’ll take work there.”

Her eyes glowed suddenly. “You would?”

“Of course I would! I can’t just let you go—”

“Okay,” she said, and smiled, all of a sudden radiant. “Listen, then. My birthday’s midsummer’s day, ten months from now. Like I said, my guardians are arranging tests. It’s tradition, I’m only supposed to marry the best—the strongest, or the cleverest, or the one with most magic. Anyone can compete, though. And once they win, I’m theirs.”

Theirs. They’d give her to someone else—someone whose only claim was that he could change shape. Someone who wouldn’t love her—

“I’ll come,” he said.

Her fingers clung to his. “The tests—they’ll be dangerous. And I—I won’t think the worse of you if you don’t come.”

From somewhere outside their leaf-dappled haven, a voice called, deep and impatient. “Saskia, time’s up!”

She took a step away. “Oh gods. I have to go. Honestly, if you don’t come—it’s okay, I’ll understand.”

He caught her arm. “But I will.”

“*Saskia!*”

For a last moment, light as a blown leaf, she leaned back into his body, her hair smooth against his face, the faint scent of her skin coming up to his nose. “I’ll help you,” she said. “I’ll find out what you have to do.”

Then she pulled herself away, her fingers dragging along his sleeve. Without meaning to, his hand twisted to hold onto her. She paused, her arm outstretched, her eyes on his. She smiled suddenly. “I don’t know your name.”

“Chris. It’s Chris.”

“Chris. I’ll watch for you. At midsummer.”

“Midsummer,” he said, and let her go.

She walked away across the lawn, the sunlight gleaming on her hair. She didn’t look back, but it didn’t matter. Midsummer would come, and he’d be there.

14th February 2007