

Out-Take One

Jayet was standing right behind Paxon when he opened the bedroom door, and she was about to peer around him when he suddenly shifted his position to block her view. She might be a barmaid and a country girl, but she knew a defensive move when she saw one. Someone was in the room, and Paxon didn't want whoever it was to know she was out there.

Or perhaps she to see in.

She held her position behind him as he started talking. A deep, familiar voice responded. It was Arcannen. The man they had come to find. The man who had taken Chrys and brought her here to Dark House. She shivered in spite of herself, remembering how it had felt even to be near him in the tavern. She did not care to repeat those moments. She held her place a moment longer. But when Paxon stepped forward, filling the doorway with his broad shoulders and tall frame, she slid smoothly to one side of him and flattened herself against the hallway wall.

Was Chrys in there, too? She didn't have time or opportunity to see, and she hadn't heard her friend's voice. This wasn't working out the way Paxon had envisioned. If Chrys weren't in there, their efforts would all be for nothing.

"Did you bring any money?" Arcannen was asking.

Jayet could see Paxon shake his head. "I don't have any money."

"So you decided you would steal her back." There was a note of false disbelief in the sorcerer's voice. "That's not very honorable of you. Didn't your parents teach you better?"

The conversation continued, but the volume dropped and Jayet could not make out what was being said. She tried to think of what she could do. But there wasn't anything, really. She had no weapons, and even if she did she couldn't risk using them until they knew where Chrys was. She was scared for her friend. They had shared wild times together, and both were overly reckless in her conduct. Although Chris was much worse. Witness the fact that she was here.

But she didn't deserve to become Arcannen's slave or worse.

"The offer is only good for the next ten seconds." Arcannen's voice was raised again, his words clipped and threatening.

Paxon remained calm. "All right, you can have it. But only if you release my sister first."

Arcannen laughed and said something else. Jayet edged her way closer to the open door, determined to hear what was happening.

A second later, there was movement inside the room. She could hear a shuffling of feet, and suddenly Chrys was standing next to her brother. She seemed unsteady, her posture slumped and her head drooping. Her appearance was disheveled and her face stricken. Jayet almost reached for her – an automatic response to her instinctive need to help her friend. But then Chrys straightened, seemed to recover herself and faced back into the room towards Arcannen.

From around the corner of the doorway, Jayet saw Paxon lean kiss his sister's cheek. "Get behind me," he whispered. "Jayet is outside the door."

There was a moment's hesitation as Paxon whispered something more, and then Chrys was peering past him into the hallway. A second later she was clear of the room. The minute she saw Jayet, she rushed into her outstretched arms.

"I'm so glad you came!" her friend gaped, hugging her tightly. "I was so afraid!"

"No more dice games with strangers for you," Jayet whispered back. Chrys nodded quickly, smiling in spite of her tears.

Inside the room, Paxon called out to them. "Go downstairs."

"We have to go," Jayet said quietly, pulling on Chrys' arm. Chrys started to resist, not wanting to leave her brother. "Right now!" Jayet hissed.

They backed down the hallway towards the stairs leading to the first floor, looking around for guards or customers as they did so. They saw no one. They were all the way to the stairs when they heard Arcannen yell, "I'll finish you and go after your sister, and you will both be dead!"

Jayet practically dragged Chrys into the stairwell, not giving her a chance to hesitate. "But Paxon is still back there," her friend cried out.

In the next instant an explosion rocked the entire building, and the girls were sprinting down the stairs like frightened cats.