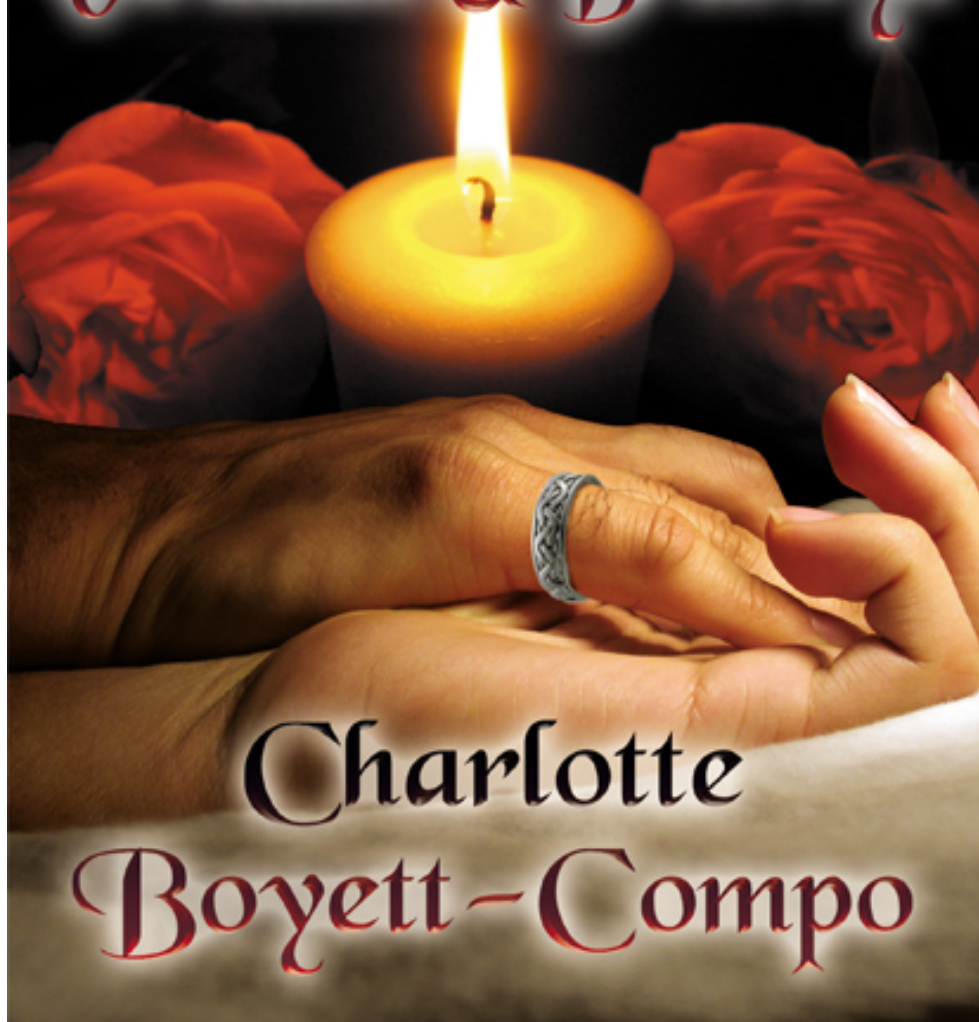


Cerrídwen Press

# Black Wind

Viraiden & Bronwyn



Charlotte  
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A Cerridwen Press Publication



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# ***BLACKWIND: VIRAIKEN AND BRONWYN***

Charlotte Boyett-Compo

### *Dedication*

To Kate Douglas. Thank you very everything, sweetie. Without you...well, it just doesn't BARE thinking about! ☺

—Charlee

### *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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## Chapter One

*Grinnell, Iowa*

*August 1995*

There was a silver cast to the sky as Bronwyn turned off Highway 6 and onto the road her mother had marked for her on the map. Rolling hills of corn on one side of her car and lush green hay on the other dotted the Iowa landscape. Red-winged blackbirds stood sentinel on rickety old fence posts. Black walnut trees and red maples added their color to the tops of the higher hills. A lone red-tailed hawk soared on the wind, dipping its wings in greeting as Bronwyn passed.

"I always thought Iowa was flat as a fritter," she commented to the little dog reclining in the passenger seat.

Brownie raised her golden-brown head. The part-poodle, part-schnauzer arched one bushy brow as if to say "That's what you get for thinking". Getting to her feet, the "schnoodle", as Bronwyn called her, looked out the window, then turned back to her mistress and yawned widely.

Bronwyn laughed. "Oh, it's not going to be that bad!"

The dog made a huffing sound then lay down, rejecting the scenery.

"Elitist," Bronwyn accused. She twisted around in her seat. "How 'bout you? What do you think?"

The black cat, lounging on the backseat, blinked at her then closed its eyes, dismissing the question and the woman who asked it.

"Traitor."

The road curved sharply to the left around a tall embankment. Bronwyn slowed, making sure she was directly in her own lane. It was a good thing she did, for at the moment she started into the curve, a motorcycle came roaring around the bend, the black machine directly in her path.

"Damn it!" she yelled, jerking the wheel to the right and sending her car onto the shoulder to avoid a head-on collision. She slammed on the brakes to keep from going into a ditch. The tires skidded precariously on the loose gravel as the car ground to a stop within a foot of a leaning telephone pole.

With a curse, she looked in the rearview mirror, watching the motorcyclist continuing on as though nothing had happened. The motorcycle's brake light flashed on for a second as the driver reached the main highway and turned east on Highway 6.

"Crazy bastard," Bronwyn snapped. Pulling back onto the road, she realized her hands were trembling from the near miss. She took a deep, calming breath.

The road curved back to the right around another tall embankment. When it straightened again, the first thing Bronwyn noticed was the triple layers of high-security fence, topped with razor wire and dotted with warning signs to indicate the inner fence was electrified. The fences stretched out from both sides of a small square building that sat in the middle of the road. Two sliding heavy-duty gates, also topped with razor wire, flanked the security kiosk. Above the brick structure were two rows of halogen spotlights, four to each side. On opposite sides of the road stood two tall guard towers, one on the outside of the gate, the other on the inside. As she came closer, Bronwyn saw men patrolling the towers, each carrying rifles.

Two guards stepped out of the security kiosk when she braked to a stop. Both men wore side arms, their gazes hidden behind dark glasses. One wore a dark brown uniform—the other was clad entirely in black. She reached down to put the car in park then lowered her window, casting a look at the guard who walked in front of her car and headed for the passenger side.

“Welcome to Baybridge, Dr. McGregor,” the guard in dark brown said as he walked up to her window.

“How did you...?” She turned to look at the black-clad guard now peering into the passenger side window.

“We’ve been expecting you, ma’am,” the first guard responded. “We have your photo, vehicle make and tag number.” He smiled behind the mirrored surface of his sunglasses and extended his hand. “May I have your paperwork, please?”

Brownie had gotten to her feet when the car stopped and was sniffing at the window. The second guard tapped the knuckle of his right index finger on the glass. “Hey, cutie.” He glanced in the back and frowned. “I don’t like cats.”

“Could you pop the trunk, please?” asked the first guard whose nametag labeled him Danforth.

Bronwyn reached for the control box on her key chain, twisted it so she could see the lettering, and pressed the trunk button. “Is Dr. Hesar here?” she asked as the trunk opened and the second guard walked to the rear of the car.

Brownie huffed and lay down again.

“Yes, ma’am. He’s waiting for you in the admin building,” Danforth replied. “I’ll be right back.” He went into the building and picked up a telephone.

Bronwyn glanced in her side mirror as she heard the second guard moving her luggage in the trunk. “Just a tad paranoid, wouldn’t you say, Brown Stuff?” she asked.

Brownie sighed deeply. She scraped her paw over her nose a couple of times before turning onto her back, paws in the air.

“My God, girl, but you are a lazy piece of work!” Bronwyn chuckled.

“I talk to my dog, too.”

Bronwyn jerked around to see the second guard standing by her window. She smiled at him, although a bit nervously, since his black uniform intimidated her and he

wasn't smiling in return. He wore the same dark sunglasses as the first guard and it was hard to read his expression.

"What kind of dog do you have?" she inquired to be polite.

He cocked his head to one side. "A rottweiler. I don't like cats," he repeated. "My dog doesn't either. Sometimes I—"

"That's enough, Gaines," Danforth snapped as he rejoined them.

Gaines made no reply as he sauntered back to one of the buildings. Before he entered, he looked back at Bronwyn and gave her a mock salute.

"Is he always that creepy?" she asked.

"Their kind can be a bit intense."

"Their kind?"

"When you go through the gate, follow the road to the top of the hill. There's a second security kiosk up there and they'll have your badge ready. You must wear it at all times when you're in the facility. Please don't lose it, because the process to get a new one takes about ten days to two weeks. You will not be allowed back in until your new badge is activated."

"In that case, I'll make every effort *not* to lose it," Bronwyn mumbled.

"We would appreciate your diligence, ma'am." Danforth pointed at a short post capped with a chrome box. "Those are security stanchions and you'll see them located every forty feet along the road to the second security kiosk. As a matter of fact, you'll see similar stanchions throughout the facility. They are tracking devices, and as your car passes each one, your speed is timed and reported to the security console in the main building. Should you stop for any reason between this guard hut and the next, we will be notified immediately and a security vehicle will be dispatched to see why. And please do not leave your car. Remain inside and someone will be along shortly to aid you."

Bronwyn frowned sharply. "The purpose for that being...?"

"It serves several purposes, ma'am." Danforth lifted his hand and ticked off the reasons. "Your car could break down and you might need assistance. There might have been a medical emergency. An inmate trying to escape could waylay you. You—"

"Does that happen often?" Bronwyn interrupted.

"It's never happened, ma'am, but there is always the possibility."

"And that's why you wish for me to remain inside the car."

"Yes, ma'am. You will be issued a stun gun for your glove compartment. Please be sure you keep it in the car at all times. Also, I must warn you—there are ground sensors buried along the roadways, in the fields, within the ten-foot perimeter of all the buildings. You will see warning signs around the buildings but not out in the field or along the road. Pressure will activate the sensors and when it does, a strong current shoots up to incapacitate the intruder." He shrugged. "Despite our safety precautions, perhaps some accomplices of an inmate might gain entrance to the fenced area and

intercept your car. They could hide in the trunk or beneath the undercarriage of a truck. We've tried to research all possible scenarios to see that inmates do not escape nor their accomplices enter. This is one of the most secure super-max prisons in the world and we want to keep it that way."

Bronwyn looked about her. "I take it the perimeter is patrolled."

"We have guard towers located every half-mile along the property, Dr. McGregor. We also have guards with dogs who patrol on foot and in vehicles. Every hour, one of our helos makes a sweep of the area with heat-seeking equipment. The pilots will tell you they know every squirrel, raccoon, opossum, deer, fox, stray cat and dog by heat signature, and have even given the boogers names." He smiled. "You will be well protected here. There are two clusters of buildings at Baybridge. The Eastern Complex houses the staff condos, shops, corporate buildings and maintenance facilities. The Western Complex is where the inmates are housed. That five-hundred-eighty acre facility is entirely underground."

Bronwyn's eyes widened. "The prison is underground?"

Danforth nodded. "Yes, ma'am. The farthest underground is Five North. That's where the worst offenders are kept."

"No one mentioned that little tidbit," Bronwyn said dryly. "Anything else I need to know before I traverse the yellow brick road?"

Danforth's smile faded. He stepped back and thrust his thumbs into the belt of his gun holster. "Just drive carefully."

Bronwyn thought of her encounter with the speeding motorcycle. "I'll keep that in mind."

For a moment, Danforth just looked at her, then shrugged lightly and lifted his hand. "Open her up!"

The heavy sliding gate made a loud clanking noise then began to slide away from the back of the kiosk. Bronwyn put her car in gear.

"Have a nice day, now," Danforth grunted.

Bronwyn nodded and drove through the open gate, the rear of her car barely clearing the entrance before the heavy structure closed with a thump. She glanced in the rearview mirror to see Danforth and the returned Gaines staring at her.

"No doubt discussing what a bitch I am," Bronwyn told Brownie.

Brownie opened one eye but remained silent. From the backseat came a soft meow of agreement.

At the top of the hill, the unsmiling black-clad guard at the second kiosk handed her a laminated badge that held her photo, thumbprint and signature. She stared at her photo, stunned to realize it had been taken back at the other building without her being aware. No doubt her thumbprint and signature had been lifted from the paperwork she had given Danforth then transmitted here to the second kiosk.



"You people don't leave anything to chance, do you?" she inquired as she clipped the badge to the lapel of her suit jacket.

"We can't afford to, Doctor," the guard whose nametag read Cahill replied. When she looked up at him, he held her gaze behind the polished surface of his dark glasses. "Baybridge is a maximum-security facility. In the thirty-five years we've been in existence, we've never had an escape. We've never had anyone successfully breach our security, either. Some of our measures might seem harsh at first, but believe me, you will appreciate them once you've taken the tour of the prison."

"I'm sure I will," Bronwyn said quietly.

The guard reached into his pocket and withdrew a second badge. "This is for the dog." Before Bronwyn could comment, he told her Brownie must have the badge clipped to her collar at all times. "We have a sample of the dog's DNA in case we ever need to identify her." He glanced in the backseat. "We'll have to draw some blood from the feline though, so we can get her a badge if you plan on keeping her here."

"It's a him," Bronwyn said, "and, yes, I do plan on keeping him here." She shivered. "How did you manage to get a sample of Brownie's blood?"

The guard smiled for the first time, but the gesture seemed awkward and stiff. "You were required to have the dog's records up to date before you could be allowed to bring it into the facility. We simply took what we needed from your veterinarian." He looked at the cat again. "Didn't know about that one. Did you pick him up on the way here?"

Bronwyn's jaw tightened. "No, he's been with me for more than nine years. Did you get Brownie's blood with or without my vet's permission?"

"Does it matter? It's curious that we knew nothing of the feline, though."

Anger shifted through Bronwyn as she attached Brownie's badge to her collar. "Apparently the inmates aren't the only crazy people here," she grated. "I can't believe my dog and cat need a security badge! Does someone think they will aid an inmate to escape?"

"Take that paved road to your left, Doctor," the guard said as though he hadn't heard her question. "You'll need to turn onto the first road you come to and keep following it until you reach the dead end. Take a right and follow that road to the main facility. Park in Lot A, slot fourteen. Look for the large red letter 'A' as you pass the statue of Justice—you can't miss it. That is your reserved parking and requires a permit. Don't worry about that—someone will place the sticker on your windshield before you're shown to your quarters this evening."

Her jaw clenched, Bronwyn nodded without speaking and drove forward, turning onto the road the guard had indicated. She looked to her right, wondering where the winding gravel road led.

As she wound her way toward the main facility, Bronwyn worried that she had made a bad mistake in coming to work for the people her late father had worked for. Despite Dr. Hesar's assurance that Bronwyn's degree in behavioral science, with a minor in criminology, was something Wynth Industries could use for a new program

they were implementing, she had reservations. She had spent her externship at a major computer company, helping to design software for law enforcement agencies worldwide to aid in tracking down serial killers and child molesters.

A month before her mother called to alert her to the job opening at W. I., Bronwyn had applied for a position with the FBI. Her dream was to work in the Behavioral Science Unit at Quantico but since the agency's policy was to recruit from present employees, she would have had to get a foot in the door as a field agent.

"Bronwyn, a glorified cop?" her mother had exclaimed worriedly.

"I want to make a difference, Mama," she'd tried to explain. "If I can help prevent what happened to Daddy and..." She stopped, unable to say her dead son's name. "I have to do this. I have to do what I can to help catch these monsters!"

"I know that, and that's why I will add my encouragement with Neal Hesar's for you to take this job at Baybridge," her mother insisted. "They are as concerned about violence as you are. The facility out here is the best of its kind. Important, high-impact research is being conducted on what makes those monsters tick and how to stop them. W.I. is connected worldwide with every conceivable agency devoted to stamping out violent crimes. They have the contacts—you have the knowledge. You could benefit from one another."

After several weeks of long-distance phone calls and hours of discussion with her mother, Bronwyn had met with a representative from Wynth Industries who had flown down to Ft. Walton Beach to recruit her. She had taken to Rebecca Woods instantly.

"As a private company, we are able to offer you a great incentive package. We'll start you out at \$125,000 a year with stock options, 401K, major medical/dental, the usual yadda-yadda-yadda packets," Becca had explained. "You'll be working with some of the best minds in behavioral research."

"I'm impressed with your roster of staff members," Bronwyn said, scrolling through the names, awards and honors on the brochure Becca handed her. "I'll feel like the proverbial redheaded stepchild."

"You'll fit in nicely. Now, let's get serious for a moment."

"All right."

"Baybridge is a major mental hygiene facility," Rebecca continued. "It is what is being touted as a super-max prison. Housed within the facility are criminals the court system has declared either incompetent to stand trial for various reasons or too dangerous for regular prisons—spree and serial murderers, violent rapists/sexual torturers, pedophiles, people who fancy themselves human vampires, and those who have become cannibalistic. In other words, very sick people."

"So I gathered," Bronwyn admitted.

"We work closely with VI-CAP, the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program, and with the FBI in general. Local, state and government agencies across the U.S. have come to rely on Baybridge and Wynth Industries to house their worst inmates."

"A hodgepodge of the nation's most lethal, I take it."

"Worse than the average citizen can even begin to imagine."

"I would imagine some medical personal are loath to work in such an environment."

Rebecca nodded. "Indeed, and that is one of the reasons the incentive package is so lucrative. Especially to a newly minted physician," she added with a grin.

"What about living facilities? How is the real estate market in and around Jasper County?"

Rebecca shook her head. "I'm afraid living on the economy is discouraged. Because of security precautions, housing is onsite but you can decorate your condo—at W.I. expense, of course—in any fashion you find comfortable and relaxing. Dr. Wynth wants his employees to be surrounded by things they like and that will make them as productive as possible. There is, however, a cap on what you can spend to furnish your condo. Budget is equal to your annual salary but you can charge your additional purchases at 9.34% interest per annum."

Bronwyn's eyes widened. "That's a helluva incentive!"

"We even put it in writing!" Becca laughed. She pulled a pen from her briefcase, along with a preliminary statement of intent. She held out the pen to Bronwyn. "What do you say? Willing to take a chance on conquering the world with Wynth Industries?"

Bronwyn had hesitated only a moment before shrugging, taking the pen and signing away her future with a flourish. "In for a penny, in for a pound," she quipped.

"You won't regret it."

Now, as Bronwyn caught sight of Baybridge's main building, she said, "Lord, I hope I don't."

Turning into the huge parking lot presided over by a six-story megalith of a building, Bronwyn felt perspiration ooze onto her upper lip and her palms grow clammy. The building was a marvel of glass and stone, with sweeping banks of dark-tinted, copper-colored windows that reflected the scuttling clouds lowering from the gray sky. In the distance, lightning flared and its image pulsed across the building's shiny façade as a few fat raindrops plunked against Bronwyn's windshield.

"I don't like bad weather," she said, an edge to her voice.

She found Lot A and her parking slot as the rain increased in intensity and the wind began to buffet the vehicle.

Brownie opened her eyes and sat up. She pressed her wet nose to the window glass and whined.

"Yeah, I know," Bronwyn responded. "And you know what I told you about Midwest storms."

The little dog looked around as if to inquire if one of those twister things might be in the offering.

"We just may regret having—"

Lightning stitched across the sky with a horrendous crack, and both Bronwyn and her pet yelped. One threw her hands over her head, the other bolted into her mistress's lap, wedging her pudgy body between the steering wheel and Bronwyn's flat belly. As the sky opened and the rain began pummeling the car, making it impossible for Bronwyn to see anything but the cascading sheet of water flowing down the windshield, she picked up her overweight pet, held it in her arms and buried her face in Brownie's golden-brown fur.

## Chapter Two

Dr. Sage Hesar stood at the window, reveling in the storm raging outside. He loved bad weather as much as his twin sisters Thyme and Anise hated it. Feeling exhilarated by the flare of the lightning and the howl of the wind, Sage took every opportunity to witness nature's spectacle. Iowa's ever-changing weather never failed to provide the Georgia-born psychologist with all the meteorological thrills he had time to enjoy.

"One of these days, you're going to get toasted like a marshmallow at a Boy Scout jamboree," his father quipped from the doorway. "Get the hell away from that damned window, Sage!"

Sage sighed, rolling his eyes to the heaving heavens. "The McGregor girl is here," he said as he turned reluctantly from the window.

Dr. Neal Hesar's forehead crinkled. "She hasn't checked in."

Sage jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "She's sitting in her car." He sat at his desk and leaned back in the twenty-thousand-dollar chair that had been molded especially for his athletic six-foot-three-inch frame. "Been there since the storm started."

"And you didn't see fit to inform anyone so they could get her?" his father snapped.

"Well," Sage drawled, "she's sitting clutching her dog, hiding her face against the mutt." He braced his elbows on the chair arms and steeped his fingers. "Does that suggest she'd be willing to venture out in that torrential fury, Dad?"

Neal Hesar mumbled something under his breath then plopped down on the sofa across from Sage's desk. "Have you spoken to the captain today?" he inquired, a look of disgust on his handsome face.

"No." Sage cocked his head to one side, grinning. "Have you lost your pet again, Dad?"

A growl issued from between Neal's clenched teeth. "I know where he is."

Sage's grin widened. "But do you know what he's up to?"

"I don't need to know," his father grumbled, picking at a loose thread on the sofa arm. "He gets things done and that's all that matters."

"It never fails to amaze me that you prefer to call what he does 'getting things done'. That's like saying Jeffrey Dahmer had a good appetite."

His father's quelling look failed to have the desired effect on the younger Hesar.

The intercom buzzed on Sage's desk.

"Yes?" he replied to the voice-activated machine.

"Mrs. McGregor to see you, Doctor," Sage's secretary informed him.

"Send her in."

Neal sat up on the sofa, tightened the tie at his collar and smoothed his lush brown hair into place.

Sage chuckled. "You've already won her, Dad. The woman has seen you with bedhead. Looking a bit crumpled at the end of the day isn't going to send her into shock."

"Watch your mouth!" Neal snapped, scowled and stood as the door opened. His face softened as Deirdre McGregor walked in. "Hello, my dear."

"I'm getting worried, Neal," Deirdre said. "She should have been here by now."

Neal took her hand. "She's in the parking lot, waiting out the storm."

"The parking lot?" Deirdre moaned. "Oh, Neal! She's terrified of storms. She has been since she was a little girl."

Sage saw his father glaring daggers at him and sighed. He pushed up wearily from his chair. "What if I fetch her, DeeDee?"

"Would you?" she asked, her eyes lighting up. She eased her hand from Neal and walked over to Sage, enfolding him in a motherly embrace. "You are a godsend, sweetie."

Neal snickered. "More demon-sent than god-sent, DeeDee. Just ask his twin brother, Savory."

Sage wrinkled his nose at his father on the way out the door. "What's her name again? As I recall, you and Dr. McGregor weren't part of the flower child movement when you named your daughter."

"Bronwyn," DeeDee replied with a giggle. "Thank you, Sage. I know she'll appreciate it."

"Not a problem." Sage closed his office door behind him, giving his father and future stepmother privacy.

He took the elevator to the parking garage, nodding at the attendant in the glass booth. "I need to get someone from the parking lot."

The attendant unhooked a key from the board. "I hear it's pretty bad out there, Doc."

"Gotta rescue a fair damsel from the clutches of the Storm God," Sage replied. "We superhero types can't let a little inclement weather keep us from our appointed tasks."

"Better take the Ravenmobile, then. That always impresses them." The attendant laughed as he tossed the keys to Sage.

Sage caught the keys and headed for a low-slung black sports car crouched in the front row. He climbed in, turned the key and drew in a deep, satisfying breath at the sound of sleek power roaring from the car's ultra-expensive engine. Maneuvering the stick into first gear, he drove into the blinding plummet of lashing rain.

Even with the windshield wipers on high, he could barely see the aisles between the rows of cars. If he hadn't known exactly where he was going, he might have bumped into something. As it was, he was able to judge his whereabouts by the flashes of lightning gleaming on the parked cars he rolled slowly past and found Bronwyn McGregor's navy blue sedan with little problem. He parked behind her and slightly to the left of her driver's door, leaving plenty of room so he could open his door to usher her inside his car.

Not averse to getting out in the slashing rain, he made sure the passenger-side door was unlocked then exited the sports car. By the time he reached her side of the sedan, he was soaked to the skin. Lifting his hand to tap on her window, he thought he saw the shadow of someone sitting in the car with her but when he called out, the shadow melted away.

"Bronwyn?" he called again, this time louder.

Bronwyn flinched, looking at the watery figure standing at her door. She turned her key in the ignition so she could lower her window. Rain splashed through the opening as it lowered.

"Hi!" the soaking-wet man said, leaning toward her. "I've come to bring you to your mom."

Bronwyn wiped away the water stinging her face. "I can't leave my dog. She's afraid of the storm," she said, licking at the moisture on her lips.

"Bring her along. I wouldn't think of leaving her."

Bronwyn gave the stranger a grateful smile. She twisted in the seat to retrieve her purse from the backseat. "Can you take this?" she asked, thrusting the large shoulder bag toward him.

"I don't know. It really doesn't go with my outfit."

A sharp shriek of lightning rent the air. Bronwyn screamed, dropping her pocketbook through the window as she covered her head with her arms.

Sage felt the woman's absolute terror and made no effort to pick up her bag. He snatched open the car door, thrust his arms under her knees and behind her back, and lifted her from the vehicle. "Come on!" he commanded the fat bundle of fur crouched against her mistress's leg.

The dog didn't appear to need to be ordered again. She bounded from the car, following as close to Sage's heels as space would permit. She whimpered as he stood Bronwyn on the pavement, yanked open his car door and ushered his charge inside. Before he could shut the door, the dog leapt into Bronwyn's lap and trembled.

Sage ran back to Bronwyn's car, rolling up the window before shutting her door and picked up her pocketbook. He cursed when he realized some of its contents had spilled on the wet pavement. Scooping up what items he saw, he jammed them into the bag and sprinted back to his car.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the black sports car rolled carefully back into the underground parking garage, a hand snaked under Bronwyn's car to retrieve her wallet, lying behind the driver's side rear wheel. Wet fingers unsnapped the leather wallet and folded back the top section to reveal the recent driver's license.

While thunder shook the ground and brilliant flashes of light scrawled childlike across the firmament, Bronwyn McGregor's driver's license was slipped from its plastic casing before the wallet was placed once more beneath the car.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Good Lord, you are soaked through!" Deirdre exclaimed as Bronwyn ambled into Sage's office.

She laughed. "You think?"

"She said she needed a bath anyway," Sage observed.

"Don't you have somewhere you need to be?" his father snapped.

"Ah, if you'll notice, this is where I'm supposed to be," Sage said dryly. "This is my office, I believe."

Neal Hesar ignored him. "I am Neal Hesar, this lout's father. Do you remember me from Albany?"

"Yes, sir," Bronwyn admitted. "Vaguely, though."

"I hope we'll get to know one another quite well." He held out his hand. "Welcome to Baybridge and Wynth Industries. We are so pleased you decided to take the job."

Bronwyn wiped her wet hand down her equally wet suit jacket then took his hand. "I'm happy to be here, although I swear I didn't bring this weather with me." She grinned. "When I left Florida, it was sunny and bright."

"If you don't like our weather, just wait a few minutes and it'll change," Sage advised.

"Don't pay any attention to my poggleheaded son. His mother dropped him early on and he hasn't been right since."

"Mom said *you* dropped me. Wish you two would get your stories straight."

After casting his son an annoyed look, Neal looked at Deirdre. "I'm sure Bronwyn would like to get out of those wet things, DeeDee. Why don't Smart Mouth and I leave you two to chat?" He caught sight of Brownie and blinked. "Is this the lovely Schnoodle?"

Bronwyn laughed. "That's Brown Stuff. Ask me how she got her name."

"Bronwyn Fiona!" her mother groaned, her face turning red.

"Glad to see I ain't the only one who makes ye olde parental units blush," Sage whispered to Bronwyn.



"Brownie for short, though, eh?" Neal asked with a twitch of his lips. He squatted and gave the dog a gentle pat. "My, but you are a precious little thing."

"The Terminator will love her," Sage said.

Bronwyn frowned. "Terminator?"

Deirdre sighed. "That's what Neal named my Chihuahua."

"Her jealous suitor," Sage corrected. "The blasted little booger chewed up a pair of Dad's best loafers." His black eyes twinkled. "He shouldn't have left them under DeeDee's bed—"

"Out!" Neal said, shoving his son toward the door. He sent Sage staggering into the hallway then firmly shut the door behind them.

Deirdre put her hand over her mouth and turned away, her face infused with color.

"Is there something I need to know, Mom?" Bronwyn inquired.

Her mother went to the sofa to get her purse. "He's a very nice man and quite handsome, don't you think?"

"He looked like a drowned rat to me."

"A drowned..." Deirdre shook her head. "I was referring to Neal, not Sage."

"Oh, him. He seems quite pleasant and, yes, he is very handsome."

"As is his son."

"I'll let you know when I see him without his hair plastered to his forehead, although—" she linked her arm through her mother's "—those clothes he was wearing clung to all the right spots, you know?"

Deirdre snorted. "Stop trying to embarrass me."

Bronwyn opened the door for her mother. "Then tell me about Dr. Hesar and the loafers."

Deirdre ducked her head. "You know we have been friends for many, many years." She glanced at her daughter. At Bronwyn's nod, she took a deep breath. "He's asked me to marry him."

"Good. You're too young and vital to live alone the rest of your life." She patted her leg. "Come on, Stuffie."

Brownie trotted out the door in front of them.

"Is that your grandmother's old locket?" Deirdre asked, casting a look at her daughter.

Bronwyn touched the locket that had somehow worked its way from beneath her blouse. She tucked the gold chain back where it belonged. "Yes, ma'am."

"It needs cleaning."

"I suppose it does, but I never take it off." Bronwyn arched a brow at her mother. "And stop trying to change the subject. What about Dr. Hesar?"

"Your father wouldn't have approved," Deirdre said quietly as she stepped into the hall.

"Yes, well, Daddy was jealous of Dr. Hesar, as I remember." She closed Sage's door. "May I ask what happened to his wife? Rosemary, wasn't it?"

"They've been divorced for four years. Neal took your father's job after—" She cut herself off. "Rosie didn't like Iowa. She gave him an ultimatum—her or the job. Since they hadn't been getting along for quite some time and didn't even share a bedroom, he chose the job and she got his parents' house at Doubletree in Albany."

"Wow," Bronwyn said with a whistle. "That was some house. Is he gonna build you something like that? If so, I got dibs on an east-facing bedroom."

Deirdre stopped walking and looked at her daughter. "Do you have any objections to the marriage, Bronnie? Any at all?"

"None whatsoever." Bronwyn embraced her mother. "I'm thrilled for you. I wish you two all the happiness in the world."

The two women commenced walking.

"East-facing, huh?" Deirdre asked.

"It was a joke, Mom. I'm too old and too set in my ways to live with my mother ever again."

"Well, you'll have to bunk with me tonight at least. How much furniture are you having brought in?"

Bronwyn shrugged. "I have about fifteen boxes of junk, an old overstuffed chair and a futon. That's the extent of my household goods. Everything came from Goodwill, and most of it, including my dishes, went back to Goodwill when I left Pensacola. I figured I'd start fresh out here."

"Oh, good!" Deirdre exclaimed. "We're going to have a ball shopping!"

Bronwyn grinned. "I thought that would make you happy."

"We'll get up early and zip over to Des Moines. There's an absolutely delightful furniture store out near Valley West mall."

Bronnie padded down the long corridor and turned a corner, disappearing from view.

"Wrong way, Goldfarb!" Bronwyn called. "Here's the elevator." When Bronnie didn't come trotting back, Bronwyn sighed and called her again.

"I'll hold the elevator," Deirdre said, pushing the button.

Bronwyn jogged to the end of the corridor, whistling for her dog. "Brownie, come on!" As she rounded the corner, she saw Brownie far down the hall, sitting in the middle of the corridor, staring up at a tall man unlocking one of the doors.

"Brownie!" Bronwyn called. "Come here, sweetie!"

The dog turned to look at her mistress then swung her head back toward the man. She let out one of her excited barks, the kind she used when she wanted to play.

Exasperated, Bronwyn clucked her tongue, patting her leg as she walked. "Brownie, come here!" she said, her voice tight.

The man never once looked in Bronwyn's direction. He opened the door and went inside, closing the portal behind him with a snap.

Brownie whined and trotted to the door behind which the man had disappeared. She lifted her paw and scratched at the metal.

"No!" Bronwyn hurried forward and picked up Brownie. She tapped the dog's nose with her index finger. "Bad dog!"

Brownie huffed and wiggled in Bronwyn's arms.

"No, you aren't getting down. Not until we're in the elevator."

Deirdre was standing at the cage, her hand against the panels. "She doesn't mind very well, does she?"

"Normally, she does. I think she made a new friend and didn't want to say goodbye."

Deirdre frowned. "Who?"

"Tall man, goatee, long black hair, dressed entirely in black." Bronwyn saw a strange look pass over her mother's face. "Do you know who I mean?"

"Yes, I do." Deirdre smiled, but the smile did not quite reach her eyes. "Let's get you into a hot bath while I call up for some room service. What would you like?"

\* \* \* \* \*

He reached into the pocket of his black leather jacket and pulled out Bronwyn McGregor's driver's license. He stared at it for a long time before easing the thumb of his right hand over the lower portion of the photograph, stroking the plastic as he had stroked the little dog's muzzle a few minutes before. He brought the card to his face and inhaled the scent of its owner that still clung to the plastic, closing his eyes to the intoxicating scent.

The phone rang but he ignored it. Instead, he walked through the darkness of his office and sat at his desk. He stared at the license as the phone continued to ring, but when the answering machine clicked on, he leaned back in his chair and turned to stare at the offending appliance.

"If you must, leave a message," he heard himself snarl.

"I know you're there," his caller said. "Please pick up."

With a sigh of annoyance, he leaned forward and jerked up the handset. "What?"

"Did you have a good ride?"

He did not reply as he flexed the license between his thumb and middle fingers.

"Have you seen her?" the caller asked.

"What do you think?"

"Is there going to be a problem?"

"You tell me."

"I don't want there to be."

"Then there won't be," he declared, and hung up.

Slumping back in his chair, he swiveled his head to one side and brought the license closer to his face. He stared into the smiling eyes of Bronwyn McGregor for a long time, then pulled open a desk drawer and flicked the license inside.

## Chapter Three

The next day, the sun was shining as though the rain had never visited the plains state. Everything looked fresh and new, and a slight scent of newly mown grass wafted on the air.

"I've spent more of your money today than I spent in eight years of college," Bronwyn complained, shifting the weight of the shopping bags.

"But it was fun, wasn't it?" her mother queried.

"I'll let you know how much fun it was when I pay you back."

"W.I. will reimburse me, dear. You won't have to."

The loud roar of an engine startled them. They turned to see the same motorcycle Bronwyn had encountered the day before, now racing down the access road in front of the condos.

"Who is that man, Mama? He almost ran me off the road yesterday. He came barreling around the corner and almost hit me head-on."

"I bet I know exactly where you were. That road can be very dangerous in the wintertime."

"He could have been hurt if we'd collided. Don't you have a helmet law out here?"

Deirdre shook her head. "Iowa doesn't require one and I doubt he'd wear one even if they did. Sometimes I believe he thinks he's indestructible. He's in charge of the S.S."

Bronwyn turned to her mother and arched a brow. "The S.S.?"

"Security Services. You'll recognize his men by their black uniforms." She patted her left shoulder. "They have a red triangle on the sleeve here."

"I met a couple of them at the gates yesterday," Bronwyn said with a shiver. "Strange men, both of them. Is he as weird as they are?"

Her mother smiled. "They can be a bit intimidating but you have nothing to worry about. Brownie seemed to take right away to the captain. Despite his stern appearance, he loves animals. I believe the only time I've actually seen him smile was when he was talking to an animal and didn't realize he was being observed."

"He was the man in the corridor yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Well, Brownie's always been a good judge of character and if she approves of him, I guess he must be all right."

"I've heard Dr. Wynth remark he would trust his life to the captain. He is a well-thought-of young man."

"But a hellion on wheels," Bronwyn snorted.

Deirdre laughed then put her arm around Bronwyn's shoulder. "Let's get your new home decorated. I can't wait to start!"

Bronwyn sighed, for she knew it would be a long day of moving furniture and moving it again until her mother had the flow of traffic in the rooms as it should be.

\* \* \* \* \*

The lights went out in Bronwyn McGregor's new condo at a little past one a.m. on the third morning of her arrival at Baybridge. Her mother had left just before midnight, going down in the elevator with the two men from Wynth Industries' housekeeping staff who had helped to arrange the furniture purchased in Des Moines the day before.

At two a.m., Bronwyn McGregor was finally sound asleep, tired from a long day of unpacking and arranging her new furnishings.

He had no trouble getting past the alarm system and gaining entrance to her condo. Though the room was dark, he walked unerringly past the unfamiliar furniture arrangement and straight to her bedroom. Slowly, quietly, expertly, he opened the door and slipped inside.

The dog lifted its head from the foot of the bed where she was stretched out. Soft brown eyes flicked from the opened door to the far corner of the room and back again. A low groan came from her silky throat.

He paid no attention to the other entity in the room as he walked to the bed and stared down at the sleeping woman. Absently, he scratched the dog's chin, feeling her wet tongue dragging over his wrist. He stood for a moment or two, watching Bronwyn's rhythmic inhalation and exhalation. He made no move to touch her. He closed his eyes and breathed in her scent, reveling in the light gardenia perfume that clung to her flesh.

"Go away."

He opened his eyes and turned to stare at the being who had spoken. It was sitting in a rocking chair at the far end of the room.

Two sets of scarlet red eyes clashed, sparking a crimson glow in the darkened room. The stares held until Bronwyn sighed and turned over, the sheets covering her rustling in the quiet.

"I will tell my master you came to call," the aged Nightwind declared, though his lips never moved. He set the rocker into motion. "He will not be pleased."

The visitor did not reply. His vermeil gaze shifted back to Bronwyn then down to the dog. He ruffled its ears then stepped back. As quietly as he had entered the room, he left.

Cedric breathed a sigh of relief that there had been no confrontation. To his way of thinking, he was too old and too tired for that sort of thing. He listened for the soft click of the door closing behind Bronwyn's night visitor, and when he heard it, he relaxed.

With a slight shiver, he returned to his feline state, curling up on the plush mounds of the rocker's seat cushion and went back to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I found a note on my door asking me to take you to a vet and have blood drawn," Bronwyn commented to Cedric as she poured herself a glass of orange juice. "I'm not sure how I'm going to handle that."

The ancient Nightwind shrugged. "I can shape-shift so you can draw the blood when I'm in my feline form. Even a hematologist won't be able to tell the difference."

Bronwyn joined him at the dining table. "That's a relief. And if you leave the apartment, please do your cloaking thing so no one will see, Cedric. I don't want to have to explain why I have a seventy-year-old gentleman living with me."

"You flatter me, Bronwyn. I'm considerably much older than that." He grinned. "By several thousand years, actually."

Bronwyn looked at him and sighed. "You don't look a day over nine hundred."

Cedric chuckled. "You silver-tongued demoness, you."

"Do you know where Danyon is?" she asked, her smile slipping to become a slight frown.

"Why don't you ask him yourself?"

Bronwyn jumped, spinning around to face the one who had spoken. She narrowed her eyes at the man who had so silently materialized. "I wish you wouldn't do that. I've asked you before not to pop in uninvited."

Danyon Hart folded his arms over his chest. He cast Cedric a stern look and the older Nightwind got up from the table and walked out as quietly as his master had entered.

"You had an uninvited guest last evening," he said, pulling out a chair. He sat facing her.

"I have an uninvited guest this morning!" she said with exasperation.

Danyon sighed. "Why must you insist on insulting me, Bronwyn? Have I not done everything you demanded? Have I not left you alone to fend for yourself these past nine years, milady?"

"With Cedric's watchful eye on me at all times."

"As your protector. And as a helpful companion who changed a flat tire in Arkansas, if memory serves." He lifted a thick, black brow. "On a barren stretch of road, in the middle of the night, in the driving rain—"

"Just what every female traveler needs—a retired Nightwind to follow her around and make things right."

Danyon smiled. "You like him and you know it. He's an ancient being and he's lonely. He enjoys your company. So where is the harm?"

Bronwyn grunted an answer. She stuffed a piece of crisp bacon into her mouth and vigorously chewed.

Danyon leaned back in the chair. "The visitor?"

"I assume this person posed no threat, else Cedric would have raised one helluva fuss," Bronwyn muttered. When Danyon did not reply, she glanced at him. There was a stern look on his handsome face. "All right. Tell me about it. You're going to anyway."

"He entered your home without permission. He stood over your bed, watching you sleep. He went so far as to pat Brownie, his hand only inches from your leg."

Bronwyn stared at him. "Who did?"

"The man on the motorcycle," Danyon growled, his face hard.

"How did he get in?" she asked, her gaze going to the front door.

"His kind can get past security as well as Cedric and I can. He opened the door and walked in."

"And Cedric didn't throw him out?"

"Cedric is old," Danyon said on a long breath. "He wants nothing more than to sit beside you in that dented old chair and rock himself to sleep. He would not have welcomed a fight and I imagine your visitor did not want a fight with him, either."

"Well, I'm glad there wasn't a fight. I was tired, and to be awakened by fighting Nightwinds—"

"Hurl another insult at me, will you? I did not say he was a Nightwind," Danyon snarled.

"You didn't say he wasn't," Bronwyn threw back. "What exactly is his kind?"

Danyon shook his head. "I cannot even bear to call him by his race, for it offends me to the depths of what soul I have left!"

Bronwyn blanched. "A race worse than the Nightwinds?"

"Some would say so."

"Is he dangerous?" she asked, a shudder rippling through her body.

"He will not harm you, beloved. I will see to that."

"How? The man you're talking about is in charge of security. He must be a powerful—"

"You are *not* to worry about him. Your visitor poses no threat to you."

"You're sure?"

Danyon lightly touched her arm. "Aye, beloved. Very sure. He would never hurt you."

Bronwyn moved her arm from his reach. "Is that all?"

The Nightwind sighed audibly. "Though you may never sign a pact between us—"

"It would be a cold day in hell before I would, Danny." She looked at her wristwatch. "I'm going to be late if I don't get out of here now. I have an appointment



with Dr. Wynth at nine-thirty." She reached for her purse, dismissing Danyon with the gesture.

A muscle jumped in the Nightwind's lean jaw. "Though you may never sign the pact between us," he continued, "I have pledged myself to you as your champion, and I will not allow that thing who invaded your privacy last evening to come between us."

"Are you going to fight over me?" she asked, one brow quirked.

He pursed his lips. "Eventually, the fight will come between he and I. He knows this as well as I."

"And you'll win," Bronwyn declared, fear tugging at her throat.

Danyon looked away. "I have every intention of doing so."

\* \* \* \* \*

The chief security officer of Wynth Industries Security Services stood at the window of his third-floor condo at the Baybridge complex and watched Bronwyn McGregor hurrying across the quad toward the administration building.

His eyes missed nothing as Bronwyn made her way to the granite steps—the two men coming toward her from the left, hurrying, as was she, to escape the imminent downpour that threatened to erupt from the lowering gray sky—the woman who exited the research building with her arms full of file folders—the lone jogger who, for the last half hour, had made the circuit of the quad's inner walkway.

Studying each of the four people within striking range of Bronwyn, he dismissed them as being no threat to her. The unease he had been feeling since waking that morning was centered on her, but there did not appear to be danger lurking about.

He drew in a long breath. The stench of Nightwind filled his nostrils.

Until the evening before, he had not inhaled that particular rancid aroma for more than several thousand years. He had never thought he would on this world.

He sniffed the air again. His nose twitched. He sneezed violently, hating the aroma that now clung to his nasal membranes.

So that was the source of his nervousness, he thought with disgust. There was another Nightwind lurking about, and this one's scent was much stronger, more intense than the old one who shadowed Bronwyn. This one was relatively young and, he grimaced, more dangerous.

He slumped against the window frame then pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, as though he could pull the smell of the vile creature from his olfactory nerves.

When had this one entered the picture? he wondered. If he had slipped by all the defenses, he must be powerful and with an ability to disguise his true nature. With a hiss of rage, the captain made a mental note to chastise his men for not picking up on the Nightwind's unwanted appearance.

But he realized he was just as much at blame, for he had not sensed the vile creature's presence, either.

The old one did not concern him. The old one had looked at him with fear, realizing superior power when he saw it. There would be no trouble with that one unless he himself provoked it, and the head of security had no intention of doing so. It was the one whose offensive odor clung to Bronwyn that brought up the hackles on his neck.

He closed his eyes to the exhaustion that came from inadequate sleep and the brutal cluster headache that had been pounding like a jackhammer above his right eye for the last three days. At least he had found the source of both his uneasiness and his pain in that brief inhalation of Nightwind fetor.

The captain winced with genuine agony as the sharp trill of the telephone pierced his skull. He cursed as he snatched up the handset. "What?" he barked.

The caller knew him well, knew this was his normal way of answering what he thought was an intrusion.

"Dr. Wynth would like you to join him," came the summons.

Snarling beneath his breath, he slammed the receiver onto its ivory cradle, making the pencils and pens in the cup on his highly polished parquet desktop rattle and bounce.

His angry stride carried him across the room where he grabbed a lightweight black denim jacket from the hall tree and shrugged his powerful arms into the sleeves with no care if he tore the seams. Still growling like an enraged dog, he jerked open the door and rocketed out of the room, slamming the portal shut so hard, the adjoining wall shuddered.

Disdaining the elevator because he loathed the closed-in feeling of the metal cage, he took the stairs, his thick boot heels rapping out a hard drumbeat on the metal risers as he descended. By the time he yanked open the outside door, rain was falling in a slanting, silver downpour.

"Son of a warthog bitch!" he exploded in his native tongue as he came up short under the overhang. He glowered at the wet sidewalks where puddles were already forming.

Rather than go back into the stairwell and take the even more claustrophobic underground convergence of tunnels, which connected the condos with each of the other five buildings of the Eastern complex, he clenched his jaw and shoved his hands into the pockets of his black jeans. He hunched his wide shoulders then ventured out into the chill rain.

\* \* \* \* \*

From the panoramic bank of high windows in his fifth-floor office, Dr. Brighton Wynth, Executive Director of Operations of Wynth Industries, frowned heavily as he observed his captain of security services cutting a determined diagonal across the quad.

Turning away from the window once the captain entered the administration building, Dr. Wynth walked to his desk and sat down. His desktop was bare of the usual accouterments of files, papers, books and the assorted paraphernalia that pertained to his line of work. What sat atop the rich oak slab, however, was what the EDO deemed necessary—two phones, one black, one red, sat on the right side of the desk, a white telephone sat on the left. The black and red phones had bug-free, secured lines while the white phone was for “ordinary” use. In the center of the sleek, oak finish sat an expensive, leather-edged blotter, its paper pad pristinely unblemished—no doodles, notations or scribbling adorned the smooth surface.

When the intercom attached to the white phone buzzed, another man, Burkett, bent forward and pressed the speaker button.

“Dr. McGregor is here,” the secretary informed them.

“Show her into Dr. Wynth’s receiving office, please,” Burkett ordered. “Make her comfortable and tell her it will be a few minutes. I believe she has a fondness for hot chocolate. Would you make a cup for her? Please add a generous amount of marshmallows.”

“Certainly, sir,” the secretary said.

Dr. Wynth was looking at the row of closed-circuit television monitors lined along the south wall of his office. He watched his captain of security services take the stairs two at a time. At level three, he stumbled and nearly fell then lashed out with a fist, slamming it into the fire door as he passed.

Wynth chuckled, leaned back in his chair and threaded his stubby fingers over his slight paunch. “My, my. He’s a tad ungraceful today. Not in the best of moods this dreary Saturday morning, is he, Alex?”

Alex Burkett grimaced. “I’ve never known him to be anything but rude and abrasive, sir.”

“Oh, he has his moments.”

The intercom buzzed again. Burkett ran a finger under his collar before he answered.

“The captain is here, sir,” the secretary said in a subdued voice.

Burkett looked to his boss. At Wynth’s nod, the thin man squared his shoulders. “Thank you, Corrine.”

Wynth watched his assistant cross the room and put his hand on the door handle. He couldn’t see Burkett’s face, but he knew there would be precious little color in the already pasty English complexion.

As the door to the EDO’s office opened, the captain of Wynth Industries security services looked away from the world map at which he had been staring. His eyes narrowed at Burkett. His gaze lowered to fasten on the smaller man’s bobbing Adam’s apple before shifting upward to lock with the man’s jittery gaze.

"Y-you can c-come in n-now," Burkett squeaked.

As he passed Burkett, the captain turned the full force of his dislike on him, crowding the man against the doorjamb. Pinning the whimpering note-taker with the hard length of his powerful body, he leaned over him, putting his deceptively calm face only inches from the ghostly white, terrified one.

"One of these days, I'm going to rip those elephant ears from your pointed little head and tack them on my wall along with all the others I've collected."

Sweat popped out on Burkett's thin face and he began to tremble violently. The sour smell of fear wafted into the captain's distended nostrils. Blinking away the fine mist of humiliating tears forming in his eyes, Burkett shuddered as the rain-dampened body pressed against him, the water obviously penetrating the fabric of his neatly pressed Bond Street suit.

"Leave the man alone, Captain," Dr. Wynth ordered.

With a shrug of indifference, the captain stepped back then made for one of the two chairs positioned in front of Wynth's desk. Without being bidden to do so, he slumped down in one, thrust out his long legs and crossed them at the ankle in an attitude of unconcern.

"That will be all, Alex," Wynth said. "Call the others and have them convene in Conference Room Five in twenty minutes."

"Young Dr. Hesar is not on site, sir," Burkett reported.

Wynth scowled. "And where, pray tell, is he?"

"I believe he went into Grinnell."

"Get him back ASAP!"

"Right away, sir!" Burkett bowed and exited the room. The door closed softly behind him.

"Why do you feel the need to terrorize that poor man like that?" Wynth snapped.

"I don't like prissy little Brits."

"You are not required to like him, but I want you to stop acting like a child." Wynth's pale blue eyes bore into the captain's stare. "Understood?"

A slight shrug was the reply.

When after a full minute had swept the clock on the near wall, the captain sat up in his chair. Brighton Wynth's look held for another thirty ticks of the clock then he blinked away the hold he held over his employee.

"Now that that's settled," he began, "I will be meeting with Dr. McGregor. At precisely eleven-hundred hours, I would like you to join us in Conference Room Five. That will give Sage time to make it back here. And pray, dress accordingly. What you have on now is unacceptable."

"Is that all?"

"For now."

“Am I free to go?”

Wynth did not reply as he leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. When he remained silent, the captain shot up from his chair and stalked to the door.

## Chapter Four

"That's basically what your job will be here at Baybridge," Dr. Wynth explained as he reached for his cup of tea. "Do you have any questions?"

"I'm sure I will once I settle in," Bronwyn replied. "Right now, I can't think of anything you haven't covered."

"When Sage returns, I'll have him take you on a tour of the facility. Your office won't be ready until tomorrow, though."

"That's fine. I—"

The door to the conference room opened and Sage Hesar hurried in. He was out of breath, his face flushed.

Wynth looked up and frowned. "You're late."

"My apologies. There was a problem on Four East," he explained, patting Bronwyn's shoulder as he took a seat beside her at the table.

"What kind of problem?" Wynth queried, setting down his teacup.

"James Schulte managed to get out of his pod. He attacked one of the orderlies before he could be subdued."

"Was the man hurt?" Bronwyn asked.

"Minor scrapes and bruises before one of the S.S. took him down."

"James Schulte," Wynth said, looking at Bronwyn, "is the sociopath who murdered everyone in his real estate office one morning then started taking potshots at passersby on the street. When they went to his home to inform his wife that her husband had been dispatched by the SWAT team, they found her and the four children murdered and stuffed in the family freezer."

"I remember reading about him," Bronwyn said with a shudder.

"Is he back in his pod?" Wynth asked.

"The captain is seeing to it personally, sir," Sage responded. "He said to tell you he'd be along as soon as things are settled."

Wynth nodded. "Do we know how it was possible for Schulte to get out?"

"Apparently he jammed something into the locking mechanism and the door didn't close properly. He was able to hook his fingers around the door's edge and pull it back. The captain issued an order to the S.S. to check all the pod doors."

"I want to see Midlin in my office within the hour," Wynth ordered, then turned to Bronwyn. "Dr. Midlin is the resident physician on Four East."

"Each of the nine floors has two resident physicians attached to it," Sage stated. "One on East and one on West. They work an eight-hour, eight on/eight off schedule."

Baybridge has a generous staff of physicians, nurses and orderlies, as I'm sure Dr. Wynth has told you."

"Plus an additional staff of specialty physicians on call from the local area," Wynth added.

"What about the North and South wings?" Bronwyn inquired. "Are those sections run in the same way?"

"No," came an answer from behind.

Looking around, she watched the tall man in black walk to the far side of the table and sit across from her.

His uniform was as black as a starless winter night and just as crisp. The creases down the pant legs and long shirtsleeves were knife-blade sharp. A thin, black silk tie at his throat matched the thin, black belt threaded through the loops at his waist. His collar insignia was a set of silver ravens. The only color on his ensemble was a blood-red triangle with twin silver slashes bisecting the center, near the shoulder seam of his left sleeve.

Bronwyn was impressed with the man, although he bore no resemblance to any law enforcement or security officer she had ever seen. From his neatly clipped goatee, to the shoulder-length black hair tied in a queue at his neck, to the small gold hoop in his left ear, he looked every inch the part of a ruthless pirate. All he needed was an eye patch to complete the picture.

And what eyes! she thought. Such an unusual color and so striking, especially on a man. They were golden, a rich cast of amber and glistening as hotly as that precious material. Framed behind long, sable lashes, the man's eyes mesmerized her.

But it was the strange design on the right side of his face that intrigued her most. Sweeping back from the corner of his eye into the thick strands of hair at his temple, the dark blue tattoo reminded her of Celtic artwork she had seen on the Internet, like a tribal tattoo.

"Bronwyn, this is Captain Viraidan Cree," Wynth grated. "He is head of our security services division."

Bronwyn did not expect the man to offer his hand, so was not disappointed when he made no effort to do so. Before she could mention that he had broken into her apartment the night before, he reached into his pocket and took out a badge.

"For the old one," he said, the right side of his mouth lifting in what might well have been a carefully controlled grin. He put the badge on the table and pushed it across to her. "I hope I spelled 'Cedric' correctly."

Bronwyn felt heat gathering in her cheeks. She looked at the badge, stunned to see a photo of a black cat. She raised her eyes to his and wondered if he also knew about Danyon's visit that morning.

"Did I get the name right?" he asked, his left brow arching.

"Yes," she said quietly. "You spelled it correctly."

"That cat is as black as the wind at night, isn't he?"

Bronwyn blinked, her heart thudding. He knows!

"Bronwyn, first things first," Wynth said, drawing her attention to him. "You need to be told – Cree came to us from Fuilgaoth right after the British invaded it and shut it down."

Bronwyn jerked. "He worked for Daniel Dunne?"

"Cree never worked for Dunne," Wynth was quick to answer.

"We know Dunne was responsible for your father's death," Sage said, putting a comforting hand on Bronwyn's arm. "We are hoping the software you helped design will aid us in locating Dunne and those of his followers who managed to escape when Fuilgaoth was shut down, including the other man responsible for your father's death."

"I know who was responsible," Bronwyn said, looking at the table.

"We're speaking of the man who actually triggered the bomb," Wynth countered. "Not the man who placed it under the car."

His words brought her head up. "I was told Sean –"

"Alistair Gallagher killed Dermot McGregor and Rory Brell," Cree stated.

"Sean Cullen was killed trying to stop Brell and your father from getting into the car," Sage said.

Tears filled Bronwyn's eyes. She touched the oval-shaped, golden locket at her throat. "Sean died trying to save my father?" Her tearful gaze skipped from one man to the other, finally landing on the dark, amber eyes of the man across from her. "Please, I have to know."

"He set the bomb," Cree said, "but he did not detonate it."

A soft moan reverberated from Bronwyn's throat. She covered her face with her hands, the news opening up a scab over her heart that had never fully healed. For a long time, she let the tears fall. It had been years since she had cried for her lost love, months since she had spoken his name aloud. When no more sorrow could be dredged up from her aching soul, she raised her head and wiped at the tears on her cheeks.

"Forgive me, gentlemen. I don't usually show my emotions in public like this."

Dr. Wynth got up and took a box of tissues from a side table. He brought them to her, placing them within her reach. "We understand."

She blew her nose then slumped in her chair. "Did you know him, Captain Cree?" she asked, wiping her eyes. When he didn't respond, she looked at him. "Did you know Sean?"

"Aye," he answered, the word gruff.

"Then maybe you can tell me how he wound up in that awful place." She stroked the locket.

"His father took him," Dr. Wynth explained, sitting down.

Bronwyn shook her head. "That's not possible. His father was dead. His mother –"



"Tymothy Cullen was *not* Sean's biological father," Sage interrupted.

Surprise parted Bronwyn's lips. She stared at Sage, too shocked to speak.

"A man named Brian O'Shea is Sean's father," he continued. "O'Shea worked for Dunne. Dunne sent him to America to fetch Sean and that's how the boy wound up at Fuilgaoth."

It took a moment for Sage's words to sink in then Bronwyn shook her head. "When I was in college in Georgia, I used to go see Mrs. Cullen once a month."

"We know," Wynth said. "That information is in your file."

"She never mentioned anything about a man named O'Shea. She said she had no idea how Sean had wound up in Ireland. Why didn't she tell me the truth? Why didn't she tell me Tym Cullen wasn't Sean's father?"

"I suspect she was trying to protect O'Shea," Sage said. "Sean was gone, but O'Shea is very much alive."

Bronwyn drew in a breath. "Do you know where he is?"

"On Five North," Cree answered.

"He's an inmate here?"

Wynth shook his head. "He's the chief resident physician of that section."

Bronwyn gasped, her eyes wide. "I must go to him! There are things I have to know about Sean!"

Cree leaned back in his chair. "That won't be possible, Dr. McGregor."

"Why not?"

"You were asking when I arrived if the North and South complexes were run the same as the East and West. I said they weren't."

"What difference —"

"North and South are lockdown units. The inmates are in their pods twenty-three hours a day. All nine floors are off-limits to all but assigned staff and my men."

Frustration made Bronwyn groan. "Will you let him know I want to speak with him?"

"I will tell him," Dr. Wynth said.

Bronwyn stood, needing to rid herself of the anxiety that had claimed her. She realized she was trembling and wanted nothing more than to walk off the nervousness. "I'm sorry, but this has all been unsettling and I need time to —"

"Perfectly understandable," Wynth assured her as he and the others rose. He looked at Sage. "Why don't you take Bronwyn on a tour of the facilities now?"

"It would be my pleasure." Sage walked to the door and opened it.

"We'll continue our talk another time," Dr. Wynth said.

"Gentlemen," Bronwyn mumbled, sparing Wynth and Cree a fleeting look before she left with Sage.

"Where would you like to start?" he asked.

Bronwyn was in no mood for a tour and said as much as they walked down the corridor. "Can we make it later this afternoon?" she asked, her gaze pleading with him.

"Of course. Is there anything I can do?"

She shook her head. "I just want to be alone for a while." She stopped walking. "This has been so..."

Sage put his hands on her shoulders, pulled her to him and gave her a light hug. "I'm sorry we upset you."

Bronwyn eased out of his gentle hold and backed away. "It's not your fault."

He cleared his throat, color having risen in his cheeks at her slight rebuff. "Well, if you need me, just have me paged. I'll be there in the blink of an eye."

"Thank you," she said, ducking her head. "I appreciate the offer, but—"

"Dr. Hesar fancies himself a knight-errant at times, don't you, Spice Boy?"

Bronwyn looked up to see Captain Cree standing a few feet away. The man in black was scowling, his amber eyes hard.

Sage raised his chin. "I was only offering to help."

"I'm sure you were."

Bronwyn sensed the hostility between them and felt uncomfortable.

"If you won't be making the grand tour for a while," Cree said as he glared at Sage, "Dr. Wynth would like a moment of your time."

"Of course," Sage mumbled. He gave Bronwyn a quick smile then headed back to the conference room.

Bronwyn shifted her attention to Cree. "You like intimidating people, don't you?"

When he didn't respond, she spun around and walked off.

Cree grinned nastily at her departing back then turned in the opposite direction. As soon as he did, his gaze locked on a pair of night-black eyes, glowing with undisguised hatred.

The Nightwind blocked his way, standing in the center of the corridor, fists doubled at his side.

"Stay away from my woman," Danyon Hart growled.

Cree narrowed his eyes. Though he was less than a month away from Transition, he knew he could shift his body into full Reaper mode if he needed to. His mouth watered with the desire to sink his teeth into the Nightwind's throat and rip out his flesh.

"Try it," Danyon sneered.

Cree took a step closer to the Nightwind then stopped, his ears picking up a strange sound. He sniffed the air, his forehead crinkling with surprise.

Danyon obviously heard the sound as well, since he turned in the direction from which it came and his nostrils also quivered.

Along the corridor, the air grew frigid and a stiff breeze washed over them. The unknown smell intensified. From the far end of the corridor, a sickly blue mist began to roll along the floor toward them.

"What the hell is that?" Danyon demanded.

Cree felt a prickle of unaccustomed fear ripple down his spine. He took a step back.

Danyon put a hand over his nose. "By the gods, but that smell is more disgusting than Reaper stench."

Cree grumbled at the insult but kept his attention riveted on the spreading mist. He, too, was offended by the rank smell. He felt clammy, awash in the fetid odor emanating from the encroaching vapor. He shifted his shoulders, uncomfortable that his clothing clung to his flesh.

"Do you feel that?" Danyon inquired, obviously so unnerved by the unnatural substance that he took up a position beside Cree. "Do you feel the evil from that thing?"

Cree did not take his eyes from the insidious mist. Although he was nauseated by the stink of the Nightwind so close to him, he was bothered more by the presence of something he could not identify.

A hissing sound echoed through the corridor, so loud both Cree and Danyon covered their sensitive ears to blot out the pain that had suddenly invaded their hearing. They stumbled back, crashing into the wall behind them, neither able to move, plastered against the concrete like insects pinned within a collector's shadowbox.

Cree felt the preternatural fingers caress him. He was sickened by the touch, unmanned by the feel of spectral digits roaming freely over his flesh, assessing, probing, stroking him in places no one had touched in a long, long time. Unable to escape the rigid hold that lashed him with invisible fetters to the wall, he endured the feel of slimy lips sliding over his. He swallowed convulsively against the unclean tongue, tasting of suppurating flesh that pushed past his lips to rape his mouth. He gagged at the slick feeling, his knees buckling beneath the onslaught. Trembling with terror, he stared into the mist, seeing nothing, and knew a horror unlike anything he could have imagined.

"Viraidan," the phantom mist whispered on a throaty sigh. "I have come for you."

Cree shuddered violently and managed to pull himself away from the wall. Hands still over his ears, he slid to the floor, his back scraping down the concrete. He hunkered there, his shirt and trousers sticking to his cold flesh.

As suddenly as the attack began, it ended.

The mist withdrew, sucking in on itself, sliding back down the corridor and disappearing in the blink of an eye. The stench—so powerful, so unnerving—became only a lingering hint of unpleasantness that made Cree's eyes water and his nostrils sting.

"W-what in hell was that?" Danyon questioned, sliding down beside Cree. He, too, was shivering, his clothing wet.

"I...I..." Cree could not finish. He turned, spewing bile as the taste that had conquered his mouth still clung. He bent over, retching violently until there was nothing inside him to bring up.

Danyon pushed his back up the wall. "I'd say you've got big trouble, Reaper."

"Go back to your lair."

"Whatever that thing was, I'm glad it's after you and not me."

Cree looked up, ready to do battle with the Nightwind, but the creature was gone, the only sign he'd been there was the stench he left behind to mingle with that of the phantom fog's.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cree closed the door to his quarters and leaned against it. He was as unnerved as he could ever remember being in his long life. Even after an hour-long run around the outdoor track at full speed, he could not shake the sense of impending doom that had settled like an iron mantle on his shoulders. He could still see the spectral fog flowing toward him, could taste the vile flavor that had invaded his mouth, could feel the eager fingers that had fondled his privates, could hear the insidious evil that had spoken in the corridor. Each of his senses had been assaulted by the experience and he felt violated in the worst way.

Haunted, he walked to the window. He pushed aside the curtain with the back of his fingers and stared unseeingly into the courtyard below. He ignored the knock at his door and continued standing at the window even when the door opened and closed behind his visitor.

"Did you forget you were going to meet me for lunch?"

Cree did not answer. He closed his eyes and lowered his head, his body as tense as a steel spring.

"You spoke to her, didn't you?"

The question brought his eyes open. He turned to stare at the man who had joined him beside the window.

Brian O'Shea took a step back. He held up a hand. "We won't talk about it, if you don't want to."

Cree let out a shaky breath. "Oh, you meant Bronwyn..."

"Aye," Brian said on a long breath. "Who did you think I meant?"

"The Amazeen," Cree whispered, the name a bitter taste in his mouth.

Brian's forehead crinkled. "What is an Amazeen?"

Cree let the curtain close. He walked to the sofa and sat, knees spread with hands clasped between them and lowered his head. "They are a race of warrior women. Savage bitches who enslave their menfolk and use them like breeding cattle."

"Even Reapers?" Brian asked, sitting in the chair across from Cree.

A shudder rippled through Cree. For a long time he didn't speak. When he did, his voice was flat and toneless. "They tried mating with my race until they realized only male offspring came from the union."

"Reaper males," Brian stated, "tainted with parasite spore. Female chromosomes would have been devoured by the parasite."

Cree nodded. "Her clan is the reason I came to Earth."

"Do you want to tell me about it, son?" Brian asked softly.

Cree raised his head and looked into the eyes of the man who was the closest thing to a friend he had ever known. He looked into eyes filled with concern, eyes that looked back at him with a quiet love he had never accepted.

"I've asked you not to call me that. I am *not* Sean Cullen."

"I know. Not entirely, anyway."

"Cullen was weak," Cree stated from between clenched teeth.

"Sean was half-human," Brian countered.

"He was a fool!"

Brian smiled gently. "He was a man in love."

Cree shot to his feet and began pacing, his angry strides giving evidence to the agitation churning within him. When at last he returned to the couch and sat, he buried his face in his hands.

"This is becoming unbearable!" he said, his voice breaking. "I don't want his thoughts in my head. I don't want his feelings twisting around inside me! They've gotten worse since his woman arrived!"

It was the first time since the Prime Reaper had awakened in Fuilgaoth—his transformation from a badly burned young man in his teens to a physically powerful warrior in his thirties completed—that Cree had acknowledged the two entities were one. It was the first time he had spoken of Sean Cullen's feelings.

Brian sighed heavily and left his chair to sit beside Cree. He did not touch Cree, just sat there, allowing his presence to calm his friend, give him the reassurance that he was not alone.

"How can I help, Viraidan?"

"She is beautiful," Cree whispered.

"The Amazeen?"

"No!" Cree exploded, glaring at the man who had given life to a small part of him. "That bitch is uglier than a Diabolusian warthog with the mange! I'll kill her the first chance I get! She is the least of my worries."

Brian looked away. "You meant Bronwyn."

"Aye, I meant Bronwyn," Cree snapped.

"I've not met her, but Sean told me she was lovely. Of course, he was looking at her with the eyes of a man in love."

"Sean loved her more than his own life."

"I know."

"She *was* his life!"

"I believe he felt so."

"She was his mate," Cree groaned.

Brian drew in a long breath. "As she will always be."

"A Reaper can have but one mate in his life, O'Shea. You know that. You had Dorrie. I had Chandra. She was my mate, the mother of my son. I should not be having these wicked thoughts of the McGregor woman!"

"I believe this situation might well be unique, though, don't you?" Brian inquired. "Sean is having the thoughts, not Viraidan."

"How can he still think of her? She betrayed him," Cree said, his voice husky.

"I don't believe that was the way of it."

"She told him she would never forgive him. She turned her back on him as he lay dying." Moisture burned Cree's eyes. "He was in agony and she turned away."

Brian drew in a long breath. "That must have been worse for him than the physical pain."

"He needed her," Cree stated, wiping away the treacherous tears clouding his vision. He stared at the wetness clinging to his fingers then furiously wiped his hand on the front of his shirt. He shot up from the sofa and stared out the window.

"Does he still love her?"

There was a long moment of silence before Cree leaned his forehead against the windowpane. "He will always love her. He aches for her and she invades his dreams each night."

"It must be hell for him," Brian said gently.

"You know she will be coming to see you. She will ask you questions about him."

"And I'll answer her questions in a way I think appropriate. But it would serve no good purpose for her to know the man she loved—"

"Loves. The man she *still* loves." Cree dug the heels of his hands into his eyes. "The man she will *always* love."

"You don't think she will find someone to eventually take his place?"

Cree nudged his chin toward his desk. "The report the major sent left no facet of her life unexamined when they investigated her background. She hasn't been with a man since that night with Cullen. Hell, she's never been kissed by anyone other than him!"

"Why do you think that is?"

Cree narrowed his eyes. "Why do *you* think that is, Brian?"

Brian smiled, but didn't respond.

"Oh, go to hell, O'Shea!" Cree grumbled, turning away.

"I believe she'll eventually meet someone she'll want to share her life with, but it might be a long time, way off in the future."

A harsh exhalation of breath was Cree's comment. He tore the clip from his ponytail and threw it as hard as he could across the room, then shook his mane of dark hair. He plowed his hands through the thick mass and tugged viciously as though he could pull his tormented thoughts free.

"I have his heart intact within my breast," he said. "I have his brain caged inside my skull, harboring his thoughts, his memories, his fears." He locked gazes with Brian. "The rest is me. The rest is me!"

Brian nodded. "I understand."

"Do you?"

"Yes, Viraidan. When She healed Sean's destroyed body, the queen replaced the memories you had before you were driven into the bog. She put back everything she knew of you, the things that made you Viraidan Cree. Your own thoughts and memories are warring with Sean's. You believe those thoughts and memories make you weak. They —"

"They hurt me," Cree grated.

"I'm sure they do and you don't know how to deal with them."

Cree shook his head. "I have tried to push them out but they return. Now with her here, the feelings are stronger. These thoughts are eating me alive!"

"What thoughts?"

"Memories of his time with her!" Cree shouted. "The way she felt in his arms. They way she smelled, the taste of her, the pleasure he took in lying with her! All those things that made him love her—her smile, her laughter, the way she treated him." He slammed a palm against the wall. "I ache with the need he has for her!"

Brian drew in a quick breath. "You can't act on that need, Viraidan."

"Don't you think I know that?" Cree bellowed, the force of his outburst rattling the windowpane.

"Stay away from her, then. No more midnight excursions into her apartment to —"

"I went to see what kind of threat the old Nightwind —"

"You went to see *her*," Brian snapped. "You know it and I know it."

Cree snarled, his lips peeling back from his teeth. But he did not deny Brian's assertion.

"You wanted to see her as much as Sean wanted to see her again. Neither of you, I suspect, was satisfied."

"Satisfied with what?"

"With not being able to touch her," Brian replied. "To hold her, to taste her, to lie with her."

"I have no such cravings for the woman!" Cree denied, but he could not look at Brian when he said it. "It is this weakling inside me who desires her still, despite what she did to him! It is he who makes me hurt like this!"

"You've always told me you were stronger than Sean. Prove it," Brian demanded. "Stay away from her."

"I intend to." Cree rubbed at his temples.

"Do you need something for the pain?"

"No."

"Perhaps you should lie down and rest. You look tired."

"I am tired," Cree admitted harshly.

"Then take a nap. If you wake in time for supper, perhaps we can eat together."

Cree heard the door close behind Sean's father and squeezed his eyelids together. He put the heels of his hands to his eyes and pushed, wishing the horrendous throbbing in his head would cease.

"Leave me alone, Cullen," he hissed, bending over with the pain. "Stop laying these mind pictures out for me to see!"

He stumbled into the bedroom and flung himself on the bed. Curling into a fetal position, he dragged his pillow to him and lay there with his hot face pressed into the coolness of the cotton.

But he could not blot out the memories plaguing him. That part of him that had lived the remembrances nudged them to the forefront of his mind and left them there for him to endure.



## Chapter Five

"Can you tell me anything about the being who came to call on the Reaper?" Danyon asked the Bugul Noz.

Ordin Gver was nearly as old as Cedric. Danyon knew that Ordin's solitary existence for so many thousands of years had made him cautious in his dealings with humans. With other entities that existed outside the laws of humanity, he had only rare and fleeting connections, and was even more reticent. But because Danyon had befriended the Bugul Noz, Ordin was comfortable with him.

"I have no frame of reference for such a one as you have described, friend," the Bugul Noz replied "I do not believe her from our realm of existence."

"I sensed great evil in his visitor," Danyon commented. "There was tremendous power and exacting authority within that vile fog."

"The Reaper was afraid?"

"The Reaper nearly soiled his britches!" Danyon chuckled. "He was terrified of her."

"You sensed it was female?"

"That was my feeling."

"Something to ponder, wouldn't you say, friend?" Ordin Gver queried. "Something that would frighten a beast of such ferocity as a Reaper is a force with which to reckon, would not you imagine?"

"Aye, you have a point there. What do you suggest I do?"

The Bugul Noz leaned back against the trunk of a black walnut tree and took a deep pull on his clay pipe. He thought for a moment as the smoke left his lungs through his misshapen nose then he pointed the long pipe stem at Danyon. "If I were you, I would converse with this being. Ask her what it is she wants with the Reaper. Remind her that the enemy of your enemy is your friend. Perhaps you can help her in some way."

"Or she can help me," Danyon replied.

Ordin nodded as he chewed on the pipe stem. He inhaled the acrid smoke, held it deep in his barrel chest then blew smoke rings in the night air.

"That is a filthy habit, Gver," Danyon said.

"We all have our little addictions," the Bugul Noz quipped. "Mine is a fine skein of tobacco unraveling within me, and yours is the twitch of a shapely behind." He laughed, his loud braying an unpleasant sound even to Danyon's ears.

"I have but one addiction, my friend, and that is the lovely Bronwyn."

"A woman you cannot have."

"I *will* have her."

Ordin shrugged. "Whatever I can do to help in that regard, you have but to ask, as you know."

A companionable silence settled as both creatures watched a star fall from the heavens. Ordin traced its lonely pathway to earth.

"You would conjure the thing that came for the Reaper, eh?" Danyon finally asked.

"What have you to lose?" Ordin raised a jagged brow. "Your soul?"

Danyon rolled his eyes. "I lost that long, long ago."

"Then seek out that one. Ask what it is that sets the Reaper's knees to trembling when she comes to call. My guess will be, whatever she has to tell you, will be to your advantage—and against the Reaper."

"But where will I find her? How will I contact her?"

The Bugul Noz considered the question then tapped the stem of his pipe against his bottom fangs. "Take something that belongs to him—something that has his scent on it."

Danyon threw another log on the fire that kept them warm. He stared into the flames, consigning the Reaper to the conflagration. In the dancing sparks that rose to the night sky, he thought he could see blood-red eyes staring back at him.

"Something tells me I will not need to make a trip to the Abyss," he said. "All I may have to do is say his vile name and she will come to me."

The Bugul Noz snorted. He got clumsily to his feet, dusting off his rough tweed britches. "Call her if you like, but wait until I am well away. I have no desire to truck with beings any more powerful than a tipsy leprechaun."

"Deserting me?" Danyon teased. "Leaving me to beard the ogress alone?"

Ordin shrugged. "You're a big boy, Nightwind. I have faith in your ability to handle the situation."

As Danyon watched, the Bugul Noz's outline wavered then vanished, drawing in on itself until it became a spark of light that wafted away with the sparks of the fire.

Minutes passed with only the sounds of the popping fire to keep Danyon company. He liked the smell of the burning wood, the warmth it extended. Sitting with his knees drawn up into the perimeter of his arms, he was content to be alone in the cool, clear, Iowa night and stare into the leaping flames. Overhead, millions of stars twinkled and the moon, a week away from its fullness, shone a soft light upon the rolling hills of the countryside.

When ground fog began to creep toward him from across the meadow, he felt his heartbeat accelerate. As the vile stench reached his sensitive nostrils, he grimaced, using his expert powers to block out the smell—but even as great as his powers were, he could not entirely eliminate that god-awful stink. His eyes watering, he put a hand to his nose and mouth to filter the scent.

The hideous dampness settling over him bothered the Nightwind more than anything else. It was a moistness that saturated his clothing and oozed over him, dragging across his flesh like the tongue of a slobbering beast. He could feel its slime, experiencing the reek of its malevolence as it spread over his body. Its touch left him unclean, defiled, and it was all he could do not to run to the nearest stream and plunge beneath the waters.

"What are you?" he asked, getting to his feet. The stick of his clothing to his chest and back made him nauseous.

"What are *you*?" came the seductive purr.

Danyon looked around, but saw nothing save the insidious fog that was now waist-high about him. "I am Danyon. I am a Nightwind."

The fog swirled upward in a column taller than Danyon's six-foot four-inch height and began to take humanoid form. It glistened a sickening blue color that gave Danyon a brutal headache.

"I am Ski'Ah," the being informed him. "I am a Blackwind, the Vengeance of the Amazeen."

Danyon did not know the term. He was about to say as much when he felt groping at his genitals. He jumped, pushing aside the unseen hands.

"Do not!" he ordered. His fangs extended and his talons arched from the pads of his fingers.

An eerie laugh rang out over the meadow. The fire flared, shooting hundreds of sparks into the air.

A spectral finger smoothed over Danyon's lips. He snapped, his jaws closing on air. Another peal of laughter echoed about him. He turned as a hand caressed his backside and quick fingers trailed down his legs.

"Stop!" He backed away from the fire and, in his fury, changed into the beast he was.

"Ah," the phantom whispered as though pleased with what it was seeing. "Another of his kind. I suspected as much."

"I am nothing like Cree!" he growled.

"But close enough."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"It is of little matter. Let me take you, little one," Ski'Ah whispered in his ear. "I will be gentle."

Danyon brushed angrily at his ear, sickened by the feel of her evil spittle clinging inside. "I am taken!" he bellowed. "I have a mistress!"

With a sudden blast of frigid wind, the stench intensified then vanished. The form of a woman slowly materialized out of the blue fog.

At first Danyon was shocked by the being that appeared. Her long black hair fell in thick waves to her ankles and the diaphanous gown that clung to her like a second skin left nothing to the imagination. She was dark-skinned and tall, her lips a rich burgundy. Vibrant blue eyes – the color of dark sapphires – watched him from beneath long, sooty lashes. With shapely limbs, voluptuous breasts and a waist Danyon knew he could span with his hands, the female was exquisitely beautiful.

“Is your mistress as desirable as I, Nightwind?”

“You do not look as you smell!”

“The smell is my protection. It is only one of the preternatural powers given to me as a high-ranking Daughter of the Multitude. I can do many things outside the realm of possibility.”

He watched her roam about the clearing. She sniffed then arched a brow at him.

“Bugul Noz,” he explained.

“A rancid smell with an ugly name.”

“You’re a fine one to talk about stench, woman!” Danyon scoffed.

A foot taller than he, she leaned over him and her sharp white teeth flashed. “What do you want of me, Nightwind?”

“I want to know about the Reaper,” he muttered, stepping back.

A horrible frown marred the perfection of the Blackwind’s face. “What of that Rysalian jackal?”

“What is he to you?”

“I own him.”

Danyon’s eyebrows rose. “Own him?”

“Through Rights of Possession.”

“I don’t –”

“My ancestor paid eight-hundred-thousand credits to the Warlord of Dahrenia Province for Viraidan Cree when the Reaper was but a bantling of two cycles. It was her intention to breed many Reapers from his staff when he came of age. But Cree managed to escape. He fled our world in a stolen starjet and we have been searching for him ever since!”

“We?”

“Those of my clan,” she snapped. “I am the two-hundredth generation of my family to seek him and, praise to the Great Lady, I have found him! Under Amazeen law, he is mine to do with as I please. He will sorely regret having caused us so much trouble.”

Danyon chuckled. “Your clan doesn’t give up.”

“Not when our honor is at stake. He owes us and he will pay a dear price, I assure you!”

“I almost feel sorry for the bastard.”

“You should. He will be punished in ways you can *not* imagine!”

"He is not entirely the warrior your ancestor bargained for."

"I sensed there was a tainting within him. He is spoiled by inferior traits."

"Human traits," Danyon explained. "They are an inferior race—frail, vulnerable, not worthy of the attention of one such as yourself."

Ski'Ah smiled and her beautiful face took Danyon's breath away. "You find me alluring, do you, Nightwind?" Her gaze roamed over him. "I find you most agreeable."

"I am taken," Danyon was quick to repeat.

The smile hardened on the Blackwind's lovely countenance. "Under Amazeen law, I cannot take that which belongs to another female, so I may not touch you, though..." Her look grew hot and evil. "If you would like me to purchase your articles of indenture from your present mistress or enter into combat with her..." She let the offer lay there as she licked her full lips.

"That is not our way. I have a blood pact with my mistress. I will belong to Aoife and her family for all eternity. She can never release me."

A pout settled on Ski'Ah's mouth. "A pity, Nightwind." She flung out a dismissive hand. "You would have enjoyed my sheath."

"I'm sure I would have."

"I will content myself with the Reaper then, if I cannot indulge my desires with you."

"Even though he also belongs to another woman?"

"What woman?" she demanded, her lips peeled back from her sharp teeth. "Who would dare lay hands to a male belonging to the house of Dubhgaoth?"

"That depends on which woman you mean."

She gasped. "What are you saying?"

"The Reaper part of him mated with one called Chandra," Danyon said, reporting what the Bugul Noz had told him. "The human part of him mated with a human girl. The one called Chandra is long dead."

"And the human?" came the savage inquiry.

Danyon hesitated. "Is under *my* protection," he declared. "*And* the Reaper's."

"I have no fear of you, Nightwind! The Reaper I consider a worm to be trod beneath my boot heel!"

"I don't care what you do to Cree, but I will throw the might of every Nightwind in the megaverse against you should you try to harm one hair on Bronwyn McGregor's head!"

Ski'Ah arched a perfectly shaped brow. "You would do combat with me for this human?"

"I would rip you apart with my bare hands and devour every last morsel of marrow in your bones!"

The Blackwind appeared to shudder, then shrugged. "Why would I harm a fellow Sister?" she growled. "My vengeance is reserved for Viraidan Cree, and his punishment will be fulfilled!"

"I don't give a rat's ass what you do to the bastard."

Ski'Ah cocked her head. "Perhaps we can help one another, then."

"Get him out of Bronwyn's life and I will be eternally grateful."

The Blackwind looked at him slyly. "You have signed a pact with this girl?"

A muscle in Danyon's jaw jumped. "No, but that is of no importance. She will relent one day and sign."

"She is from the lineage of the one you are pledged to, then."

"Aye, but she is unaware of the connection. I could not have gone to her had she not been of Aoife's blood."

"Ah," the Blackwind cooed. "You are a duplicitous demon, are you not?"

"I do what must be done," he replied, "to have the females I desire."

"As I will do what must be done to bring Viraidan Cree to justice."

"I can help you, but it might take a while."

"Why would it?"

Danyon smiled so evilly the Blackwind shivered. "My lady will not come to me of her own accord," he explained. "I must lure her to me and the lure—the bait—is the Reaper."

"She desires him?" Ski'Ah growled.

"Not yet, but she will."

"You are that sure of his prowess?"

"It is what is inside him she will crave when she learns it is there."

Understanding lit her sapphire eyes. A savage smile stretched her lips. "How long a time do we speak of here?"

"What is a day, a week, a month, even a year when your family has waited two hundred generations to avenge Cree's insult, lovely Ski'Ah?"

"I do not wish to—"

"The human inside Cree desires her, Ski'Ah. He aches with need for her. His dreams are filled with thoughts of her. His every waking moment is spent in remembering how she felt in his arms so long ago."

The Blackwind stiffened. "You think this improves the chance of me helping you, Nightwind?" she hissed.

"Think, lovely one! Think of the agony he will experience when you tear him from her arms!"

"They are lovers now?"

"Not yet. They have been and they will be again."

"You know this, do you?"

"I intend to see to it."

She narrowed her eyes. "But will this not hurt her? Do you not care if she is harmed when I fetch the Reaper and take him to Amazeen in chains?"

"She will have me to comfort her," he said, his smile hard as stone. "And I will comfort her in ways she will not be able to resist."

The Blackwind stared at him for a long time, then nodded. "Hurt him is all I ask. Make him weep with the brutal pain of her loss and I will aid you in any way I can."

Danyon put out his hand. "Your word of honor as a warrioress of your clan?"

Ski'Ah did not hesitate. She clasped his wrist—sword hand to sword hand—in a fierce grip. "On my honor as a princess of the Amazeen. Tell me what I need do to help you bring the Reaper to his knees and it will be done!"

## Chapter Six

Bronwyn opened her door that evening to find a handsome older man smiling at her. "May I help you?" she asked.

"Hello, Bronwyn." He extended his hand. "I am Brian O'Shea."

Looking into a face that was an older version of Sean's, Bronwyn felt tears welling. She took his hand, drawing him into the apartment. "Come in."

"I hope I haven't come at a bad time," he remarked in a thick Irish brogue.

"No," she said, still holding his hand. It felt warm and comforting in hers.

He gave her hand a light squeeze then gently withdrew from her grip and surveyed the room. "My, my, my, this is absolutely lovely."

Bronwyn let out a shuddery breath and closed the door. Her heart pounded as she turned to her visitor. "My mom and I had a great time decorating it."

"DeeDee has good taste. She also helped me decorate my place."

Bronwyn's brows shot up. "Does she know you were Sean's father?"

"No, and I would just as soon keep it that way, Bronnie. Your mother had no love for my boy."

"I'm sorry."

"Perfectly understandable under the circumstances. I don't blame her for how she felt." He craned his neck to look down the hallway. "Is your, ah, friend here?"

"Friend?"

"Cedric, is it? The Nightwind?"

Bronwyn gasped. "You know about him?"

Brian smiled. "Cree told me."

She bit her lip. "Do you know what..."

"A Nightwind is?" Brian finished for her. "Aye, sweeting. I know all about the ungodly fiends."

"And you don't find it bizarre that such creatures exist?"

He shrugged. "No more bizarre than knowing Reapers exist."

"Reapers?"

"So where is your aged night beastie?" he inquired.

Picking up on Brian's reluctance to explain, she flung out a dismissive hand. "He's probably sleeping."

"In the rocker beside your bed."



"Apparently Captain Cree tells you everything."

"Only what he wants me to know," Brian said with a sigh.

"I gather he is a secretive man."

"More secretive than most." Brian looked pointedly at the sofa.

Bronwyn blushed. "I'm sorry! Where are my manners? Please sit down, Dr. O'Shea. May I get you anything?"

"No, thank you. I just had supper. And please, call me Brian." He sat down then patted the place beside him.

Bronwyn sat beside him, folding her arms over her chest. Her breath came quick and shallow.

"There is no reason to be afraid of me, dearling," he said in a husky voice.

"I'm not. It's just this is so...so—"

"Unexpected," he finished for her.

"Sean never mentioned you to me."

"He knew nothing of me until after you were taken to Ireland."

"You came here to get him," she accused.

Brian nodded. "I was ordered to."

"By Daniel Dunne?"

"Aye. I had no choice. If I hadn't come after him, Dunne would have sent someone else. That someone might have been rough on Sean."

"Did you know Sean would be trained like he was?" she asked, searching the man's face.

"I knew," he whispered. "And I will regret it 'til the day I die."

Bronwyn shuddered while a single tear fell down her cheek. "I despise the IRA."

"There's something you should know about that, Bronnie. The explosion that killed your father rocked the IRA. They were not happy being given credit for the bombing."

"Why not? They were responsible, weren't they? Mama showed me the file Mr. Brell had compiled. There was a lot about Daniel Dunne in there. He was training IRA assassins in that place."

"Aye, Dunne was doing that, but your father's assassination wasn't carried out by the IRA," Brian said. "It was entirely Dunne's idea."

"Why would he have singled out my father? Daddy wasn't involved with any of the politics over here. Was it a mistake?"

"No mistake. They knew precisely who they were targeting. The reason they wanted your father dead had to do with Dr. McGregor ordering Rory Brell to take Sean into custody, to snatch him out of Dunne's grasp."

Bronwyn stared at him. "I don't understand."

"It was your father's intention to get Sean out of your life once and for all. It didn't matter how that was accomplished. As long as Sean was alive, he posed a threat to the future Dr. McGregor wanted for you. He knew you would do all you could to join Sean when you were out from under his control. That did not sit well with him. He had no intention of allowing a union between you and someone he considered unworthy. He ordered Brell to find Sean and turn him over to the British army. Failing that, he was to eliminate him, if necessary."

She gasped. "He ordered Brell to kill Sean?"

Brian nodded solemnly.

Bronwyn felt as though someone had placed a great weight on her chest. "I can't believe my father would do something like that."

"I'm afraid he did. Dunne found out about the plot to capture Sean and set his own plans into motion. He could not afford to have my boy taken and perhaps questioned about the facilities at Fuilgaoth. Sean was ordered to kill your father to keep that from happening."

"But Sean wasn't like that! He would have never —"

"You were threatened, Bronwyn. Dunne told Sean that if he didn't do as ordered, men would be sent to Galrath. I'll leave it to your imagination what horrors he threatened for you should Sean not do as he was told. It was either be responsible for the death of the woman he loved or take out the man who was responsible for tearing the two of you apart."

"He was protecting me?" she whispered.

"With his very life."

"Why didn't Sean just leave Fuilgaoth?" Bronwyn asked, wiping at the tears running down her cheeks. "He could have come after me and —"

"Sean was a prisoner at Fuilgaoth, watched day and night. There was no way for him to escape. We were all prisoners there, dearling."

"Including Viraidan Cree?"

"Especially him. He was caged the entire time."

"Why?"

"That's something we don't need to go into right now. Let it suffice to say Cree was a threat Dunne took seriously. Keeping him locked up was vitally important."

"He said a man named Alistair Gallagher killed my father. Is that true?"

"Alistair detonated the bomb Sean placed under the car, aye."

"Dr. Wynth said Sean tried to stop Daddy from getting in the car. Is that what happened?"

Brian sighed heavily. "He saw Brell's baby and —"

"What?"

"The child. The one Rory was carrying."

Bronwyn stared at him—thoughts of her lost infant rippled through her mind. “No. No, you’re wrong.”

“I was told there was a baby. Brell was—” Brian frowned, then jumped up. “Your child?”

“Mine and Sean’s—your grandson.”

“I didn’t...he didn’t...” Brian stopped, his face white.

“That was why I was so angry that day in the hospital—why I said what I did to Sean. It wasn’t just my father I thought he’d killed, but our child.”

“Mother of God,” Brian whispered, slumping down on the sofa. He ran a trembling hand over his face.

“I never got to hold our child. They took him away right after he was born.”

Brian flinched. “Oh, Bronwyn. I am so sorry.”

“I named him Sean Patrick,” she said softly, “but the people my parents gave him to called him Cormac. Cormac McDougal.”

“Did your parents know Brell was bringing the baby that day?”

“Yes, they knew. My mother and I don’t discuss what happened. I don’t talk about it to anyone. It still hurts too deeply.”

“I have to tell him,” Brian mumbled.

“Tell who?”

“Cree,” he answered, his mind obviously on the information she had given him.

“Were they friends?” she inquired.

“Something like that,” Brian muttered, running a shaky hand through his hair.

She sensed his inattention. “What is he, anyway?”

“A vampire.”

“A what?”

He jerked and groaned, as if realizing his mistake. “By the beard of Job, I shouldn’t have told you that!”

“Then tell me you were joking,” she snapped.

There was a long moment of silence before he spoke again. “I can’t. He is what he is.”

“A vampire,” she stated, letting the word fall like a heavy stone.

Brian nodded. “That is why Dunne kept him locked up.”

“A vampire...”

“The correct term is ‘Reaper’. He has to have blood every day to survive.”

“As in transfusions?”

“No, dearling, to drink.”

“To drink,” she echoed, feeling sick.

Brian sighed then shrugged. "Reapers are shape-shifters, a cross between vampires and werewolves. There is a name for his race. They are called 'dearg duls'. His blood is as black as tar and when he Transitions, he enters a beastlike state where he resembles a large dog."

She stared at him for what seemed to her like a full sweep of the minute hand on a clock then slumped against the back of the sofa. "You are serious, aren't you?"

"Aye, sweeting."

Bronwyn drew in a long breath then exhaled shakily. "If I didn't know Nightwinds were real, I couldn't accept this."

"There is more strangeness in this world than most people know. More creatures than just Nightwinds and Reapers."

She sighed. "I am beginning to think my entire world is populated by inhuman creatures."

"Cree is as human as the next man until he Transitions."

"And how often does that happen?" she asked with a shudder.

"Every twelve weeks. He is given the drug tenses every day to keep him from Transitioning out of cycle. It is a painful drug that makes your blood boil, but it's as necessary to him as insulin to a diabetic."

"And when he Transitions?"

"He voluntarily enters the containment cell and stays there until the Transition is over."

"Containment cell?"

"The cell doors, walls, floors and ceilings are ten-foot-thick reinforced concrete, sandwiched between two-foot-thick sheaths of laser-welded titanium. The door is built with fourteen ten-inch-thick locking rods that fit into the casing, penetrating in three feet. It opens inward on five heavy-duty titanium ball bearings. On the outside of the door is a portcullis of stainless steel electrified mesh, which carries a payload of over five-hundred-thousand volts."

At Bronwyn's stunned look, Brian laughed.

"Believe me that's not enough to kill a Reaper trying to escape one of the cells, but it would sure as hell slow him down long enough for a team to shoot him full of a powerful neuroinhibitor called 'cinera'. It causes a cessation of cerebral circulation, and the resulting lack of nutrition and oxygen will easily put a Reaper out of commission."

"I've never heard of cinera," Bronwyn said.

"I'd be surprised if you had," Brian stated. "It was one of several drugs Dunne learned of from the queen. We had this Reaper who had gone rogue. The Transition drove him crazy, you see. I mean mad-dog crazy. Dunne was going to put him down but the queen didn't want that. She reluctantly told Dunne about that drug and a few more to save Her precious Reaper's life. That's one of the reasons we have containment

cells. They are there to give the Reapers a place that is safe for them *and* you when they Transition. They are at their most dangerous during that time."

"You said 'Reapers'. Are we talking about more than one?"

"There are still five that we know of. Four are here at Baybridge."

Bronwyn thought of Gaines at the main gate and felt a wave of fright envelop her. "Where is the fifth?"

"That would be Alistair Gallagher, and right now we don't know where he is. But when Cree finds him, believe me, he will put him down hard." He looked down at his clenched fist. "Especially after he finds out about the baby."

Bronwyn took in the look on her companion's face. "I think you need to tell me about Cree."

Brian drew in a long breath, held it for a second then exhaled slowly. He turned to look her in the eye. "Aye, I think you should be told, but you must never repeat what I am going to tell you. Keep it secret."

"What you tell me will go no further than this room."

"You swear?"

Bronwyn held up her hand. "On my honor."

"On Sean's name," Brian stated, as if knowing that would be a firmer vow for her.

She nodded, tears filling her eyes before she shook her head to rid herself of the telltale sign of weakness. "On my Seannie's name."

"All right." Brian put his hand on her arm. "Just bear in mind that what I am going to tell you is God's gospel truth. None of it is made up and none of it is exaggerated. You might have to suspend belief in things you have been taught are impossible."

She nodded. "I did that long ago when I saw my first Nightwind and what I think was a Bugul Noz."

Brian withdrew his hand. "That had to have been a rude awakening."

"Sometimes I still don't believe I have seen the things I've witnessed."

"I know the feeling."

"So tell me."

"As far as we know, Cree was the first Reaper to come here. His craft crashed somewhere in Northern Ireland. He was badly burned, his flesh hanging in tatters when the tribe found him. They were no doubt stupefied when he began to spontaneously heal before their eyes, although it took him several days to fully rejuvenate new flesh."

Bronwyn held up a hand. "You said his craft crashed here. I take it he was from beyond—" She stopped, her eyes going wide. "Oh, my God!"

"What?"

"I remember one of the girls at Galrath talking about a spaceman they had at Fuilgaoth. Was that Cree?"

"Aye, that was him."

"I thought she was lying. Making up crap to tease us."

"I don't know how she knew about it, because it was supposed to be a secret, but I guess Fuilgaoth wasn't as secure as Dunne wanted to believe it was."

"What happened when he recovered from his burns?"

Brian explained all he knew about Cree. He told her of his marriage, his son, the way he had been forced into the bog. He recounted the way Dunne found the Reaper in the bog and what the scientist had done with the body, imprisoning it in a case, its parasite separated from the corpse. He told her about the queen's offspring, how they had been experimented on, and how they had been implanted into human men, turning them into creatures like Cree.

"The revenant queen was furious that She was incarcerated, unable to protect Her young," Brian said. "I'm sure an intelligent being such as She was constantly searching for a way to exact Her revenge and rejoin with Cree's physical body."

"This is all so bizarre," Bronwyn said, getting up from the sofa. She walked to the bar that separated the living room from the dining area and poured herself a brandy. She turned to Brian.

"I don't drink, dearling," he said.

She brought her blackberry brandy to the sofa and sat down, then took a sip, staring across the room at a painting over the dining room sideboard. "Do I need to be afraid of him, Brian?"

"Cree?" he asked. "Absolutely not!"

"That's what Danyon told me, but I wanted to make sure."

"Anything else you want to know?"

"Not about Cree, but..." She looked at him, took a deep breath then straightened her shoulders. "Did Sean ever talk about me?"

Brian took her hand. He brought it to his lips, placing a gentle kiss on her wrist. "Sean never got tired of talking about you. The lad loved you more than anything in this world."

"I miss him more than anything in this world."

"He would want you to get on with your life, Bronwyn. Get out, meet some nice young man like..." He shrugged. "Like Sage Hesar, for instance. Don't you think he's a handsome young devil?"

Bronwyn was about to answer when a heavy knock sounded at the door. She jumped and Brian let go of her hand. The sound was so loud the door panel shook. When it came again, the picture on the wall beside the portal bounced.

"All right already! I'm coming!" Bronwyn snapped, getting up and sitting her snifter on the end table.

After jerking open the door, she was surprised to see Cree standing there, his fist clenched, poised to knock again. His eyes were fierce, his jaw set, a muscle twitching in his right cheek.

"Brian, come!" he ordered, looking past Bronwyn.

Brian shot up from the sofa and hurried to the door. He cast Bronwyn a strange look as he mumbled his apology.

"Perhaps we can have lunch tomorrow?" she asked as Brian eased past her and into the corridor.

"I think not," Cree answered for the older man. He grabbed Brian's arm and started down the hall with him.

"Brian?" Bronwyn called after them.

He looked around. "I'll call you."

"No, you won't!" Cree snarled.

"I'll call *you*, then, Brian!" Bronwyn yelled.

Cree stopped in his tracks, jerking Brian with him as he spun around to face her. "Hell you won't."

"Hell I will!" Bronwyn threw back.

Letting go of Brian's arm, Cree stalked back to her. "You found out what you wanted to know about Sean Cullen," he said through clenched teeth. "Now let it rest."

"Don't tell me what to do. This doesn't concern you."

"I'm making it my concern. O'Shea is off-limits to you."

She narrowed her eyes. "What are you worried about, Cree? What are you afraid I'll find out?"

The Reaper's right eye had developed a tic in the muscle beneath it. He breathed heavily, his fists opening and closing at his side. There was a brutal look in his amber eyes as he glared at her. "Let...it...rest," he said, emphasizing each word.

"Go...to...hell," she grated, stepping back and slamming the door in his face.

## Chapter Seven

Brian risked a glance at his companion as they walked down the hallway. The anger on Cree's face had kept them both quiet on the elevator down to Five North. As the stainless steel doors parted and they stepped into the corridor of the underground segment of Baybridge, Cree turned a hateful look to Brian.

"Stay away from her," Cree ordered.

"Why are you so angry?"

"Get out, meet some nice young man like Sage Hesar, for instance. Don't you think he's a handsome young devil?" Cree mimicked in a snide tone as they walked toward the check-in desk.

Brian flinched. "What were you doing? Listening at the gods-be-damned keyhole?"

"Sage Hesar is a...a..." Cree could not seem to find the words to convey what he thought of the young man.

"Rival?" Brian supplied.

A vicious snarl was the only answer Brian received as Cree headed back to the elevator.

"Viraidan!" Brian called.

Cree did not answer. He got into the elevator.

"Read me, Viraidan!" Brian shouted as the elevator doors began to close.

Cree started to put up a thought reception shield between him and Brian, but Brian sensed his thought wedged under the shield anyway. The mind picture of an infant boy—dripping with fluid fresh from its mother's womb, its little mouth parted in soundless fury—flashed across Cree's mind. Obviously knowing there was more, he kept the elevator doors from closing and stared at Brian.

Brian sent another image to the Reaper. This one took the color from Cree's angry cheeks and placed deep hurt in the blazing amber eyes.

Brian held up a hand to the check-in clerk then walked to the elevator. He kept his gaze on Cree as the Reaper stood frozen in the cage. "She needs me, Viraidan," he said quietly. "Don't keep me from seeing her."

Tears dampened the Reaper's eyes. "He killed his own child?"

"No," Brian said firmly. "Gallagher killed Sean's child."

"But I set the bomb," Cree whispered.

Brian drew in a quick breath, his eyes wide. "*Sean* tried to stop it from going off."

"I killed my own child. I killed our son."



"Let's talk about this," Brian said, reaching out to take Cree's arm.

Stepping back, furiously shaking his head, the Reaper moved away. "Leave me be," he snarled. When Brian tried to enter the elevator, Cree shoved him back. "Leave me be!"

Brian watched the elevator doors slide shut, closing off the anguished look that had transformed the Reaper's face.

\* \* \* \* \*

He opened the throttle as far as it would go, allowing the machine to roar onto the midnight pavement. The front wheel left the ground for a moment or two as the rear wheel carried the full four hundred and seventy pounds of tubular steel twenty feet down the deserted highway. When the front wheel crashed onto the hydraulic telescopic fork, the black motorcycle shot forward until it was nothing more than a blur against the Iowa scenery.

The night wind pressed damply against his face, numbing his flesh. His hair blew wildly about his bare head. Cold air snaked down his shirtfront and chilled his chest and belly, sent tendrils of discomfort around his rib cage as his shirt billowed around him.

Nothing registered with him outside the torturous thoughts pummeling his mind. He barely felt the light splattering of rain as it began striking his cheeks and forehead. He barely heard the roar of the machine between his legs. He barely noticed the deer in the sweep of his headlight until he was right on the animal.

The deer stood frozen in the middle of the right lane, its chatoyant eyes locked on the oncoming headlight.

He laid down the bike on the asphalt, tearing away the skin on his right hand from knuckle to shoulder when he hit the pavement. The deer leapt out of the way, the cloven hooves of its rear legs barely clearing Cree's face.

The Reaper's head hit the asphalt with a sickening crack and consciousness began to flee as though a light was being turned out in his world. As the machine skidded in a wide arc across both lanes and went flying into the ditch, his right leg from hip to ankle lost black jeans material and a four-inch-wide section of gouged flesh. When the motorcycle stopped spinning, it was lying atop him, the heat from the right exhaust pipe digging a firebreak into his calf.

It was the burning pain that brought him out of unconsciousness. In one screaming moment, he threw the machine from him, tossing it like a child's toy into the field beyond. Gasping, he half-crawled, half-pulled himself toward the edge of the ditch and lay there, gritting his teeth to the flaming agony burning a way through his leg. With his fingers sinking clawlike into the rain-softened earth, he ground his face into the straggly grass and bellowed with rage and grief and physical hurt.

The revenant queen woke from Her slumber and surveyed the damage done to Her host. In a matter of moments, She began to seal the massive concussion and repair the broken bone, to heal the torn and scraped flesh, to mend the damage done by the hot steel. Placing a comforting mist over the Reaper's mind, She sent him into a place of coolness, of darkness, until the healing could be accomplished.

"Sleep, beloved," She cooed. "It will take awhile for Me to heal you."

Cree heard the queen's soothing voice and began to sink beneath the undulating waves passing over his mind. He let go of the hold he had on the soil and turned onto his back, staring at the night sky and allowing the rain—grown heavier and cooler now—to splatter his face. He lay with his hands curled at his head, the flesh drawing together, mending.

"Sleep, Viraidan," She commanded.

He closed his eyes, allowing Her powers to invade him. He trusted She would tend his savaged flesh, heal his physical wounds. Within a few minutes, there would be no sign that his body had kissed the rough pavement. As Her healing waters closed over his head, he wished he could drown in their sweetness.

Dawn came and with it a wetness that brought him out of slumber. A warm slickness passed over his chin, lips and nose. He opened his eyes and looked into the soft brown stare of a large black dog, hunkered down beside him on the wet ground. Around them, rain continued to fall, and from the sponginess of the earth, he knew that rain had been falling all night.

"Humphf?" the dog inquired, its wet muzzle twitching as he showed yellowed fangs.

"Aye, I'll live," Cree mumbled.

He pushed himself up on his elbows and winced as a car passed on the roadway above. The squelch of the vehicle's tires sent a spray of dirty water into the ditch where Cree lay hidden by cattails and brush.

Every muscle in his body ached as he managed to drag himself to a sitting position. He had a brutal headache and reached up to touch the spot where his head had encountered the pavement. Despite the queen's intervention, he found a soft area beneath his questing fingers and sighed. It would be awhile before that injury healed completely. Absently, he wondered how badly he'd been hurt.

"Humphf," the dog commented.

"I can't die. I wish I could, but I can't."

Another car passed by in the opposite lane then throttled down, its brakes squealing on the wet pavement. A change in the engine tone told Cree the vehicle was backing up.

"What'cha wanna bet it's Brian?" Cree grumbled.

The dog sneezed in answer then pushed itself up to stand guard over Cree. Its ears twitched, searching for sound. Its muzzle twitched, searching for scent.

"Friend," Cree said, catching the scent before the dog could.

"Do you know I've been searching for you all night?" Brian complained as he appeared on the shoulder of the road. He pointed at the bike. "Enjoy your ride, did you?"

Before Cree could answer, he caught another scent. His lips drew back from his teeth as he growled at Brian.

"Don't give me that," Brian snapped. "I needed someone to watch the right side of the roadway while I searched the left."

Sage Hesar came to stand beside Brian. "I told you he'd be an ungrateful SOB, Brian."

Cree tried to stand but his legs were weak, his injured calf muscle screaming in protest. He looked down to see the flesh charred and groaned.

"You know that'll take awhile for Her to heal," Brian said.

Sage looked at the motorcycle. "Will that thing run or do you reckon he now has an eight-thousand-dollar paperweight?"

"Lay one hand on my bike and I'll gut you, Spice Boy," Cree hissed.

"Humphf!" the dog agreed.

"Like you are fit to ride the damned thing," Brian scoffed. He looked at Sage. "See if it'll turn over. If not, we'll send a trailer back for it."

"I don't want him touching anything of mine!" Cree shouted.

"Can you get up or do I have to carry you?" Brian asked, ignoring the outburst.

Cree tried once more to get to his feet, but the pain was too much. He plopped down, the dog tight at his side, its massive head wedging under Cree's right arm.

"A new mate?" Sage threw over his shoulder as he struggled to jerk the motorcycle onto its wheels.

"It's a male dog, you spineless eel!" Cree declared, and the dog barked in agreement.

"Touchy, touchy," Sage said as he managed to right the bike. He threw a leg over the seat, grinning at Cree's enraged growl.

Brian sidestepped down into the ditch and extended his hand. Cree grabbed it and tried not to grimace as Brian pulled him to his feet. He couldn't put any weight on his calf without feeling it all the way to his hip.

"You did a number on that leg, son," Brian said.

Before Cree could stop him, Brian scooped the Reaper into his arms and headed up the incline. He faltered once in the wet earth then was finally able to gain the roadside.

"He's okay," Brian called. "Just a little disagreement with that demon bike of his."

Cree turned his head to see Bronwyn and her mother parked just behind Brian's car. He groaned again.

"Is he hurt?" Deirdre inquired.

Brian chuckled. "More bruised ego than battered flesh."

"Eat shit and die," Cree snarled under his breath.

The sound of the motorcycle revving up brought Bronwyn across the road. "Do you know how to drive that, Sage?"

"Wanna ride with me?" Sage asked.

"No!" Cree shouted.

Bronwyn looked at him as he lay in Brian's arms. "Who's going to stop me?" she asked, arching an eyebrow.

Cree pushed against Brian's chest, striving to get down, but the older man tightened his grip.

"Behave!" Brian ground out.

"Get in the car, Bronwyn," Deirdre ordered. When Bronwyn turned to look at her, Deirdre shook her head. "I mean it. Come get in the car."

"Do what your mother says," Cree ordered between clenched teeth.

Sage drove the motorcycle up on the roadway and revved the engine, watching the Reaper's face. Bronwyn started toward the bike, but simultaneous roars of denial from Cree, Brian and Deirdre made her stop. She grinned, spun on her heel and started back to her car.

Cree said nothing until Bronwyn was behind the wheel and pulling away, Sage riding right behind her.

"One of these days I'm going to tear that bastard apart piece by bloody piece."

Brian sighed, shifted Cree's weight and headed for the car. "You aren't going to do any such thing."

It took some doing but Brian managed to get Cree in the backseat without causing too much discomfort.

"Humphf?"

Brian turned. "You coming?"

The black dog shook itself, looked both ways before crossing the roadway then trotted to Brian's car. He hopped in the passenger side when Brian opened the door for him then perched there, staring out the window.

"I might have a pretty lady for you," Cree said.

"Humphffff?"

"Aye, a pretty little brown bitch."

"Humphf."

"Beware of dearg duls bearing gifts, boy." Brian laughed as he patted the dog's head.

Cree tried to will away the throbbing pain in his calf as he stretched out on the backseat.

"It's Her way of reminding you who's boss," Brian said, obviously reacting to the pain he sensed. "Burns are hard for Her to heal."

"I know."

"Stupid thing you did last night."

"I didn't think so at the time."

Brian looked at him through the rearview mirror. "And now?"

"It was stupid and it didn't solve anything. The baby is dead and I am responsible."

"Do you hear what you are saying?"

Cree didn't answer, but closed his eyes.

"Viraidan?"

"I've got to work it out, Brian. In my own way."

They were silent the rest of the way back to the prison. Once there, Cree refused to be seen being carried to his apartment so hobbled beside Brian, within reaching distance should he start to fall. To Cree's left, the black dog kept pace, his massive head swinging right to left as he surveyed his new surroundings.

"What are you going to call him?" Brian inquired.

When they got into the elevator, Cree leaned heavily against the stainless steel wall and looked at the dog. "What's your name, boy?"

"Humphf," the dog answered.

Brian laughed, putting a hand to his mouth.

Cree blushed. "I'm not going to call you Love Muffin," he snarled.

"Humphf?"

"I don't know," Cree replied. "Let me think about it."

"Humphf."

"How 'bout Ralph?" Brian inquired.

"Humphf!"

"You like that, do you?" Cree asked as the doors slid open.

"Humphf."

"Ralph, it is, then."

When Cree tried to walk, after having stood still for a few minutes in the elevator, the pain came to life in his calf and he sucked in a breath. Grabbing at the crash bar, he squeezed his eyes shut, willing the pain to disappear.

"No one's looking," Brian said quietly.

Cree thought about it then sighed. "Open my door first."

Ralph stood sentinel while Brian unlocked Cree's door. When the older man returned and picked Cree up into his brawny arms, the dog stood aside, allowing them to leave the elevator first.

"I don't think Ralphie cares for elevators," Brian said in his thickest brogue.

"Why?"

"He pissed on it when he got out."

\* \* \* \* \*

As night fell, Cree no longer suffered from the burn, as it had completely healed. He was able to walk Ralph down the stairs—neither of them enamored with elevators—and stand outside while Ralph attended to business. Happy to see his motorcycle parked in the lot, Cree breathed a sigh of relief that Hesar had not wrecked it.

"Humphf?" Ralph queried.

"It's the only thing I own I care about," Cree explained.

"Humphf," Ralph protested.

"Well, I don't own a car. You can ride with Brian if you need to."

Ralph sneezed, his disdain evident, and lifted his leg for the last time that evening.

"You piss on my floor and I'll give you to Spice Boy," Cree threatened as they climbed the stairs to the third floor.

Ralph ran ahead, stopping at the turn that led up to the fourth floor.

"Aye, she lives up there."

Ralph lay down, his feet stretched in front of him.

"No, you can meet her tomorrow."

Ralph lowered his head between his paws, his eyes shifting back and forth.

Cree ground his teeth. "I said tomorrow!"

Ralph scrambled to his feet, took one last look up the stairs then hung his head.

"You're a piece of work," Cree grumbled as he jerked open the door.

Ralph snorted and scooted out into the corridor. He was waiting at the apartment door when Cree got there and opened it.

The light was blinking on the answering machine. Cree looked at it for a moment then turned his back. He had showered earlier, but he still felt grungy from a night spent in a waterlogged ditch. After going into the bathroom, he shrugged out of his clothes and climbed into the shower.

Ralph padded to the bathroom door and stuck his muzzle through the crack, widening it until he could get his head through. Satisfied the Reaper was safe, he pulled his head back out and lay down across the threshold.

As steam rose in the room behind him, Ralph caught a whiff of scent he did not recognize. He raised his head and sniffed. The odor irritated him and brought the hackles up on his back. He got to his feet and turned, but before he could push his way into the room where his master was, the door closed. There was a soft click as the lock engaged.

Ralph whimpered and scratched at the portal. He cocked his head to one side, listening for the Reaper's voice but there was only silence. He pawed the door again, more forcefully this time. He barked, but still the Reaper did not answer. He double-scratched the door, leaving three shallow gouges in the wood.

Something cold touched his front left paw and he looked down as mist came from under the door. He barked at the mist and backed away, not liking the cold or the stench that accompanied it.

"Humphf?" he questioned, calling out to his master, but there was no reply.

Alarmed, Ralph began to bark excitedly. The mist was advancing toward him, backing him into a corner. He looked from right to left but could find no way past the circling mist. It was nearly upon him, and when its sliminess touched his muzzle, he yelped and brought up a paw to swipe at the feel. When the mist sucked him into its belly, Ralph collapsed into a deep sleep.

Inside the shower, Cree stood with his hands against the wall, his forehead pressed to the ceramic tile, allowing the water to beat on his shoulders. His long black hair was plastered to his shoulders and chest. His eyes were closed, his mind on the tragedy that had occurred in Ireland. He was lost to everything around him and felt nothing save the terrible guilt in his heart.

He did not sense the encroaching mist as it mixed with the steam of the shower. He did not pick up the telltale odor of that creeping evil, for it had camouflaged itself to smell like the soap he had used. He was completely unaware of the questing fingers that roamed lightly over his body or the eager eyes that inspected every inch of his anatomy. As he stood there spread-eagle, he unknowingly submitted to that vile inspection, and he grew hard and tumescent at its touch.

Standing beneath the onslaught of the soothing water and the caressing phantom fingers, Cree felt sensations he had not experienced in thousands of years. As guilt-ridden as his mind was over the death of the baby, his body was sending a message he could not ignore. He groaned, reveling in the tug on his privates, the moistness that sucked him deep into its maw and laved him. His breathing grew quicker, shallow and his blood began to pound in his brain and in his shaft.

It was the change in the water temperature that brought his eyes open. The chill bearing down on his head and shoulders, running over his chest, made him back away from the stream. He looked down at his erection as the cooling water struck it, frowned at the strange feel on his flesh. For a moment, the nature of the sensation did not register. He lifted his hands and ran them through his hair, pushing the heavy mass from his shoulders to cascade down his back.

As he had many times, he waited for the erection to subside. He willed the need to ejaculate, to give in to the delicious feel of release, to pass him by. It was part his own self-imposed punishment and the queen's desire to control him that had denied him sexual pleasure since emerging from the prison of Daniel Dunne.

When the pleasure in his loins increased and his shaft grew harder still, he realized it was more than memory and his bodily needs bringing about the erection. He felt the tugging on his shaft, the slick moistness sliding up and down its length, felt phantom teeth nipping at his scrotum.

"No!" he bellowed.

Before him the mist rose up, solidified and she was there, grinning, her long black hair like a cloak about her naked body. She held her heavy, full breasts in her hands, caressing them, inviting him to taste the milky fluid oozing from her nipples.

He backed up until his flesh was plastered to the slick shower wall and stared at the apparition in absolute horror.

"I am told I am the very image of my ancestor," she purred. "Am I?"

"Ski' Ah," he whispered, fear straining his throat.

"Aye. I am Ski' Ah incarnate and I have come for you, warrior."

She reached out to touch him. As she did, the bathroom door crashed open and fifty pounds of snarling animal bolted into the room.

The Amazeen screamed, her arms coming up to cover her face. In the blink of an eye, her form disappeared, leaving behind a noxious scent that brought tears to Cree's eyes.

He hunkered in the shower, the icy water now enveloping him. Shivering uncontrollably, he barely felt the dog climb into the shower and press itself close.

"Humphf!"

Cree bent forward, burying his face in the dog's wet fur.



## Chapter Eight

Danyon paced the glade, waiting for the Amazeen to join him. His face was set into hard lines of anger, for the Bugul Noz had informed him of what had happened in the Reaper's apartment.

"Had I not been there, she would have snatched him up and carried him away," Ordin Gver said.

The Nightwind snarled, fury turning his handsome face to a mask of evil. "I knew not to trust her."

"You were wise to send me to shadow the Reaper. She came close last evening, but sensing me, she did not materialize."

"What do you think of our filthy Reaper?" Danyon inquired.

"I fooled him easily. He is completely unaware of my true identity," the Bugul Noz replied with a chuckle. "He is no more intelligent than a piece of quartz, but he is likeable enough."

"Not to the Amazeen," Danyon snorted.

"Do not let her know you suspect her dishonesty."

"I have no intention of letting her know anything! She could have ruined everything this night!" He looked at the Bugul Noz. "Why are you smiling?"

Ordin took a long pull on his pipe. "It amuses me that I like the Reaper well enough to keep him safe for you, friend."

Danyon turned to thank the Bugul Noz and found himself looking into the eyes of the black dog named Ralph. "You have grown adept at shape-shifting, Gver."

Ordin materialized, his hideous face stretched in a happy grin. "I rather like it," he admitted, drawing smoke deep into his lungs. "Thank you for teaching me the art."

Danyon waved aside the gratitude. "Be careful how you use it, though. You are vulnerable when you shift into a form not your own. Only a powerful magiksayer could bring you back and there are few of them left. Remember, an enemy could dispatch you with ease."

"I have no enemies," the Bugul Noz boasted. He cocked his head to one side. "Can you die, Nightwind?"

"Not in the way you mean, no. Unlike the Reaper, I can walk through the hottest fire and never be kissed by the flames. Although I do not like water, I cannot be drowned in it. Take my head and all you'll get is an angry incubus who will rejuvenate and come after you with a fury you cannot comprehend. No, Nightwinds cannot die, my friend. Nightwinds are ageless."

"You are invincible?" the Bugul Noz asked, astonishment rife in his voice.

"Not entirely. Should I be challenged by another Nighwind and lose that challenge, he could send me to the Abyss to remain forever or else bind me to him in slavery as I bound Cedric. But since there are no Nightwinds more powerful than I, that is not a concern for me."

"So you have no powerful enemies to cause you grief." Ordin chuckled. "Unlike the Reaper, with his stinking bounty hunter."

A wide grin slipped over Danyon's face. "You say she appeared afraid of you?"

Ordin laughed. "She wasn't merely afraid, friend. She was terrified. Instinct tells me the Amazeen fear such beasts. This is why she did not bother the Reaper when he lay defenseless on the roadway."

"Had you not been there, I might not have the leverage I will need. Thank you." Danyon clapped the Bugul Noz's back.

The Amazeen's stench reached them and Ordin got hastily to his feet. "Your harpy comes, friend. I will return to my master now. He has a female he is to introduce me to tomorrow." He chuckled.

Before Danyon could reply, the Bugul Noz vanished, leaving behind the wafting aroma of his pipe.

Ski'Ah's scent was worse than it had been on the two previous occasions Danyon had encountered her. The horrendous odor made him ill. He brought the tail of his shirt to his nose to block the stench.

"I forget you have such sensitive smell," Ski'Ah complained as she materialized.

Danyon gasped. "I would appreciate it if you would not forget."

"Here," she said and the scent of jasmine wafted through the air. "Better?"

"Much," he mumbled, lowering the cloth from his nose.

"Why did you call me?" she asked, wariness hovering in her sapphire eyes.

"I have learned something that might prove useful."

"To me or to you?" she inquired, searching his gaze.

"To us both, I think." He indicated a nearby log. When she declined the offer to sit, he began pacing in front of the fire the Bugul Noz had built. "I have learned the human part of Cree was responsible for a death that will plague him for the rest of eternity."

Ski'Ah frowned. "Why should that concern us?"

"He was greatly distressed with the knowledge."

"Whom did he kill?" she asked in a bored tone.

"His child."

Her mouth dropped open. She took a step toward Danyon. "His child?"

"Sean Cullen, the human part of Cree, was responsible for a bomb that blew his child to so much dust."

"A girl child or a boy child?"

"What difference –?"

"A girl or boy?" Ski'Ah screeched.

"A boy."

"Oh," she said, relaxing. "That is of no import, then."

"It is to the human inside Cree."

"Perhaps, but it means nothing to me."

Danyon bit his tongue to keep from cursing the Amazeen. His hands curled into fists at his side and he willed himself not to attack her.

"This is one more nail to pound into his flesh, Ski'Ah. He is feeling remorse."

"He felt no such remorse earlier this eve when I..."

"What?" Danyon asked, watching her face.

She shrugged. "When I listened in on his conversation with a beast he has taken in to live with him."

"A beast?" Danyon asked and frowned deeply.

"Aye. What of it?"

"A black dog?"

She nodded slowly. "Is that significant?"

"Best you do not encounter such a hell-spawned dog."

Fear clouded the Amazeen's eyes. "Why?"

"When a dearg duls takes a black canine as his familiar, the beast is there to protect him. It will make hash of any that would lay hands to its master."

"We Amazeen do not like canines. They are filthy creatures, given to evil habits. We keep felines, but canines..." She shook her head. "They are to be avoided."

"On this world, they are demons in disguise. Harm one and you will come back in the next life as one."

Ski'Ah shuddered. "A fate worse than any I could conceive."

Danyon turned away to hide his smile. "Or I."

"It is good I did not enter the Reaper's abode, eh?"

"Aye."

Ski'Ah walked to the log and sat down. For a long time, she said nothing then sighed. "How can we use the human's guilt to our advantage, Nightwind?" she asked, staring into the flames.

"I have not decided yet, but as soon as I do, I will let you know. I simply wanted you to know I had discovered this weakness in Cree."

She nodded, apparently deep in thought. As her mind roiled with emotions, the stench rose up from her in pulsing waves. Danyon gagged and backed away.

"Forgive me," she said.

"I will take my leave of you now, lovely lady," he mumbled. "Be careful until we meet again."

When she looked up, he was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Brian handed Cree a full glass of amber-colored liquid. "Drink it straight down."

"What is it?" Cree asked, sniffing at the glass.

"Just drink it and then we'll talk."

The phone had rung just as Brian was sitting down to watch his favorite comedy on television. With two liters of ginger ale, a huge bowl of buttered popcorn beside him, along with chips and salsa, a bag of marshmallows, a box of chocolate-covered cherries, an eighteen-inch stick of pepperoni, four bags of spicy-hot bacon rinds and a carton of freeze-dried figs, he was looking forward to a relaxing evening with "Reaper Comfort Food", as Viraidan called it. But Cree's strained voice had put an immediate end to Brian's plans.

Cree grimaced at the tart smell coming from the liquid, but lifted the glass and drained it, swallowing convulsively. He began to cough as soon as the liquid was down his throat and Brian had to slap him on the back.

"What the hell was that?" Cree gasped, his eyes watering.

"Irish whiskey. Eight ounces of the best alcohol County Cork has to offer."

"Reapers can't drink alcohol."

"One just did." Brian chuckled and folded his arms. "And I'm anxious to see what it will do to you."

"You don't know?" Cree questioned, his eyes wide.

"Tell me about the Amazeen," Brian said, ignoring the question.

"She defiled me," Cree snarled, visibly shuddering.

Brian grinned. "Send her to me next time."

Cree knew Brian was joking but it bothered him nevertheless. "She'll not bother you. You have a mate."

"So do you."

"No, mine —"

"Sean's mate," Brian interrupted.

"Obviously that means nothing to Ski'Ah," Cree snapped. "She still laid hands to me, vile bitch that she is."

"You need to tell me how you know this woman and what she wants from you."

Cree shook his head and he sat back, obviously not displeased with the sensation he was feeling.

"Ah," Brian said, smiling. "The whiskey is beginning to work its magic."

"I feel calm, Brian."

"A side effect of really *good* Irish whiskey."

Cree sat for a moment then tears pooled in his eyes. "I am sad."

"Another side effect of the whiskey. I once heard a priest call it 'Irish Confession Juice'."

"The baby," Cree whispered. "Our baby."

Brian took a deep breath. "Let it out, son."

Cree looked at him. "I can't." His words were a plea for understanding.

"I think you can."

"No, it isn't permitted."

"Who will know, Seannie?"

It was the name—spoken gently—that brought the first tear cascading down Viraidan Cree's cheek.

"The gods forgive me!" Cree whispered, then covered his face with his hands.

Brian watched as the Reaper's shoulders shook with sobs. He listened to the keening that came from the very soul of the creature sitting across from him. He made no move to comfort Cree, to touch him. He merely allowed the man to vent the grief and guilt that permeated his being.

Cree lay on the sofa, his back to Brian, and curled into a fetal ball, his hands thrust between his legs. He buried his face in the fold between the sofa's back and seat and cried.

Softly, Brian began to speak. "When they brought your body back to Fuilgaoth, I was beyond grief. I couldn't cry. I couldn't let them see my pain. I knew Dunne would try to revive you and, if the burns had not been so bad, they would have succeeded. I would have had my son back. To lose a child is one of the hardest things in the world for a father to bear."

"I murdered my child," Cree sobbed.

"You did, or Sean did?"

"I did."

"Then are you ready to admit that you and Sean are the same man?" Brian asked the question without scorn. He crossed his ankle over his right knee and waited for the answer.

Many minutes passed before the Reaper turned onto his back. He flung his arm over his eyes, drew up his knees and lay there until there were no more hitches in his breathing.

"I am drunk," he said at last.

"I used to enjoy putting on a good drunk now and again."

"Why?" was the incredulous query.

Brian shrugged. "It pushed all the feeling out of mind for a time."

"But it will come back."

"Aye, that it will. Along with one helluva hangover."

"Hangover?"

Brian uncrossed his leg and got up. He walked to the bar where he'd left the whiskey bottle and poured another full glass, which he brought to Cree. "Drink it down, lad."

Cree let his arm fall behind his head and stared at the glass. He started to protest, but pushed himself up, took the glass and drained it. This time, he got the amber liquid down without gagging or coughing. He handed the glass back to Brian then lay down again.

"You didn't answer my question," Brian said as he took his seat.

"That being what? I'm rather fuzzy around the edges, Da."

Brian smiled. "I think you answered my question, son."

"Ask it again so I'll know what I said," Cree said with a burp. He was staring at the ceiling, as if counting the holes in the acoustic tile.

"Have you decided that you and Seannie are one and the same?"

Cree thought for a moment then again covered his eyes with his arm. "We always have been, I guess. I've his heart, not mine. I've his brain, not mine. I have all of his thoughts and wants and desires and memories. The only part of Viraidan Cree that is left is the memories I have of who he was and his body. I'm more me than him."

"Realizing just who you are is one step closer to accepting who you are. And that's one step closer to being comfortable with who you are."

"That doesn't help me feel any better."

"No, but eventually you'll forgive yourself. You won't forget what has happened, but you *will* forgive."

"I can't stand the thought of another man touching her."

"I know, but what choice do you have? You can't let her know who you are. How would you explain why you never contacted her? Why you weren't there for her?" Brian sighed. "Why you are alive when she was there when you died?"

"I don't feel good," Cree answered, turning to his side.

Brian spied a wastebasket and went to fetch it. He placed it on the floor in front of Cree.

"What's that for?"

"The nice hangover you're going to wake up with in the morning." Brian pulled down the afghan hanging on the back of the sofa and spread it over Cree's legs. "I'll get you a bottle of water and put it here on the end table."

"Sustenance?" Cree asked, yawning.

"I don't think you'll be wanting or needing any tonight. Let the booze take you, lad. I'll be back in the morning with your shot. Until then, just rest." He glanced around. "Where's the dog?"

"Bedroom, I guess," Cree mumbled.

Ralph appeared in the kitchen door. "Humphf?"

"Take care of him, Ralphie," Brian advised then let himself out. "He's not going to be a happy camper come morning."

Cree reached up to adjust the sofa pillow under this cheek. "I'm not a happy camper now," he said as he heard the door close.

Running his hand inside his shirt, he pulled out the silver chain he always wore around his neck. Hanging from the chain was a one-of-a-kind Claddagh. He brought it to his lips, kissed it lovingly then stuffed it back inside his shirt. Then, just as he had done for many years, he whispered "Good night, milady," then slipped restlessly into the arms of Morpheus.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Cree woke the next morning, he lay there for a moment, wondering why he felt so bad. He ran his tongue over his teeth and swore the enamel had grown a coat of fur. There was an evil taste in his mouth and when he swallowed, his spittle rushed back up his throat, along with something so foul, so disgusting, he barely had time to twist his body.

Ralph cocked his head to one side as his master regurgitated a massive quantity of bad-smelling liquid into the wastebasket. The horrid sounds coming from the sick man lifted the dog's brows. He watched as the Reaper gripped the edge of the sofa and continued to relieve himself. When Cree plopped back on the cushions, his arm flung over his pale face, Ralph trotted into the kitchen.

It was the Bugul Noz who opened the refrigerator, rummaged around inside and took out the bottle of cold water. He sighed, shut the refrigerator door then reverted to his canine shape, the bottle of water clutched in his massive jaws. He padded back to the living room and nudged Cree's arm with the bottle.

Reaching to grab the arm of the sofa to keep from sliding off it, Cree pried open his aching eyes and looked at his arm.

"Humphf," Ralph grunted.

"I was wrong," Cree whispered, wincing at the sound of his overly loud voice.

"Humphf?"

"I *can* die. I'm dying right now," he declared in a voice just above a breath.

"Humphf." Ralph dropped the bottle to the sofa cushion. He grunted when his master fumbled for the bottle then managed to get a grip on it.

It took more energy and wit than Cree would have thought possible to twist off the cap and bring the bottle to his mouth. He didn't flinch as the cold water streamed down his chin, across his neck and behind his head, for he managed to get some in his mouth. He swished it around, struggled to lift himself far enough off the sofa to spit it in the wastebasket. Afterward, he collapsed on the cushion.

"Humphf," Ralph admonished with a yawn.

"No, I won't do it again and I'm going to kill Brian." Cree swigged another sip of water and this time let the coldness trickle down his parched throat.

Ralph cast a disapproving eye at the offensive wastebasket and trotted to the other side of the room, away from the putrid smell. He lay on his back and began to twist his body, scratching his haunches against the carpet. When he was finished, he cast a quick look at the sofa and saw the Reaper was sleeping again, the empty bottle clutched to his chest.



## Chapter Nine

Bronwyn's first full day at work proved to be a handful. The caseload Dr. Hesar assigned her was more than she had expected and it took her all morning just to get through the first two files. After taking copious notes on the serial killer and pedophile she would begin working with the following day, she was tired and had the beginning of a nasty headache by the time she broke for lunch.

"I'm going to the cafeteria," she told Mari Beth Grimes, the secretary she would be sharing with Koenen Brell, a man she had yet to meet. Koenen was Rory's son, Sage had informed her.

"Take your pager," Mari Beth reminded her.

"Got it."

The cafeteria was on the lower level, near the front entrance to Baybridge. It was fairly crowded by the time Bronwyn arrived, but the smells coming from the steam tables drew her eyes from the fast-food kiosks.

"You gotta try their chicken and dressing," Sage said, joining her. His lab coat bore a dark rust-colored stain.

"Is that blood?" Bronwyn asked.

Sage dusted the front of the lab coat. "Afraid so. One of my patients decided to open his veins with a strip of hard rubber he pulled from the shoe molding in his room. Must have taken him half an hour to scrape the rubber through his flesh."

"It's amazing what they can come up with, isn't it?"

"I sent him down to the loony room for a few days."

"Loony room?"

"There are a couple of rooms on Five North that are like the old rubber rooms from days gone by. We strip the offenders, put 'em in a specially constructed straightjacket and lock them up for a day or two. There is no furniture, only padded walls and floor with a hole in one corner for ye olde body wastes. The room can be hosed down when the patient leaves because, nine times out of ten, the bastards have crapped and pissed from one side of the room to the other, wiping their butts on the floor like dogs."

Bronwyn winced at the description as they reached the line that was snaking in front of the steam tables. Up close, the food smelled even better and looked delicious.

"One thing I'll say about Baybridge," Sage said. "The food is excellent and they give you enough of it. You want seconds, just ask."

Bronwyn took his advice, and ordered the chicken and dressing, jellied cranberry sauce, sweet potato soufflé and Waldorf salad. She was amazed to find the cafeteria offered real sweetened tea, Southern style.

"We have a heap of folks from Georgia and Alabama," the cashier said when Bronwyn handed her a meal card. "They got to have that sugar water with their meals."

"You can't have a decent meal without sweetened tea," Sage pointed out. "It wouldn't be right, Jonelle."

The black woman chuckled as she took his meal card and ran it through a machine. "Save some room for egg pie, Miss," she told Bronwyn. "They ain't brought it out yet, but it don't stay long on the table when they do."

"Egg pie?" Bronwyn gasped, looking at Sage.

He nodded. "We're talking cholesterol city with no less than one dozen eggs in the custard." He told Jonelle to ring up two slices and to page him when the pie appeared.

"I think I've died and gone to heaven," Bronwyn said as they took a seat not far from the cashier.

"Today was Southern Harmony Day. Tomorrow will be German Umpah-pah Day," Sage said, unwrapping the plastic wrap from his tossed salad. "They'll be serving black pumpernickel, German potato salad, hasenpfeffer and whatever else might strike the Teutonic taste buds. Next to Southern day, it's my fav."

"I assume there are Spanish, Italian and Chinese days, too?" Bronwyn asked as she salted her dressing.

"Along with Irish and French. Occasionally, we have a Mixed-Up day where we have Middle Eastern, African and a few other nationalities. It's great." He started to say something else but his pager went off and he looked around at the cashier. She nodded. "That's our dessert," he said, and hopped up.

Bronwyn cut a forkful of jellied cranberry and was just putting it into her mouth when she saw Viraidan Cree enter the cafeteria. He glanced at her then headed into the kitchen.

Sage placed a huge slice of pale yellow pie, piled high with meringue before her. "He can't eat normal food like the rest of us."

"Does he get something special?" she asked, keeping watch on the door.

"I guess," he snapped. "I don't know what they give him, but he comes in and gets a big sack of it every day." He sat and pulled his chair up to the table. "Doesn't deign to eat with us lowly doctor types."

"Where does he eat? In his apartment?"

Sage shrugged as he sprinkled pepper on his salad. "I guess if the weather's bad, but most of the time I've seen him sitting up on the hill overlooking the lake."

Bronwyn chewed thoughtfully as the kitchen door opened and Cree marched out, a brown paper bag in his hand. "Must be a sack lunch, huh?" she inquired.

"With him, it could be raw chicken gizzards and hog entrails."

Bronwyn grimaced and took a sip of tea.

"I heard Brian O'Shea came to see you," Sage said before shoveling lettuce into his mouth.

Bronwyn wiped her lips with her napkin. "Um-hmm."

"Did he tell you about our Reaper?"

Bronwyn stared at him. "Excuse me?"

"I know what he is." Sage speared a chunk of tender chicken. "Brian warned me if I told anyone about what I'd seen, he'd pull off my ears and if he didn't, Cree would."

"Then should you be telling me?"

"I know he had to have told you because you turned three shades of green when I mentioned hog entrails." Sage grinned.

"Well, that's not exactly conducive to pleasant dining conversation, do you think?"

"He told you. I'd bet my ears on it."

Bronwyn picked up her knife to cut a piece of her chicken. "Let's say he did. Tell me how you know about Cree."

"I followed them."

Bronwyn dug her fork into the chicken then dragged it through some gravy that had been poured over the dressing. "Followed them where?"

"To the level where the containment cells are located."

She looked up. "You've seen them?"

"No, but it hasn't been from a lack of trying," Sage confessed. "Once I found out they were there, it's been like an itch on my back I can't reach to scratch. One of these days, I am going to get a look at those things."

"If you didn't know about the cells when you followed Brian and Cree, why were you following them?"

"This was about two months after good old O-negative came to work here. He was acting weirder than normal and I knew something was up. They passed me in the hall and Cree literally growled at me. His eyes were wild and he was sweating bullets, let me tell you! Brian had him by the arm and was leading him as though Cree would try to break away and trip out into the wind."

"He was going into Transition."

"I didn't know what was wrong but I was sure going to find out. I watched the elevator go down to the third subbasement and stop. I thought that was strictly power-grid land, you know? There isn't supposed to be anything down there but mechanical stuff. So when the elevator came back up, I went down to that level but the door wouldn't open because I didn't have the key. It's like those penthouse suites at fancy hotels, you know? They require—"

"I know what you mean," Bronwyn interrupted. "If you didn't get in, how did you find out about the cells?"

"Brian opened the elevator, and there I was," Sage replied. "God, I thought the man was going to rip me a new one, but all he did was slam me up against the cage wall and tell me if I knew what was good for me, I'd keep my mouth shut."

"What happened then?"

"On the way up in the elevator, Brian told me about the containment cells. I was surprised as hell to learn there were things like that at Baybridge. But I nearly dropped my drawers when I learned Brian had been using them for himself."

"What?" Bronwyn yelped, drawing everyone's eyes.

"Keep the shrieking to a bare minimum, huh?"

"Are you...?" she began, but at Sage's shushing, she lowered her voice. "Are you telling me Brian is like Cree?"

"That I am."

"Brian is a Reaper," she said in a toneless voice.

"Not as powerful as O-Neg, but able to leap tall file cabinets in a single bound when the moon is full." Sage took a sip of tea then wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "I knew about Brian before I knew about Cree."

"How?"

"You know about the tenerse?"

Bronwyn nodded. "Yes, although I don't know where it came from. It's not from this Earth, is it?"

"Well, sorta. The queen gave Dunne instructions on how to make it from a parasite that grows on rye wheat. It's really the only way to control a Reaper and keep him calm."

"So Dunne made up the tenerse and gave it to the Reapers to inject themselves?"

Sage scooped up a large forkful of potato salad, plopped it into his mouth and talked around it. "They don't give it to themselves. It has to go into the jugular and into the jugular only for it to be effective. The parasite doesn't like them to inject themselves I guess for fear they'll abuse the stuff. Brian needed someone here to do the dastardly deed for him. Brian chose me for whatever reason and I'm the one who pops him with the stuff." He grinned. "Hurts like hell, if his expression is any indication."

Bronwyn recalled the conversation she'd had with Brian a few days earlier. "He says it makes your blood boil."

"Wouldn't be surprised. Until the day I learned about the containment cells and what they are used for, I thought tenerse was just some high-powered steroid or narcotic Brian was tripping on. Didn't have a clue it was anti-werewolf liquid! Hell, I didn't even know werewolves were real until then!"

"Do you give the tenerse to Cree, too?"

"Are you kidding? Old O-Neg would bite off my fingers if I tried to stick a needle into his thick neck. Brian gives it to him. I guess one parasite doesn't care about another."

"How many people know about this?"

"You, me, the bloodsuckers," Sage answered. "That's it, I think."

"I don't understand," Bronwyn said, her appetite gone. "How could Brian have had the special cells built and Dr. Wynth or your father not know?"

"Here's what I think happened." Sage leaned forward. "You remember back when the Brits managed to infiltrate Fuilgaoth and close it down?"

"Yes."

"The facility at Fuilgaoth was dismantled and the land given to the Irish people for parkland. They sold some of the equipment and some of it came here to Baybridge. I'd be willing to bet that among that equipment was one of the containment cells, intact and ready for use. We didn't have Five North until Brian came to work here. That part of the prison wasn't excavated until he took over. He designed it, supervised its building. It would have been easy just to have that room dropped in with the rest of the lockdown cells. Who would question it?"

Bronwyn thought about it, then nodded. "I can see that happening. He knew he'd need it and he probably had already decided to bring Cree here as head of security."

"That was the Day from Hell, in my book."

"Doesn't he do his job?"

"Only too well. It's like living in a fascist state at times, if you ask me."

"I get a feeling you two don't care for one another."

"You got that right, girl." Sage wiped his mouth with a napkin. "Let's drop the subject of old O-Neg and talk about something more fascinating."

"Like what?"

"How fascinating I find you and how I want to jump your bones every time I see you."

Bronwyn chuckled. "You are incorrigible, Hesar!"

"Nope, just horny. How 'bout it? Wanna relieve some of my tension?"

Bronwyn's pager went off. She took it off her belt to see who was summoning. "Gotta go."

"Whatcha going to do for supper?" Sage asked, taking up his fork again.

Bronwyn stood, picking up her pie and glass of tea. "Whatcha got in mind?"

"It's taco night at Taco Poncho in Grinnell. How 'bout that, then a movie and a big box of popcorn, cup of soda then home to have wild, dirty sex with me?"

"Tacos, popcorn, soda and *no* sex, and we've got a date."

He sighed. "Okay, but you don't know what you're missing."

"Six o'clock?" she countered.

"On the dot. I'll pick you up."

As she was leaving, Bronwyn waved at her mother and Sage's father, sitting alone in a secluded part of the cafeteria. Her mother made a sign for Bronwyn to call her. Bronwyn nodded and hurried back to her office. When she arrived, she was surprised to see Cree waiting.

Despite the neatly pressed black uniform, the captain of the Security Services looked ruffled. At some point after she'd last seen him in the cafeteria, he had taken the clip from his hair, which now hung loose about his face. There was pallor to his skin. His eyes were bloodshot, with dark circles accentuating the high planes of his cheeks while his goatee glistened with moisture.

"You took your damned sweet time getting here," he complained.

"Did you have an appointment?" she snapped.

"I don't make appointments."

"With me, you do." She looked at Mari Beth. "Is that understood?"

The secretary shot a nervous look at the Reaper. "Dr. McGregor, I—"

"Go to lunch," Cree ordered Mari Beth without looking her way.

The woman jumped up, ran to the file cabinet and retrieved her purse, then took off as though the hounds of hell nipped at her heels.

"How dare you?" Bronwyn said, turning on Cree. "You can't come in here and—"

One moment she was in front of the secretary's desk, the next she found herself plastered against the wall, Cree's hands tight on her upper arms as he pressed into her.

His fierce eyes bore into hers. "Let's get something straight, Doctor. I don't make appointments and I don't call to let you know I'm coming. When I need something, I get it *when* I want it, *where* I want it and *how* I want it. I won't take backtalk from you and I won't argue with you. What I say goes and what I do isn't questioned. Do you understand?"

He was so close she felt his body heat, felt the rise and fall of his wide chest against the front of her lab coat. His grip on her arms was painful but she would not give him the satisfaction of knowing he was hurting her. His breath was salty, but not unpleasantly so, as it fanned the wisps of hair at her temple.

"Let go of me," she said quietly.

He stared at her, his grip tightening even more. She stood perfectly still as his savage gaze crawled over her face, settled for a heart-stopping moment on her lips then captured her eyes. He said nothing, only watched her, his body as tense as a coiled spring.

"You don't frighten me, Captain," she said, raising her chin. "And you are not intimidating me, if that is your intent, so you might as well take your hands off me."

"You have an appointment tomorrow to interview George Vance and Jason Faulkner," he said as though she had not spoken.

"So?"

"You are not to schedule appointments with Class Seven inmates without my permission."

Bronwyn's eyebrows drew together. "Why the hell not? There is nothing in the protocol that says I have to—"

"I am telling you. You will not meet with any Class Seven inmate without me being present in the room with you."

"Oh, no," Bronwyn drawled, shaking her head. "You cannot be present during any sessions. That's a breach of doctor-patient confidentiality—"

"If I'm not there," he said, a muscle working in his jaw, "you don't have the interview. It's as simple as that."

"You can't do that!"

He pulled her against him, the full length of their bodies from chest to thigh coming into hard contact.

"I can do anything I like," he said, his voice a mere whisper.

With his rock-hard thighs and belly tight against her, Bronwyn's knees threatened to buckle. Her breasts were being flattened against his broad chest—her nipples hardened into nubs at the contact. In the damp region between her legs, a wild pulsing started that made her heart beat faster and enlivened her breath. Her vision lowered to his neck where a vein beat strongly in the thick column. His goatee smelled of cinnamon cologne mixed with a scent that made her womb quicken. She ached to thread her fingers through his long black hair and pull his mouth to hers. The thought brought a groan, but she wasn't sure if it was his or her own.

"Just do what I say," he whispered. "I am only trying to keep you safe, Bronwyn."

For a long time, she stared into his eyes, wondering if he was as affected by their nearness as was she. When she felt his grip relax then slip from her arms, she almost moaned.

"Bronwyn?" he questioned, stepping back. "Do you understand?"

She mentally shook herself then straightened her lab coat, pulling it together over her chest. She nodded, all anger inexplicably gone.

"I will bring a set of headphones and my radio," he told her. "I won't listen to what you two are saying and I don't read lips so I won't be privy to what is being discussed."

"You read minds, though, don't you?" She had no idea where that question came from and was surprised when he nodded.

"Aye, but I won't," he said firmly, then moved back, allowing her room.

"They are that dangerous?" she queried.

"Some are. And even though much of the time they'll be restrained when you are in session, insanity can give a man strength and resources he wouldn't normally have. You never know what they are capable of doing. I want to make sure you're safe with scum like Faulkner and Vance."

Still experiencing sensations she found disturbing, Bronwyn went to her office door. "You could have just asked."

"Then I wouldn't have had a reason to put my hands on you."

She turned to gape at him and found his face as red as the triangle on his black shirtsleeve. She was stunned when he dropped his gaze and turned to leave.

"Captain?" she called, halting him at the door.

He looked at her.

"Next time, just ask."

"I think we understand one another, Bronwyn. There won't be a next time."

Long after he had gone, Bronwyn stood beside her office door and tried to calm the racing thunder of her heart.

Cree cursed all the way back to his office. He was annoyed with himself for having lost control, furious he had made the comment about putting his hands on her. He struck out at the corridor wall, putting a dent in the steel panel as he stormed into his office. Slamming the door behind him, he threw back his head and howled with frustration, the sound reverberating through the room.

"What the hell did you do?" he snarled, flinging himself down in his chair.

He looked at his trembling hands. His palms itched, were slick with sweat. With a snarl, he thrust his arms across his chest and buried his hands in his armpits. Breath rasping through his lungs, he had to clench his teeth to keep from howling again.

She had been soft under his hold. Her flesh had smelled of gardenias. The press of their bodies had driven him nearly insane with a desire he knew he could not appease. He ached, he needed, his blood was throbbing with passion.

"Bronwyn," he groaned, covering his face with his hands.

There had been a time, he thought as he hovered in his misery, when he could have denied the pull she had on him. Until she had shown up at Baybridge, she had been but a distant, if ever-present, memory. The other part of him dreamt often of the pretty teenage girl with the long brown hair and emerald green eyes. The other part of him had remembered scents and touches, and the sound of her voice. The other part of him had longed for the girl.

But this older part, the man within him, had seen the woman in her. He had inhaled the scent of her womanhood and it had beckoned him with its siren call. This older part now had the feel of her on his palms, the sound of her soft Southern voice in his ears. He longed for her. He ached for her. He needed her as he never had Chandra.



"Though he may be eased by surrogate manipulation, a Reaper may physically mate with only one female in his lifetime and he must remain loyal to that mate even unto death!"

The man who had taught him the rules of the Convocation had impressed upon him at a very early age the laws that governed his kind. He knew each rule as though it had been burned into his brain.

The older part of him had mated with Chandra. He had given her his seed. She had been his mate.

The only mate he was allowed to possess for all eternity.

"I believe this situation might well be unique, though, don't you?" Brian had inquired.

Cree slowly lowered his hands.

Aye, he thought, it was unique. In his extensive knowledge of Reaper lore and law, no precedent had been set forth for such a thing as he had experienced. No Reaper had ever been given the revenant queen of another. Only the queen's offspring had been implanted in Reaper candidates, so what had happened to him was completely outside the norm.

He screwed up his courage and closed his eyes, willing his mind to link with the One who controlled him.

"Lady?" he questioned, and felt the queen undulating painfully along his spinal column. He sucked in his breath, the agony excruciating.

"You wish something, beloved?" She inquired.

"Is it your wish that I remain alone the rest of my life?" he asked, his heart pounding.

The queen shifted positions, bringing him to his knees with the agony. For a long while She did not answer, and when She did, Her voice was a soft caressing hiss in his ears.

"You want this human female, beloved?"

He panted with pain as he knelt on the floor, one hand on his throbbing spine. "She is his mate," he gasped, then shook his head. "She is *my* mate!"

"You want Dispensation to have her."

The pain was nearly unbearable, and no matter how hard he tried, he could not block it. It laid him out on the floor, drew his legs to his chest and punished him with its brutal intensity.

"What are you willing to offer to Me for the female human, Viraidan?"

Eons ago, he had done Her bidding without question, willingly carried out the vile requests She had made of him. He had slain his enemies and friends alike to feed Her unquenchable thirst for gore. His sword had plowed through many a body to ease Her thirst and he had done so with no regard for the lives he wasted. He had borne no

conscience and had given no quarter. As his reward, She had given him Chandra to ease the need within his loins.

"Give her to me, Lady," he begged, his voice strained with agony.

"And in return?"

The part of him that still bore the thoughts and feelings and emotions of Sean Cullen balked at what he knew he was being forced to promise, but that part also knew it was the only way Bronwyn McGregor would be a part of his life again.

"I will hunt," he said, shame filling what was left of the soul of Sean Cullen and thrilling the evil that remained in Viraidan Cree. "But—"

A wild torment drove through his body, bringing a scream of animal suffering to his lips. It was all he could do to finish speaking before She allowed the torture to spread.

"But I will only slay those who deserve such a fate," he panted. "I will not harm the innocent."

The pain eased slightly. The burning, throbbing waves of agony rippled over his spine then stepped down in strength a little more.

"Give me the evil ones and I will be content," She said in a soothing voice.

"Agreed," he replied, and felt the pain decrease again.

"Kill in the fashion of those before you."

"Aye," he said, willing to do whatever She asked to stop the excruciating pain.

"Then you may have her, beloved." She released Her hold on his body.

The torment racking his spine stopped and an immediate lassitude overtook him. He relaxed in the cottony warmth She provided.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"Sleep."

His last waking thought before the tendrils of darkness enveloped him was of the pretty teenage girl with the long brown hair and grass-green eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Bugul Noz sat on his canine-fashioned haunches and stared at the sleeping Reaper. Observing Cree's restless tossing and hearing the occasional soul-deep groans that came from him, Ordin Gver felt a great pity well up inside him.

It had been long after the moon had risen that Cree had come back to his apartment. He had barely acknowledged the black dog before going into the bedroom and flinging himself down on the mattress.

Ralph had nosed open the partially closed door and gone to the bed. "Humph?" he inquired. *What's wrong?*

"I sold my soul today, Ralph," Cree said in a flat voice.

“Humphf?”

“To have her again. To know love again.”

Ralph stood on his hind legs and dragged a sloppy tongue over Cree’s cheek. He had reveled in the gentle ruffling of his ears and the affectionate pat on his broad head before the Reaper turned to the middle of the mattress, shutting him off to further care.

Now Ordin Gver resumed his normal state and stared down at the sleeping man. “Love,” he whispered, then shook his head. He shifted once more to his canine form then hopped up on the mattress. Gently, he stretched out beside Cree, laid his head on his paws and sighed.

He himself had never known love—no kind touch upon his brow, no lips upon his cheek. No one had ever drawn him near and held him in comforting arms. No eyes had ever looked upon him with affection...

Until now.

The Bugul Noz sighed again and shifted his eyes to the door. He wondered about the pretty brown bitch he had yet to meet. He wondered if she would sense he was not entirely of her species. Would she, too, recoil from him as human females did? Would she run away, yelping to the heavens at his ugliness? Would she cower behind her mistress and soil the carpet at the sight of him?

A third sigh closed his tired eyes. He turned to his side, placing his back against the side of the sleeping Reaper. The touch of their bodies soothed Ordin Gver and he snuggled closer to the Reaper’s warmth.

## Chapter Ten

Jason Faulkner was already in the exam room when Bronwyn arrived the next morning. He was strapped to his chair, his forearms and wrists secured tightly to the metal chair arms. Leather restraints ran across his chest and around each ankle. The chair was bolted to the floor and housed inside a metal cage locked with a thick padlock and chain. The top of the cage was enclosed, its mesh electrified for added safety.

Knowing how dangerous the man was, Bronwyn was relieved to see the restraints. She was nervous being in the same room with him, and when he spoke, she jumped.

"I wish to protest that one's presence," Faulkner stated, cocking his chin toward the room's other occupant. "This is a direct violation of doctor-patient privilege."

Bronwyn glanced at the Reaper. He looked intimidating in his black uniform, yet she was grateful for his presence. He was standing with his arms crossed, legs spread. Around his neck was a set of mini-earphones and clipped to his belt was a small cassette player.

"Captain Cree will not be able to hear what we will be saying, Mr. Faulkner," she said, annoyed that she sounded as nervous as she felt. "That's why he brought his radio."

Faulkner smiled nastily. "Note the protest, doctor. It matters little to me what that one tells you. I know he will be listening to every word I say."

Bronwyn put Faulkner's chart on the table in front of the cage and took a seat. "I will so note, Mr. Faulkner."

"He is lusting after you, did you know that?"

Bronwyn's face flamed. She refused to look at Cree, although from the corner of her eye she saw him reach up to put the earphones in place.

Faulkner chuckled. "He has wicked thoughts of you, dear doctor."

"We're not here to talk about Captain Cree," Bronwyn said, opening the serial killer's chart. "We're here to talk about the twenty-four women you murdered."

"Thirty-nine," Faulkner corrected, and grinned when Bronwyn looked up. He nodded. "Thirty-nine."

Cree never took his eyes off Bronwyn, watching her facial expressions as she interviewed the beast in the cage. Now and again, as the music changed tracks, he caught a word or two, and the implications of those words sickened him. He sensed the conversation was upsetting Bronwyn, but there was nothing he could do about it. This was the job she had chosen, and though he detested it, he would never interfere. When

the interview was over and he watched her get shakily to her feet, he turned off the cassette player and heard Faulkner's comment.

"I would like to do the same things to you, dear doctor. I would take my time with you and –"

Cree moved quicker than was humanly possible and took Bronwyn's arm. He opened the door to the interview room and ushered her outside. He could feel her trembling as he closed the door behind them and stood there, her arm still in his firm grip. Her breathing was shuddery and her eyes stricken as she looked up to meet his gaze.

"He is sick," she said. "I understand that."

Cree's grip tightened. "All that is wrong with him is the evil in his mind, Bronwyn. You can't help men like him."

"But I have to try," she said, her gaze pleading.

He shook his head. "Some you will never be able to salvage. Best you realize that now and not waste your time trying."

She pulled her arm from his hold. "What would you suggest we do with men like Jason Faulkner, Captain? Execute them?"

He folded his arms and regarded her. "That is the only way society will ever be safe from predators like him."

"Society has been served. He'll never leave Baybridge."

The right side of Cree's mouth lifted in a smile. "Aye, in that you are right."

Her shoulders slumped, the evil she had been shown lurking in Faulkner's mind obviously draining her energy. "Thank you for being there. I'm glad you insisted. I felt safer."

He ached to reach out to her, to cup her cheek but he resisted the urge. "I'll make sure he gets back to his cell."

She nodded then turned to go.

Cree watched her until she turned the corner. He could sense the turmoil tumbling in her mind and knew she would have bad dreams that night. The memories of the vile things Faulkner had related to her would return to torment her in the darkness.

A slow growl of fury rumbled through his chest and his eyes slid to the door behind which Jason Faulkner sat. Crimson flashes rippled through Cree's eyes then bled over to form a scarlet haze that pulsed with every angry breath he took. At his sides, his hands doubled to powerful fists, his fingernails digging into the flesh. For the first time in a long time, he felt the Bloodlust rising, singing through his veins and scratching at his throat. He sniffed the air, drawing in the demonic stench of the man tied to the chair in the room beyond. He could taste the evil of Jason Faulkner on his tongue, savored the rankness of it and made his decision.

His fingers went to the buttons of his uniform shirt.

Faulkner looked up as the door opened. The cocky grin slipped from his face when he realized it was not the female doctor. It took him a moment to realize that what had come in naked through the door was the stuff of his worst nightmares. In the moment it took him to open his mouth to scream, it was already too late for the serial killer who had savagely mutilated thirty-nine young women.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What happened?" Bronwyn asked as she hurried into the morgue.

"Massive coronary," a man she didn't recognize barked with a thick Australian accent. He glanced up at her, did a double take then straightened from his position over the dead man.

Jason Faulkner was lying on a metal gurney, his body as white as parchment. His eyes were wide open and staring fixedly at the ceiling. There was a hideous grimace on the killer's face, his lips drawn back in a rictus of a scream.

"Who found him?" Bronwyn asked.

"Our fascist dictator Cree. Are you Bronwyn McGregor?"

"Yes."

"You interviewed Faulkner today?"

"This morning. He was okay when I left him. Captain Cree told me he'd see him back to his cell."

"Well, he's useless to us now." The man ripped off his rubber gloves, wadded them into a ball then slammed them forcefully into the trash can.

"Are you implying that I—"

The pathologist spun around and looked at her with eyes she realized were almost sapphire in color.

"You didn't do anything, Doctor," he replied. "I'm not mad at you. I'm just pissed that we won't be able to find out where this son of a bitch buried his victims. Their families have a right to—"

"We know where they're buried." At his blink, she nodded. "He told me this morning. It's in my notes that Mari Beth is typing up. I've already informed the authorities."

He put his hands on his hips. "He told you?"

"He took great delight in bragging about what he'd done and how he'd gotten away with it for so long. There were more victims than we knew about, too."

The pathologist winced. "That's not surprising, but at least we'll be able to give them a decent burial. Thank God for small miracles."

"I agree." Bronwyn looked down at Faulkner. "He looks scared to me."

"Maybe the bastard saw the vengeful face of his creator when he bought it, or the grin of the devil come to take him to his just reward."

"I'm inclined to believe the latter."

"Good Catholic, are you?"

"Cafeteria Catholic, I'm afraid."

"Me, too." He chuckled, sticking out his hand. "I'm Koe Brell."

Bronwyn took the man's hand and felt a shiver ripple through her. She looked into his face, searching. "Bronwyn."

"No," he said, letting go of her hand.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said 'no'," he returned. "I don't blame you for my father's death." He shrugged. "Me and the old man hadn't spoken in ten years when he got made into tossed salad over in Ireland."

"Oh," she said, not knowing what else to say. "I didn't realize he was from Australia. I thought he was from Ireland."

"He was. My mother was from Sydney, and that's where I was born and raised. He left us right after he found out Ma was pregnant with my brother Diarmuid. I was nine years old and that was the last time I saw him."

"I'm sorry he died because of me."

"We all have to die for one reason or another."

Bronwyn looked away, feeling the man's hurt.

"I never met your father," Brell informed her, "but I know your mom quite well." He grinned. "DeeDee's almost as lovely as her daughter."

Bronwyn blushed. "I'd heard you Aussies were formidable flirts. Guess it's true."

"Oh, I'm not flirting with you, darling," he said, his face stern. "I'm merely putting you on notice."

"On notice for what?"

He took her hand, bringing it to his lips as he held her gaze captive with his own.

Bronwyn felt a stab of desire shift through her belly when he drew her closer, folding her hand against his broad chest.

"Have supper with me this evening," he said in a low, throaty voice.

She found herself lost in the sapphire pools of his eyes. He was devastatingly handsome with thick, black, wavy hair that curled invitingly around his chiseled face. His broad shoulders and lean hips, flat waist and long legs were distracting enough, but it was the Black Irish temptation of that dark hair and those sparkling blue eyes that made her heart skip a beat. She leaned toward him, wondering what his full lips would feel like on hers.

"I won't take no for an answer." He stroked a lock of stray hair from her cheek then ran his fingers along her jawline, the tips easing into her hair.

"You'll have to," came an annoyed voice from the doorway.

Bronwyn jumped back, pulling free of Koe Brell's warm grip.

A muscle in Brell's cheek bunched as he turned to face the intruder. "I've always said you have piss-poor timing, Cree," he snapped.

Viraidan Cree stood framed in the doorway, his long legs spread, his hands hanging loose and ready at his sides. His body language spoke of power and a willingness to engage in combat if that was what was required.

"Th-thank you for your invitation, Koe," Bronwyn stammered, "but Sage and I have plans this evening."

"Sage Hesar?" Brell inquired.

"How many other Sages you know around here outside a spice rack?" Cree grunted.

Brell ignored the question and looked at Bronwyn. "Some other time, then?"

She nodded. "I'd like that."

"Perhaps we could —"

"George Vance is waiting in interview room D, Doctor McGregor," Cree interrupted. "If you plan on seeing him today, let's get to it."

Brell turned a heated look to the Reaper. "Where the hell do you get off giving her orders?"

Bronwyn sensed a confrontation she'd just as soon stop before it started. The two men were glaring daggers at one another, and the look Cree sent Koe's way was a hundred times angrier and more lethal than any look she'd seen him give Sage. To prevent any unpleasantness, she moved toward the Reaper.

"Captain Cree was good enough to offer his services as an escort while I'm interviewing the Class Seven inmates," she said, hoping to forestall any other combative words.

"If you need an escort, I would be happy —"

"Class Seven inmates," Cree said, "are off-limits to you. Or did you forget that, Brell?"

Koe took a step closer, obviously not threatened by the Reaper's stony expression and stiff stance. "I can walk her to an interview just as —"

"Captain Cree goes into the interview with me," Bronwyn was quick to say.

A light of understanding washed over Brell's face. He opened his mouth to speak, but Bronwyn cut him off.

"We have Dr. Wynth's permission. Everything is perfectly legal and within the guidelines."

Brell cast Cree a narrowed look, as if realizing he had been defeated in this particular instance. Cree's return look was smug and filled with victory. Upon observing their facial expressions, Bronwyn rolled her eyes.



"Thank you for offering, Koe," she said, glancing up at Cree who stepped out of her way so she could exit the room.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow," Brell called.

"Not if your gods-be-damned tongue gets pulled out, you won't," Cree mumbled under his breath.

"What?" Bronwyn asked as he fell into step beside her.

"Sage Hesar," he replied, glancing at her upturned face.

"What about him?"

"Don't you think he's a handsome young devil?" Cree echoed Brian's words from between clenched teeth.

Bronwyn stopped in the middle of the corridor. Cree took a few steps then turned and looked back at her.

"He doesn't pose a challenge for you, does he?" Bronwyn asked.

Cree snorted. "The only thing Brell could challenge —"

"I'm talking about Sage."

The Reaper's brows drew together. "What of him?"

"You don't feel threatened by him."

"Hell, no, I don't."

Bronwyn smiled nastily. "But Koenen's a different can of worms, isn't he?"

The Reaper obviously realized where her reasoning had roamed and he stood, arms akimbo, gaze narrowed and looked at her.

Bronwyn arched a brow. "I'm right, aren't I?"

"Aye, you are right," he replied, his brogue thick as molasses on a cold day. "Brell is a can of worms."

Bronwyn walked to him. "Are you afraid of worms, Captain? Are they a threat to you?"

They stared at one another—Cree's attention wandering freely over her upturned face, Bronwyn's gaze passing over then locking on his lips.

Why had she thought Koenen Brell so handsome? she wondered as she studied Cree's rugged features. The man before her was beyond compare in the physical department. There was authority stamped on his lean face, power in the steady regard that held her transfixed. He gave off an aura of raw sexuality that brought heat to her cheeks and juices to her loins. And that tattoo! The thing was sensual in a strange sort of way. The stylized scythe almost called out to her to trace it with her fingertips. It more than added to Cree's magnetic pull. From the soft thickness of his sable hair to the piercing gleam in the amber eyes, Viraidan Cree was pure sensuality and the signals his powerful body gave off were playing hell with her control.

"What is it you want?" he asked.

She looked at his lips and wanted nothing more than to feel that velvet hardness slanted across her mouth, claiming her. "What do you want?" she countered, holding her breath.

"Be careful what you wish for." After a long pause, he lowered his voice to a sultry whisper. "You just might get it."

Bronwyn stepped back, her heart thudding dangerously fast. She swallowed, trying to tamp down the growing desire making her body tingle. When she didn't reply, he stepped back – military-style – pivoted then started walking down the corridor.

"Viraidan," she said, hearing the rampant need in her voice, but not embarrassed by it as she might once have been.

He turned.

She lifted her chin as she drew near him. "I never wish for anything I don't truly want," she surprised herself saying.

That wicked half-smile she had come to recognize lifted the right side of his mouth. "I'll keep that in mind, Bronwyn."

\* \* \* \* \*

Koenen Brell shrugged out of his lab coat and hooked it on the clothes rack beside the door. His face twisted with fury as he slammed himself down at his desk. With his anger so intense he could barely breathe, he reached for pencil after pencil and snapped them in two, dropping the wooden carcasses on the desktop.

"Interfering bastard," he growled, wishing each pencil he broke was the backbone of the head of security forces.

For nine years he had been waiting to meet the woman responsible for his father's death. It had been he who had hinted to Neal Hesar that Hesar's whore should suggest the job to her daughter. He had also been the one to put the bug in Brighton Wynth's ear to hire Bronwyn McGregor. When news had reached him that the McGregor spawn would be coming to Baybridge, Koenen Brell had been beside himself with glee.

He had bided his time when she first arrived. Meeting too quickly would not have been to his advantage. Though it had irked him to prolong the confrontation, he had forced himself to take it slow, to let her come to him as he knew she eventually would.

"Vengeance is best served cold," he muttered, and vengeance was what he intended to have. He wanted nothing more than to destroy the woman who had caused his father's death.

He had lied to Bronwyn when he told her he did not blame her. In truth, he had put the blame squarely on her slender shoulders. Had it not been for her, his father would still be alive. She had been the catalyst that had set that horrid sequence into motion, and for that she must be made to pay.

While it was true he had not spoken to his father in years, Koenen Brell had worshiped the man. Despite the fact his father had seldom written and had called only

a few times after abandoning his family in Perth, Koenen blamed his mother and the stupid child she had conceived for pushing away his father. To him, his father was a hero and deserved to be avenged for his untimely death.

Koenen had maneuvered himself into the job at Baybridge simply to be near the place his father had worked. He had learned all he could about the McGregor family and had put the blame of his father's murder where it needed to be – on Bronwyn.

"If it is the last thing I do," he snarled, "I will make you pay for taking my father from me!"

Grabbing several sheets of paper from his desk, Brell began to methodically shred them, his face twisted with rage.

"Does that really help, Koenen?"

Brell jumped, spinning around to confront whomever had spoken. He glared at a man he did not recognize. "Who the hell are you and what do you want?"

Danyon Hart sauntered into the room, closing the door behind him. There was a tight smile on his face as he walked toward Brell. "You are I are going to become very close, Koenen," Danyon replied, his eyes flashing crimson. "Very, very close, indeed. As a matter of fact, no one will know where you leave off and I begin!"

## Chapter Eleven

Brian looked up from his desk to find Cree leaning against the doorjamb. "How'd it go with Vance?" he inquired.

Cree shrugged. "As well as could be expected."

"That bastard is as vile as they come."

"I've seen worse."

Throwing his pen to the desk blotter, Brian leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. "Did she get through the interview okay?"

"She seemed to."

Brian rested his chin on the tips of his fingers. "Is Vance still alive or has he joined Faulkner in the hereafter?"

"He was alive when I left him in his cell."

"And functioning, was he?"

Cree rubbed the back of his neck. "Maybe not functioning at peak efficiency."

"Come in and shut the door."

For a moment it seemed Cree would not obey the command. He looked down the corridor, then drew in a deep breath and came into the room, closing the door behind him. Without being asked, he took a seat. "You got a lecture prepared or are you going to wing it?" he grumbled, and crossed his left ankle over his right knee.

"How close to Transition are you?"

"Three weeks," was the stony reply.

"Tell me what happens if you Transition out of cycle," Brian commanded.

"Ah for the love of Alel!" Cree snapped. "I—"

"Tell me what happens!"

Anger settled on Cree's handsome face. A muscle jumped in his cheek as he ground his teeth. He glared at Brian, refusing to answer.

Brian lowered his clasped hands to his desk and sat forward. "I went down to the morgue this afternoon and took a look at Jason Faulkner."

Cree's left foot jiggled up and down, an indication of his annoyance. His breathing—rapid and heavy—was audible.

"That was sheer terror I saw engraved on the man's face. Whatever he saw put one helluva fierce strain on his heart and it killed him."

They stared at one another for a long time, neither speaking. Finally, Brian leaned back.

"If I go to Vance's cell and look in on him, am I going to see terror on his face too, Viraidan?"

"That asshole doesn't look any different than he did when he woke up this morning," Cree snarled, dusting unseen lint from his trouser leg.

"But his mind's not the same as when he crawled out of bed this morning, now is it?"

The Reaper shot up from the chair and began pacing in front of Brian's desk. "Those two perverted excuses for human beings won't be missed and won't ever hurt another woman or child again! And Bronwyn won't have to hear their vile boasting of the evil they've done!"

"I don't give a rat's ass about Faulkner and Vance. I am worried about you!"

"You don't need to."

"For every time you Transition out of cycle, another day or two is lopped off the day sequence. You know that, Viraidan!"

"It doesn't matter."

"The hell it doesn't!" Brian shouted. He got to his feet and shook a finger at the Reaper. "How long did you maintain the Transition? Two minutes? Five? Ten? How long did you hold it?"

"How the hell should I know?" Cree yelled. "I wasn't counting!"

"You Transitioned twice in one day. And you didn't take Sustenance from either victim. You held the shift without venting the bloodlust. It would have been bad enough if you'd bled them, Viraidan, but you didn't. That puts more of a strain on the parasite and —"

"I can handle it!"

"Mark my words," Brian grated, his lips skinned back from his teeth. "You are going to go into Transition well before you expect it, and by the gods, Viraidan, you'd better hope you're close enough to get to the containment cell before someone sees you!"

"I will handle it," Cree said, stressing each word.

"You better hope you do."

Cree stalked to the door, flung it open and started out.

"And stay the hell away from Bronwyn McGregor!" Brian ordered.

Those the captain of Security Services passed in the corridor stepped back from the infuriated look on his face. They pressed themselves against the wall or hastily entered rooms they'd had no intention of entering. The few employees who had decided to take the stairs instead of the elevator regretted doing so as Cree shoved past them. He knew his warning growl frightened more than one of them.

Once outside, the Iowa night air turning cooler as fall approached, the Reaper's long strides took him past the parking lot and out behind the main building as he headed for the gravel path to the lake.

A twinge in his back made him flex his shoulders. When it happened again, he stopped walking, the pain finally registering. He hung his head, doubled his fists and pressed them to his temples. He squeezed his eyes shut in an attempt to blot out the burning sensation that had begun.

"I know," he said, feeling the ripples of demand shifting across his kidneys.

He knew he would have to kill for Her. She was reminding him as gently as She would that he needed to make good on his promise.

He also knew, in order to kill, he would have to Transition again.

The agony intensified in his back. He bent over with the force of it, his elbows on his flexed knees.

"Give me time," he gasped when a sharp stab of pure torture went through his right kidney. "Please, Lady!" he begged.

She held the torment for another breath or two then relented, reminding him who controlled him.

Cree's breathing was ragged as he straightened. He knew the reprieve would not last long. Before She could renew Her physical attack on him, he turned and staggered back down the path. He was sweating profusely by the time he reached his motorcycle, moaning in agony as he swung his leg over the machine.

He needed to hunt.

For Her.

He never slowed down as he reached the security huts. There was a tracking device on his bike and his men knew he was coming. The gate was barely open as he roared between the parted chain link sections, opening the throttle as he shot down the roadway.

It was dawn when he returned, his face haggard, his eyes glazed with the bloodlust that had turned him from man to beast in order to feed the parasitic mistress that rode him. He was not wearing the same clothing he had worn when he had left Baybridge. The tattered black uniform now lay buried in a shallow hole—near the splintered bones of the Reaper's latest kill.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bronwyn had just come out of her condo, Brownie padding spryly beside her, when she noticed the big black dog lifting its leg on the corner of the building. She hesitated, pulling gently on Brownie's leash. The sight of such a large canine—unleashed and roaming free—unsettled her. The beast could turn, snarl and attack. Even though Brownie was a female, the animal could conceivably jump on her and clamp his

massive jaws into her silky throat. The thought of that made Bronwyn stoop down to pick up her pet.

"He won't harm her."

Bronwyn looked around then straightened up, shocked by his pallor and the tremor in his hand as he threaded his fingers through his unbound hair. "Are you all right?"

"I've been better," he replied, then hunkered down to pat Brownie. "Come here, gorgeous."

Bronwyn smiled as Brownie lay down, turned up her stomach for a scratching, and wiggled with pleasure at the firm fingers that ran over her tight little gray tummy. Her smile flickered when the big black dog loped over.

"Bronnie," Cree said. "Meet Ralph."

Ralph sat then lifted one giant paw in greeting, raking it up and down.

Bronwyn's smile returned. She shook the proffered paw. "Does he belong to you, Ralph?" she asked, using her other hand to smooth the sleek black fur on the dog's head.

"Humphf," Ralph replied with an emphatic nod of his big head.

"It certainly isn't the other way around," Cree joked.

Cree vigorously rubbed Brownie's stomach one last time then got to his feet, jamming his hands into the pockets of his black jeans.

Brownie wiggled on her back a few more times, her little paws waving in the air.

Bronwyn laughed. "Get up, slut. He's lost interest in you."

"She knows better," Cree disagreed.

Sighing, Brownie got to her feet, shook herself then turned to look at Ralph. For a moment, her pretty little brown eyes blinked then she walked cautiously toward him.

Bronwyn dropped the leash, giving Brownie space to investigate this new acquaintance. When the canines touched noses then gave each another the traditional nose-to-butt inspection, Bronwyn looked away with embarrassment.

"Are you off today?" she asked Cree.

"Aye. We were headed down to the lake."

Brownie and Ralph were playfully nipping at one another, running in tight little circles around their master and mistress.

"Mind if we tag along?" Bronwyn inquired.

Cree shrugged. "It's a free country."

The reply wasn't encouraging, but Bronwyn decided to ignore the standoffishness it implied. She called Brownie to her to take hold of the leash.

"Let her run free," Cree said. "No animal should be tied up."

"Stop reading my mind. I don't like it."

Cree said nothing to her demand. Instead, he started down the gravel path, seemingly uncaring if she walked with him or not.

A frustrated sigh hissed from Bronwyn's mouth as she followed. She had to jog a little to catch up to him, slapping her leg for Brownie to follow then became exasperated when her pet raced on ahead, the black dog plodding along beside her.

"Isn't that the dog who was with you the day you fell off your bike?" Bronwyn asked, coming abreast of Cree.

A muscle worked in his cheek. "I didn't fall off my gods-be-damned bike, woman."

"Then what happened?"

He kicked a large rock off the path. "I laid it down to avoid hitting a frigging deer."

"Oh," she said, smiling at the male ego she'd unknowingly bruised.

He cast her a sidelong glance. When she grinned at him, he looked away.

They were quiet until they reached the hill overlooking the lake. A large red maple, a few lilac bushes and a trio of tall poplars ringed the hill. Lush grass covered the knoll. The view was magnificent, the crescent-shaped lake fanning out in either direction from the hill. The water rippled gently, a deep steel blue that lapped at the rock-strewn jetty jutting out into the waves.

"When the lake freezes over, some of the people who work here build ice houses out there," Cree told her.

"It gets that cold here?"

"I've seen some idjuts stupid enough to drive pickup trucks all the way along the shoreline, forty feet or farther out across the water."

"Huh," Bronwyn commented. Such a thing seemed incredible to her, having grown up in the South and spending most of her life there.

Cree nodded toward an inviting spot. "I come up here a lot."

"So I've heard," she said, dropping to the grass.

"From who?"

"Sage says you come up here to eat your mysterious lunch."

"And does he tell you what's in that mysterious lunch?"

"He believes hog entrails and chicken gizzards, as I recall."

Cree snorted as he sat down. "That boy is one of the idjuts I've seen driving on the gods-be-damned lake. It figures he'd think something so frigging obscene."

"No entrails and gizzies?" she queried with a grin.

"Not likely."

"Then what?"

He leaned back on his elbows, crossed his booted feet and regarded her. "Why do you want to know?"



"Just curious." She picked up a blade of grass and ran it between her fingers. When he remained silent, she looked back at him.

"So you can report what you've learned to Spice Boy?" he asked.

"You don't want to tell me, don't tell me," she said, returning her attention to the rolling lake.

"A corned beef on rye with a side order of sweet potato fries and a soda pop."

"Well, that's normal enough."

"A bag of cheese puffs, two chocolate bars, a box of raisins, three double packages of toaster pastries, a tube of sugar cookie dough and a can of mixed nuts."

She turned to stare at him. "You're joking!"

He laid down, his hands cupping the back of his head. "I have a healthy appetite."

"You are a heart attack waiting to happen! Do you know what that stuff will do to you?"

"What can I say? Reapers are junk-food addicts."

It was the first time he had labeled himself to her and she wasn't sure how to react.

"Are you afraid of me?" he asked.

She knew he'd plucked her thoughts from the air, but this time it didn't annoy her. She crossed her legs and stuck the blade of grass between her lips. "Do I have reason to be?"

"No."

"Would you ever hurt me?"

"Never," he said, his voice low and throaty.

"Then I'm not afraid of you."

"Disgusted by what I am?"

She shrugged. "Unsettled a bit, perhaps." She chewed on the grass.

"Enough to stay away from me?"

She took the grass from her mouth and tossed it away. "Obviously not or I wouldn't be up here with you, now would I?"

Brownie yelped playfully and Ralph answered as they raced down the hill and to the edge of the lapping water.

"Don't you dare get in that water, Brownie!" Bronwyn yelled.

"Ralph is part Lab," Cree remarked. "He loves the water."

"Well, I don't feel like bathing that little brat today."

"Let her play. If she gets wet, I'll bathe her."

Bronwyn glanced at him. He was staring at her, his eyes looking tired and wounded. Before she thought, she touched his forehead. "You've got a fever!" she said, shifting around to get a better look at him.

He took her hand, staying her inspection of his face. "Reaper body temperature is much higher than a human's. I'm okay, Bronwyn."

"You don't look okay," she said, feeling the heat of his flesh radiating up her arm. "There are deep circles beneath your eyes that weren't there when we came up here. Your face is flushed and —"

"I am all right." He brought her hand to his chest. "I swear."

Through the fabric of his black polo shirt, she felt the heavy thudding of his heart. It seemed unnaturally quick, though she had no idea what the blood pressure and pulse rate of his kind would be.

"I'm worried about you. You don't look well, Viraidan."

"You'll get used to seeing me this way from time to time," he said, letting go of her hand. "It's normal."

Bronwyn opened her mouth to protest his cavalier attitude then thought better of it. The man obviously knew whether he was ill or not, she reasoned, and decided to drop the issue. She did, however, make a mental note to talk to Brian and see if he would give her a lesson on Reaper anatomy.

"Is that a tribal tattoo?" she asked, staring fixedly at the dark blue design.

"It is a *marc as úinéireacht*."

"Which is?"

"A mark of ownership."

Before Bronwyn could ask what that meant, he unbuttoned his shirt, palmed a medallion hanging on a thick chain around his neck before she could look at it then pulled the shirt toward his shoulder. "This is a tribal tattoo — the *dúr diabhol*."

Bronwyn glanced at the dark crimson design on his left pectoral. She thought his flesh looked burned around the stylized grim reaper with its scythe handle made of human skulls.

"It was done with a laser brush," he said, pulling his shirt over the tattoo.

"That had to hurt," she said, flinching.

"I was a child when it was done. I barely remember the pain," he said as he re-buttoned his shirt.

"Your culture was vastly different from ours, wasn't it?"

"More brutal, more uncaring, aye. But you have men who are just as brutal and uncaring. Daniel Dunne was one of them. He marked his newly made Reapers in the same manner."

At the mention of that hated name, Bronwyn looked at the ground. "Would you mind if I asked you something?"

"What do you want to know?" he asked, his gaze wary.

She drew up her knees and clasped them in the perimeter of her arms. "Brian said you were a friend of Sean's."

A shadow passed over his face. He looked away to stare at the leafy canopy overhead. "I don't want to discuss him."

Bronwyn felt heat rising in her cheeks. "May I ask why?"

Cree cut his eyes to her. "No."

She sighed heavily and turned her attention to the dogs frolicking at the water's edge. There were so many questions, questions she thought perhaps Cree would answer in time. At least, she hoped he would.

"Don't count on it," he said, springing to his feet.

She watched him walk down the hill. His shoulders were stiff, his hands clenched into fists. He was like quicksilver, she thought. One moment he seemed to want to be with her and the next he was pushing her away. His manner, his mood swings, irritated her, yet she found herself drawn to him in a way she could not explain.

As he picked up stones and sent them skipping across the water's surface, she was reminded of watching Sean do the same thing on the Flint River. She smiled sadly and squinted. If she concentrated, she could picture that long-lost boy standing on the riverbank in Georgia, his sideward pitches causing the rocks to skip three, four or more times across the water.

She closed her eyes and imagined the male standing at the water's edge was Sean grown into manhood. She could picture his bright blond hair and cornflower blue eyes shining in the warmth of the sun. In her mind's eye, she could see the light green shirt he had worn most often and the tight, faded blue jeans that had made her insides ache.

She lay on the grass, her hands to either side of her head. The smell of the grass was crisp and clean, its lushness a comforting cushion beneath her body. A light breeze washed over her and the lacy patterns of the tree branches overhead against her closed lids lulled her.

Her thoughts returned to the river, but this time it was the Kinchafoonee and the late afternoon when Sean had made her a woman. Her memories were strong—his hands on her breasts, the feel of his lips on her mouth, the weight of his body upon hers, the pressure of him seated deep inside her.

There was a rustling sound nearby but she did not open her eyes. She was locked in the past, her body on fire with a need she had not felt in many years. Her breathing was deep, slow, her lower lip caught between her teeth.

She felt contact along her right side—a hard length stretched beside her. A sensation moved over her leg, pressing that leg to the ground. Another sensation became wedged between her legs, insistent pressure firm at the juncture of her thighs. Strong fingers threaded her own and she captured them in a tight grip. The light grew slowly darker over her face until soft, pliant lips claimed hers. A powerful chest flattened her breasts, the tips aching to be touched. When the warm moistness of her shadow lover's tongue slid past her lips, Bronwyn groaned and tightened her grip on the phantom hands that held her own captive.

She groaned again when her left hand lost its prisoner then gasped as the escapee found its way to her breast. Arching up into the possessive grasp that plied her, she thought she would faint, for her lover's tongue took that moment to probe deep inside her mouth.

Her free hand went to her lover's hair, pressing his mouth tighter to hers, which brought a grunt from deep in his throat. She felt him release her other hand as he shifted fully atop her, his hands going under her body to caress her buttocks, his knees spreading her legs apart, the steel of his shaft held hard against the core of her. His lips left her mouth and trailed down her throat, placing hot kisses in the hollow.

"Sean!" she cried, holding him to her.

"I am here, *ghrá mo chroí*."

Bronwyn's eyes flew open. The long-remembered term of endearment sent a shockwave of pure agony through her soul and brought her out of the strange reverie into which she'd fallen.

Cree was sitting beside her, his face closed, unreadable.

She sat up, pulling at her blouse, clutching the front in a fist.

"You were dreaming," he told her.

Bronwyn let out a shuddering breath, then another. She squeezed her eyes closed. "It was so real," she said, her voice breaking. "It felt so real!"

He watched her cover her face with her hands and ached as she began to cry. For a moment, he resisted the urge to take her in his arms, to comfort her, but her heartbreaking sobs struck a chord deep within him and he pulled her onto his lap, drew her head to his shoulder and held her as her wild sobbing shook them both.

When her grief was spent, she pushed gently away from him and ran the back of her hand under her chin. She apologized for her outburst.

"Don't worry about it," he said, reaching for the handkerchief in his back pocket. Before he could hand it to her, she got clumsily to her feet and walked down to the spot where he had stood skipping stones.

He watched her then worried as he surveyed the water. His agitation at her being so close to the threat of the waves brought him to his feet. He hurried to her, his nerves tingling.

"I'm not going to throw myself in the lake," she said, as though she had read his mind.

"Good, because Reapers can't swim."

Despite her tears, she laughed and looked up at him. "Running water and vampires don't mix, huh?"

He shrugged, digging his hands into the back pockets of his ebony jeans.

Bronwyn frowned. "They need to clean up this section of the waterline," she said, kicking a piece of broken beer bottle with her sneaker.

"Some of the orderlies party down here at night. It's kept fairly good most of the time." He scraped the heel of his boot against the ground. "You okay now?"

She bobbed her head and drew in a ragged breath. "I get this way when I think of him."

"Then don't think of him."

Bronwyn pursed her lips but made no comment. She whistled for her little dog, lying under a poplar tree with Ralph. "Let's go, Stuffie!"

There was loose gravel on the lip of the hill and Bronwyn tripped going up the slight incline. Before Cree could catch her, she fell, her palms scraping in the dirt.

"Son of a bitch!" she cried.

The smell of her blood reached him before the transmission of her pain entered his mind.

"Let me see!" He came to his knees beside her and took her hand. A deep gash on the side of her hand gaped open, blood streaming from it. He pinched the wound closed, the smell making him giddy.

"God almighty, that hurts," she whimpered, gripping the wrist of her injured hand. "What the hell did I get cut on?"

Cree glanced at the ground. "Rusty metal half-buried in the shale."

"It'll have to be sutured," she sobbed. "I hate needles."

"I know."

Whether it was the pain she was experiencing or the fear of being stitched or the alluring scent of her warm blood gushing between his fingers, despite the pressure he exerted on her flesh, Cree made a decision he hoped he would not regret.

"Look at me," he said sternly, his voice brooking no resistance.

She glanced up and stilled, his stare holding her transfixed.

"You do not feel the pain, beloved. You feel nothing but my touch. You hear nothing but my voice. Do you understand?"

Obviously mesmerized by the power and authority in his gaze, she nodded.

"I cannot bear to see you hurt."

The wound pulsed with redness, with the flesh split apart so the tendon showed. Cree lowered his mouth to the laceration. He sharply bit his tongue, then allowed his blood to mix with hers, to flow into her injury. Beneath his lips, he could feel the spores of his black life force bubbling inside her wound, sealing it, healing it. The taste of her blood was like nectar to him and he drew it into his mouth, invigorated by its flavor and intoxicated knowing it was the essence of her that he drank.

## Chapter Twelve

"Good morning," Brian said.

Bronwyn nodded, yawning. "What's up?"

"You forgot," he sighed, looking at her bathrobe.

"Forgot what?"

"Sunday? Nine o'clock? Coffee and rolls. Inane conversation."

Bronwyn gasped, her hand going to her mouth. "Mass!" she shrieked.

Brian looked at his watch. "Can you get dressed in fifteen minutes?"

"Fifteen? Fiddle!" Bronwyn pointed a finger at him. "Stay here. I'll go shower!"

Brian chuckled as she ran out of the room. He found the Sunday Des Moines *Register* on the coffee table and rifled through it until he found the business section. He sat on the sofa and shook the paper.

"He did a very dangerous thing yesterday."

Brian lowered the paper. There was an elderly man standing before him. The being known as Cedric, no doubt. But when Brian sniffed, he did not detect the odor Cree had told him Nightwinds possess.

"The scent can be hidden when necessary," Cedric told him.

"So you can sneak up on people?" Brian growled, snapping the paper shut. He tossed it to the coffee table. "What do you want?"

Cedric took a step closer. "I care deeply for the Lady. She has been most kind to me. She has given me companionship and —"

"You know something, Nightfart, I don't care what Bronnie has given you."

"She was hurt yesterday. He healed her with his own blood."

"Viraidan?"

Cedric grinned. "I would imagine it was the Cullen part of him that couldn't help himself." When Brian gasped, the Nightwind's grin turned mean. "You have hidden nothing from our kind, Reaper. We know who he was."

Casting a quick look to the door behind which Bronwyn had disappeared, Brian got to his feet. "Have you told her?"

A snort was Cedric's first answer. His second was firm. "We've no intention of her finding out."

Relief washed over Brian. "We don't want her to know, either."

"Understood. We also understand the danger of what he did yesterday."

"Tell me what happened," Brian demanded, sitting down.

Cedric moved to a recliner and sank creakily to the seat. "Old bones make the odd noise now and again," he sighed as he shifted his aged body to a comfortable position.

"I suppose I'll find out," Brian acknowledged, being polite. "I'm told I'll live hundreds and hundred of years if my head stays attached to my body."

"I," Cedric said, jabbing a thumb at his chest, "am beyond the second millennium of life and would just as soon not be."

"You were going to tell me what he did," Brian pressed.

"She cut her hand at the lake and —"

"They were together at the lake? Alone?"

"The Reaper came close to taking her while she slept."

Brian winced. "By the gods, that man is out of control!"

"Aye and blending his blood with hers shows to what degree."

"He would reason he had helped her," Brian defended.

"True, but now he has the taste of her in his mouth and can track her no matter where she goes. Should it be necessary to take her from this place —"

"She's not being taken anywhere!" Brian snapped. "Especially not by one of your kind!"

Cedric sighed. "The longer she is near the Reaper, the nearer to disaster she is. Sooner or later, she will begin to see the similarities between Cree and Cullen."

"I'll have a talk with him."

"I fear it will take more than talk."

"Let me worry about that!" Brian grated.

"Worry about what?" Bronwyn asked from the doorway. She looked from one face to the other. "I see you two have met. What were you talking about?"

"Protecting you," Cedric ventured, rising clumsily from the chair.

"From what?" Bronwyn asked.

Brian opened his mouth to answer but Cedric beat him to it.

"Cree," Cedric replied, ignoring Brian's look of disbelief. "He is not the man either of us would have for you."

"Really?" Bronwyn narrowed her eyes. "How 'bout you two minding your own business, okay?" She walked to the door. "You coming, Brian?"

"I wasn't even breathing hard," Brian said beneath his breath, and caught the wicked grin on Cedric's face.

Bronwyn's lips were pressed tightly together as she walked into the hall.

Brian hurried to catch up with her. "Are we taking my car or yours?"

"Mine," she said, casting him an annoyed look. "I don't want you and Cedric discussing my affairs. Are we clear on that?"

"Aye," Brian said as they reached the newly constructed enclosed garage.

The ride into Grinnell was spent talking about mundane topics that kept well away from Viraidan Cree or Cedric's and Brian's attempt to meddle in Bronwyn's affairs. At Saint Mary's, the church was crowded with few seats left unoccupied. Bronwyn and Brian took their places.

Bronwyn joined Brian on the kneeler and made the Sign of the Cross. As was her habit, she looked around before beginning her prayers and was surprised to see Cree at the inside seat across the aisle and three pews up from her.

Once again he was dressed entirely in black with a lightweight turtleneck pullover, its long sleeves pushed up to his elbows, straining across his broad chest and tight dress slacks that accentuated the high firmness of his rump. His long hair was pulled back in a sleek ponytail and glistened blue-black beneath the chandeliers. He was kneeling, eyes closed, head bowed and resting on his clasped hands.

And she could not drag her attention from him.

Neither could several young women and girls who were gawking at him as though he was a feast and they were starving. Even older women glanced surreptitiously in his direction.

As the bells began tolling to call the parishioners to worship, Bronwyn watched Cree lift his head and look at the huge cross hanging behind the altar. Even though he was in profile to her, Bronwyn could see the misery reflected on his face. When the last bell tolled, he crossed himself and sat in the pew.

"Please rise and direct your attention to the back of the church," one of the deacons called.

As Cree turned, their eyes met. Bronwyn saw his gaze shift to Brian then quickly away.

A young couple had brought their child to be baptized and the preliminary ritual of the welcoming of the infant, his parents and godparents at the back of the church, kept Bronwyn's attention. But she could feel Cree's gaze on her back and at one point noticed Brian turn and look the Reaper's way.

As the procession started to the altar, the worshipers turned, singing the *Gloria*. Bronwyn noticed Cree was not singing. He avoided her gaze and she felt the snub as though it had been a physical slap.

If someone had asked her what the readings and homily had been about that Sunday, Bronwyn would not have been able to tell them. Her attention—as was that of many other females—was riveted on Cree. If that had not been the case before the baptism began after the homily, it certainly would have been once the sacrament began.

Bronwyn noticed that Cree did not watch what was going on. His head was bent and he was staring at the floor. Even when the parishioners rose to repeat the baptism vows, Cree did not look at the young couple and the child at the baptismal font. Taking his seat again with the rest of the congregation, he resumed his stony contemplation of



the floor until the deacon took the infant in his arms and came to stand in front of the parishioners.

"Please join me in welcoming Patrick Sean Wilder to the family of God," the deacon called.

Those gathered began clapping. Bronwyn saw the Reaper lift his head—tears cascading down his cheeks.

"What's the matter?" Brian whispered, bending toward her.

"N-nothing," Bronwyn said. She added her distracted clapping to that of the others but her heart was not in the moment. A lump had formed in her throat. Looking at the other women who were openly staring at Cree, she could see they seemed as affected by the man's obvious misery as was she.

Throughout the remainder of the Mass she watched him. She was in a good position to observe his every move so that it did not seem obvious. Her heart ached each time he closed his eyes and lowered his head. She could almost feel the loneliness weighing down his shoulders. At the Sign of Peace, he did not smile at those whose hands he shook, though his lips moved in the traditional recitation of "Peace be with you".

When Communion arrived, she was not surprised to see Cree step aside for the others in his pew to go to receive the Eucharist. She did not miss the longing on his face as he knelt and lowered his head once more.

"You cannot receive Communion if you are not in a state of Grace," she remembered Father Goodmayer snarling from the pulpit many years earlier. "If you are a sinner, either by choice or in your heart, you must never take the Body and Blood of our precious Jesus Christ!"

Knowing what Cree was, what he had no doubt done as a warrior, she could well understand why he did not feel worthy to receive the Eucharist. Coming back from receiving her own Communion, she added to her prayers peace of mind for Viraidan Cree. As she did, she saw him look at her for a moment before resuming his stony demeanor.

It was a lively song that made up the Recessional when the Mass ended. After the last chorus, the parishioners struck up an impromptu clapping in appreciation of the folk choir's efforts.

"That was fantastic!" Brian said, smiling. "They keep getting better every month."

Bronwyn barely heard him. She was trying to find Cree in the people leaving the pews, but he had somehow managed to get past without her seeing. She was disappointed. She didn't think he would go downstairs for coffee and rolls.

The priest and deacons were waiting at the foot of the outside stairs to greet the departing parishioners. Bronwyn and Brian could not easily get to the basement door to go downstairs, so they allowed themselves to be herded outside.

"Nice to see you again, Bronwyn," the shorter of the two deacons said as he hugged Bronwyn then took Brian's hand. "Brian."

She shook hands with the taller deacon then went to speak to the priest who barely acknowledged her. When she turned away, she looked right at Viraidan Cree. He was standing off to one side of the courtyard and was tying a large black bandanna around his head.

"Hi, Viraidan," a couple of teenage girls called as they passed him.

"Miladies," he greeted, then winked at the young women, which amused Bronwyn.

The sound of self-conscious giggles wafted through the air before the girls put their heads together and no doubt compared notes about the handsome man they had been ogling.

"You made their day," Bronwyn said as she walked up to him. She heard Brian let out a long, hard sigh as he followed in her wake.

"Good morning, Bronwyn," Cree said, ignoring her comment.

"I was surprised to see you here. I didn't know you were Catholic."

A muscle bunched in his taut cheek. "A part of me is anyway."

"Are you going down for coffee and rolls?"

Cree looked over her shoulder. From the corner of her eye, Bronwyn caught Brian's stern shake of the head. Before she could say anything, Cree told her he wasn't.

"How 'bout joining us for supper, then?" she asked, giving Brian a look of her own.

"Thank you, but I have business in Iowa City," Cree responded.

"Some other time, then?"

He shrugged carelessly before heading across the street toward his motorcycle, parked in the religious education center's parking lot. Bronwyn watched him sprint between oncoming cars and up the grassy incline. When Cree swung his leg over his bike, Bronwyn felt a ripple of desire drive straight through her belly.

"Great God Almighty," she whispered.

"What?" Brian asked.

"Nothing. Don't do that again, Brian."

"Do what?"

"I saw you warn him off."

Brian's lips tightened. "He's not the man for you."

"You throw Sage Hesar at me like he's manna from heaven but Viraidan is off-limits?"

"Something like that," Brian mumbled.

"Well, I've got news for you, Brian O'Shea," Bronwyn snapped. "Maybe I don't like white bread. Maybe I like rye!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The message light was blinking on Bronwyn's phone when she got home but she ignored it. She was so annoyed with Brian, she had told him she'd changed her mind about fixing supper for the two of them and had left him standing at the curb, his mouth open.

Brownie, stretched out on Bronwyn's mattress, lifted her head to watch her mistress undress.

"Men are idiots!" Bronwyn asserted as she dragged the blouse out of her skirt.

After tossing clothes about until she found the long T-shirt dress that she lounged around in after work, Bronwyn slammed the closet door and stalked into the living room, Brownie close on her heels.

"Give them an inch and they'll take a frigging mile!" Bronwyn snarled as she went into the kitchen.

"Who did what to whom this time?" Cedric asked, looking up from the sink where he was opening a can of cat food.

"Leave me alone, Ceddie. I'm in no mood to discuss the stupidities of men who think they know what's best for me!"

"Ah, we're talking about Cree." Cedric took a fork from the drawer and began ladling the cat food into his mouth.

"That," Bronwyn said, her nose crinkled, "is disgusting."

"No, this is my lunch." He plopped another large morsel into his mouth, grinned and began chewing.

"Yuck!" Bronwyn went into the living room and slumped down on the sofa.

"Did it ever occur to you that Cree isn't interested in you?" Cedric asked from the kitchen door. He leaned against the jamb and continued to scoop his meal from the can. "You've tried hints and that didn't work. If you run after him, that's only going to push him farther away."

"Then what the hell do you suggest I do? And just why the hell do you care since you and Brian were discussing keeping him away from me in the first place?"

"That Australian left a message on your talking machine," Cedric said, scraping the last of the cat food from the can. "He wants to take you out next Friday night."

"It's an answering machine, not a talking machine, and so what?"

"The quickest way to interest a human male is to enflame his ego," Cedric remarked as he licked the fork clean.

"What are you talking about?"

"Perhaps I was a bit erroneous in my thinking," the aged Nightwind suggested. "I've been sitting here thinking I should not discourage you from seeing the Reaper."

"Why not?" Bronwyn asked suspiciously.

"Well," Cedric said, putting the can and fork on a kitchen counter, "the best way to show you Cree is not the man for you is to allow you to see him socially. Once you see he's nothing more than an uncouth, unsophisticated and dull beast, you'll get over this ridiculous infatuation."

Bronwyn narrowed her eyes. "Infatuation?"

"Ah, hell, Bronwyn," Cedric stated with a dismissive wave of his frail hand, "you women go all goo-goo-eyed over that bad-boy persona. Best you learn it's not a romantic thing but a dangerous personality you're dealing with."

"And me going out with Koe Brell will accomplish what?"

"It'll make the Reaper jealous, if he is at all interested in you."

Bronwyn thought about it. Maybe Cedric was right. Cree had shown a decided streak of jealousy where Koenen was involved. What would it hurt to tweak that jealousy a bit?

"And Danyon wouldn't like it," Cedric remarked.

"Like what?"

"You dating that Brell man." Cedric cocked an eyebrow. "He's with Aoife right now and won't be back for another day or so."

Annoying Danyon had never entered her mind. She spent little time in thinking about the Nightwind, and none at all worrying about what did and did not concern him. To her, he was a necessary evil that came along with having Cedric as her companion.

"What would it hurt to go out with the Brell fellow?" Cedric asked.

"I don't know."

"Then call him back and say you'll accompany him. The place he wants to take you sounds interesting."

Bronwyn chewed on her thumbnail for a moment then made up her mind. "If this turns to crap, I'll blame you." She got up and went to the desk.

Cedric shrugged. "You will anyway, dearling."

She punched the button and listened as Koenen Brell told her about a supper club in downtown Des Moines called the Triskelion.

"It's a converted warehouse with brick walls and wood floors. There are three sections of the club and they're shaped like the triskele. Know what I mean?" he asked in his thick Auzzie brogue.

Bronwyn pushed the pause button and turned to Cedric. "What's he talking about?"

"He's referring to the ancient Celtic symbol for earth, sea and sky."

"Oh," she said, and started the message playing again.

"The bar spirals off to one side, the supper tables to another and the bar tables to the third. The dance floor is a large triangle in the center," Koe told her. "The food is

great and the atmosphere has to be experienced. I know you like Celtic music and that's all they play there. You have to go, Bronwyn! Give me a call and tell me what time to pick you up."

Cedric chuckled. "Great close."

"If anyone should know about that," Bronwyn said dryly, "it's you, Mr. I-Buy-Everything-I-See-On-Infomercials."

"We needed a widget that dices, pares and cubes raw meat." Cedric sniffed. "No self-respecting meat eater should be without one."

"Yeah, right," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Take the man up on his offer. What have you got to lose?"

## Chapter Thirteen

The Triskelion was crowded when Bronwyn and Koenen arrived. Customers were milling around in the lobby, drinks in hand, waiting for a table. Some looked resigned to what might be a long wait but a few were obviously angry, impatiently glancing at their watches, scowling at those around them.

"If you don't have a reservation on Friday nights, you're screwed," Brell remarked. With a hand to her back, he ushered Bronwyn past a group of yuppie types. He smiled at the reservations girl who stood like a sentinel between those gathered and the dimly lit supper club beyond. "Table for two for Brell."

The girl checked her clipboard, running her finger down the list of names, and seemed relieved to find what she was looking for. She smiled. "Your table is ready, Dr. Brell."

"How come this asshole gets right in and we've been waiting for a damned hour?" a frizzy-haired woman demanded, her eyes spiteful.

Koenen came toe to toe with the woman. "Could be," he said, his voice icy, "you have godawful hair and my lady doesn't. Or it could be because you're butt-ugly and she isn't. Whatcha think?"

The woman's narrowed eyes flared, her mouth dropped open, closed and opened again.

"Has anyone ever said you look like a largemouth bass when you do that?" Koenen inquired with a wink and a cluck of his tongue.

The woman gasped in outrage, sputtered and turned to the man beside her. "Are you going to let him talk to me like that, Gregory?"

Gregory shrugged and looked away.

"Right this way, Doctor," the reservations girl said, obviously trying not to laugh.

Bronwyn glanced back at the woman, snarling vulgarities and insults at her companion. "You are terrible, Koe," Bronwyn quipped.

"I don't suffer stupidity gladly," he commented as they reached their table.

"I can see that." Bronwyn took the chair he held out for her.

Koenen sat across from her. "Women like that drive me crazy."

"She was rude."

"And classless and vulgar and myriad other epithets I could hurl at her hideous hairdo."

Their waitress appeared, handed them the dinner menus then took their drink orders.

"For as long a wait as there appears out there," Bronwyn commented, "the service is very prompt."

"As I said, the regulars never have a problem getting in on the weekends. We know to reserve our tables." He shook the folds from his napkin. "Otherwise, you may not get in at all. I'll venture to say the Frizz Queen won't be enjoying the hospitality of the Triskelion this evening."

Bronwyn looked around the cozy room. There were thick beams overhead with old cogwheels attached to pulleys that no doubt had served mechanical purposes at one time but which now were used as giant plant hangars. One wall of windows looked out into a courtyard filled with trees and shrubs adorned with tiny white lights. A large fountain sat in the center of the courtyard with park benches to either side. Above the central dance floor, a huge stained glass atrium reflected the light of the full moon.

"This is lovely," she said.

"Yes, it is." Koenen reached for hand. "Almost as lovely as you."

Bronwyn eased her hand from under his and continued her inspection of the room.

As she scanned the small crowd of customers, she was stunned to see Viraidan Cree at a table near the dance floor. He was sitting hunched over the tabletop, his hands wrapped around a nearly full mug of what looked like dark ale. He was staring into the mug and his face was grim, his lips tight.

Bronwyn silently called his name, wondering if he was capable of "hearing" her in the noisy room. He looked up and turned his head in her direction. Their eyes met, held as the Celtic music swirled around them. For a long time, they stared at one another, then the Reaper's gaze shifted to Brell and narrowed. He blinked and turned away, lifting his mug to drain it.

"Bronwyn?" Koenen questioned, waving a hand in front of her face.

Bronwyn flinched, heat flooding her cheeks for she'd forgotten all about her date. She jerked her attention back to the man sitting in front of her. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

Koenen looked behind him. "What's so engrossing back there?"

Bronwyn couldn't refrain from looking toward Cree's table and was surprised to find it empty. She felt keen disappointment plummet to the bottom of her stomach. "I-I thought I saw someone I knew."

"Anyone I'd know, too?" Koenen inquired as their waitress arrived with their drinks.

"I wouldn't think so," she lied.

A lively ballad started from the band and a young woman with long, curly red hair and dressed in a short black skirt and white silk blouse took the stage. As the woman's feet began moving in the tapping rhythms of a lively Irish step dance, Bronwyn and Koenen joined the other patrons in keeping time by clapping.

"Do you step dance?" he called out over the music.

"Lord, no!" Bronwyn laughed.

"I know DeeDee does."

"She took lessons as a girl. I, on the other hand, have two left feet when it comes to tap dancing." She took a sip of her Bloody Maria. "How 'bout you?"

Koenen chuckled. "Elephants can dance better than me. I hate dancing. I can't even do the two-step."

"Why do you come here if you don't like to dance?"

"For the atmosphere and the wonderful food you're going to enjoy."

Bronwyn had hoped to take a turn on the dance floor. Her regret obviously showed.

"Want me to find someone to trip the light fantastic with you?" Koenen inquired.

Bronwyn was saved from answering when Koenen's pager went off. He cursed as he unclipped it from his belt. Reading the calling number, he frowned. "Damn it! I asked them not to bother me unless the world was coming to an end!"

"Baybridge?"

"I'm sorry." Koenen angrily folded his napkin and placed it beside his plate. "I need to see what they want."

"I hope it's nothing serious," she said as he got to his feet.

"The damned buildings better be on the verge of collapse, is all I can say."

Bronwyn watched him stalk toward the lobby where she'd seen the phones. His shoulders were bunched and she was glad it wasn't she who had called him. Drawing in a deep breath, she turned to look once more at the spot where Cree had been sitting. Finding even the mug gone caused deeper disappointment.

Loud applause rang out when the dancer finished her number with a high kick and a rapid tattoo of her tap-studded toes on the parquet. While showing her own appreciation of the dancer's talent, Bronwyn felt hands on her shoulders. Soft warmth invaded her ear along with the words, "Let's dance."

She turned and blinked. Cree was standing there. He held out his hand.

Moving as though she was in a dream, Bronwyn put her hand in his and allowed him to help her to her feet. He led her to the dance floor. As they reached it, the music started. Bronwyn tensed, trying to pull away, but he would not allow it. He swept her into his arms—one hand firmly at her back, her right hand clutched tightly in his.

"I don't want to..." she said, her eyes filling with moisture.

"Shush," he instructed, moving them to the middle of the floor.

It was the song that had brought tears to Bronwyn's eyes. The slow tune had been Sean's favorite. The memory of her singing the words to him caused intense hurt, the pain of it stabbing at her heart, raking over the wound she knew would never heal. The singer's words tore at her very soul.

"Red is the rose on yonder garden grows

"Fair is the lily of the valley



"Clear is the water that flows from the Boyne  
"But my love is fairer than any.  
"Come over the hills, my handsome Irish lad  
"Come over the hills to your darling  
"You choose the road, love, and I'll make the vow  
"And I'll be your true love forever.  
"'Twas down by Killarney's green woods that we strayed  
"When the moon and the stars they were shining  
"The moon shone its rays on his locks of golden hair  
"And he swore he'd be my true love forever.  
"It's not for the parting of my sister Kate  
"It's not for the grief of my mother  
"'Tis all for the loss of my handsome Irish lad  
"That my heart is broken forever."

Cree waltzed with expert grace, his long legs in perfect sync with the soft strains of the Celtic melody washing over them. His eyes were locked on hers as they danced, her body so close to his she could feel his belt buckle against her stomach. The black silk of his shirt shimmered beneath the revolving lights of the disco ball overhead. Sparkles of that playful light reflected off his soft black leather britches, so tight on his powerful legs it looked as though he had been poured into them.

Vaguely aware of the people watching them, of the women staring with hungry eyes at his taut body, she began to relax in his arms. The moment she gave in to the pull of the music, the insistence of his hold, he pulled her closer to him so that her cheek came to rest against the opened collar of his shirt. She felt his chin rest gently on the back of her head and closed her eyes, taking in the cinnamon smell of his cologne and experiencing its fragrance in the pit of her belly.

It was as though they were the only two people on the dance floor. The singer seemed to sense their pleasure, for she sang it again in its entirety. Cree waltzed Bronwyn across the floor, his movements sensual and plying her body with wave after wave of desire. When the music stopped, he dipped her low, held her there for a moment then swept her around in a half circle and finally tight up against him so that their bodies touched from chest to knee.

There was no sound in the room as they stared at each other for the space of several heartbeats. When noise at last intruded on their intimate moment, it was the band's fiddler who played a lively Celtic tune with vigor.

Cree still held Bronwyn's hand in his. He brought it to his lips and turned her arm so he could plant a soft kiss on her upturned wrist. His gaze never left hers.

Bronwyn drew in a slow breath, deeply affected by the sensations his touch sent through her. When he finally released her hand and stepped back, she felt like throwing herself into his powerful arms.

"Another time," he said, then turned away, disappearing among the dancers before she could bid him stay.

It was Koenen's hand, tight on her upper arm that brought her back to her senses.

"Did you enjoy making a fool of yourself out there?" he snarled, drawing her off the dance floor.

Bronwyn tugged against his rough handling and pulled her arm free. "Excuse me?"

Koenen's handsome face twisted into a mask of contempt. "I can't believe you allowed that son of a bitch to rub all over you like that. I've never been so disgusted. You were acting like a slut in heat!"

Fury blazed within Bronwyn. She slapped him as hard as she could, snapping his head to the side. With such rage and venom in the hit, Brell staggered beneath the force of it.

"Go to hell!" Bronwyn snarled and spun around, pushing her way through the curious onlookers.

It was raining when she shoved open the heavy oaken doors, after gathering her purse from their table, and walked into the Des Moines night. A lone taxi was parked across the street and she put two fingers in her mouth and whistled loudly. The cabbie turned on his headlights and made a U-turn, pulling up to the canopy under which she was standing. Just as she reached for the taxi door, Koenen put a firm hand against it.

"I brought you, I'll take you home," he grated.

"I'm not going anywhere with you." She pushed away his hand and tried to open the door, only to have him pull her from the curb. "Get your hands off me!" she yelled.

"I'm sorry, okay?" he said, holding up his hands. "I got a little crazy in there and –"

"A little crazy?"

The cabbie rolled down the passenger window and asked if she was getting in.

"Yes," Bronwyn said.

"No," Koenen replied at the same time.

"There are people behind you wanting a lift," the cabbie protested. "Either get in or step back, lady."

Bronwyn started around Koenen, but he blocked her path. When he did, another couple made a run for the cab door, scurrying inside as quickly as they could.

"Now see what you did?" Bronwyn slammed her open palm against Koenen's shoulder.

"I will take you home."

"No, you won't!" she insisted, attempting to go back inside so she could call another cab.

"Woman, listen..." Koenen began, then stopped. A hateful smirk crossed his face as he looked over Bronwyn's shoulder. "I ought to stomp the shit outta you!"

Bronwyn turned to find the Reaper standing a few feet away, his hands inside the pockets of his leather jacket. Instant relief turned to dread as she realized the situation could turn ugly.

"You had them page me, didn't you?" Koenen hissed. "You did it so you could move in on her!"

"You need a ride home, milady?" he asked Bronwyn.

"Yes."

"Let's go, then."

"You're not taking her anywhere, Cree!" Koenen barked.

Cree took a step toward Brell. A muscle ticced in the Reaper's lean jaw. "You think you can stop me?"

Brell's lips skinned back from his teeth. "It will be my pleasure to put you down, you arrogant hound!"

Bronwyn moved between them. "Don't either of you start something here!"

Several people had gathered outside the club doors, avidly watching.

"I'm going with him and that's all there is to it, Koenen," Bronwyn snapped. "If you don't like it, tough!"

Koenen looked as though he was about to explode. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides and he shot daggers of hate at Cree with his eyes. "Yeah, you go with him, Dr. McGregor. Get drenched on that piece of shit motorcycle for all I care. I hope you both catch your death of cold!"

Brell spun around and headed back inside the club.

Bronwyn sighed heavily, looking out at the pouring rain. She didn't look forward to getting drenched. It had also turned cooler and she was feeling the chill through the lightweight pullover she wore.

"Here," Cree said, shrugging out of his leather jacket.

"Oh, no, I can't," she protested, but he was already swinging the heavy jacket around her shoulders.

"I don't need it." He took her arm to lead her to the parking lot.

"I hope you have a helmet," she said miserably, lifting his jacket to cover her head.

"Afraid not."

Bronwyn whimpered. Stepping into a puddle, she whimpered again, as miserable as she could remember being for quite some time. But she was pleasantly surprised when Cree drew her toward a sports utility vehicle. He opened the door for her and ushered her inside.

Through the rain-streaked windshield, she watched him walk around the SUV. He didn't seem to mind the water pummeling him, and when he opened the door and climbed behind the wheel, she smiled as he raked his hands through the wet strands of his long hair.

"I didn't know you owned a car," she said.

"I don't. It's Brian's."

"And you just happened to borrow it this evening?"

"Something like that," he said, sticking the key in the ignition.

"Lucky for me. I really am happy you came along. Thank you for rescuing me."

"You should be more selective in the company you keep," he told her, pulling into traffic.

"I'm sure Dr. Brell would say the same of you."

"There is no love lost between us."

"Why?" she asked, watching him through the greenish glow of the dashboard lights.

He shrugged.

She knew she'd get no answer from him so she settled in the seat, drawing his heavy jacket closer around her.

"Want me to turn on the heat?" he queried.

"No, I'm okay, but you're soaked. You have to be cold."

"Reapers don't get cold."

"Never?"

He shook his head.

"What is it like where you come from?" she asked, wondering about the climate.

Cree frowned. "I don't know."

Bronwyn's brows shot upward. "Why not?"

He took the Interstate and accelerated onto the super slab before he glanced at her. "I was very young when last I was there."

Remembering the story Brian had told her about Cree's crash-landing on Earth, she was even more curious. "How old were you when you left?"

"Chale?"

"That's your home?"

He nodded, changing lanes. "I was two years old when I was stolen by a Dahrenian slaver and taken to Rysalia."

"Where were you before you came here?"

Cree was silent for a moment. In the reflected light from the dashboard, Bronwyn saw his jaw harden. "On Amazeen Prime," he stated.

"From the way you said that, I take it you didn't like living there."

"I was a prisoner of the Amazeen. No, I didn't like it."

"Had you broken one of their laws or were you a prisoner of war?"

"I was sold to them by that infernal Dahrenian. Purchased to be used in their breeding program when I came of age."

A shiver ran through her. "They do things like that?"

"They tried," he said with a snide laugh, "but Reapers don't breed well in captivity. And there is only male issue from their loins. Female chromosomes are killed before they ever leave the male Reaper's body."

"Why?"

"Because females are weak, unworthy of the parasite's help."

"I take it the parasite is male."

"On the contrary. It is female."

He glanced at the accelerator. As if realizing he was going well over the speed limit, he let the SUV drop back into a more acceptable range.

"Then why would the parasite kill female chromosomes?" Bronwyn asked.

"I've always thought it was jealousy, but I could be wrong. Thank Al-el the Amazeen warriors could not produce half-Reaper, half-Amazeen females. Those bitches should be allowed to die out, but unfortunately they find males to breed with wherever they go."

"The Amazeen are females?" Bronwyn gasped.

"They are the scourge of our star system. As evil as the nights on Virago are long."

Cree sped up to pass a semi, the backwash from the truck's rear wheels making it hard to see. He handled the SUV as though it was a natural extension of him, gliding in and out of traffic with an ease Bronwyn found exciting.

"I'm curious," she said.

"So I've noticed."

"If you don't want to answer, you don't have to."

"If I think you're getting too personal, I'll tell you so."

She laughed. "I know you will." She stretched out her legs, enjoying the ride.

"Adventureland," he said, pointing to the right up ahead.

Bronwyn looked toward the glowing neon lights around the amusement park. "I didn't notice it when we passed on the way to the Triskelion."

"I doubt Brell would have thought to show it to you. It's not something a wild and swinging guy would find entertaining."

"Ouch. You really *don't* think much of him, do you?"

"I never think of him at all if I can avoid it."

They were silent for a moment, then Bronwyn said, "You're good."

Cree turned to look at her. "Good at what?"

"You managed to get us off the subject," she sighed, amused at the ease with which he'd maneuvered the topic from himself.

Swerving expertly into the exit lane, Cree took them off the interstate. "Too much spiced cider at the Tris. Gotta pee."

"Was that what you were drinking? I thought it was ale."

"Reapers shouldn't drink alcohol," he said, then mumbled under his breath, "Especially this one."

He turned into the truck stop at the exit and slid the SUV into a parking space. Turning off the engine, he glanced at Bronwyn. "Need to go in?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Then I'll lock the car behind me," he said, opening the door.

"Why? Is this a dangerous part of town?"

"No, but I'll feel better knowing you are safe behind locked doors."

Warmth settled gently in Bronwyn's stomach. She watched him with interested eyes as he went into the truck stop. Her gaze dropped to his rear end and held as he walked. "Man, oh, man," she said, liking what she saw.

Through the rain-streaked windshield, Bronwyn saw several women and a couple of men inside the truck stop turn to watch him pass and wondered if they weren't as intrigued by the man as she was.

He was undeniably handsome, virile and seductive. The powerful build of his body was a bit intimidating though reassuring at the same time. She doubted few men could take him in a fair fight. He had about him an air of tightly controlled anger that she suspected could become lethal should he unleash it. Any man foolish enough to engage the Reaper in combat might find he'd bitten off more than he could chew.

The rain increased in strength. Wind buffeted the car. Lightning lit up the night and drove Bronwyn further down in her seat. As thunder shook the windows, she whimpered and buried her face in the confines of Cree's leather jacket. She barely heard the locks pop up, but flinched as rain misted into the car.

"The gods-be-damned bottom's fallen out," Cree complained as he slammed the door shut. "We're going to have to—"

A strident shriek of lightning forked across the heavens. Bronwyn screamed, covering her ears.

Cree shot the driver's seat back as far as it would go and reached for her, dragging her gently over the console and into his lap where he cradled her protectively against his firm chest. "It's all right, *ghrá mo chroí*," he whispered against her hair. "I am here."

She pressed against him, hiding her face in the wet coolness of his shirt. His arms were wrapped around her, one hand covering her exposed ear to block the sound of the torrential rains hammering at the car. With each sharp crack of lightning across the firmament, his hold tightened and when the harsh glare pulsed more frequently, he began to croon to her in his native tongue.

Despite her intense fear of the weather, Bronwyn concentrated on the richness of his voice as he sang. Though she did not understand his language, she knew the melody well. It was "Red is the Rose". The cadence of his heart beat strongly to the rhythm of the tune. He had a beautiful, clear voice and he sang the old Celtic tune with feeling.

They sat that way for twenty minutes as the storm raged overhead. Hidden by the slashing rain striking the fogged windows, Cree and Bronwyn were cocooned within the SUV, oblivious to what was going on outside. His singing had lulled her, soothed her phobic fears. She relaxed against him, her left hand tucked inside the V of his shirt, her fingertips tracing the raised pattern of his tattoo, occasionally plucking at the wiry hair that thickly covered his broad chest.

By the time the rain stopped, Bronwyn was asleep, her head tucked under his chin, her fingers entangled in the chain of the medallion he wore. Cree was content to sit there holding her, listening to her soft breathing. He was watching truck-stop customers come and go, and when he finally realized he and Bronwyn were receiving odd looks, he mentally shook himself from the languor that had claimed him and gently called her name.

Bronwyn stirred, but she was obviously comfortable and snuggled closer to his warmth.

"Wake up, little one," he whispered, stroking her back.

She opened her eyes. "Where are we?" she asked, yawning.

"Bosselman's Truck Stop."

"Umm." She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder.

"We're creating quite a fascinating spectacle, milady," he said with a note of humor in his deep voice.

She sighed. "Ask me if I care."

He chuckled. "I don't need to. I know you don't, but I do."

She looked up at him. "Party pooper."

Cree stared into her beautiful face and lost all sense of correctness. The people walking past the car meant nothing to him. All he saw was the woman he loved gazing up at him with trust and budding affection, and he bent his head to claim her lips.

His kiss was as soft as a butterfly's wings plying over Bronwyn's flesh. The touch made her groan, wanting more, needing a deeper pressure, an invasion that would satisfy the hunger building within her. She craved to feel him stretched out atop her, his body pressing hers firmly to the seat, his shaft deep within the very core of her.

"Uh-uh." He lifted his head and gently shoved her back to her side of the car. "Not the time or the place."

"Aidan," she protested in a childish tone of petulance.

He stopped, thrilled she had used the shortened version of his name. A glimmer of pure desire went straight through him and it was all he could do not to jump on her and ravish her where she sat.

"You're a beast," she grumbled as he started the car.

"Best you not forget that, milady," he replied in a throaty tone.

"You know what I meant," she said, dragging her seat belt across her.

As Cree backed out of the parking space, Bronwyn was keenly disappointed he had broken off their kiss. But she was proud of him too, for the self-restraint at least one of them had exhibited.

The tires made squishing sounds against the rain-slick pavement as they pulled onto the interstate. To the east, flickers of light still pulsed in the sky, but there the rain had stopped.

"Are we going to talk about your time on Amazeen?" she asked to break the silence.

"If you like. What are you curious about, now?"

She glanced at him, realizing he had not asked the question in a snide way, but seemed resigned to tell her what she wanted to know.

"Did they hurt you?"

"There is hurt, then there is hurt, little one." He took her hand and brought it to his thigh, rested it there, his fingers twined with hers. "I wasn't tortured deliberately, if that's what you mean."

She moved closer to him. "But they hurt you."

"They tried to crush my Reaper pride."

"But they didn't succeed."

"They did not. What they didn't realize is when you attempt to humble a Reaper, all you do is make him meaner."

Bronwyn smiled. "I can see that happening."

He glanced at her. "I'm sure you can."

"Did they manage to—" she blushed and looked out the side window "—you know."

"Breed with me?" he asked, humor in his tone.

"Yeah."

"One of them did, but I don't think she found the experience a pleasant one," he said grimly.

Bronwyn looked around at him. "Why?"

He grinned. In the greenish light from the dashboard, his face looked evil. He chuckled. "Reapers can mind-screw women, mess with their libidos, but Ski'Ah didn't know that. It's a psychic ability we're born with and learn to control at an early age. I knew what she was going to do before she ever laid her filthy hands on me. I used



every bit of my ability to suggest to her that she unchain me and let me show her how well Reapers can fornicate."

Bronwyn tucked her lower lip between her lips. "Good at it, are you?"

"Experts."

She wagged her head at his brag then shifted in her seat so she faced him. "I take it they had you tied down."

"Spread-eagled, naked and defenseless. Or so they thought."

"She let you loose."

"Quicker than a Diabolusian warthog can shit in the forest."

Bronwyn laughed. "Did you hurt her?"

"I damned near killed her, and would have, if she hadn't had her women pump me full of cinera."

"Brian mentioned that drug. What is it again?"

"It's a neuroinhibitor that instantly blocks oxygen input to the brain. It makes you pass out. It's the only way you can put a Reaper down instantly."

"I imagine they weren't too happy with you."

"If Reapers scarred, I'd still have the laser whip marks to prove it across my back."

Bronwyn tightened her fingers around his. "I'm sorry."

"No big deal. I worked that punishment to my advantage."

"How?"

He pulled around a long motor home before answering. "They beat me so severely, I couldn't walk for a few hours. One of the Amazeen felt sorry for me." He snorted. "I made sure she did."

"You mind-screwed her," Bronwyn said.

"In a big way."

"She's the one who helped you escape."

"Provided me with the ship, the manual, all the síoraí crystals I needed to take me to the far ends of the universe and a goodly supply of Sustenance to keep me sane until I got there."

She was sure she knew what had happened, but asked anyway. "She thought you were going to take her with you."

"Amazeens are not the brightest stars in the megaverse."

"What do you think happened to her?"

"Best-case scenario? They banished her and sent her to one of their nunneries on Idyllion."

"And worst-case scenario?"

"They made an example of her and burned her alive."

Bronwyn shuddered, drawing his jacket around her once more. "Which do you think happened?"

He was quiet for a moment. "I think they turned her into a crispy critter."

"Do you regret she might have been killed because she helped you?"

"No."

Bronwyn eased her hand from beneath his. "Why not?"

He pulled the SUV onto the breakdown lane. The vehicle skidded on the gravel as he slammed on the brakes. He pushed the gear into park.

"They kept me locked in a cell with nothing in there but a gods-be-damned cot to which I was chained hand and foot. Any of them could come in anytime they liked to 'assess' my potential. Some of them were merely curious and did no more than stroke my chest and legs. Some were more aggressive and directed their attention to that part of me they found the most interesting. Even though they didn't hurt me, being fondled against your will is not enjoyable, Bronwyn. It was humiliating, degrading and I loathed every moment they had their hands on me.

"I managed to stay perfectly quiet around women like that, for they really had no meanness in them. But a few—and that included the bitch who helped me escape—treated me like a prize stallion they could pull and twist and hurt until I cried out, until I showed something other than stoic acceptance of what they were doing to me. Those women I will hate until the day I cease to draw breath, and if there is a Hereafter, I will curse them until time is no more!"

Bronwyn lowered her head. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For what they did to you."

"I've been hurt far worse than that, baby," he snapped, reaching for the gearshift lever.

She said nothing as he slammed his foot on the accelerator and sped down the interstate. They were silent all the way back to Baybridge.

## Chapter Fourteen

When Cree pulled into the parking garage and stopped the SUV at the elevator, he didn't get out to open the door for Bronwyn, but sat staring out the windshield, his jaw tight, his hands wrapped around the wheel.

"Thank you for bringing me home," she mumbled, shrugging out of his jacket.

"My pleasure," he grated, gunning the engine.

If he had pushed her out the door, she thought, he couldn't have made his feelings any clearer by racing the motor. She was surprised he hadn't looked at his watch in a bid to make her hurry.

"I don't wear a gods-be-damned watch," he snarled as he leaned over, took the handle of the door and slammed it shut behind her.

Bronwyn's mouth dropped open as he peeled away, the squeal of the tires loud in the parking garage.

"Son of a bitch!" she hurled at the departing taillights.

She stood there a moment, growing angrier by the second. Hissing, she stomped to the elevator, jabbed the button and mumbled curses. By the time she reached her apartment, she had worked herself into a fine head of steam.

Cedric jumped straight up off the sofa, the fur on his back going stiff as Bronwyn slammed into the room. He hissed, his whiskers twitching before he shifted into human form. "What in Raphian's name happened?"

"Men!" Bronwyn ran through the living room and into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

Brownie padded to the door and scratched at the panel, whimpering. The little dog looked back at Cedric.

"I don't know," Cedric answered the silent canine plea for understanding. He walked to Bronwyn's door and knocked lightly.

"Go away!" Bronwyn said, her voice rife with tears.

"Can I help?" Cedric asked, stroking the door. Rarely was the portal closed between them, for he slept each night in the rocker beside her bed and when he couldn't, he was uncomfortable.

"Leave me alone, Cedric!"

The Nightwind leaned his forehead against the door. Her crying unsettled him. He slid down beside the portal and resumed his feline shape. Brownie whimpered again and curled up beside him.

It was a little past midnight when Cedric sensed the other presence in the room. He opened his eyes and looked up. Brownie woke, too. The little dog growled low in her throat then slunk away on her belly.

Cedric shifted, coming with effort into his human form as his old bones cracked and popped. He took in the look on the face of the being standing before him and shook his head. "What you are going to do is wrong."

"She is mine. As those before her were mine."

The Nightwind shook his head. "This is *wrong*."

Danyon glared. "Why don't you go back to your lair for a while, Cedric."

Fear filled Cedric. "Danyon, no! I don't want to—"

"I think you should take a leave of absence for a few days."

"I won't interfere!" Cedric said, tears forming in his eyes. "I swear, I will not interfere. Just don't send me back. Please don't send me back!"

Danyon smiled, but there was no warmth in that cold expression. "Go back to your lair," he ordered, his voice hard and rife with demand. "Now!"

Before Cedric could reach out to his master, he disappeared in a flash of multicolored light. His howl of misery was cut off in mid-vibrato, but it was enough to set Brownie to whimpering.

Bronwyn, awakened by the sounds coming from her living room, sat up in bed. The light from the room beyond cast her visitor in silhouette and her heart began to pound.

"Who's there?" she asked, knowing Cedric would never dare enter her room without permission.

"Rest easy, milady," was the soft, throaty command.

Bronwyn drew in a quick breath. "Danyon?" she asked incredulously. She threw back the covers. "What the hell are you—"

He moved so quickly she had no time to get out of bed. The protest that began on her lips died as he reached for her, a strange tingling crawling up her arm to numb her brain.

"Lie down," he ordered.

Unable to resist, Bronwyn did as she was told.

"Listen to what I say to you and understand every word. I have waited long enough for you to come to me. The time for waiting is long past."

It was as though a blanket of thick fog had formed around her. She could hear nothing but his mesmerizing voice, feel nothing but his hand on her arm as he stroked her, see nothing but the glow of his crimson eyes peering into hers.

"You thwarted me this evening, Bronwyn. Had the Reaper not appeared, I would have seduced you in the form of Koenen Brell and made you mine once and for all. I went to much trouble to take Brell's worthless life and assume his unpleasant shape. I

saved you from his vile plan to destroy you but what thanks did I get? The least you could have done was spend one night with me!"

Bronwyn was in thrall, and when Danyon's hands moved to the front of her gown, she could not protest the liberties he took. She barely felt the cool air wash over her as he removed her gown, and she didn't flinch when he stood and removed his clothing. Though the weight of his body covered hers, and his hands grew insistent upon her flesh, she made no sound. The heat of him pressed into her, sinking her into the soft comfort of the mattress, yet she experienced no fear. She was a mannequin for him to move and mold as he saw fit. Totally detached from what was happening, she lay at the mercy of the Nightwind.

"Put your arms around me," he ordered, his knee between her thighs.

She did as she was told, bringing him tightly to her breast.

"You will feel great ecstasy in my arms, beloved. The passion within you will rage."

The first faint stirrings of desire rippled through Bronwyn's body. She squirmed beneath him, arching her hips to implement his invasion.

"You are mine," he whispered against his ear. He placed himself at the entrance of her womanhood. "You will revel in my lovemaking and feel the power of it."

She began to pant with need, bringing up her legs to clasp his waist.

With a low chuckle of victory, Danyon entered her, going deep within her sheath, impaling her on the thrust of his desire.

He rode her hard, bringing her to mindless release, her scream of fulfillment bringing a howl of satisfaction from his throat. She clung to him, her nails digging deep furrows into his back but he seemed only to revel in the pain.

Long after he had left her—his instructions as clear in her mind as the soft daylight filtering in through the blinds—Bronwyn felt the thrill of his touch, the satiation of a need she had long waited to have.

"You will not deny me when I come to you as Koenen Brell," he had whispered to her, his fingers tracing lazy patterns on her naked belly. "We will see one another when I—"

He stopped and cocked his head, as if hearing a call Bronwyn could not hear. His lips drew back over teeth that elongated into savage fangs, and he hissed and cursed in obviously frustration. "No, Aoife! Not now!"

But whatever pulled at him must have been too strong, for he readied to leave.

"Remember nothing of this night," he told Bronwyn. "Remember only that when Koenen Brell comes to you, you will do whatever he bids. Understand?"

"Yes."

Danyon had kissed her long and hard, his tongue raping her mouth with deep possession. With his brand of ownership still seeping from beneath her quivering legs, he left her, wantonly spread upon the bed where he had defiled her.

When she came to herself midway through the morning, she heard the ringing of the phone beside her bed. In the cocooned stupor from which she had to drag herself, she could not find the energy to reach for the phone. She listened as the machine answered in the living room but was not overly curious to know who was calling. With what little vitality she had left, she pulled the cover over her nakedness and went back to sleep, wondering vaguely why Cedric was not in the rocking chair.

\* \* \* \* \*

Viraidan Cree had slept harder than he could ever remember, but his restless tossing had completely denuded his bed of covering. The sheets lay crumpled on the floor, the coverlet hung precariously over the footboard. The black silk sleep pants he wore were plastered to his legs. His bare chest glistened with sweat.

He felt groggy and his head hurt something fierce. There was a foul taste in his mouth and his belly rumbled with a slight cramp.

"What the gods-be-damned hell is wrong with me?" he muttered, pushing up and attacking his pillow as though it was an enemy. He plowed his hands through his hair, tugging at the thick mass.

Sitting up had made his head swim and he reached behind to grab the headboard. Squeezing his eyes shut, he willed the vertigo to pass. When he opened his eyes, he saw the glass sitting on his bed stand.

For a moment he was puzzled, then he groaned and mentally kicked himself. It all came back to him in a rush of self-contempt—going to the liquor store at the mini-mall, demanding the clerk give him the most potent bottle on the shelves.

"I want to forget everything!" Cree had snarled.

"Well, there's Sharp Image," the clerk responded. "That stuff is ninety-eight proof."

"Proof of what?" Cree spat.

The clerk laughed. "How stupid a man can be when he drinks it. If getting blitzed is what you want, that'll sure do the trick."

Obviously it had.

The liquor had been awful, its fumes working on Cree's supersensitive olfactory nerves even before he took the first drink. He had forced himself to swallow the godawful mess, which burned a path down his gullet—far worse tasting than Brian's whiskey—and had filled his glass several times before the pleasant sense of floating lulled him into thinking he could pass the night comfortably numb.

"The hell with you, Bronwyn McGregor," he had grumbled as he climbed into bed with the bottle and glass, "and your condemnation of what I helped do to Ski' Ah!"

Perhaps the night had been passed in comfortable detachment—the ever-present image of Ski'Ah burning to her death—but the morning was bringing with it a throbbing agony between his temples and a belly that was on fire.

When he belched, the taste of the grain alcohol flooded his mouth and he gagged. He shot up from the bed as though launched from a rocket sled.

Stumbling into the bathroom, he retched into the toilet until his insides felt as though they would squeeze out through his gasping mouth. The residual liquor bubbled into his nose, burning like hell and dropped him to his knees to clutch the porcelain stool.

"Sweet Alel," he groaned, his long hair falling over his face.

Ralph padded into the bathroom and stood between the tub and toilet, his dark gaze intent on the Reaper.

"Dying," Cree said, then gagged. More fluid than he thought he could possibly have inside his body exploded from his throat.

"Humphf," Ralph replied with what might well have been doggie disgust.

Had he not seen it with his own eyes, Cree would not have believed what Ralph did. The dog loped over to the linen closet, nosed open the door, stood on his hind legs to reach an upper shelf, took a washrag in his mouth and dropped back to all fours. Carrying the rag to the vanity, he stood again, dropped the washrag in the sink, managed to grip the cold water handle with his teeth and pull it toward him to turn on the water. It was a wet, soggy mess that he brought over to Cree, but the Reaper greatly appreciated the effort.

Ralph sat on his haunches as Cree dragged the dripping cloth over his pale face.

"Humphf?"

"Aye, I feel better," Cree managed to admit. He sat cross-legged on the floor and leaned his head against the wall. "But I'm still dying."

"Humphf!" Ralph snorted with a yawn.

"'Not likely', my ass. I am dying here, dog."

The ringing of the phone brought instant agony to Cree's head and he slapped his hands over his ears.

If dogs could smirk, Ralph smirked as he padded into the living room. He reappeared with the satellite phone between his jaws, dropping the instrument into his master's lap.

The chirp of the phone brought tears to Cree's eyes but he was able to lower one hand from his ear and grab the implement of torture. "What?" he whined in a pitiful voice.

"Where is Bronwyn?" Brian queried.

"I don't know," Cree whimpered, the sound of his voice excruciating.

"I've called her apartment all morning and there's no answer," Brian grumbled. "Did she come home last night or spend it with Brell?"

"No Brell."

"What?" When Cree didn't answer, Brian asked again, his voice harsh and louder.

"No, Brian, no," Cree moaned. "Don't do that."

There was a moment of silence, then a heavy sigh. "What did you drink?"

"Proof," was all Cree could remember.

Another silence then Brian snorted. "Fool. I'm on my way over there."

Cree was still sitting beside the toilet, his head against the wall, a death grip on the phone when Brian came into the bathroom and hoisted him to his feet.

"What a gods-be-damned mess you've made," Brian accused. "Well, you'll be the one to have to clean it up!"

Taking Cree into the living room, Brian shoved him onto the sofa, ignoring the Reaper's gasp of pain. "Here," he said, picking up a plastic squeeze bottle he'd obviously brought with him. "Drink this."

"What is it?"

"Never mind what it is, just drink it!"

The lavender brew smelled awful and the taste wasn't much better, but almost instantly the heavy throbbing inside his head and the bitter taste in his mouth disappeared. The nausea fled almost as quickly and his mind began to clear.

"What was that?" Cree asked, wiping his mouth with the back of his arm.

"Cechanz. One of the drugs the queen told us about."

"The gods bless Her spiny little heart."

"What happened? You get mad because Bronnie went out with Mr. Down Under?"

Cree laid his head on the back of the sofa and pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers. "I brought her home, Brian."

Brian stilled, his eyes flaring. "From where?"

"The Triskelion."

"How the hell did that happen?"

The lavender medicine had done its job so that Brian's shout did not cause Cree the agony it would have five minutes before. Cree sighed. "It's a long story."

"You just happened to be there? When have you ever gone to the Tris?"

"There's always a first time."

"Didn't I tell you to keep away from her?"

Cree didn't answer. He lay sprawled on the sofa, his long legs stuck out in front of him.

Brian looked toward the bedroom. "Is she in there?"

"No."

Ignoring the reply, Brian got up and checked anyway. He came back, his lips pursed. "I went by her apartment on the way here and she didn't answer the door."

"Maybe she's with her mother."



"DeeDee went to Europe last week with Neal and Sage Hesar, or did you forget that?"

"Then maybe she went to Rebecca Woods. They've become good friends."

"I tried there. Rebecca's husband said she's in Chicago at the King Tut exhibit this weekend."

"Well, maybe she went for a walk," Cree said, exasperated. "How the hell would I know?"

"I've been worried about her all night."

Cree raised his head and looked at the older man. "I'd know if something was wrong with her."

"You would? Drunk out of your mind? Thinking clearly and able to hear her if she needed you?" Before Cree could answer, Brian snorted. "Oh, I forgot you have her blood indexed within you. You should be totally aware of anything that goes on with her, right?"

"Brian—"

"I don't have such a connection to her! And I'm worried!"

"All right!" Cree yelled. He shot up from the sofa. "Let's find her, then!"

Halfway to the door, Cree stopped and a hard shudder ran through his body. He stumbled, clutched a floor lamp to keep from falling even as Brian made a grab for him.

When the older man touched Cree, he groaned. "Oh, Alel, not now!"

Cree was hot as fire, the vibratory waves of a pending Transition rippling through his flesh faster than ever.

Throwing his arm around the Reaper, Brian pulled him out the door and down the corridor to the elevator, slapping angrily at the button until the doors peeled back. Thrusting a sweating, panting Cree inside, Brian pushed the button to the lower level.

"It was the alcohol," Brian said, "and the Transitioning out of cycle that brought this on."

"Tell me something I don't know," Cree whispered, his body beginning to twist with the fiery agony spreading through his organs.

"You are an ungrateful young sot."

Cree gasped in torment as his limbs twisted and popped, the bones elongating and the joints cracking. Thick, wiry hair began shooting up from his flesh and the smell of it was musky in the close confines of the elevator.

"Hold on," Brian begged, obviously hoping to get Cree to the containment cell before full bloodlust Transition occurred.

The elevator stopped. Both Reapers stumbled down the corridor toward the cell, Cree bent over with the pain in his belly. As Brian grunted beneath Cree's weight, Cree whimpered in excruciating pain.

Opening the containment cell door was easy, but Brian had to wrestle Cree into the room, shoving him to the floor. He slammed the door shut as fast as he could, for the bloodlust had come fully on the man in the cell. Howls of rage shook the walls. Cree sprang at the door, pummeling it with black leathery fists and scraping lethal talons down the steel surface. Even though Cree crashed into the door with all his brutal strength, the thickness of the walls and door muffled the sound.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Brian hung his head, exhausted and unnerved by the quick out-of-sequence Transition that could have been a disaster had he not been there to see to Viraidan Cree. He slumped against the wall, panting and ran a trembling hand across his mouth.

"Too close," he said, feeling the thunderous vibrations hitting the wall behind him. "Too close."

\* \* \* \* \*

Brian knocked one last time on Bronwyn's door and was about to turn away when he heard the lock click. When the door opened and he saw her standing there, he relaxed. "Where've you been, sweeting?"

"Right here." She stepped back to let him in.

"You didn't answer your phone. And when I came by earlier there was no answer."

"I was probably in the shower. I don't know why, but I've taken three showers today." She shrugged away her words. "Did you leave a message on the machine?"

"Aye," he replied, getting a good look at her. Her face was haggard, her eyes dull. "Are you sick?"

"Migraine." She curled up on the sofa, her hands tucked beneath her cheek.

"Oh, dearling, I'm sorry. I'll leave."

"No, don't go. I took my meds and it should go away in a bit."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then I may need you to take me to get a shot at the clinic."

"Of course." Brian started to take a seat in one of the two recliners flanking the sofa. "Can I get you anything?"

"Some lemon-lime soda?"

"Sure thing." He headed for the kitchen.

Bronwyn took the iced glass of soda when he returned. "Thanks."

"Where's the Old One?" he asked, looking for Cedric.

"I don't know," Bronwyn answered, taking a sip of the beverage. "He wasn't here when I woke up this morning."

"Is that like him to up and disappear like this?"

"He never has before," Bronwyn sighed. "I've been calling him and Danyon all morning, but neither has answered."

"Perhaps they're together."

"Could be. I know Aoife is dying and Danyon could have needed Cedric to help ease her."

"Aoife?"

"The woman to whom Danyon is pledged. She is close to one hundred years old and has been ill for some time."

"You've met her?"

"No, but Cedric has told me about her."

"I don't know that much about incubi and their women," Brian said with a shrug. "I have a hard enough time understanding my own kind."

"Then maybe you can tell me what I can do to help Viraidan," she said, finishing the soda.

"You can stay away from him," Brian grumbled.

Bronwyn closed her eyes. "Maybe I don't want to."

When Brian did not reply, she opened her eyes and looked at him. Before she could say anything else, he stood.

"Come with me," he said.

"Brian, I don't feel like —"

"You wanted to know what you could do for him? Then come with me and I'll show you."

"Where?" she asked, pushing herself up.

"To the containment cell."

Bronwyn froze, her eyes wide. "He's Transitioning?"

"You need to see what we are. You need to understand how it is with us."

"No," she said, putting the glass on the coffee table. "He wouldn't want me to see him like that without a damned good reason. Just traipsing down there to take a look when he's vulnerable would be rotten, an invasion of his privacy."

Brian's brows drew together. "What difference does that make?"

"I won't go."

"I think you should! You seem to have this romantic notion of what —"

The ringing of his cell phone interrupted Brian.

"Hell!" he barked, reaching for the offending instrument. He unclipped it from his belt, his mouth tight, but when he saw who was calling, he felt the blood drain from his face. He hit the talk button and slapped the phone to his ear. "Brian O'Shea."

As he listened to the caller, Brian went rigid. Sweat formed on his upper lip as his anxiety grew.

"I'm on my way!" he declared.

"What's wrong?" Bronwyn asked. "A patient get loose?"

"It's Dorrie," Brian whispered, his lips trembling. "She's had a stroke."

Bronwyn gasped. "Oh, Brian, no!"

"I've got to go to her."

"Do you want me to drive you to the airport?"

Brian stared at her. "Airport?" he echoed, then shook his head. "I don't think they'll let me use the corporate jet."

"They'd better!" she said, going to him and pushing him toward the door. She opened it for him. "I'll call Dr. Wynth and make the arrangements."

Brian walked into the corridor then spun around and stared at her. "He can't be left alone!"

"Tell me what to do."

Brian looked at the floor, his gaze shifting back and forth across the sand-colored carpet. "He has to be fed and he has to be given the tenerse when he comes out of it." He looked up at her. "Sage isn't here to inject him!"

"I'll do that," she said firmly, and came out into the hall with him, shutting the door on a whimpering Brownie. "Tell me where the meds are."

"He won't like you giving him the tenerse."

"He wouldn't allow Sage to give it to him even if Spice Boy was here."

Despite the turmoil boiling inside him, Brian grinned at her use of the insulting name.

"Don't just stand there, O'Shea!" she challenged. "Tell me where you keep his Sustenance and the tenerse!"

"Ah, hell, I forgot about Ralph."

"I'll feed him and walk him, don't worry. That's the least of our problems!"

"Here's the key to Cree's apartment," Brian said.

As they hurried down the corridor toward his condo, Brian watched Bronwyn out of the corner of his eye. Her willingness—some might even say eagerness—to help, to be a part of Viraidan's life, was all the proof Brian needed to understand there would be no keeping them apart. He sighed, his mind going to Dorrie.

Perhaps the gods had made the decision for them all.

## Chapter Fifteen

"Sometimes the Transition lasts an hour or so, sometimes several days," Brian explained. "It depends on whether the Reaper gets fresh, warm blood or Sustenance from the refrigeration unit."

"Understood," Bronwyn said.

"Since he can't go out to hunt for fresh blood, the Transition will take longer."

They had stopped at Brian's apartment long enough to take a plastibag of blood from the refrigerator and to call Dr. Wynth to request the use of the jet. Wynth had said the jet would be ready in twenty minutes.

"I can't believe they're letting me use the Raven Jet," Brian muttered.

"How will I know when the Transition is over?" Bronwyn asked as they left the apartment.

"I'm guessing three, maybe four days. To be on the safe side, let's say five. It's certainly not going to hurt him to stay in there longer than usual."

"I don't want to keep him in any longer than necessary. I'm guessing Viraidan is claustrophobic."

"Aye, that he is. In spades!"

They rode the elevator to the lowest level. Bronwyn leaned against the stainless steel wall of the cage. "How do I feed him?"

"There is a security hatch through which you can pass the bags of Sustenance. You push a red button beside the cell door and a long titanium tray will slide toward you. Place the bag on the tray then press the green button to send it into the cell. You will need to feed him every four hours. That will keep the bloodlust at its lowest level. If you don't get to him within that time, if you take longer than five or six hours to feed him again, he's going to be mad with hunger and that's not a pretty sight."

"Where do you get the Sustenance?" she asked as the elevator doors opened.

"It's outdated blood," Brian answered, stepping aside for her to exit the cage. "I stockpile it for us."

"And no one questions that?"

"We keep blood on hand in case of medical emergencies here and I also get it from the local blood bank. They think I'm conducting experiments. No one has questioned me so far."

"And the tenerse?"

"I distill that myself from the protocols given to us by the queen."

The corridor was dimly lit and there was a strange smell in the air.

"Reaper scent," Brian told her. "Our urine during Transition is potent."

Bronwyn covered her nose with her hand. "Yes, it is."

They came to a row of three gray doors, each ten feet apart. The doors had a solid surface except for a small peephole like that on Bronwyn's own front door.

"The peephole was specially built to encompass the entire cell," Brian said. "I don't know how they designed it, but there's no distortion like you get with a fish-lens apparatus."

They reached the farthest door.

"He's in there."

No sooner had the words left Brian's mouth than the door began to vibrate. The violent thuds against it shook the walls.

"No need to be worried," Brian said, sensing Bronwyn's disquiet. "He can't get out."

Bronwyn watched Brian activate the tray and place the bag of Sustenance on it. He sent the bag into the cell. Almost immediately there was a howl of rage and the pounding on the door began again.

"I forgot you held the bag for me while I got the tenerse out of the fridge," Brian groaned. "He smells your scent and is so gods-be-damned mad he's ignoring the Sustenance."

"You think he knows I'm out here?"

"Aye, but it doesn't matter. The next time he gets the Sustenance he'll catch the scent again and know for sure." He looked at his watch. "You've got the key to my apartment?"

Bronwyn patted her pocket. "Yes, sir."

"And you know where everything is?"

"Go, Brian. I've got everything covered."

"He's naked in there. As soon as the full Transition occurs, his clothes get shredded like so much confetti. There is a closet at the end of the hall. We keep jumpsuits in there. Just fold one up and put it on the tray."

"I'm sure he'll remind me if I don't."

Brian hesitated, his loyalty to Cree vying with his need to go to Dorrie, the woman he loved.

"I'll take care of him," Bronwyn said, touching Brian's cheek. "You know I will."

"I know, lass."

She kissed him on the cheek. "Tell Dorrie hello for me," she said, her voice breaking.

Brian started to say something, but turned and rushed down the corridor.

Bronwyn was tempted to go to the peephole and look in on Cree, but as soon as the thought entered her mind, the pounding grew harder.

"It's all right, Aidan," she said softly. "I'm not going to look."

The pounding stopped abruptly.

She laid her hand on the door's slick surface. "I'll be back later."

Bronwyn walked to the elevator and pushed the button. She swiped at the tears falling down her cheeks—tears for Dorrie, for Brian, for the man whose tortured soul was revealed once more in the inhuman howl of misery that penetrated the thick concrete walls.

Twice more she came down to the containment cells that afternoon, but all was quiet behind the titanium doors. She sent the plastibag through then stood at the door.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

There was no sound from behind the door.

She laid her head against the door. "You're angry. You don't understand why Brian sent me down here. It wasn't to hurt you."

The silence beyond the door continued.

She moved away. "I was supposed to have an appointment with Rose Ann Danvers this afternoon, but—"

The walls thundered with powerful hits against them.

Bronwyn smiled. She knew that would get a reaction.

"I said I was *supposed* to have an appointment with her, Aidan. But since you won't be able to go with me, I've postponed it until next week."

There was a few seconds of silence then a single slap against the door.

Bronwyn laughed. "Temper, temper." She walked back to the door and touched it. "I hope you're happy that I'm going to be up all night trotting down here every four hours to feed you. Now I know how new mothers feel."

Silence.

Bronwyn drew in a long breath then exhaled slowly. She touched the door once more and left.

\* \* \* \* \*

For the next three days, every four hours like clockwork, Bronwyn made her trek to the containment cell. No matter what she had been doing, she dropped it to take care of Cree. But no matter what she said or how she provoked him, he remained silent, uncommunicative. There were no more hits on the door, no more howls. She was tempted several times to look in on him to make sure he was all right, but knew he wouldn't appreciate it. She would wait the five days then risk a glance through the peephole.

On the morning of the fourth day, she was getting dressed when the phone rang. She glanced at the wall clock in the bathroom—it was a quarter to five—and wondered who could be calling that early. Normally she didn't get up until seven, but since she'd

been feeding the Reaper, her schedule had been vastly altered. Her one, five and nine treks to the containment cell would not be missed, she thought as she picked up the phone.

"Dr. McGregor," she answered.

There was no reply.

"Hello. This is Dr. McGregor."

Then a lost, forlorn voice said, "She's gone."

Bronwyn pressed the phone closer to her ear. "Brian?"

"My Dorrie's gone, Bronnie," he said in a cracked voice.

"Oh, Brian." Tears filled Bronwyn's eyes. "Sweetie, I'm so sorry."

"They want me to... They said I had to..." He broke down, sobbing loudly.

"Where are you, Brian?"

"Hospital..."

"Is there someone there with you?"

"Aye."

"Can you put them on the phone?"

There was a rustling sound, a few low words then a woman's voice came on the line. "Four East, Mrs. Wilton."

"Mrs. Wilton, I'm Dr. McGregor. I'm a friend of Dr. O'Shea's. Were you Mrs. Cullen's nurse?"

The woman acknowledged she had been then reported the particulars of Dorrie's death. Ignoring her own tears, Bronwyn could hear Brian's quiet sobbing in the background.

"He's not dealing with this well," Mrs. Wilton said with no little annoyance.

"I take it you need someone to handle the funeral arrangements."

"Well, someone needs to."

Bronwyn ground her teeth and grabbed a pen to write down the number of the local funeral home the nurse provided. When she had the information, she told the nurse to put Brian on the line.

"I have to know where you want her buried," Bronwyn said softly.

"Bronnie, I can't..."

"It's being taken care of. Don't worry. I just need to know where you want her laid to rest."

"Can you... Will you —"

"I'd think Georgia, but it's up to you."

After a long silence, Brian agreed Georgia would have been Dorrie's choice. "She loved Albany. Despite everything, she loved that town."



"I'll call Crown Hill, then. My parents had a plot there, but Mom says she wants to be buried out here. I'm sure there won't be a problem if I tell them I want Dorrie buried there."

"Oh, God!" Brian keened. "I need you, Bronnie!"

"I'll be there," she said without hesitation. "Let me get hold of the funeral director first. Okay?"

Brian told her where to come and how long it should take the corporate jet to get her there. She knew Dr. Wynth would never balk at flying her to Georgia.

"I'll see you in a few hours. Try to get some rest," Bronwyn advised.

"I'm going to stay with her. I have to, Bronnie."

"I know. I understand. I'll be there as quick as I can."

"I love you, Bronnie," Brian sobbed.

"I love you, too," she replied, and realized it was true. She cared deeply for the older man just as she had cared deeply for Sean's mother.

When she hung up, she called to inform Dr. Wynth of the death and to have the jet stand by. It took more than an hour for calls to the Albany funeral home to have the body transported there, to discuss details with the funeral director and to order a simple mahogany casket. Another hour to make arrangements for the plot, to call the florist to order a spray of flowers, to speak with the priest at Saint Teresa's and to reserve the church. Thirty minutes more to pack a bag and to find someone to cover for her with her patients. Ten minutes to take Brownie to Carol Mason's apartment. Carol was already looking after DeeDee's little dog.

When she was ready to leave, Bronwyn looked about her living room, wondering what she had forgotten. She tried once more to contact Cedric and Danyon but neither answered her call. She was almost out of her apartment when she remembered Ralph.

Another fifteen minutes were taken up as she called around and finally found someone to take the big dog. Another ten minutes to fetch Ralph and take him—protesting the entire way—to Vince Cartelli's apartment.

"Behave, Ralph," she warned the dog who growled menacingly at the gardener.

It wasn't until the jet was in sight on the runway that she remembered.

"Oh, dear God, Cree!"

She dropped her bag, yelled at one of the ground crew members to put it on the plane and starting running as fast as she could.

He was pounding on the door, yelling at the top of his lungs when she finally made her way to the containment cell. Having had to stop for the Sustenance added another ten minutes to the timeframe.

"Get me out of here, Bronwyn!"

She skidded to a stop at the door. She doubted Cree would be shouting at her in his thick brogue if he was still in Transition. Not giving herself time to consider if what she was about to do was wise, she hit the lock release and the pneumatic hinge hissed open.

He was standing in the doorway, his face livid with rage and something else she didn't recognize until he snatched the plastibag from her hand and tore it open with his teeth.

Normally, she might well have been sickened by the sight of Cree slurping the thick red liquid, his throat working convulsively as he swallowed, a slender thread of the blood trickling from the corner of his mouth and onto his chest. She might even have been frightened of the intense power that came off him in waves had she not been so captured by the sight of his nakedness.

Of their own accord, her eyes traveled the length of him, from his thrown-back head as he guzzled, past his brawny, heaving chest with the thick pelt of wiry hair, to the lean waist with its washboard abs, flat belly, past that part of him that made her blush hotter than the fires under a crucible, along the sturdy legs that ended in perfectly shaped feet then up again, lingering once more on that powerful shaft that had her swallowing.

"Stop that!" he thundered, slapping his hand across his chest to cover the silver medallion nestled among the curling thatch. His amber eyes narrowed dangerously. "Get me some gods-be-damned clothes, woman!"

His tone thrust Bronwyn into immediate action. She sprinted down the hall, snatched open the closet and grabbed a black jumpsuit. Before she could turn to rush back to him, he was behind her, jerking the jumpsuit out of her hands.

Avidly her gaze locked on the firm buttocks shifting in movement as he walked away from her. His long legs had just the right amount of hair on them, she thought, as he stopped with his back to her and thrust one limb into the pants leg. His naked feet were beautiful and she longed to stroke their sturdy length. As that part of him that had so greatly distracted her dangled into view as he lifted his other leg to jam it into the jumpsuit leg, she had to put her hand over her mouth to keep her whimper of desire from escaping.

"Brazen hussy," he accused as he turned, zipping the jumpsuit up to his neck. "What the hell's the matter with you? Where were you? Did you forget I was locked up or was that your little way of punishing me?"

"W-what? Punish you?"

"Where's the tenerse?"

Bronwyn looked at him as though he were talking in a foreign language. She wasn't prepared when he grabbed her arm none too gently. "Where is my gods-be-damned tenerse?"

Bronwyn shook herself, trying to block the image of him naked from her mind. "Tenerse—"

"I need it, woman!" he thundered. "I'm nearly out of my mind!"

"I didn't bring it." Her eyes widened when the look on his face became lethal.

He turned, dragging her to the elevator. "Where is Brian?"

For a moment she couldn't remember. "I...I—"

"Just shut up! I'll deal with that bastard later!"

The ride up in the elevator was the longest fifteen seconds of Bronwyn's life. Her arm ached where Cree's hand gripped the flesh. She knew there would be one hell of a bruise before the day was out. She could hear him gnashing his teeth, and the heavy breathing and rigid posture that had claimed his body was enough to make the faint of heart lose hope they'd survive the ride with him. He jerked her out of the elevator on Brian's floor even before the doors were all the way open.

As he pulled her down the hall, they passed people who leapt out of their way. No doubt those who saw them would have rumors floating about the head of security and his captive Dr. McGregor.

Not bothering to knock on Brian's door, Cree lifted his bare foot and slammed it against the panel, splintering the frame. He pulled her into the apartment, through the living room and into the kitchen, then sent her careening across the room.

"Get me the med, woman!"

Bronwyn crashed into the counter, crying out as her hip hit the edge. She turned to give him a furious look but his face bore the unmistakable stamp of a man who was fast reaching the limit of his endurance. She couldn't get the fridge door open fast enough.

Her hand shaking, she took one of the prepared syringes of tenses from the Plexiglas box in which it was stored. Turning around, she was almost afraid to get near him. He was breathing so hard he was heaving, his chest rising and falling rapidly. His hands were fisted at his side and his jaw was clenched so tightly, a muscle bunched in his cheek.

She looked around, groaning when she didn't see what she needed.

"What are you looking for?"

"Alcohol swab—"

"Give me the shot. Now!"

He was taller than her and she knew the injection had to go in his jugular vein. She was about to tell him to sit at the table when he dropped to his knees and yanked the collar of the jumpsuit out of her way.

"Do it before I go insane!"

She put the index finger of her left hand on his neck, found the spot Brian told her should be used and plunged the needle into his flesh. She felt him flinch, heard his indrawn breath as the liquid spread through his vein and saw him squeeze his eyes closed to the agony traveling through him.

Bronwyn put the disposable syringe on the counter. Cree was still on his knees, his head bowed, his breathing somewhat slower but his eyes still held firmly closed. His hands were bunched on his knees, pressing into the flesh.

She didn't think — she simply reacted. She put her left hand on the back of his head and pulled his forehead against her belly. Her right hand she used to gently rub the spot where she had given him the injection. When his arms went around her hips, she held him closer.

"Where is Brian?" he asked in a gruff voice.

Brian's face passed through her mind then Dorrie's. As Sean's mother's visage drifted out of sight, Cree looked up at her.

"She's dead?" he whispered.

"She died this morning."

A strange expression passed over Cree's handsome face. "How?"

"A stroke. Brian was with her when she passed away. He's been there since the day he took you to the containment cell."

Cree lowered his head and pressed his cheek against her. His arms tightened.

"I told Brian I would go there," she said, stroking Cree's thick black hair. "The jet is waiting for me."

"I have to go," he said, releasing her. He got to his feet and looked at her.

Brian and Cree were close, and she understood that. "I'll let them know you'll be coming, too. Do you need to pack something?"

He shook his head.

"You can't go like that."

He glanced down at what he was wearing. "I guess I can't."

"Go change. We can get you a suit down there."

He nodded and turned away.

"Aidan?" she called.

He looked back.

"You might want to take a shower first," she suggested with a gentle smile.

He winced, as if just now realizing how he must smell. "I'll be as quick as I can," he said, before walking from the room. Almost immediately he was back.

"What?" she asked.

"Bring what we need, Bronwyn. Brian will have taken his supply, but we might need a few days more of each."

How strange, she thought, as she rummaged in Brian's closet, to be looking for a suitable carryall for bags of blood and an alien substance that could turn a ravaging beast back into a human male.

## Chapter Sixteen

One of Bronwyn's greatest pleasures was the feel of a jet taking off beneath her. The strain of the g-force then the weightlessness, made her sigh. She always wished the feeling would last longer.

"You'd like space travel," Cree mumbled.

She turned her head to glance at him across the aisle. He wasn't looking at her. "What's takeoff like in a spacecraft?"

"More prolonged and more intense," he replied, then shut his eyes.

"Gotta try that one day," she said wistfully.

Cree grunted then turned his head to stare out the starboard window.

"This must be tame for you," she said.

When he didn't reply, she tried again.

"What was it like when you landed on Earth?"

When he still didn't answer, she gave up and turned toward her window to look at the patchwork of fields, stitched together by silver-colored roads, moving slowly beneath the wings of the jet.

The man is an enigma, she thought. She doubted anyone had ever understood him or ever would. He had a way of closing himself off to gentle probing and locking out others to insistent inquiry. His silence challenged her. His brooding posture intrigued her. She wanted to know more about him, to get to know the man beneath the stern exterior. There had been glimpses of a more human side to him and it was that persona to which she had tried reaching out, only to be rebuffed when she got too close.

*What are you hiding, Viraidan Cree?* she wondered. *What terrible secret are you trying to keep the world from knowing?*

"The idjuts couldn't communicate."

Bronwyn jumped at the sudden interruption. "I beg your pardon?"

He shrugged. "When I crashed in Ireland, I taught the natives a thing or two of my culture," he said, his eyes glowing with mischief. "They didn't have a spoken or written language as yet. All they knew how to do was grunt. Because they were so gods-be-damned backward, I taught them the Low Chalean dialect and gave them a rudimentary alphabet." He grinned. "And I taught them how to fight."

"Not one of your more intelligent moments there, Aidan," she said dryly.

He chuckled. "How was I to know they'd embrace the concept so readily?"

"It's thought the Gaels taught the Irish to speak somewhere around 300 B.C."

"It's thought wrong. And it wasn't ogham script they learned to write, either. It was Chalean High Runic form and it was around a lot longer than they originally thought. Only the Holy Men, the ones you call Druids, could write it, though."

"Is Chalean your native tongue, then?"

"No. Rysalian would have been, had I stayed on the planet long enough to learn it. There are similarities between Rysalian High Speech and Chalean just as there are similarities between French and Spanish."

"You were, what? Two years old when you were sold to the Amazeen?"

"Aye."

"Then Chalean is their dialect."

"By Alel's beard, no!" he said, his face turning hard. "Those bitches speak a language all their own. It's a compilation of the languages of many worlds, mostly Diabolusian."

"Who taught you Chalean?"

Cree raised his leg and crossed his right ankle over his knee. "A slave assigned to take care of me."

"Like a nanny?"

Humor tugged at Cree's full lips. "I doubt Daithi Tarnes would have liked being called a nanny. The man was six feet tall and, despite the cutting, was rock-hard and twice as strong."

"The cutting?"

Cree held up his hand and used his index and middle finger like a pair of scissors. "They took away his goodie."

Bronwyn blushed. "Oh..."

"All the men of the harems were neutered," Cree said in a matter-of-fact tone. "All those except the ones the Amazeen intended to breed by."

"This Daithi had been captured by them?"

"He had been in the Chalean Guard and was taken prisoner during a skirmish near the capitol of Meiraman when the Amazeen went after one of the royal sons."

"How was it you learned to be a Reaper, then, if you were cared for by an outsider? Someone not of your kind?"

"I learned what I needed from the computer on the ship I commandeered," he said, pride in his voice. "There was an extensive amount of data on Reapers. Some of what I read surprised me, but most I'd already begun to feel by the time I came into puberty. The urges I experienced made sense after I finished assimilating the information. I knew I had been created to kill, and then I knew how I should go about it."

Bronwyn smoothed her skirt, wanting to change the subject. "What was it like to wake up in Fuilgaoth after spending all that time in the bog?"

The knuckles of Cree's right hand traced an arc across the jet's window glass. "I wasn't happy to find myself imprisoned at Fuilgaoth, if that's what you mean."

"It must have been like going from one prison to another."

Cree looked away. "Aye."

"Were you and Sean...?"

He turned, his eyes narrowed. "I don't want to talk about Cullen. Is that clear?"

She raised her chin. "Why not?"

"Leave it alone, woman!" He looked away, dismissing her.

The rest of the flight was spent in silence. Somewhere over Kentucky, Bronwyn accepted a soda pop from the stewardess and a bag of salted nuts, but Cree refused to even acknowledge the stewardess's presence. He stared out the window, his hands doubled into fists on the luxury chair arms. At one point, he got up, retrieved the satchel into which Bronwyn had placed the extra plastibags of Sustenance and took it to the restroom. When he came back, he sat down, avoiding Bronwyn's look and resumed his contemplation of the clouds.

When the plane landed in Milledgeville, a light rain was falling. The tarmac was slick with silvery shadows as the plane settled on the runway. The sudden drag upon landing was not as exhilarating to Bronwyn as a takeoff, but it was nevertheless a slight thrill that always made her smile.

A representative from the local funeral home was waiting with a limousine to take Bronwyn and her companion to Mason and Sons Funeral Home. He got out of the limo, opened an umbrella and stood waiting for the plane to taxi to a stop.

"He looks like a bloody vulture," Cree snarled when they approached the waiting man.

Bronwyn had to agree. The man was tall and thin, and dressed in black as he was, he did resemble a wiry bird of prey. His neck was crooked forward, adding to the vulture image, along with dark, beady eyes that seemed devoid of animation.

"Dr. McGregor?" he inquired, coming forward to hold the umbrella over Bronwyn. "I am Richard Ludlum from Mason and Sons. I am sorry for your loss."

"Is Dr. O'Shea at the funeral parlor?" she asked.

The lanky man winced. "We prefer to call it 'the home', Dr. McGregor. It implies an abode from which we will take our final excursion."

"Bloody idjut," Cree mumbled as he jerked upon the back door of the limousine. He glared at Bronwyn. "Will you get in or do you plan on catching your death of cold?"

Mr. Ludlum tsked, obviously dismayed by Cree's behavior but too polite to say anything. The gaunt man looked at Bronwyn with sympathy.

"He's been cooped up too long," she explained, and heard Cree snort as she ducked into the back of the limo. "He's a bit out of sorts."

"He's a bit out of sorts," Cree mimicked as Ludlum shut the door.

"Better than me telling him you're a blooming ass," she quipped, and was surprised to see shock pass momentarily over Cree's face before he squinted and turned away.

Ludlum kept up a continuous chatter about the places they passed on the way into town. Waving his thin hands like semaphores, he pointed out local attractions as though he had personally been responsible for their conception and building.

At one point, Cree leaned over and whispered in Bronwyn's ear. "If you don't shut that fool up, I am going to leap over the seat and pull out his throat!"

Bronwyn turned to him, her gaze going automatically to the full lips that had sent a shiver straight through her ear to her belly. When she raised her eyes to his, she saw the lethality of his warning.

"I mean it, Bronwyn. Either shut him up or I will."

"Mr. Ludlum?" Bronwyn asked, tearing her attention from Cree's steady look. She sat forward, her hand on the seat between herself and Cree.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Mr. Cree and I would like a few minutes of silence to pray. Would you be so kind as to accommodate us until we get to the home?"

Ludlum looked at her in the rearview mirror then shifted his beady eyes to Cree who was glaring back at him with murderous intent.

"Of course, Dr. McGregor," Ludlum sniffed. He tightened his birdlike hands around the steering wheel. "I would be most happy to oblige."

"Thank you, Mr. Ludlum," Bronwyn said, breathing a sigh of relief as she sat back. She was unprepared as Cree reached over and covered her hand with his.

"Good girl," he said, giving her fingers a light squeeze before removing his hand.

"Don't mention it," she mumbled, feeling like a pet that had had its head patted.

Brian was on the wide veranda of the funeral home when they arrived. He was smoking, something Bronwyn wasn't aware he did. When the limo pulled to a stop in the circular driveway, Brian flicked his cigarette into the nearby azalea bushes and came down the steps to meet them. He opened the limo door and reached for Bronwyn's hand, then helped her from the car, barely glancing at Cree who climbed out of the other door.

Brian gathered Bronwyn into his arms. "I've needed you, darling," he said, his voice thick with emotion.

"I'm here now," she told him, putting her arms around him.

"Let her get in out of the rain, Brian," Cree grumbled, taking Bronwyn's arm to escort her up the steps.

Bronwyn caught the look that passed between the two men and was surprised when Brian released her and gave in to Cree's possession of her.

"They told me you have taken care of everything, Bronnie," Brian said, following in their wake. "I really appreciate it."



"It's okay."

"I wasn't up to it," Brian said, and his gaze strayed to Cree.

"Where is she?" Cree asked.

Brian nodded down the hall. Tears filled his eyes. "They are... They have to..." He broke down, his shoulders sagging against the weight of his grief.

Bronwyn put her hand on his back and rubbed gently. She looked at Cree. "Will you take care of him while I go talk to the funeral director?"

Cree nodded. He cut his eyes down the corridor then looked away.

When she returned, Bronwyn told them everything was in order. Mr. Ludlum would be driving the body to Albany and they would be ready to go in about fifteen minutes.

"I called our pilot and told him we would be accompanying Mrs. Cullen home," Bronwyn said. "He'll fly the plane to the terminal in Albany and get a room for himself and the crew until we're ready to go back to Kellogg."

"I'll ride with Dorrie," Brian said, but Cree angrily vetoed that suggestion.

"You will ride with Bronwyn," he said. "I will ride with my..." He shook his head brutally. "With Mrs. Cullen."

Brian opened his mouth to protest but the look on the Reaper's face warned there would be no further discussion. Reluctantly, Brian bobbed his head and went to sit in one of the dainty chairs lining the hallway. He clasped his hands and looked at the ornate rug.

"You handled that well," Bronwyn whispered after casting Brian a quick look. "He doesn't need to be in the hearse with her, but..."

"But what?" Cree demanded, standing arms akimbo, his gaze narrowed.

"Don't devour poor Mr. Ludlum in the bargain, okay?"

Cree blinked then the right side of his mouth twitched in what might have been a carefully controlled smirk. "I will attempt not to do so, but..."

"But what?"

"Warn the vulture I will not tolerate his useless prattle. One extraneous word out of his beak and I will squash him like an overripe melon."

"So noted."

"I mean it, Bronwyn."

"I know you do," Bronwyn replied, and went in search of Ludlum.

Brian raised his head as Cree hunkered down before him. "Are you all right?" he asked the Reaper.

Cree nodded. "Are you?"

Brian shrugged. "I don't think so. I don't think I ever will be again."

Cree put a hand on Brian's knee. "We're here for you."

A gentle smile stretched slowly across Brian's face. "We, is it, now?"

The Reaper drew in a long breath and looked down the corridor where Bronwyn had walked. He exhaled slowly before locking gazes with Brian.

"I love her," he said. "I've always loved her and maybe one day I'll be able to tell her who I am."

Brian shook his head. "That would be the worst thing you could ever do, son." When Cree started to protest, Brian put a hand on his cheek. "If you love her, then show her. Start fresh with her. Here and now. Make a life together if you want, but let the past bury the past. Don't resurrect Sean Cullen, Viraidan. Don't make the mistake of bringing him back. Let him go as she is letting him go."

"Is that what she's doing?" Cree asked, uncertainty clouding his amber gaze.

"You don't think it is? She's interested in you. Even a blind man can see that."

Cree got up and walked a few feet away. "Does Viraidan Cree have a chance with her, though?"

"More than most other men. She can't keep her eyes off you and the way she tells it, she likes rye as opposed to white."

"She does what?"

"You talk too much, Brian O'Shea," Bronwyn snapped as she joined them.

"What did he mean?" Cree queried.

"Never mind." Bronwyn cast Brian a warning look before changing the subject. "Have you had anything to eat today, Brian?"

"Aye," he replied.

"Liar. Mr. Mason said you refused breakfast and lunch. I called the hospital and they said you didn't eat last night either."

"He had Sustenance," Cree told her.

"How do you know?" she demanded.

"He'd be a raving lunatic if he hadn't."

"Better than being a flaming idjut," Brian sighed.

"Who administered your tenerse while you were down here?" Bronwyn asked.

"One of the nurses," Brian replied. "I told her it was insulin." He shrugged. "She didn't question it."

Viraiden snorted. "What he isn't telling you is he mind-screw —"

"I hypnotized her," Brian interrupted, shooting Cree a stony glance.

Bronwyn grinned. "Oh, you mind-screwed her." She chuckled at Brian's immediate blush. "Makes sense."

"Happy you approve," he mumbled.

"The hearse will be ready in about twenty minutes," Bronwyn informed them, looking at her watch. "Would you like to get something to eat before we leave?"

Brian shook his head. "I couldn't eat anything if my life depended on it."

"Are you hungry?" Cree asked Bronwyn.

"Yes," she replied, "but I can wait if you two don't—"

"Take her to get something to eat, Viraidan," Brian ordered. "I'll be right here when you get back."

"There's a submarine shop around the corner," Bronwyn suggested.

Cree hesitated then seemed to make up his mind. He took Bronwyn's arm in his powerful hand. "Let's go, then."

When they were almost out the door, Brian called after them. Cree turned to look at him. "Make sure she gets her rye bread, Cree," he said, then chuckled.

\* \* \* \* \*

The ride to Albany was boring for Bronwyn. Brian had fallen asleep, his head on her shoulder, and the limo driver—a tall, cadaverous, black man dressed in an ebony suit—was not inclined to carry on idle conversation. He answered Bronwyn's questions but volunteered no information on his own.

Above them, the sky was dark with occasional flashes of light to the west. A storm was brewing, and Bronwyn hoped they would get to Albany well in advance of it.

By the time the entourage of two funeral cars reached the Stein Funeral Home, Bronwyn was worn out from the trip and dreading what she knew lay ahead. She had made arrangements to have a rental car at her disposal and she thought she recognized the one it would be when they pulled into the parking lot. It would be necessary for her to go to the church, speak with the priest and to make what other final arrangements were necessary to lay Dorrie Cullen to rest.

"We're here, Brian," she said, gently shaking him.

Brian sat up and rubbed his eyes. He winced when he looked around. "The hearse...?"

"They've already pulled around back."

There had been a heated discussion as they wound their way to Albany. Bronwyn refused to allow Brian to stay a minute longer with Dorrie's body once they arrived. There were procedures that must be followed. Despite his virulent protests, there would be no exception. Some things, Bronwyn had reminded the grieving man, should not be witnessed by loved ones.

"You've been with her all morning, Brian," she said. "Let others care for her for a while."

"I tried to get her moved out of that place a long time ago, but the state of Georgia wouldn't allow it," Brian said softly. "I wanted to put her in a bright, cheerful place closer to where I was. Now..." He lowered his head. "I hate letting go."

"We all have to at some point, sweetie."

"As you have let go?"

Bronwyn smiled. "In my mind, I let him go long before now, but my heart is finally losing its grip on him, Brian. Don't get me wrong. I will love him forever, but I've finally come to realize that it's time to move on. I don't think he'd want me to spend my life alone."

"I know he wouldn't. But he'd want you to be with the right man."

"And who would that be?"

A light tap on the window brought Bronwyn's head around. Cree opened her door and offered his hand to help her out.

"They're expecting a severe thunderstorm," he said. "You'd better get to the motel."

"Aren't you coming with us?" she asked as she took his hand.

"I need to buy a suit, remember?"

"Do you want us to come with you?"

"I think the man is old enough to buy his own clothes, Bronnie," Brian snorted.

"Yes, but he doesn't know Albany and —"

"I'm not an imbecile," Cree growled. "I can find my way around."

Bronwyn ground her teeth. "I didn't say you were stupid, Aidan," she began, but a severe thunderclap cut her off. She shrieked involuntarily.

"Get her to the motel, Brian," Cree ordered.

"Will do." Brian ushered Bronwyn toward the rental car.

As Brian started the engine, Bronwyn looked back and wondered aloud why Cree was entering the funeral home.

"He's got to have a car, doesn't he?" Brian asked, pulling onto Dawson Road. The downpour started and he squinted at the windshield. "He probably went in to call the rental place."

"I suppose you're right. I just hate for him to be roaming around lost in the rain."

Brian adjusted the rearview mirror. "He'll be fine. The man is perfectly capable of taking care of himself."

\* \* \* \* \*

They allowed him to see Dorrie before the embalming process began. He wanted to hold her, to kiss her flesh before it was corrupted with chemicals and by the touch of strangers' hands.

The ride to Albany had been hell. He could smell her as she lay in the coffin behind him. It was the scent of death, of impending corruption and it had saddened him more than he thought possible.

It was also the scent of his mother—flesh of his flesh—she who had brought a portion of him into this world. It had been she who had been the first to love him, she who had taken care of his needs and had seen to his hurts, she who had known of the love that had been his entire being and had encouraged it.

The funeral director had opened the coffin and left the lid up. There was a dim light just to the right of the catafalque upon which the coffin sat. The glow from the torchere cast its light upward, away from the coffin, so the illumination did not fall directly on the dead woman's face. Thoughtfully, the director had also placed a prie-dieu before the coffin.

Viraidan Cree stood beside Sean Cullen's mother's coffin for a long while, gazing at the serene face that belied the years of physical and mental abuse she had suffered at the hands of Tym Cullen. He let his attention crawl over the deep lines in Dorrie Cullen's countenance—refusing to dwell on the scars he also found there—and marveled at the stark whiteness of her cropped hair. His vision traveled to the gnarled hands lying atop one another. There were wrinkles there too, and liver spots and extended purple veins that seemed so fragile against her milky white skin. Returning his scrutiny to her face, he traced the paper-thin consistency of her half-closed eyelids and the thinness of her lips. The creative touch of the cosmetician had yet to apply the rouge, powder and lipstick. The stitches had yet to seal those thin lips and eyelids together for all eternity.

Taking a deep breath, the part of him that was still Sean Cullen made the Sign of the Cross and slipped to its knees on the prie-dieu. He hung his head, his hands clasped on the back of the prayer stand then began the memorized prayers of his childhood for the Repose of a Soul. When his prayers were done, he raised his head and looked at his mother.

That part of him that was Viraidan Cree had never known a mother's loving touch. He had never seen the female part of the equation that had given him life, had never heard a lullaby sung to him when he was sick or a gentle voice assuring him all would be well with his world. He wondered what Dorrie Cullen's voice had been like, and when the soft singing began in his head, he knew Sean was giving him the opportunity to know.

Tears fell heedlessly down the Reaper's cheeks as the old Irish lullaby wafted gently through his mind. He felt a phantom touch—long-remembered by the man who was so much a part of him—upon his brow, along his back, and knew vicariously the loving touch he had been denied as a bantling. He felt arms surrounding him, holding him, giving him comfort, and he thought his heart would break with the grief that welled up inside him.

"Mama," he sobbed, and felt to the very depths of him the agony that Sean Cullen was feeling.

He covered her frail hands with his own. The hardness of her flesh, the coldness, did not register. All he felt was the sadness at the loss of those loving hands. Never again would his mother touch him, hold him or place her sweet kisses upon his feverish brow. Never again would she croon to him in her lilting voice or chastise him with exaggerated annoyance. She was gone from his life forever. Only her gentle memory would remain.

His shoulders shook beneath the weight of his sorrow. He clung to her hands, needing the contact, wishing with all his heart he could feel those rigid fingers enclose his own just one more time. He longed to feel her brush the hair back from his eyes. To hear her sweet Irish lilt as she called him Seannie.

He would never know how long he would have stayed that way had the funeral director not come in to bid him leave. He had not even been aware of the violent storm lashing against the building.

"We are under a tornado warning, sir," the director said softly.

Cree nodded. It was all he could do to heave himself from his knees, bend over Dorrie Cullen and place a gentle kiss on her work-worn brow.

As he drove through the pouring rain—his own tears rivaling the water cascading down the car windows—he knew a grief so encompassing it was hard to draw breath. At one point, he pulled off the road, crossed his arms over the steering wheel, lowered his head to his hands and cried, barely aware of the keening sound dredged up from his closing throat.

## Chapter Seventeen

There were only a handful of people at the funeral liturgy the next day – Brian, Bronwyn and Cree, along with a few older parishioners who came to any and all funerals held at Saint Teresa's. Tymothy and Dorrie Cullen had made no friends in Albany and the only neighbors who had been friendly to Dorrie while they lived there had either died or moved away.

It was a sad little affair with the priest obviously embarrassed by the lack of mourners. Although his homily was well-written and equally well given, he had not known the dead woman and the words he spoke of her sounded generic. Even the music – though traditional – seemed out of sync.

There was a short trip to the cemetery under a steel gray sky that threatened more rain. Only two cars – the hearse and the limo – drove Dorrie Cullen to her final resting place.

Bronwyn sat between Brian and Cree in the limo and neither man spoke. Her hand was in Brian's but she was conscious of the length of Cree's leg alongside her own. Now and again in church she would look beside her at the Reaper but – just as she had seen him do in church in Grinnell – he sat like marble, his head down, his eyes closed throughout the ceremony. Though he joined Brian and Bronwyn when they walked up to Communion, he did no more than touch Dorrie's casket, shaking his head at the priest's offer of the Host.

The Rite of Committal, the graveside part of the ceremony, was brief. The three of them scooped up handfuls of the Georgia red clay to fling into the gaping maw of the grave as the casket was lowered.

"From dust have we come and unto dust we shall return," Father McElroy spoke.

Brian was trembling violently by the time the casket had finished its six-foot journey into the belly of the earth. His face was stark white, his lips quivering.

Cree gently pushed Bronwyn aside and put his arm around Brian. He drew the man to him, lowered his head and said something Bronwyn couldn't hear. But when he had spoken, Brian raised his tear-streaked face and nodded. Whatever had been said seemed to calm the man.

"Eternal rest grant unto her, oh Lord."

"And let perpetual light shone upon her," Bronwyn answered and heard Cree echoing her words.

"May her soul and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace."

"Amen," Bronwyn whispered.

Brian turned abruptly and walked to the limo as fast as he could. His shoulders were bunched against his grief and he looked like a man battling the forces of nature to reach his destination. Once more the sky had turned to a leaden gray and lightning made jagged lines across the western horizon. It seemed fitting that the elements should mourn the passing of Dorrie Cullen.

Cree had found the black suit he had gone after, Bronwyn thought, as she walked alongside him. He had also found a black shirt and tie. She idly wondered if he ever wore anything other than the unrelieved black. Not that the black did anything to detract from his powerful male beauty. If anything, it only added to the allure, the mystery of Viraidan Cree, and she could imagine him in no other garb. Glancing at him, she noticed he had taken a pink rosebud from the spray that had blanketed Dorrie's casket. The perfect bud seemed out of place in his powerful hand.

"He's going to need you, Aidan," she said softly.

"Aye, I know."

"You are a good friend to him."

He made no reply.

She put a hand on his arm. He stopped and looked down at her.

"Will you talk to me about Sean one day?" she asked.

He stared at her for a long time. "One day I *will* talk to you about him."

There was no need to remain in Albany. As soon as they left the cemetery they drove to the airport where the jet's crew had turned in the two cars Cree and Bronwyn had rented. Already onboard was what little luggage they had brought with them, including a locked cooler Brian had purchased to hold the Sustenance Cree had somehow commandeered while he was out the evening before.

"Don't ask," he had snapped when Bronwyn inquired about the plastibags of blood.

"But I brought plenty," she protested, but his warning look made her drop the subject.

Earlier that morning, Cree had administered Brian's shot of tenerse, but Brian had been so nervous about the coming funeral that Bronwyn offered to inject Cree. Once more, she played witness to the agony the med caused the Reaper and had massaged away the stinging. Before he turned away, he had looked at her with eyes that smoldered with desire.

"Dr. McGregor?" Mr. Ludlum called as they neared the jet.

Bronwyn let Cree and Brian go on ahead, stopping to see what Ludlum wanted. "Yes?"

He smiled hesitantly. "I forgot to tell you that one of the nurses from the hospital had sent along a box for you. I had it in the trunk of the limousine on the way here. I gave it to that nice Captain Jeffreys and he put it onboard."

"A box? For me?"



Ludlum waved his hands about. "It was a box of old letters that belonged to Mrs. Cullen. The nurse said many were from you and she left it to your discretion to give them to Dr. O'Shea and his son as you saw fit."

At the mention of Sean, Bronwyn flinched, but she managed to thank the thin man. "I'll see it."

"Godspeed, Dr. McGregor." He spun on his elegant loafer heels and wobbled off, pumping his arms as though he was trying to take flight. The image of a vulture seemed to settle over his stick-thin frame.

Shaking her head at the unkind thought, Bronwyn climbed the steps into the jet. Brian was sitting in the chair she had used on the flight down so she moved further back in the plane. Cree seemed to be lost in thought, his attention riveted on the rain that was now beading the window. As she took her seat, she asked the stewardess for the box Ludlum mentioned.

"It's in the baggage compartment, Doctor. Remind me when we land and I'll get it for you."

Bronwyn nodded and buckled her seat belt. From where she sat, she could see Cree's stony profile and she wondered what he was thinking. There was a remoteness about him that seemed to warn people away, and the stewardess gave him a wide berth. She wished she was sitting opposite him, at least that near, for the distance between seemed insurmountable.

As the jet began to taxi down the runway, Bronwyn laid back her head, closed her eyes and reveled in the feeling that propelled her skyward. She wondered if Cree could feel her exhilaration.

"Aye," he whispered to the gathering dusk outside his window. "I am very aware of what you feel, beloved."

\* \* \* \* \*

Bronwyn yawned as the plane settled once more to earth. It was pitch black outside when they landed in Newton, Iowa. She heard Cree talking softly to Brian. The Reaper was hunkered down beside the older man's chair. He patted Brian's shoulder, then stood and looked at her.

"Can you get home by yourself, Bronwyn?"

She blinked. "You don't want me riding back to Baybridge with you?" she asked, hurt rife in her voice.

"I need to talk to Brian in private while he's still able to listen. Would it be all right if I called one of my men to pick you up?"

"Ah, yes," she said, surprised by his question. "Where are you going?"

Brian chuckled. "Out for a wee drink, we are. Or five or six or ten."

Bronwyn frowned. "I don't know if that's a good idea, Aidan."

"I'll take care of him, Bronnie," Cree replied.

"Who's gonna take care of you?" Brian snorted. "The last time you had a wee drink you —"

Cree hissed at the older man, said something Bronwyn didn't catch then walked back to her.

"He needs to bid his lady a proper Irish farewell," he said in a matter-of-fact tone. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do. He wants to get shit-faced Irish drunk!"

Cree grinned. "Good that you understand what Celtic warriors need."

"What about you? Do I have to worry that you'll wrap his car around —"

"We're taking my bike."

"—wrap your *bike* around a telephone pole?" she finished as though he hadn't interrupted.

He put his hand over his heart. "No alcohol for this Reaper. I learned my lesson, I did."

"Gobshite," Brian pronounced. "This is one Reaper who intends to come home none the good for wear!"

"Aidan!" Bronwyn whined.

"He'll be all right," Cree said, and chuckled.

"Don't let anything happen to either of you," she pleaded, searching Cree's amber gaze.

He took her hand, brought it to his lips and placed a soft kiss on her upturned wrist. "I promise."

A thrill of longing shot through Bronwyn. She drew back her hand, seeing in his dark gaze the knowledge of what he had caused to happen in her body.

"Sleep well, dearling," he said huskily, then turned, shoving Brian off the jet. "I'll call one of the guards to come get you."

Sighing heavily, Bronwyn headed into the terminal when the stewardess hurried up to her with the box of Dorrie's letters.

"I'd forgotten all about them," Bronwyn said, feeling a deep sadness settle over her as she accepted the item. "Thanks."

"Have a good evening, Doctor," the stewardess bid. "Looks like more bad weather is on the way by morning."

"Great," Bronwyn muttered.

By the time a ride had been sent for her, Bronwyn knew Cree and Brian had gone back to Baybridge to fetch the motorcycle. She was worried about them, although she knew very little could hurt either man.

Knowing that didn't help her frame of mind. By the time she arrived at her condo, she was wide awake, knowing she'd be unable to sleep until she heard that powerful bike roar into the parking lot.

It was too late to fetch Brownie, and Cedric was still absent. With no other living being to keep her company, the condo felt lonelier than ever. Putting the box of letters on her desk, she went into the kitchen, poured herself a glass of tomato juice and sat to watch television. Soon bored of the pathetic fare that passed for entertainment on the networks, she flipped to cable, but there wasn't much there, either, to interest her. Finally with a snarl of contempt, she turned off the television and sat staring into the distance.

Her gaze drifted to the letters and held. After five minutes of looking at the box, she headed to the desk. Just as she got there, the phone rang, startling her. Thinking it might be about Cree and Brian, she jerked it up.

"Hello?" she said, her voice tight.

"Hello, dear," her mother answered. "Don't you ever listen to your messages?"

Bronwyn noticed the blinking red light on the answering machine and mentally groaned. "Have you been trying to reach me?"

"Only since yesterday morning," her mother said, sounding a bit miffed.

"I'm sorry, Mom, but I've been in Georgia."

There was a short silence then DeeDee McGregor sighed heavily. "You went to see the Cullen woman?"

"Mom—"

"You need to wean yourself from contact with that woman," DeeDee grumbled. "It isn't good for either you or her—"

"She died, Mom," Bronwyn said between clenched teeth. "I went to attend her funeral with Brian."

"Brian O'Shea? What was he—?"

Bronwyn was in no mood to explain about Brian and Dorrie. "Was there something you needed, Mom?"

"Well, yes, I wanted to share some good news, but it doesn't seem to be the right time."

Bronwyn closed her eyes. "What good news? I could use some."

"I'll call back in the morning," her mother said, her voice sharp. "Get some rest and we'll talk then." Before Bronwyn could reply, her mother hung up.

"I love you, too," Bronwyn mumbled as she put down the phone.

Depressed after the stilted conversation—so uncharacteristic for the two of them—Bronwyn sat on the sofa, the letters on her desk forgotten. At a little past two o'clock in the morning, she heard the rumble of Cree's bike and shot up from the seat. She pulled aside the curtain and saw him sagging beneath Brian's weight as he carried the older

man over his shoulder. Sighing with relief, she was about to turn away when she saw Cree look up at her.

"Good night," she mouthed.

He held up a hand, acknowledging her then she lost sight of them as Cree carried his burden into the building.

Relieved that the men were home safely, she turned toward the sofa. But again, her gaze fell on the box of letters.

For a moment, she stared at the box. She knew there would likely be at least a couple of dozen of her own letters to Dorrie, each written after Sean's death and while Bronwyn was in college. There would most likely be many of Brian's letters and perhaps a few from Seannie.

It was the thought of reading Sean's letters that brought her to the desk. Gnawing on her lower lip, she fought with herself, wondering if she had the right to read what he had written. Wondering if seeing his words after all this time would be too painful. As much as she ached to know what he might have written, she pondered the wisdom of prying.

She touched the locket hanging at her neck. It was her dearest possession and she never took it off. Within the hinged interior was a poem Sean had written her long ago. Whenever she felt the burden of Sean's leaving, she would touch the locket and recite the poem to herself. His words comforted her. Perhaps reading what he had said to his mother would bring a measure of peace.

The box had been taped shut, the wide cellophane material sealing the top on three sides. Bronwyn rummaged in the desk for a box cutter. When she peeled open the lid, a strong smell wafted up—a clinical smell, the scent of disinfectant and antiseptic, of medicine and floor wax.

Inside the box lay several large manila envelopes, each labeled by year, beginning with 1984—the year Dorrie Cullen was taken to Milledgeville.

Taking a deep breath, she pulled out the first envelope and held it in her hands for a long time. She could feel the blood pounding in her temple. She stroked the handwriting on the envelope front, smiling slightly at the heavy scrawl that had been Sean's mother's penmanship.

A part of her wanted to thumb open the metal clasp on the back of the envelope, yet another part warned the memories invoked by what she might read would reopen wounds that had lately started to heal. After another moment of trying to decide what to do, she carefully replaced the envelope in the box and walked to the window to stare out at the dark night.

When she pushed aside the curtain and looked down, she saw Cree and Ralph taking the pathway to the lake.

"My God, Aidan! You woke Vince at this time of night to get Ralphie?"

As though he had heard her, he nodded. His hands were shoved into the pockets of his black jeans, his shoulders hunched against the world, drawn in upon himself, and she felt the burden of his solitude heavy on her heart.

Not giving herself time to rationalize whether what she was doing was right, she grabbed her trench coat and the flashlight she kept on her desk, and left the apartment. A light mist was blowing across the parking lot as she took the trail to the lake. Pulling the hood over her hair, she switched on the light and directed its beam along the gravel pathway.

The air was cooler than she had anticipated, but the chill of it washing over her face, accompanied by the soft prickle of mist, felt good.

He was standing with his back to her, looking out across the midnight waters of Rock Creek Lake. His hands were still jammed into his jean pockets, but his shoulders no longer looked so rigid. There was a sense of defeat about the way he stood. Ralph, hunkering on the ground at his feet, turned his big head to look at her as she came toward them.

Bronwyn tripped over an unseen root. When her arm rose, the flashlight beam traveled up to catch Cree's eyes as he turned. She gasped at the chatoyant glow that came from his wolflike amber eyes and would have fallen had he not rushed forward, catching her easily in his arms.

"Woman, what the hell are you doing out here this time of night?" His tone was more exasperated than angry. He steadied her then moved away, putting distance between them.

"Making a fool of myself, apparently," she mumbled. Being this close to the water, there was enough sky-glow to see so she switched off the flashlight and stuck it in her coat pocket.

"You shouldn't be traipsing around in the dark."

"I saw you coming here. You looked like you needed some company."

"You know me that well, do you?"

She looked up at him then blinked. "You shaved your goatee!" She made a grunting sound of disbelief. "And cut your hair!"

He tugged at the thick curls spiraling at his nape. "It's not all that short."

"But why?"

"On my world, it is a ritual of mourning to shorn the hair."

Bronwyn felt a tug at her heart. "You did it for Dorrie."

He moved to the large rock everyone used as a bench. He sat and drew his spread knees into the perimeter of his arms, one hand clasping the opposite wrist. "I cared for her."

There was enough room for her to join him and she did. Her hip touched his as she sat and she thought he tensed at the contact.

"Did you ever go see her with Brian?"

"Sometimes. I hated that place so I didn't go often."

"I'm sure she enjoyed your visits."

He looked at her. "She enjoyed yours. She would talk about them for days afterward."

Bronwyn lowered her head, tears gathering in her eyes. "I really cared for her, too."

"She knew you did." He returned his attention to the calm lake. "She called you her daughter-in-law. Did you know that?"

Bronwyn squeezed her eyes closed. "In my heart, I was."

Cree made no comment. He continued to stare at the glistening dark waters, seemingly content to keep the silence that had settled over them. When Bronwyn leaned her head against his shoulder, he lowered his legs, shifted his right arm around her and pulled her head to his chest. He held her as his body absorbed her sobs, then laid his cheek against the top of her head and began crooning, rocking her, as he would have a child in need of comfort.

When she had cried out her misery, she eased away from him, fishing in the pocket of her coat for a tissue.

"Here," he said, handing her his handkerchief.

"I came here to comfort you," she apologized, and wiped at her eyes.

"You did."

"Is Brian all right?" she asked, blowing her nose.

"He's probably puking up his guts right now." He chuckled. "And cursing me for all I'm not worth in his eyes."

"Why? He was the one who wanted to go drinking."

"It has nothing to do with the drinking. He knows you're out here with me and he'll give me hell about it when I go back, afraid I'll say something I shouldn't."

"Do you care?"

"Not especially."

"He'll probably say something to me too, then."

"About what?" Cree demanded.

"He'll lecture me. I'll listen, he'll preach. I'll ignore his warnings, he'll threaten dire consequences if I do. I'll remind him I'm a grown woman, he'll remind me you are not the man for me."

"I'm not."

"That's for me to decide, don't you think?"

Another deep silence spread over them and lasted longer than the one before. It was Cree who finally broke the stillness.

"Maybe it's time to talk about him, now."

Bronwyn drew in a shaky breath and pulled her coat closer around her shoulders. "Maybe so."

He drew up his knees again in what she had come to realize was a defensive posture. "What do you want to know?"

"Sometimes I can hardly remember what he looked like. Every year, his face grows less vivid in my mind. I hear his words less clearly. The memories seem to be fading. They are still there, but they are not as sharp."

"That's to be expected. Time heals all wounds, they say. If the wound stays fresh and painful, it's hard to move on."

"I think it's time for me to move on. I've resisted doing so for nearly ten years, but lately I feel as though he's trying to tell me to let him go, to find someone to spend my life with and not be alone anymore."

Cree took a deep breath and looked out across the shoreline. "But something is stopping you."

She slid off the rock and walked to the water's edge. Wrapping her arms around her, she waited for him to join her, knowing he would, before she answered. When he came to stand behind her and enclosed her in his strong embrace, she leaned her head back on his chest.

"I've never asked Brian," she said. "I've tried a couple of times, but I never could seem to get out the words. It hurt too much."

"What, dearling?" he asked, his breath soft against her ear.

"I need to know," she said, her voice breaking. "I have to know where he's buried, Aidan. I want to go there and say goodbye. I *need* to do that."

His arms tightened around her for a moment then he released her. He turned her around to face him, put his hands on her cheeks and locked his gaze with hers. "There is no burial place, Bronwyn. When he was taken back to Fuilgaoth, he was cremated and his ashes cast to the wind. He would not have wanted to be caged in the earth for all eternity."

Bronwyn pressed against him, her cheek to his powerful chest and her arms around his waist. She reveled in the feel of him, the strength of his arms as he held her. The cinnamon smell of his cologne was heady, driving straight through her defenses to stroke the fire of her passion.

"Tell me you don't want to be with me," she said, "and I'll do what Brian says. I'll leave you alone."

He was silent for so long, she pulled away and looked up at him.

"Aidan?" she questioned.

He shook his head. "I can't tell you because I would be lying."

Her heartbeat quickened. She threw caution to the wind. "Come home with me. Stay with me tonight."

Cree stared into her eyes, as if searching for answers to questions he needed settled. When she touched his cheek then stood on tiptoes to place a light kiss on his mouth, the growl from deep in his throat excited her.

“The hell with Brian and his warnings,” he snarled, taking her hand.

Ralph trotted behind the human and her Reaper as they hurried back to the condo. He stopped only once to lift his leg against a bush before rushing to catch up with his master.



## Chapter Eighteen

Ralph trotted over to Brownie's wicker dog bed, sniffed the corduroy cover then wedged his big body inside. He turned around and around until finally content he was positioned where he could see both the front door as well as the hallway down which his master and his master's lady had hurried. He settled with a grunt of pleasure, dropped his head to the rim of the bed and snorted. His eyes shifted across the room, taking in every shadow the lights did not reach. His ears were pricked for any sound that was out of the ordinary and his nostrils twitched, taking in the scents that seemed normal to him. No bad odor permeated the room, so the chances of the Amazeen slut being nearby were slim. Snorting again, Ralph licked his chops and – satisfied all was as it should be – closed his eyes with another groan and went to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bronwyn led Cree into her bedroom, his hand clutched in hers. She turned on the bedside lamp, casting the room in a warm, aureate glow.

Cree looked at the coverlet and matching pillows shams. "Sage green gingham and mauve roses. It suits you."

"I've always loved gingham."

"I remember," he said, and could have bitten his tongue when she gave him a quizzical look. He covered his blunder. "Dorrie mentioned it."

He hooked his finger under her chin and lifted her face so he could look into her eyes. "Don't be afraid, little one."

"I'm not," she said, her lips quirking. "I've waited for this a lifetime."

The Viraidan part of him winced, for that part desired her as much as the renegade who shared his body and was jealous of the one straining to break free and overshadow him. Keeping a tight rein on Sean Cullen was proving to be more difficult than he could have imagined.

Taking a deep breath, Cree lifted his hands and cupped Bronwyn's cheeks. She covered his hands with hers and smiled. Lowering his head, he kissed her as gently as a feather floating on the wind – his mouth no more insistent than that ephemeral weight – then pulled back to search her eyes.

"Help me to go slowly, milady. It has been centuries since this warrior has lain with a woman. I could hurt you if we're not careful."

Without speaking, Bronwyn moved against him and put her cheek on his chest. So loud and strong was his heartbeat, he was certain it drowned out all other sound in her ears as she slid her arms around his waist and held him.

Cree closed his eyes, willing the steel of his erection not to ruin the moment. His arms were tight around her back and hips, molding her to him. He hurt as he had not hurt in many years, and the tumescence that strained against his jeans was a force he had not reckoned with for a long time. Not even Ski'Ah's intrusion into his shower had brought about such a need.

How long they stood there, he would never know. Time did not lessen his hardness nor, from what he sensed, decrease the desire building within her. When he could not bear the torment any longer, he moved back.

Driving his hand down his shirt, he palmed the medallion around his neck, pulled it over his head and stuffed it into the pocket of his jeans. He yanked the black T-shirt from his jeans, crossed his arms over his chest and peeled the garment from his body as though it was a second skin, tossing it to the foot of the bed. He was breathing so raggedly now, his chest heaved. When Bronwyn's eyes lowered to his bare flesh, he groaned.

Bronwyn's gaze lifted to his as she reached for the buttons of her blouse. He pushed her hands aside, tugged the silken fabric from the waistband of her skirt and made slow work of the buttons, taking great delight as each one came free of its buttonhole. When the last button was undone, he slipped his hands under the fabric at her shoulder and folded it away from her body, allowing the blouse to fall behind her.

The décolletage revealed in the deep V of her white lace bra mesmerized him. With trembling hands, he ran the backs of his fingers along the soft swell of her breasts. Then he turned his hands and gently, reverently, pressed his palms against the mounds.

Bronwyn drew in a breath, her knees threatening to buckle. It had been years since Sean had touched her—the only man to do so—and she had longed for this wondrous feeling for so long, believing she would never again know the excitement and passion that was flooding her lower body. Her lips parted so she could draw breath easier, unaware of what her soft panting was doing to the man standing before her.

She was on fire with a need that was building at a faster rate than she could control. She longed for his muscular thighs to part her legs, to wedge his strong body against her. She ached to feel the weight of his body pressing her down to the bed, the hardness of his manhood seated deep within her, his hungry mouth devouring hers. She needed the thrust of him, the flow of his juices, the total possession of his ride as he took her with him to a place she had once shared with Sean so long ago.

"Please!" she whispered.

He smiled, then reached behind her to unbutton and unzip her skirt. The gray gabardine fell in a pool at her feet. He eased her back, picked up the garment and draped it on the footboard of her brass bed.

"You're going to drive me crazy," she said.

Cree did not answer. He simply put his hands on her hips and –bending his knees as he went– began lowering her half-slip to her ankles, his palms sliding sensuously over the bare flesh of her legs. He wrapped his hot hands around her left ankle, lifted her foot, removed her shoe then moved over to her other foot. As he hunkered there, massaging her instep, he looked up at her, his gaze as hot as the depths of a molten fire.

She threaded her fingers through his thick black hair and drew his head to her. As he slid his hands up her back and pressed his cheek against her belly, she released a long, contented sigh, reveling in the warmth of his breath against the waistband of her silk panties.

"You smell like cinnamon," she said.

"You smell like gardenias," he replied, pressing a kiss on her navel.

When his tongue darted into the deep indention, a shudder went through Bronwyn's body. "Much more of that and we won't need the bed."

"I realize that," he replied huskily, climbing to his feet. His hands went to the front hook of her bra and parted it, giving neither of them a chance to say another word.

Bronwyn heard his long exhalation and watched as he stared avidly at her unbound bosom. She wanted nothing more than to have him lower his mouth to either of the turgid nipples that strained toward him and was only partly appeased as he covered each breast with his palms.

"Beautiful," he said in a low, throaty tone as he plied her flesh, lifting, molding and lightly kneading the swollen mounds. "So soft. As soft as silk."

She wanted to scream at him, to demand he touch her nipples, and even as her need manifested itself in her mind, she knew he had heard her silent wishes, for his thumbs moved over the sensitive nubs.

"Oh, God!" she moaned, her legs quivering. "I can't take much more!"

One moment her panties were still riding low on her hips, the next they were torn scraps of pale blue against the sage green carpet. Cree swung her up into his brawny arms and placed her none too gently upon the bed.

Bronwyn lay shivering, staring at the man looming beside her. He snarled as he jerked open his belt buckle. He ground his teeth as he kicked off his sneakers and stripped off his socks. He panted as he snagged down his zipper and pushed the jeans from his slim hips in nearly one motion. She was surprised to find he wore no underwear.

But it was the sight of his unrestrained manhood that caught and held her undivided attention. Bronwyn looked up at him, almost unaware she was licking her upper lip. Her eyes widened, for an unholy light filled Cree's face that would have frightened any woman.

"Help me to go slowly," he grated, his hands clenched tightly into fists at his side. "Else, so strong is my desire for you, I will hurt you."

She swallowed hard, opened her lips to answer but her mouth was so dry she could not speak. She swallowed again then moved over, patting the place beside her.

Cree was obviously struggling to refrain from throwing himself on her. It seemed to take every ounce of his control to put one knee on the mattress.

"L-lie down," Bronwyn managed to say. "On your stomach."

He looked at her quizzically, but did as she commanded. He was as tense and rigid as an oak branch, his legs slightly parted, his hands clutching the pillow.

"Relax," she whispered, putting her hand on his back. She felt him shudder, and watched the muscles along his flanks bunch and hold. She repeated her whisper, gently stroking his shoulder blade. Gradually, she felt the tension dissolve under his flesh.

Without speaking, she straddled him, settling her body atop his firm buttocks.

"What are you doing?" he gasped, lifting his head to look at her.

"You've never had a massage?"

He shook his head.

"Well, you are about to get one," she said firmly, and pushed his head back to the pillow.

Cree was on fire with a passion that was consuming him. It was painful to lie on his erection, but the pressure against the mattress eased the ache somewhat. He made himself lay there, holding his breath as she moved her hands to his tight shoulders and began kneading. The feel of her applications as she worked the muscles was a sensation he found immeasurably satisfying.

"You like that?" she asked as she plied the length of his left arm then his right, giving one time to relax before moving to the other.

"I like that," he sighed deeply, closing his eyes and giving in to her manipulations.

Her hands moved down his back, pressed expertly into the area over his kidneys, shifted firmly along his sides and with enough pressure to make him groan with pleasure. As she rose up and moved down his legs, sitting gingerly on his calves, he made no protest, though his hands still clutched the pillow.

"Stop punishing the foam rubber, Aidan," she said with a light laugh.

He released his grip on the pillow but clutched it again, wadding it beneath his cheek, for her hands were now on his buttocks and he had stopped breathing again. When she remained paused, her hands not moving, he realized she was waiting for him to relax. It took some effort, but he let the muscles loosen and let out a shuddery breath.

She gave his firm cheeks a deep-tissue massage for quite a length of time, sighing at every grunt of pleasure forced from his throat. When she moved down to his upper thighs, he groaned in protest.

"Spread your legs," she ordered.

Cree lifted his head and looked around at her. "Are you going to do something I'm going to find not so pleasant?"

She slapped him lightly on the ass. "Do as you're told and you'll find out."

He hesitated then shifted himself, tensing as tight as a coiled spring when she positioned herself between his opened legs. He forced himself to lie down again, though his eyes stayed open and wary as her hands moved to his thighs. Soon, he was relaxed again as her deep massage worked each taut thigh then slid down to repeat the process on his calves.

"You have beautifully proportioned legs," she said as her fingers plied his flesh.

"I've never paid any attention to my legs."

"And elegant feet." She lifted his leg so she could massage his toes.

"Ah," he sighed, then groaned in gratification.

"The feet are an erogenous zone on most people."

"You don't have to tell me that. I may start humping the mattress if you're not careful."

She laughed. "That I'd like to see."

He sucked in a sharp breath as the bed dipped between his legs and her hands were once more on his backside. But it was not her hands that pressed into his flesh—it was her nails, dragging in lazy circles over his flesh, sending prickles of intense sensation down his legs and through his groin.

"By the gods, Bronwyn! You are torturing me, woman!"

"Lie still or I might stick my finger—"

"No!" he exploded, grabbing the brass bars of her headboard.

Bronwyn slapped him on the rump—not as lightly this time—and ordered him to turn over.

He reluctantly obeyed, wanting more of her hands on his ass, but realizing as he turned over and she shifted her position between his open legs, another part of his anatomy would be easily within her reach. That part of him leapt to the same conclusion.

"My, my, my," she said. "Aren't we happy to see Bronnie?"

Before he could answer, her warm hands wrapped around his turgid flesh and he once again gripped the headboard above him, his eyes squeezed shut to keep from unmaning himself in her hands. He began panting, feeling her touch to the very core of him.

"Look at me, Aidan," she said softly, and in a tone of voice that brooked no argument.

His eyelids fluttered open. He looked up at her as she braced one hand on the bed and leaned over him, her breasts lightly touching his chest, her other hand firmly grasping his manhood.

"I own you, Reaper," she taunted, her hand squeezing him.

Cree's eyes narrowed. Very slowly, his lips stretched into a vengeful smile. "You think so?"

She leaned closer. "I know so, baby."

One moment he was beneath her, his cock in her hand. The next he was straddling her, his knees pressing her legs far apart, her wrists in his strong hands, pinned above her.

"Let's see who owns who, baby," he growled.

Bronwyn gasped as his head dipped to her chest and his mouth closed on her nipple. As his tongue laved the swollen tip, she strained against his invasion, arching her back.

He gave no quarter as he plied his own brand of torture to his ladylove. His lips moved from one peak to another—tasting, suckling, flicking, tormenting—and back again. His fingers tensed, holding her wrists captive as he moved his lower body against her, allowing her to feel the stab of his erection and the grind of his hips against her pelvis. He released one of her wrists and drove his hand down her side and hip then to the damp mound of her sex.

"Aidan!" she hissed, rising to meet him.

He cupped her womanhood, swirled his palm over her wiry hair then turned his hand so his index finger could slide inside her.

"Aidan!" she screamed, lowering her free hand to push at his shoulder then clutch him as her nails dug into his flesh.

She wiggled against his invasion, gasping, reveling in the feel of him thrusting shallowly inside her—first one finger, then two, then three. His thumb made tiny circles on her clitoris, driving her mad with pleasure. She moaned and tightened her muscles around his questing fingers.

His mouth slid from her chest to her mouth, slashing brutally across her lips, plunging his tongue deeply inside. He ravished her mouth with his tongue—claiming her, branding her, making her his possession for all time. When he had his fill of her lips, he abruptly released her other hand and slid his body down hers, shoved his hands under her hips, lifted her and claimed her nether lips in a hard vacuum that lifted her off the mattress with a shriek.

She grabbed his hair—the thick strands threaded through her fingers—and pressed him to her. She made low, guttural sounds that seemed to spur him on as his tongue drove ruthlessly into the center of her sex.

"Oh, my God!" she screamed, feeling the almost-forgotten itch deep within her that she had known only once before so long ago on the banks of a Georgia river.

Cree had no more control over his flaming passion. He moved up and over her and pressed himself inside her, striving not to hurt her but unable to keep from doing so as her legs came around his hips and she arched up to impale herself on his steely length. He heard her gasp of pain and would have withdrawn, but she held his hips captive and began moving against him, grinding her sex on his cock.

Almost at the same moment as he went as deep inside her as he could thrust, their passions ignited, rose up to meet one another, and crashed together in a blinding flare of consummation that brought a roar of satisfaction from his lips and a scream of intense pleasure from hers. They shuddered, clutching at one another as he fell limp against her, her arms wrapped tightly around him.

Cree rolled off her but was loath to be apart from her. He pulled her into his arms, their sweaty bodies pressed together and nestled her firmly in his arms.

"I love you," she whispered.

"As I love you," he returned, his hold tightening as he placed a chaste kiss on her damp brow. He felt her stiffen. "What is it, sweeting?"

"What were we thinking, Aidan?" she asked, sitting up. She put her hands over her face. "What have we done?"

Cree was alarmed at the hopeless tone in her voice. "Baby, what did I do? Did I hurt you? Did I...?"

She turned to him, tears in her eyes. "You could have gotten me pregnant. We didn't even consider that, Aidan! I..."

He gathered her to him. "I would have known if I'd impregnated you, sweeting," he said.

"But..."

"I would have known," he stated firmly, "but from now on, we'll use protection if you desire it." He smoothed her hair, concentrating on easing her into a deep sleep.

Within moments, she was sound asleep in his arms, exhausted by their lovemaking. He laid there listening to her deep, regulated breaths, and sighed with contentment.

For the first time in his life, he knew utter contentment.

He had known sex long, long ago, but it had been just that and nothing more. It had not been the exquisite pleasure he had just experienced with Bronwyn. With Chandra—the woman who had been his mate when he'd crashed on Earth—it had been simple relief with no love involved. He didn't think Chandra had loved him. She had feared him, had allowed him to have her without protest, but he doubted she bore him any real affection. He had not been a man any woman could have loved back then. But now? With Bronwyn?

The joy of their lovemaking had been like a laser thrust—he could feel the slicing away at his loneliness, the severing of the solitude that had always held his body captive, the fading away of the darkness that had been his constant companion since birth. He never once tried to reach out, to keep his emptiness from leaving, for the

brutishness that was his solitary existence was being torn away, leaving in its wake a wondrous warmth that was his new physical being.

With a smile on his face, he slid into the depths of slumber with his lady.

\* \* \* \* \*

"It's almost three o'clock in the afternoon," Bronwyn groaned as she lifted her arm to look at her watch. "Why did you let me sleep so late?"

Cree ran his index finger down her arm. "You seemed so at peace, I hated to wake you."

She turned her head. "What were you doing? Watching me sleep?"

He nodded. "Reapers don't sleep well or deeply. I have been lying here reveling in having you at my side."

Bronwyn pushed up in the bed, blushing as the coverlet fell, exposing her naked breasts. She tugged up the sheets and tucked them under her arm. "Voyeur."

Viraiden Cree's amber eyes gleamed as a slow, devilish smile creased his mouth. "I am an evil man. What can I tell you?"

"Then you had best repent, Reaper."

"I'm already doomed, my love. The sacraments will forever be denied me."

Bronwyn frowned. "Why? If you go to reconciliation and —"

A harsh breath rose and fell in Cree's chest. He tossed the covers from his lower body, swung his legs from the bed and sat up, plowing a hand through his tousled hair. "'If any man whosoever of the house of Israel, and of the strangers that sojourn amongst them, eat blood, I will set my face against his soul, and will cut him off from amongst his people'—Leviticus 17:10." He turned to look at her. "I belong in hell, Bronwyn, and one day I'll take up permanent residence there."

Bronwyn winced. "Don't say that. I can't believe God would condemn you for something not of your doing. You didn't ask to be born a Reaper."

He took her hand. "You have to understand something about what I am."

She tried to withdraw her hand, but he held fast, his eyes locked on hers were golden fire pools.

"I am a killer, milady. I have killed so many times the very act of murder has no meaning for me. To me, it is no different than swatting a pesky mosquito and bears no more thought."

"I don't want to hear —"

"You *need* to hear."

"Don't," she said, tears forming in her eyes. She cocked her head in pleading, causing her lips to tremble. "Don't."

"Bronwyn —"



"I know what you are. I just don't want to be reminded of it. I can accept you if you can accept that some things should not be discussed between us. This is one of them!"

Her misery unnerved him. Her eyes were forgiving, her look one of infinite trust. She was wisdom's dark angel peering at him through a gaze that said more than words ever could. When she lifted her hand to his cheek, caressed him, her thumb stroking the side of his mouth, he gave in, gathering her to him.

"Life is never simple," she said as she settled against his chest. "Don't make it any harder than it already is."

His arms went around her. "I love you," he whispered into her thick hair. "They tried to take the right to love away from me, to keep me from feeling anything but hate but you saved me from the darkness into which I had fallen. For the first time in my life, I know what it is to love and be loved. Chandra feared me and the son she and I made together hated me, though I loved and tried to teach him the Reaper ways. That is the way of it sometimes."

She drew back and looked at him, her smile a saving grace. "I understand, Viraidan."

Her use of his name made his heart soar. He brought her fingers to his lips, closed his eyes and kissed her knuckles. "Never leave me, lady. I could not bear it."

She pressed against him, her bare breasts soft against his naked chest. He opened his eyes to look at her and found himself staring into her very soul.

"I have loved Sean Cullen for as long as I can remember," she said. "I love him still. Now there is another soul to which I cling and that one is not as dark as its owner would like me to believe." When he started to protest, she pulled her fingers free of his grip and covered his mouth. She pulled him toward her, falling back so his upper body slid over hers.

"I thought you were getting up," he protested, bracing himself on his elbows so he did not crush her.

She craned her neck and looked down at his lap. "And I thought you were." She arched a thick brow. "You need some starch for that package, Reaper?"

He grinned. "Wicked woman."

"Goes well with an evil man."

He shifted position so he was lying against her, his belly to her hip. "Shall I show you what evil men do to wicked women, milady?"

Bronwyn's eyes widened. "Aye, my warrior. Show me."

"With the greatest of pleasure."

\* \* \* \* \*

Sometime near dawn, the storms returned. Lightning crackled across the firmament and the strobe-like flash brightened the room in a harsh blue glow. The window-rattling boom of thunder woke them both. Bronwyn moved closer to the safe harbor of Cree's arms, flattening her trembling body to his.

"Shush," he crooned, stroking her long hair. "I am here, beloved."

Her whimper brought an ache to his heart and his hold grew more possessive.

"I will never let anything harm you, Bronwyn. Never."

She clutched at his chest, her fingers threading through the hairs nestled there. He could feel the sticky moistness of her sweat along his side.

"Come over the hills, my bonnie Irish lass," he began to sing in a low, soft voice.

"Come over the hills to your darling.

"You choose the road, love, and I'll make the vow.

"You'll be my true love forever."

As the tempest grew bolder beyond their window, his words rose in volume, drowning out the raging rain that lashed at the glass and the thunderous vibrations that shook the building. His left hand moved along her back, stroking her, calming and soothing her—his right hand held her head cradled in the crook of his shoulder, his fingers partially blocking the pulsing of the lightning.

When at last the elements were nothing more than a distant echo, coming back to them from miles away, he realized she had fallen asleep. He smiled, closed his eyes and would have drifted into a Reaper's dreamless rest had not the sudden intense pain in his back brought him fully awake.

"*I am hungry, Reaper,*" the queen stated.

"Not now," he pleaded, biting his lip to keep the agony at bay.

"I allowed you the female, now you must pay!" the revenant worm queen demanded.

He knew what She was requesting. The thought of leaving Bronwyn's side to kill for Her sickened him. He also knew that if he did not, it was entirely within Her power to accelerate his Transition. Such a punishment would not only be painful, it would be dangerous for Bronwyn. He had no desire for his lady to ever see him in his bestial state.

He rose carefully from the bed and his lover's side, bending over to kiss her goodbye. He made one stop before leaving, taking a grumpy Ralph with him when he left.

## Chapter Nineteen

Bronwyn turned off the water and opened the tempered glass door. Patting the wall beside the shower, she fished her bathrobe from the hook and pulled it on. She hated drying off with towels and the thick terrycloth robe cocooned her in warmth while it absorbed the water. She belted the robe around her and, after stepping into her slippers, padded over to the vanity to brush out her hair. But she stopped and sniffed the air.

"All right!"

She put down her brush and headed for the kitchen. Her objective was a steaming hot cup of the coffee she'd smelled wafting through the air. The aroma of the rich brew was a pleasant surprise and she was thankful for Cedric's ability to provide her with that much-needed waker-upper each morning.

The coffeemaker was just finishing its timer cycle, the rich black coffee pooling in the glass pot but Cedric was not in the kitchen to greet her. Instead, Cree had left a note on the computer by the refrigerator asking her to join him for lunch by the lake when she got back from Mass.

"I'll bring human food too, along with my usual entrails," he'd typed, and signed it simply "C".

"Idiot," she called him affectionately at the reminder of what Sage Hesar thought Cree ate for his lunch.

The coffee beckoned, the aroma comforting.

"And the man makes coffee," she sighed, opening the cupboard to retrieve her favorite mug.

After pouring herself a cup of the delicious-smelling brew, she carried it into the living room and sat on the sofa, curling her legs beneath her. Her first sip of the scalding liquid made her sigh with contentment.

"The man makes great coffee," she said, and sighed again.

The cup nestled in her hands, she laid her head on the back of the sofa and thought of the night she had spent in Viraiden's arms.

Bronwyn lifted her head and took another sip of coffee. As she did, her eyes fell on the box of letters sitting on her desk.

A brief spasm of pain flickered through her heart. She stared at the box, knowing she would have to deal with it sooner or later. Before she had followed Viraiden to the lake, she had made up her mind to read some of Sean's letters to his mother. Now, she realized that would be unwise. The past would be dredged up, dissected and relived. The agony of what had happened to them would open fresh wounds and, at that

moment, she was too happy, too satisfied with the way things were advancing with her and Cree to look back, to borrow trouble from the past.

She put her feet on the floor, the coffee cup on the table and stood. Her gaze on the box, she walked to her desk and stared at the manila envelopes housed within the cardboard receptacle. She ran a finger along the box's flap, her bottom lip tucked between her teeth. But before she could open anything, her phone rang, surprising her. She doubted it would be Cree and she had no desire to talk to Brian, so she let the machine catch it.

"Bronwyn, are you there?" her mother demanded. "If you are, pick up!"

There was a long pause then an audible sigh.

"All right, I suppose you went to the nine o'clock Mass with Brian. You know I really don't approve of your relationship with a man old enough to be your father. Well, anyway, I can't wait any longer to tell you our good news."

Another pause then a more cheerful tone of voice.

"Bronnie, Neal and I were married in Provence a few days ago. I know we should have waited, but we found this darling little country church and the priest was so sweet."

Another prolonged sigh.

"Sage was best man and the priest's housekeeper was my maid of honor. I wish you could have been here, but I knew we'd never drag you away from work. I hope you aren't too upset with us. We are deliriously happy and wanted to share our good news with you. When you get this message, please give us a call at..."

Bronwyn grabbed a pen and wrote down the international number in Switzerland where her mother and new stepfather were located.

"We'll be here through Tuesday, then it's off to Norway, Denmark and Sweden. Sage, however, should be back in Iowa by tomorrow. You know you could do a lot worse than that sweet young man, Bronwyn."

Another long pause then a quick "I love you" and a hasty goodbye.

Bronwyn leaned against the desk, not sure how she felt about her mother's marriage. While she liked Neal Hesar and certainly understood her mother's need to have him in her life, Bronwyn felt a slight betrayal of her lost father despite what he had done to her own life. She knew that was natural, but all the same, it hurt a little to know her father could be replaced in her mother's affections.

Mentally shaking herself, she was about to return to the sofa and her cooling cup of coffee when she looked at the box of letters. For a long time she stood there, deciding what needed to be done. Finally she let out a ragged breath.

"I'll take out my letters to Miss Dorrie," she said, nodding. "No one needs to ever see them."

The decision made, she pulled the first envelope from the box and opened it. The first ten or so letters were from Brian. His name was in the return address. Next came a

letter from her—the first of many she’d written Sean’s mother—and she pulled it from the stack, remembering well how she had smuggled the letter out of Galrath and who had helped her. There were two more letters from Brian, then in the return address were simply the initials SDC. She deliberately looked away, hearing the blood beginning to pound in her ears.

She remembered that day at Saint Teresa’s as though it had been yesterday—

“I’m here to enroll me boy,” Dorrie Cullen had said in her thick brogue. “His name be Sean Daniel Cullen.”

“Sean Daniel Cullen,” Bronwyn whispered, staring at the bold initials. She ran her thumb over the initials. Before the tears that stung her eyes could gather and fall, she quickly moved past the letter.

There were five at the back of the stack postmarked Ireland, all from Brian. With a sigh of relief, she stuffed the letters back in the envelope and moved on to the next year’s group.

The first letter in the next envelope was from her. She laid it aside, shuffled through several from Brian, an equal number from Sean, another from her then she stopped.

She knew the exact date Sean had died. That day, month and year was etched firmly in her fertile memory as the day John F. Kennedy had been slain. She stared at the postmark from that terrible day, her lip quivering. Her gaze shifted to the initials in the return address and she realized this was Sean’s last letter to his mother. She lifted it, looked at it a long time, torn between reading what he had written and not wanting to know. No doubt the missive had been penned the day before the tragic events in front of the Flying Wench Tavern occurred. Bronwyn wondered if he had mailed it the morning he died or had dropped it in the post a day earlier. A part of her longed to know, to be a witness to his last thoughts, but another part warned the grief would be unbearable and she had no right to pry.

At long last she laid the letter lovingly aside then moved on.

In that envelope, there were seven more letters from her, the rest from Brian. When she opened the next envelope, she started looking only at the postmarks. If the letter came from Florida, she put it aside. If it was from Iowa, she thumbed past it without bothering to look at the return address.

She found thirty more letters from her in the next six envelopes. Some were thin, only a page long—most were two pages. One or two were several pages thick.

“I guess it depended on how sorry I was feeling for myself at the time...”

She remembered complaining about college classes, professors, dorm room conditions and roommates who didn’t have a clue how to keep a room livable. There had been reviews of books she’d read or movies she’d seen that had struck a chord. A particularly moving homily at church might warrant a comment or two.

And there had been clippings that Dorrie had asked to see when Bronwyn had made the Dean’s list or when she had won an academic award of some sort.

And there were pictures of Bronwyn through the years—self-consciously sent and graciously accepted and acknowledged in the letters Dorrie had written back to her.

Opening one of her letters to Dorrie, Bronwyn realized the picture that should have been there had been removed and she wondered what Sean's mother had done with it, with any of the pictures, for when she opened several that should have had photos, she found none.

Neither were they in the box.

"I wonder what they did with her belongings," she said, and made a mental note to gently query Brian.

She knew there would be only seven letters from her to Dorrie in the last envelope. Four had been sent from Florida and the other three from Iowa. She had to look at the return address to see which ones were hers and which ones were Brian's.

It was then her world came crashing to a sudden stop.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bronwyn pounded on the security headquarters door. The man behind the desk looked up and frowned. "What can I do for you, Dr. McGregor?"

"I'm looking for Captain Cree."

"This is his day off. He doesn't like being bothered on his day off."

Digging her fingernails into her palms, Bronwyn stepped into the office. "I neither need nor want your opinion about what Viraiden does or doesn't like, Mr. Cahill," she snapped, putting all the haughtiness she had ever heard her mother use into her tone. "All I need from you is his whereabouts."

Douglas Cahill's eyebrows shot up. "He's down at the stables."

"Which is where exactly?"

"Down where the road into Baybridge T-bones into paved on the left and gravel on the right. Take the gravel road about a mile and a half east. You'll see the farm buildings. Turn in there and keep on the road until it winds 'round to the stables."

"Thank you," Bronwyn muttered.

She turned on her heel and left the office, her jaw clenched, her eyes narrowed. Five minutes later, she left the paved section of the street at the kiosk and took the serpentine curves of graveled roadway out to the farm. She barely noticed the pretty scenery surrounding the crimson-hued outbuildings with their green metal roofing. She drove past a duo of tall brick silos and turned in at the opening of the winding split-rail fence that swept from either side of the farm access road. Absently, she waved at several workmen gathered around a tractor and hay wagon when they greeted her.

The road passed beneath a modern version of a covered bridge perched over a narrow stream, then became shrouded with the branches of old-growth maple and walnut trees as it wound its way east by northeast. The curving road would have been

beautiful had Bronwyn's mind been other than where it was. The lush growth and the changing colors of approaching fall barely registering with her. By the time she caught sight of the sprawling stables and white paddock, she was as tense as a coiled watch spring.

She didn't see anyone milling about, and when she stopped the car, got out and went into the dusky interior of the stable, her calls of "hello" went unanswered. Going back outside, she stood by her car, her hands on her hips and gazed around with growing frustration. There were two horses in the paddock, one lying in the sun and the other drinking at the trough.

"Is anybody here?" she called.

When there was no answer, she opened the car door and tapped the horn. She waited a minute or two then pressed again on the horn, longer.

"Stop that! You're scaring the horses!"

Bronwyn turned. A tall black-haired woman was sitting bareback astride a pinto. Anger was carved on the woman's tanned features and her vivid sapphire blue eyes were narrowed.

"What do you want?" she inquired in a husky voice.

"I'm looking for Viraiden Cree," Bronwyn grated, trying not to gawk at the woman's imposing height.

"Do you see him here?"

"Are you the stable manager?" Bronwyn asked, but privately thinking the woman looked like a professional basketball player.

The woman smiled nastily. "I might be. Who the hell are you?"

Bronwyn raised her chin. "I am a friend of Aidan's."

"Aidan, is it?" the woman snorted, swinging one long leg over her mount's rump and sliding to the ground. She walked toward Bronwyn, the pinto following her. "Does he know you call him that behind his back?"

Bronwyn opened her mouth to tell the woman it wasn't any of her business what she called Cree, but the sound of barking made her look to the west. She thought she recognized Ralph's excited ululation.

"Who are you?" the woman asked. "And why are you looking for Cree?"

Knowing she could never drive her car over the rough-looking land she was sure must border on the crescent-shaped lake off to the west, Bronwyn turned on her heel and headed for the paddock.

Ignoring the woman who had fallen into step beside her, Bronwyn stopped at the paddock, put two fingers to her lips and whistled for the horses. Both equines turned their heads, but only the one at the trough headed her way, ambling along, tossing its thick mane.

"I asked you your name," the woman insisted.

"Bronwyn McGregor."

"What do you want with Cree?"

The horse that sauntered over to Bronwyn was a roan mare with a coat gleaming so brightly it hurt the eyes. Its sleek body rippled with healthy muscle and its soft brown eyes were filled with friendliness. Looking down the mare's legs, Bronwyn saw that she was shod.

"If you're shod, sweetie, you're rideable." Bronwyn patted the velvety nose.

"Do you even know how to ride?" the woman inquired, her voice filled with insult.

"Do you know how to mind your own business?" Bronwyn gave a look she hoped would shut up the bitch.

The woman snorted. Crossing her arms over her lush chest, she cocked her head, amusement settling on her pretty face. "Horses can tell when a human is inept at riding them. The beast will throw you quicker than you can bat an eye."

"I've been riding since I was five."

Bronwyn went in the stable and came back out with a set of reins. Not even looking at the tall woman, she opened the gate arm of the paddock, went inside and speaking softly to the mare, draped the reins over its head. Tightening the reins in place, she led the mare outside the paddock then closed the gate.

"He belongs to me," the woman said.

"He is a she," Bronwyn snapped.

"Fool! I don't mean the horse."

Bronwyn grabbed a handful of the little mare's mane and swung up onto its back. She settled herself then pulled lightly on the reins, turning the mare's head to the right.

"You don't mean Cree, either." Bronwyn walked the mare forward, her gaze locked on the woman. "I don't know who you are and I don't care, but Viraidan Cree belongs to me."

"That I will not allow!" The woman grabbed for the mare's reins, but Bronwyn dug her heels into the horse's sturdy sides. The animal shot forward, pulling away from the strange woman's grasp.

"Eat me," Bronwyn threw at her.

"He is mine!" the woman yelled as Bronwyn nudged the mare into a fast trot. "Do you hear me, McGregor? The Reaper is mine!"

Bronwyn could hear her shouts but couldn't make out what she was yelling, for the mare's hoofbeats were loud and the wind rushed in her ears, blowing her hair, which blotted out the woman's words.

"Ugly black-haired witch," Bronwyn murmured, but the woman's exotic beauty was enough to put seeds of doubt in her mind. Cree had made no mention of seeing another woman. The witch, as Bronwyn mentally labeled her, could be like the young



girls at church on Sunday – lusting after Cree but having as little chance of attracting his attention as an ant underfoot.

She guided the mare toward where she had heard what she thought was Ralph's excited bark. The lacy umbrellas of the red maples and gingko trees brushed past as the mare ventured deeper into the forest beyond the stables. The ground was rocky, rippled with low hills and smelled of a recent mowing. Looking at the area over which she passed, Bronwyn realized she was traveling over a hay field.

The glint of light on water shone through the stand of trees ahead. Bronwyn slowed the mare to a walk. She thought she heard music. When she listened closely, she recognized the strains of a Celtic folksong, its haunting melody drawing her like a magnet.

She found him at the water's edge. Ralph was chasing snow geese, which seemed to be delighting in the game of landing on the water then flapping away to taunt the big dog. A huge black stallion was tethered to a sapling nearby, its gaze seemingly on the man standing a few yards away.

Cree was glistening with sweat as he went through the paces of a form of martial arts Bronwyn had never seen before. He was barefoot, shirtless, his broad back to her. The only clothing he wore was a pair of tight black denim jeans that molded his rump like a second skin.

Sliding down from the mare's silky back, Bronwyn quietly tied the horse's reins to a low-hanging branch. Careful where she stepped, she eased forward. Creeping closer, watching the graceful body maneuvers that made the muscles bunch and ripple across his upper torso, she was mesmerized by the beauty of his movements. The fluidity with which he moved, the strength in the muscles of his arms bunching beneath his sweaty flesh, the power exhibited in his thighs as he shifted position, all combined to capture and hold her attention.

The music coming from the battery-powered CD player added the right amount of eroticism to the scene. The lyrical strains of the Celtic tune, the beat of the bodhrán, the skirl of the tin whistle, all added to the mystery of the physical dance being performed at the water's edge. Cree moved slowly, putting his finely honed body through its paces, synchronized with the rhythms coming from the folksong.

As quietly as she could, Bronwyn hunkered down behind a spreading bush and parted the branches. She wanted the target of her rapt attention to turn so she could see his face, for from the glimpses she had of his profile as he exercised, she knew his eyes were closed, his concentration high.

It was as though the thought reached him like a lethal missile. Cree turned, his eyelids flying open, one hand going to the center of his chest where his medallion lay nestled in the damp hair. He slapped his palm over the silver disk, hiding it from view.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked, his voice harsh.

Bronwyn stood, her eyes locked with his and came into the clearing. She stumbled on an exposed root, but Cree made no move to go to her aid.

He unhooked his T-shirt from a branch and turned his back to her, drawing the black fabric over his head in a savage jerk. Turning, he glared at her. "What were you doing spying on me?" His breath came heavy and rapid from his heaving chest.

Bronwyn took a few steps closer. "Did he give it to you?"

His eyes narrowed. "Did who give me what?"

"The medallion you wear. The one you are trying so hard to keep me from seeing. The one you removed before we made love so I wouldn't recognize it. Did Brian give it to you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

Bronwyn shivered. She wrapped her arms around her, holding his gaze. "It's a Claddagh, isn't it?"

"What if it is? What difference does it make?"

"None, unless it's the one Sean gave me. It was one of a kind."

"Oh, you mean the one you gave back to him on his deathbed?" A vein throbbed wildly in his neck. "It ceased being yours the moment you put it in his dying hand!"

"Did you and Brian think I wouldn't find out, Aidan?" she asked, ignoring his hateful remark.

Cree growled low in his throat, his hands clenching and unclenching at his side, but he didn't answer. Neither did he back up when she came closer.

"You were his friend. Brian was his father. Brian is a Reaper, so it stands to reason Seannie was, too. And unless I miss my guess, you were the one who taught him how to be a Reaper, how to kill for the IRA. You protected him and you're protecting him now."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Where is he, Aidan? Where is Sean?"

"Sean is dead!" he shouted. "Dead and gone, Bronwyn!"

"Dead men don't write letters to their mothers."

Cree's eyes widened and his full lips parted. He stared at her, his posture rigid. She could hear his breathing, heavy in the still morning air. When he remained silent, she dug into the pocket of her lightweight jacket, and pulled out an envelope and extended it to him.

"Go ahead, look at it. His initials are there in the return address space." She thrust the envelope closer to his chest. "It's postmarked two weeks *before* Miss Dorrie died."

He snatched the envelope, his lips pulled back over gritted teeth. "I suppose you read the gods-be-damned thing, didn't you?"

"I wanted to, but I didn't."

"How did you get this?" he said, shaking the letter at her.

"Mr. Ludlum gave a box of letters to me. He said one of the nurses at the hospital sent them along. She thought Brian and his son would want them." An uneasy smile

trembled on Bronwyn's lips. "That part didn't register with me until just now – Brian and his son. I guess the nursing staff knew Miss Dorrie's son was alive."

"No one has said anything about him being alive!"

"But he is. I know he is and I want to see him. I need to talk to him."

Cree threw up his hands. "By the gods, woman! Why?" There was obvious misery stamped on his handsome face. "Why?" he asked again in a whisper.

When she didn't answer, he flung the letter away from him as though it was a Frisbee and went to her, grabbing her upper arms in his strong grip. He shook her lightly.

"You laid in my arms last night," he reminded her. "You gave yourself to me. You told me you loved me!"

"I do love you," she said forcefully. "My needing to see Sean has nothing to do with you. This is between Sean and me, Aidan."

Cree laughed mirthlessly. "That's what you think."

"It's obvious he doesn't want me, Aidan," she said, tears forming in her eyes. "If he did, he would have sought me out. If he had loved me the way I loved him, he would have come after me. He would have told me about Alistair Gallagher, the man who detonated the bomb that killed my father. He would have explained what happened."

"And you would have listened?" he scoffed, his grip on her arms tightening.

"I don't know if I would have or not. I was angry, in shock that day in the hospital. My father and my child had been killed. That is not something easily accepted."

He searched her eyes, his hands relaxing a little on her flesh. She watched emotions pass over his face – anxiety, hurt, uncertainty. When his shoulders drooped and his hands fell away from her arms, he lowered his head and squeezed his eyes shut.

"I love you, Bronwyn," he said so softly she had to strain to hear him. "I love you with all my heart and with what soul I have left. I could not bear losing you again."

Bronwyn moaned, stepping forward to place her trembling hands against his cheeks to lift his head. He opened his eyes to look at her and she saw moisture glistening in the amber orbs.

"Oh, Aidan. You aren't going to lose me."

A solitary tear fell down his cheek. He reached up to cover her hands with his own then drew her palms to his chest, her right hand pressed firmly over the medallion beneath his T-shirt.

"It is your Claddagh. I've worn it since the day I came back."

Bronwyn moved her hand so her fingers could touch the impression of the medallion through the fabric. "Sean gave it to you, didn't he?"

Cree sighed heavily. "Sean died that day." When she started to protest, he put a hand to her lips. "Let me finish. He was Brian's son and he was a Reaper, that's true. The parasite inside him was an offspring of the queen I have inside me. There are only a

few ways a Reaper can truly die—by drowning, beheading or by fire. Sean's parasite was so badly damaged it could not survive. When the healers pronounced him dead, he truly was."

"But you were burned just as badly," she reminded him. "When you crashed in Ireland all those centuries ago, you were hurt just as severely as Sean, weren't you?"

After a long pause, he nodded. "Aye, and I knew the agony he had endured. But there was a difference."

"What difference?"

"The queen is more powerful than her offspring, and each generation is less powerful than their dam when they are produced. What She could withstand, Her progeny could not. The parasite in Sean Cullen ceased to exist, and when it ceased to exist, his mortal body succumbed to its injuries."

"But he's alive. Somehow they brought him back to life." She drew in a breath. "Did they give him a new parasite?"

"They tried, but the implantation didn't work."

"Then how—"

He shushed her, then reached inside his shirt and withdrew the Claddagh. He pulled the silver medallion over his head and placed it in her palm, curling her fingers around it.

"This was in his hand when they brought him back to Fuilgaoth. Not even death could have taken it from him. It was there when a part of him came back from the dead."

Bronwyn drew in a shuddering breath. Cree had all but admitted Sean was alive. She felt her knees grow weak and would have collapsed had he not helped her to sit on the ground. She stared at the medallion that still bore the warmth of Cree's flesh and brought it to her chest.

"Where is he?" she said, tears falling down her face. "Aidan, please. I have to know where he is."

Cree took a breath then exhaled slowly, his gaze locked on hers. "You're looking at him."

## Chapter Twenty

"Do something!" Ski'Ah demanded.

Danyon was bone-tired and experiencing a grief he had not expected at the loss of Aoife, the woman who had been his mistress for more than eighty years. He had prolonged his departure from the old woman's gravesite near Belfast, mourning her in his own way for three days past the moment of her burial. Now he was deeply depressed, unable to understand why and annoyed that the Blackwind was making demands of him.

"She took his seed within her last night!" Ski'Ah hissed. "He claimed her as his mate!"

"She was already his mate," Danyon mumbled.

"What if she has conceived?" the Amazeen warrioress snapped.

He rubbed at an unaccustomed ache in his temple that should not be there. "If she has, I will see that the fetus does not survive."

Somewhat mollified, Ski'Ah commenced pacing in front of the stable. She was furious, decidedly so, because she had not been able to prevent the Reaper from taking the human woman the night before. The black dog's presence had been an effective deterrent.

"This changes things," she grated.

"In what way?" Danyon asked, not really caring. He had fallen into a strange lassitude that alarmed him and his inability to get incensed about Cree lying with Bronwyn surprised him even more than his unexpected grief.

"He cannot be executed once I get him back to Amazeen. He belongs to a Sister—human and inferior, though she is—and as such, he is protected under ancient Chattel Laws. He cannot be made to atone for the crimes he committed against my ancestor!"

"So don't tell them he belongs to Bronwyn. Who will know the difference?" Danyon asked with a yawn. He longed to find a warm bed.

Ski'Ah drew herself up. "When I take him back, I am obligated to tell the Council of Elders. I could lose my head for omitting the fact the Reaper has been claimed by another woman!"

"Not that it matters to me, but what will become of him, then?" Danyon asked, intrigued despite his weariness.

The Amazeen threw out a dismissive hand. "He will be imprisoned in the public square for all to see and taunt. To a Reaper, being caged is the ultimate torture. Pain is nothing to them, but confinement is an agony they do not tolerate well. He will be punished in a way he will find hard to endure."

Danyon shrugged. "Couldn't happen to a nicer guy."

"I would have preferred watching him roast in the auto-de-fe! His screams would have been music to my ears and my ancestor would have been avenged!"

"Well, we don't always get what we want." Danyon chuckled.

"I want this over with, Nightwind! I am ready to return to Amazeen. The cybot on my ship awaits my order to transport us onboard. This has gone on long enough. When—"

"I am curious. Where does one hide an alien spacecraft?"

"Behind the Terran moon, fool! No more useless prattle. When will I be able to capture him?"

Danyon sobered. "Soon, beautiful Ski'Ah. Very soon."

She narrowed her eyes. "This you promise?"

He raised his left hand to the heavens. "As surely as I pledged my undying love for Bronwyn McGregor, I promise you, soon you will be in possession of the Reaper and on your way across the megaverse."

"You will rid me of the beast that interferes?"

"Ah, yes, the black beast." Danyon thought of the entity he had befriended. The Bugul Noz would have to be dealt with, for Ordin Gver had developed a strong affection for the Reaper. "I will see to him. Have no fear on that account, lady."

Content that the one obstacle to capturing the Reaper would be removed, Ski'Ah seemed to relax. She batted her long lashes at Danyon and moved closer, her hand going toward his chest.

"Ah, no," he said, stepping back. The thought of her laying hands on him turned his stomach. "I am in need of a bath and a warm pallet."

Ski'Ah frowned. "Some other time, then?"

He nodded, taking another step back. His olfactory senses were being bombarded by the stench that seemed to roll off the Blackwind when she was irritated.

"You will call me when it is time?" she inquired.

"Aye. Within the next day or two you should be on your way to Amazeen with Cree in chains at your feet."

\* \* \* \* \*

Cree explained to Bronwyn what had happened at Fuilgaoth on the day the queen revenant worm had brought both Sean and him back from the dead. He refrained from touching her, wiping at the tears falling down her pale cheeks, taking her trembling body into his arms to comfort her. He held her gaze captive as he told her how he had felt upon awakening from his centuries-long imprisonment and revealed how odd it was to be sharing a portion of his soul, his memories, his feelings with a stranger. He

allowed her to see into his deepest emotions and opened his heart to her before turning over the rest of the explanation to that part of him he both loathed and pitied.

"I was horrified to find myself in the body of Viraidan Cree," the Sean part of him explained. "This man looked nothing like me, talked nothing like me. He was older, more powerful. I felt a terror I could not explain the first time I looked into a mirror and I was shocked when I opened my mouth and a thick brogue came out!"

"I had a hard time dealing with Sean Cullen's love for you," the Viraidan part of him stressed. "Love was something I had never experienced. I didn't know how to love. What I'd had with Chandra was not truly a mating as you and I have come to know it. It was simply a making do. I had no idea what true mating could be so I fought him every step of the way because he wanted to go to Florida to keep watch over you. I just didn't understand his fascination with a female. We compromised and made one trip there. One look at you and I knew I wanted to be with you, too. I would have moved heaven and hell to have you as my mate, but the both of us knew that would be dangerous."

For more than an hour, the two beings inside the Reaper's body revealed to Bronwyn their innermost thoughts, desires, hopes and fears. When the last defense was shed and the last secret told, they grew silent, each in his own way, dreading the response he would garner.

Bronwyn felt lightheaded, her pounding heart loud in her ears. Her palms were slick with perspiration while her mouth was dry as desert sand. A part of her wanted to throw back her head and scream mindlessly to the heavens. Another part wanted to run, to put as much distance as humanly possible between her and the two entities staring at her through the eyes of the Reaper. Still another side of her wanted to throw her arms around the two men she loved with her entire being and tell them everything would be all right, that everything would work itself out.

"Do you hate me, now?" Cree whispered, his heart in his eyes. "Do you hate us both?" Sean asked.

"I don't hate either of you, but I need time to deal with this, to adjust. This is too much to get my head around in so short a time."

"I understand." The Reaper moved away from her and went to stand by his horse. He stroked the animal's withers. "Take all the time you need, milady."

Bronwyn walked to the little mare, wondering how she was going to mount the animal. She was numb, her legs weak, her arms without strength.

"Here," Cree said, coming to her.

He lifted her into his strong arms and swung her up on the mare's back, then gathered the reins and handed them to her. He stood looking up at her for a moment then moved back, giving her room to put the horse in motion.

Returning his steady gaze, Bronwyn could see the effect their conversation had had on him. His shoulders were rigid as though he expected a blow, was preparing himself

for her rejection. Though his face was carefully blank, there was keen misery in his amber gaze. The tautness of his clenched jaw could not hide the slight tremor in his lips.

Her heart went out to him, but she was not ready to blithely accept the explanation he had given. An errant part of her was angry beyond words, hurt—perhaps beyond healing—and unable to respond to the sadness darkening his golden eyes.

“Forgive us,” he said.

Bronwyn bent toward him, placing her palm on his cheek. He reached up to cover her hand as she caressed him.

“Time, Aidan. I just need time.”

He brought her hand to his lips, placed a gentle kiss in her palm then released her.

Before the tears gathering in her eyes could fall, she lightly kicked her mount into action. Never turning to look at the man she left standing at the water’s edge, she let the tears flow.

\* \* \* \* \*

From the canopy of trees beside the stables, Ski’Ah watched the one who had captured Viraidan Cree’s heart remove the borrowed horse’s reins and lead it back into the paddock. Her eyes narrowed when she saw the Terran stop, cover her face with her hands, her shoulders shaking beneath her sobs.

“What did he do to you, Sister?” she mumbled. “Did he hurt you as he did my ancestor?”

Wondering if she should confront the Terran, challenge her for the ownership of the Reaper, Ski’Ah lost her chance when she heard a vehicle coming down the roadway. Cursing, she moved back further in the trees but continued to watch her rival who was hastily swiping at her tears.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bronwyn glanced at the Jeep heading her way, but dismissed it. She walked to her car and had her hand on the door handle when a blast from the Jeep’s horn made her pause.

“Oh, hell,” she sighed, recognizing Koenen Brell through the Jeep’s windshield.

Brell got out of his vehicle and came to her. “I’ve been looking for you,” he said, smiling.

“I’m not working today,” she said, opening her car door.

“You might have to whether you want to or not.”

“Why?”

“One of your patients died this morning.”

“Who?” Bronwyn asked, her concern immediate.



"Aston Pounder. The one who tortured and murdered those kids in Tennessee."

"I know what he did," Bronwyn snapped. "How did he die?"

"Aneurysm. Scrambled his brain like a whisk." Brell cocked his head. "Has it hit you yet that every time you interview one of those perverted bastards, they end up either dying or in a vegetative state?"

Bronwyn gritted her teeth. "What are you inferring, Dr. Brell?"

"He's always there with you, isn't he?" When Bronwyn didn't reply, he stepped closer. "Cree's always there."

"So what? He's there to protect me."

"Now that's the key word, isn't it? Protect?" He smiled nastily. "And neither Faulkner, Vance or Pounder will ever pose a threat to you again."

A sliver of suspicion pricked at Bronwyn's belly. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Faulkner had a massive coronary," Brell said, tapping his bottom lip with his right index finger. "He looked as though he'd seen something that literally scared him to death. I wonder what that could have been?"

"I don't have time for this —"

"Vance has been catatonic since the day you interviewed him. What could have caused that? Perhaps he also saw something that scared him senseless?"

Annoyed at the smug look on Brell's handsome face, she slid into her car and tried to slam the door, but he grabbed the edge.

"Just yesterday, Pounder was telling his nurse that he wanted to do to you what he had done to those children. He went into great detail. Can you guess what happened next? The nurse told Cree this morning and now Pounder's lying on a slab in my morgue."

"Are you accusing Captain Cree of causing Pounder's aneurysm? That is absurd!"

Brell chuckled. "I wouldn't put anything lethal past our Captain Cree."

"You'd say anything to get back at him for taking me home that night," she sneered, jerking the door out of his grasp. She slapped down the lock.

"Think about it, Dr. McGregor," he shouted over the roar of her car engine. "Cree is protecting you, all right. He's eliminating those who would harm you, given the chance. I bid you think about what I've said."

Bronwyn threw the car into reverse and backed away. She was trembling as she spun the wheel and raced from the stable.

Brell looked about, sniffed the air, frowned and turned his gaze toward the forest. He stared at the shadowy figure of the woman lurking there then dismissed her from his mind. He shed the loathsome appearance of a dead man and resumed his natural state. Walking back to the Jeep, it was Danyon Hart who swung himself into the driver's seat.

"Think about it a while, Bronwyn," he whispered, sending out the command. "Think about it then go looking for Brell to confront him."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ski'Ah left the concealment of the trees as the Nightwind drove away. Puzzled by his disguise, she watched until his vehicle was out of sight then turned her attention to the area of the forest where she knew Cree was.

The black dog was with the Reaper, so Ski'Ah made no attempt to intercept Cree. Instead, she tapped the Vid-Com link on the bracelet she wore and, within a matter of seconds, was transported to her runabout.

There were plans to be set into play.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cree stared at the sunlight reflecting on the waters of Rock Creek Lake. He was sitting on the ground, his legs drawn up and his arms resting on his knees. Ralph was stretched out beside him, his massive black head cradled on his outstretched paws. The dog was keeping watch on the forest behind them, his dark eyes never straying from the trees. Nearby, the horse nickered softly then lowered its head to nibble at the grass.

"I know she was here," Cree said, his sense of smell irritated by the stench of the Blackwind. "He was, too."

Ralph looked up at his master. "Humphf?"

"The gods-be-damned Nightwind. I smelled the bastard."

"Humphf." Ralph lowered his head.

"He came looking for my Bronwyn. One of these days, he and I are going to have a talk about her."

Ralph whined.

"I will kill that son of a bitch, Ralph. As surely as I draw breath, I will slay the Nightwind."

Ralph shivered.

The Reaper had killed earlier that morning. Twice. And as he always had since he could remember, he had gone out to be alone, to celebrate the *bású*, the execution of his enemy, with the *mhaolaigh an stoirm fiáin*, the alleviation of the savage storm within him. The exercise, the strenuous ritual of the complex martial arts routine, cleared his mind and soothed the revenant worm that had controlled him body and mind during the *bású*.

Aston Pounder—the sick pervert who had murdered twelve children—had been a given the moment he wound up on Bronwyn's list to be interviewed. There had never been a question in Cree's mind about ridding the world of such useless filth. The moment Pounder had voiced his desire to harm Bronwyn, his minutes on Earth were

numbered. Showing the twisted murderer what real evil looked like had brought on the exploding vessel in Pounder's warped brain. Although satisfactory for the Reaper, Pounder's death had not satisfied the queen. Her desire had led to Cree's second kill of the morning.

"They will never find Nyles Brady," Cree said. "He will become the first inmate of Baybridge to successfully escape."

Ralph sniffed disdainfully, as if the smell of the animal torturer was still on Cree's flesh and that his breath bore the scent of Brady's blood.

Cree laid down, his hands to either side of his head and stared into the bright blue sky. He barely felt the coolness that had crept down from Canada and that would likely bring out sweaters and coats for the staff of Baybridge by evening. He shifted, trying to get comfortable, for the queen was moving beneath his flesh, feeding Her young. He closed his eyes in an attempt to block out the pain Her ramblings caused. It was something he had lived with all his life, but the older he got, the more painful Her stirrings had become.

"I know why," he said.

Ralph cocked an eyebrow. "Humphf?"

"There are more offspring. I'm a virtual hive of slithering, wiggling revenants."

The dog shuddered violently and sat up to lift a paw to scratch at his belly. He grunted as he scratched, one paw waving in the air. He got to his feet and shook himself, his ears flapping loudly.

"Well, it bothers me more than it bothers you, my friend." Cree chuckled, watching the animal's reaction.

"Humphf!"

"Aye, it is disgusting. But without Her, I would cease to be."

Ralph laid down, closer to the overly warm body that had become the greatest love of his life. Brownie ran a close second to the Reaper, but she did not hold the key to Ralph's heart. Only Cree possessed that.

Pressing his side close to Cree's, Ordin Gver sighed contentedly. The Bugul Noz was happy as long as the Reaper was near.

\* \* \* \* \*

Brian waved at Bronwyn when she entered the complex, but the young woman apparently did not see him. He knew she had lost a patient earlier that morning, and when he realized she was taking the service elevator to the morgue, he knew she would be preoccupied a while.

Turning on his Reaper senses, he located Cree a few miles away and sighed. There was no one to have coffee with and he was bored. He was also hungover. Rubbing at

his eyes, he sighed. It had been a long time since he'd drank himself into oblivion and now realized why – he felt worse than the specimens in his lab jars looked.

"Dr. O'Shea?"

Brian turned as one of the receptionists from the main desk walked up to him. He smiled. "Aye, pretty one?"

Blushing, the woman extended to him a piece of paper she removed from an overflowing clipboard. "A message from junior Dr. Hesar, sir. I've been paging you all morning."

Brian took the note. "I turned off my pager. Is Sage back?"

"He's due back today."

"Thank you, sweeting." Brian unfolded the note. His eyebrows jumped up as he read.

"Good news, isn't it, sir?"

Brian whistled. "I guess." He refolded the note. "Does Dr. McGregor know?"

"She hasn't answered her pages, either. I have several notes here from her mother. Have you seen Dr. McGregor?"

"Aye," Brian said, trying to assimilate the information he'd just read. "If you'll give them to me, I'll see she gets them."

The woman unclipped a thick wad of notes. "Please have her return her mother's call, will you?"

"I sure will."

## Chapter Twenty-One

It had been more than an hour since Bronwyn had spoken with Koenen Brell. Furious about his accusations against Cree, she had turned left at the intersection by the guard kiosk and left Baybridge. She drove toward Newton, Brell's words echoing in her mind. Unable to think about anything other than the jealous man's wild suppositions, she nearly lost her life. Had it not been for the wide shoulders, she would have hit a farm wagon broadside as it was pulled across the highway by a slow-moving tractor from one farm road to another. As it was, she careened around the vehicle onto the gravel shoulder toward an oncoming pickup. With the pickup's horn blaring, she turned back into her lane.

Not a driver given to reckless behavior and never having been ticketed for any traffic violation, she was shaken and slowed enough to safely take her shoulder of the road. She stopped the car, got out, and rushed around to the passenger side and threw up, her narrow miss with wagon and pickup turning her insides to mush.

Now she was back at Baybridge, still shaken and distracted by her near-death experience. With no conscious thought of doing so, she headed for the service elevator.

The stench of death assaulted Bronwyn as she stepped off the elevator at the morgue. She slumped against the wall, covering her mouth with a trembling hand, trying to keep the nausea from erupting.

"Are you all right, Dr. McGregor?"

She flinched, turning to see an orderly wheeling a gurney toward her. "I'm fine. Is Dr. Brell in his office?"

"I don't know." He gave her a strange look. "Excuse me, Doctor, but you are pale as a ghost. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes." On unsteady legs, she headed for Brell's office.

Danyon was leaning against Brell's desk, his arms folded across his chest, when she entered. He smiled at her shocked expression.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"You wouldn't have died, beloved," the Nightwind stated. "I was right there beside you in the car the entire time."

She stared at him. "What?"

"Had it been necessary, I would have snatched you up and taken you out of harm's way. The car would have been destroyed, the drivers of the tractor and the pickup truck killed, but you would have been safe in my arms. I will never let anything happen to you."

At his bizarre statement, Bronwyn drew in a shaky breath, put a hand to her head and realized she was well on her way to a wicked migraine.

"I can take care of that, too." Danyon pushed away from the desk.

"Keep away from me!" Bronwyn hissed, stumbling back. She looked around. "Where is Dr. Brell?"

"He was such a tedious fellow, don't you think? A pesky, boorish man."

"Was?"

"Oh, I relieved the world of his annoying presence long ago, beloved. He'll not be a bother to you ever again."

She backed up another step, realizing he had moved closer. "What kind of sick game are you playing, Danyon? I just spoke to him."

When he shook his head, his appearance changed, metamorphosing into Koenen Brell's persona. "No, sweeting," he denied in a thick Australian accent. "You spoke with me."

Bronwyn's eyes widened. His was a cruel, nasty smile that never reached his cold, soulless eyes. There was a vicious twist to his mouth that gave lie to the soft words he spoke.

"You have far too much power over me, Lady. My sword arm is yours, as it has always been at the ready to the house of Broderick. But now you have my heart, as well. What more may I do for you? How else may I show you my fealty? I have taken the life of a useless man who thought he could possess you. I am about to send another to hell. How else to show you my depth of feeling?"

She reached for the Claddagh that was once more around her neck after long years of absence. To her, it was a talisman against the prime evil stalking her, sliding toward her as she backed out into the corridor.

"It will do you no good to call the Reaper," Danyon told her. "By the time he gets here, we will be long gone."

"I'm not going anywhere with you!" Bronwyn shouted. She turned, intent on running, but to her stunned amazement, the Nightwind was beside her, his brawny arms circling her waist. Though she fought, she was no match for his inhuman strength. She struggled, screaming for help.

"No one can hear you down here, beloved," he mocked as his hand came toward her face.

The moment his fingers touched her brow, the lights dimmed. The room around her spun crazily, the walls and furniture spiraling faster and faster in dull flickers of green light. She squeezed her eyes shut to blot out the vertigo. There was a cold rush of wind, a strong scent of rotting wood, then complete and utter darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ordin Gver heard the Nightwind's call and sat up, shaking off the form of the black dog he had come to enjoy. Humans loved to pat the animal's head and stroke his silky coat. They talked to the animal and played with him. They showed him affection. Not so the Bugul Noz, Ordin thought, as he heard the clarion call once more. No one had ever touched him in his natural form. No human had ever shown him anything save horror and disgust.

"Come, friend!" the call continued. "I need you!"

Though Ordin had come to dislike the Nightwind and questioned his motives, he had a debt he was obligated to repay. Danyon Hart had made it possible for him to learn how to transpose his body into different forms. It was a treat that had given Ordin a chance to interact with humans, have them touch him, know kindness and affection for the first time in his long life. It was a debt he must repay.

Reluctantly, he stood, cocking his head to one side as the call came a final time. Sighing, he used his warty, humanlike hand to open Cree's door, took a quick look into the corridor to make sure no one was about, then shut the door and shape-shifted into Ralph. Dropping to all fours, he padded down the corridor.

\* \* \* \* \*

Brian looked up as Cree came into his office. "You look like the hounds of hell are nipping at your heels, boy. What ails you?"

The Reaper plowed a hand through his hair. "I told Bronwyn the truth about myself."

Brian grunted. He sat back in his chair and regarded Cree. "Now, that might have been a singularly bad mistake you made there."

"Is that why I feel like the world is off-kilter and me along with it?" Cree inquired, taking a seat in front of the desk.

"Could be. You want a drink?"

"By the gods, no! That's the last thing I need!"

"Piss-poor Irishman, you are."

"But a damned good Chalean."

"Did she think so?" Brian inquired, and at Cree's wince, he nodded. "I guess not."

Cree sat forward and buried his face in his hands. "Why do I have the feeling I have screwed myself royally, Da?"

Brian got up and put a hand on Cree's shoulder. "Did she run away screaming?" When Cree shook his head, Brian hunkered down beside him, his knees popping. "Did she tell you to go to hell?"

"She said she needed time to adjust to having found out Sean is living inside me," Cree said in a miserable voice.

Brian drew in a long, deep breath. "That had to have been a right stunning surprise to the lass, don't you imagine?"

"I know it was."

"Then give her time like she asks. Keep watch over her, but keep away until she's ready to come to you. My gut tells me that it won't—" Brian frowned. "Why are you looking like that?"

The Reaper shot to his feet. "Something's wrong!"

Brian pulled himself up as Cree sniffed the air, his amber eyes turning crimson. "What is it, lad?" he asked, a chill going down his spine.

"I can't sense her. Brian, I can't sense her!"

"Don't go Transitioning on me, now," Brian insisted, alarmed at the red cast of the Reaper's eyes. "We'll find her. I saw her going to the morgue."

"The morgue? Why?"

"She lost a patient this morning," Brian explained, but before the last word was out of his mouth, his listener was running from the office.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ordin Gver had nosed his way into the stairwell, loping down the metal stairs to the place from where he sensed the Nightwind's call had originated. He morphed into humanoid form to open the doorway onto the floor, stuck out his head and was satisfied no one was about. Once more, he shifted into his canine form and trotted toward a door at the end of the corridor.

\* \* \* \* \*

Danyon was waiting impatiently for the Bugul Noz. As soon as the big black dog appeared, Danyon hurried forward to shut the door behind him, throwing a switch he had rigged a few hours earlier.

"You have need of me, friend?" Ordin asked as he resumed his natural state.

"Aye, my dear friend. I have a request of you and it will be the last one I ever make on our friendship. Are you willing to help me?"

Ordin inclined his bulbous head. "I have sworn as much to you."

"You might find it distasteful."

The Bugul Noz's chin came up. "That matters not. Ask your favor and I will grant it."

"I wish you to transform yourself into my lady."

Ordin's watery eyes blinked in surprised. "Into Bronwyn?" he asked, his gruff voice filled with shock. "I don't understand. Why would you want me to do this?"



"The Reaper is on his way down here. I want him to catch she and I in a situation that will forever ruin their chances of being together. I want him to know I can have her whenever I wish."

Distaste flickered across the monster's face. "You want to have sex with me?"

"No, no, no!" Danyon shook his head, shivering at the thought, despite himself. "I only want Cree to think that is what we've done." He took a vial of fluid from the pocket of the lab coat he was wearing and uncorked it. "He will catch scent of this and know I have taken her."

Ordin recognized the unmistakable odor of male and female love juices. "And have you?" he asked, his ugly face sad.

"Aye, we have known one another. And we will again, once the Reaper is out of the picture. I saved our combined fluids from that night."

Ordin's shoulders slumped. "This will hurt him deeply. He will never touch her again."

"That is the Reaper way once he has lain with a woman. He will cast her aside for betraying him."

"And you will be waiting to take his place."

"Aye, but think on this, friend—you will have him all to yourself from this day forward."

The Bugul Noz looked up. "You know?"

"That you are in love with him?" Danyon glanced at the clock, knowing it would be a matter of minutes before Cree crashed through the door. "I am aware of your feelings, friend."

Ordin heard the noise at the end of the corridor.

"Change, my loyal friend!" Danyon ordered. "Change now and we will both have what we want!"

Ordin had no time to think about what he was doing, for there came a pounding at the door. Danyon bid him hurry as the pounding increased. He heard Cree's bellow of rage. Oath-bound to do as he was bid, Ordin had no choice but to give in to the demand.

"Do it now!" Danyon hissed, obviously sensing Ordin's capitulation.

Gver pictured Bronwyn in his mind and shuddered, her physical shape settling over him like a silken coat. He looked down at his shape and was not displeased. A momentary flash of thought sped through his mind and he wondered what it would be like to have the Reaper hold him, to make love to him in this borrowed form. So engrossed in his own metamorphic change, he didn't notice Danyon had also taken a different shape until the blade buried itself deep in Ordin's belly. He knew he had made a terrible mistake. He had trusted the incubus and now his life was forfeit.

"I am sorry, my friend," Danyon said from the mouth of a stranger. He dragged the blade upward, slicing into Ordin's heart. "Your sacrifice will not go unmourned."

The last thing Ordin Gver saw was the door bursting open with a bang. He turned his eyes to the sudden flash of flames spreading across that side of the room, and through the crackling, searing heat, he saw Cree's terrified face. Though the Reaper was screaming, Ordin could not hear the tortured cries. As his stolen form sagged against the stranger/Nightwind who had gutted him, he knew Cree could never pass through the flames to what he thought was his ladylove. Reaching out his dying hand toward the only being he had ever loved, Ordin Gver died, Viraidan Cree's horrified face stamped forever on his soul.

"Bronwyn!" Cree screamed, trying to find a way through the flames. The parasite was crippling him with pain in order to keep him clear of the leaping fire. He had caught the blended scent of Bronwyn's vaginal juices and the tormenting stench of Brell's ejaculatory fluid. The mental image of Brell straining against her, taking her, as she lay unconscious nearly drove Cree mad. The pain in his body was nothing compared to the pain in his heart.

"She's mine!" he heard Koenen Brell shout. "She will be with me for eternity! If I can't have her, you sure as hell will never put your filthy hands on her again!"

The insane coroner was holding Bronwyn's limp body in his left arm, his right hand pressed between her breasts where the scalpel was buried. As the flames rose higher, shutting out the people locked in a deadly embrace, the fire alarm began to peal. Overhead, the sprinklers sputtered and came alive.

But Cree knew it was too late to save Bronwyn. The flames surrounded her, but she was not feeling their lethal kiss. He had seen the moment her life had fled and it was a moment he would relive for as long as he drew breath.

"Bronwyn!" It was an anguished cry that drove him to his knees. He drew in a deep, suffering breath then froze as the scent of shed blood reached his quivering nostrils.

Because of this distraction, he barely smelled another putrid odor that invaded the corridor and barely felt the prick of the needle as it entered his neck. He reached up to cover the spreading sting.

"See what your lust has done to Bronwyn McGregor?" a voice bid him.

Turning his head, he found himself staring into the gloating, vengeful eyes of Ski'Ah Dubhgaoth. As consciousness fled, his last thought was that the bloodscent he had inhaled was not Bronwyn's.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

"What did you learn?" Dr. Wynth, Baybridge's EDO, asked when Sage Hesar entered the open door of Wynth's office.

"They recovered two bodies." Sage wiped a sooty arm across his forehead. "Both male."

Brian slowly looked up. "Both?"

"One is definitely Koenen Brell. The fire didn't destroy his face entirely. They think the other is Nyles Brady."

"Who?" Brian asked.

"The SOB who killed all those animals in Missouri at the animal shelter? He's missing from Five North," Sage explained. "They can't go by dental records because Brady was toothless and didn't wear dentures."

"Oh, him." Brian looked at the floor, confusion running rampant through his numb brain.

"Why did you think Bronwyn was down there, Brian?" Wynth queried.

"I saw her take the service elevator." Brian motioned for Sage to take a seat beside him. "Have they found her?"

"We're still looking for her and Captain Cree," Douglas Cahill responded. Cree's second-in-command had been standing silently on the far side of Wynth's office. He shrugged. "Neither answers their pages. Chances are they're off-site together and don't have their pagers on."

Brian knew differently. He had been too far away down the corridor to stop the tall, black-haired woman from disappearing with the Reaper. He had no doubt the malodorous smell that had assaulted him when he got off the elevator after Cree's descent had belonged to the Amazeen about whom Cree had warned him. Only two people had disappeared before his eyes—not three—so that left Bronwyn's whereabouts unaccounted for.

"What was Brady doing in Brell's office, anyway?" Wynth demanded.

"How would he have gotten there, is a better question," Sage countered.

"Inmate Brady managed to get out of his pod," Cahill reported.

"Obviously," Brian grated. "How the hell that happened, I can't imagine."

"Well, we'd damned well better find out!" Wynth snapped. "We lost a good man to this carelessness. Koe will be sorely missed."

Brian and Sage exchanged a look. Brian knew Sage shared his feelings for Brell. Neither man had liked the coroner. Though Brell had done his job exceptionally well,

his social skills had left something to be desired. While Brian would not mourn him, neither would he say anything bad about him.

"Do they know what started the fire?" Brian asked, changing the subject.

"Not yet." Sage, obviously bone-tired, drew in a long breath. He had arrived at the complex from the airport just after the fire alarm started, and had seen the firefighters manhandling Brian out of the building. Brian's frantic shouts to Sage, begging him—anyone—to get Bronwyn out of the engulfed room, had pushed Sage into the building, outwardly mindless of his own safety. "The state fire marshal was there when I left. It probably won't be known for a few days."

"I want to take the security level to six until we find Cree," Wynth said. "No one in or out for the time being, all inmates in their pods and accounted for. I want responses from every staff member, whether on-duty or not." He pointed at Cahill. "Is that understood?"

"Perfectly, sir. Anything else?"

"Find Cree!"

Cahill snapped to attention and saluted, then dashed from the room.

"I'm worried about Bronwyn," Sage admitted, looking at Brian.

"If she's with Cree, she's perfectly safe," Wynth said.

"Do you think she's with Cree, Brian?" Sage asked.

Brian flinched. "No, I don't."

"Then where is she?"

"I don't know," Brian said, getting up. "And I won't find out sitting here." He locked gazes with Sage. "Will you help me look for her?"

"I've got a stake in finding her," Sage said with a quick smile that slid almost instantly from his lips. He cast Dr. Wynth a passing look. "After all, she's now my stepsister."

"Go," Wynth said, flinging a hand at them. "I'm worried about her, too. I'll hold off calling Neal and DeeDee until you men get back to me."

Brian took Sage's arm and led him into the corridor, moving close to the young man once they were out of Wynth's earshot.

"We aren't going to find Viraidan. But Bronwyn is another matter."

Sage stared at him. "You think that was Cree's body in the morgue?"

"I know gods-be-damned well it wasn't. If it isn't Brady, I don't know who the hell it is and, at this point, I don't really care. We need to concentrate on finding Bronwyn and as quickly as we can!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Bronwyn was listening to the wind skirling through the trees. She felt the chilly breeze blowing across her face and was reluctant to open her eyes. Comfortable where she lay – the cottony softness beneath her, the warm comforter snug along her body and the soothing silkiness of the fabric pressed lightly against her cheek had lulled her into gentle dreams from which she hated to be drawn. Sighing as a firm hand stroked her hair, she smiled.

“Time to wake, milady.”

A pout formed on Bronwyn’s lips. She gave out a moan of protest but opened her eyes. For a moment, she watched her bedroom curtains billowing, the white lace fluttering in the breeze. She closed her eyes once more and turned to her back. Lifting her arms to the sides of her head, she stretched, groaning as her muscles flexed.

“Please shut the window, Cedric.”

The sound of the window closing, the cessation of the wind, brought her eyes open again. Expecting to see the aged Nightwind hovering at her bedside, she was not pleased to find Danyon Hart.

“It’s late afternoon, beloved,” he informed her. “There are people looking for you.”

She pushed up in the bed, her face tight. “What are you doing in my bedroom?”

“Your machine is turned off and you weren’t answering your pages. People are worried. I thought it best to wake you.”

Looking at her watch, she was stunned to see it was well after four p.m. “Oh, my God!” she said, tossing back the covers. She stopped, staring at her nightgown. “What the hell is going on here?” Not prone to taking naps during the day, she would have never put on her nightgown to sleep. Suspiciously, she looked at Danyon. “Did you do this?”

He folded his arms over his chest. “There was a fire in the morgue. Koenen Brell is dead.”

Surprise lifted Bronwyn’s eyebrows. “Dead?”

“Do you remember being there with him?”

Bronwyn looked at the comforter, her gaze straying back and forth over the pattern. She searched her memory and found a black hole, pieces of her day missing. A vague recollection of talking to Brell flittered through her mind but escaped as quickly as it came.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Danyon pressed.

“I was with Aidan. At the stables.”

“And Brell drove up as you were leaving. Remember?”

She put a hand to her head. “Vaguely, but –”

“The two of you talked about Brell’s concerns regarding Cree.”

“Concerns about what?”

“Do you remember going to the morgue to confront Brell?”

"Confront him? Why would I have—?"

"He suggested that Cree had been killing your patients," Danyon said, his eyes holding hers, not allowing her to look away. "He was more astute than I gave him credit for, since that was exactly what the Reaper has been doing."

A memory slithered insidiously through Bronwyn's mind and snatches of her conversation with Brell returned.

"You went to the lab and got into an argument with Brell," Danyon insisted. "He tried to stab you but you got away. You ran into the corridor, passing Nyles Brady who attempted to grab you. Remember? You kicked him, ran to the stairwell and as you snatched open the door, you looked back and saw him struggling with Brell. You watched in horror as Brady dragged Brell into the lab and the slammed the door shut. Do you remember?"

Bronwyn was lost in the Nightwind's stygian gaze. Slowly, she saw the scenes unfolding in her mind's eye, accepting them as truth as the tragedy played itself out.

"Do you remember?" Danyon repeated.

She nodded, unable to break free of the hold his dark orbs had on her.

"Good," he said, putting out a hand and drawing her to her feet.

She allowed herself to be enfolded in his arms. He nestled her against his chest and cupped her head in one strong hand.

"Listen carefully to what I tell you, beloved," he said, his voice the only sound she could hear. "Heed my every word and know it to be exactly as things occurred. Understand?"

"Yes, Danyon," she answered automatically.

"You fled the morgue, running up the stairs to find a call box from which to let security know what was happening. You heard the fire alarm go off and it startled you. Understand? You tripped on the stairs and fell, hitting your head on one of the risers. Do you feel the bump?"

Bronwyn touched the raised knot on her left temple. "Yes."

"Your head is hurting, is it not?"

A slight whimper escaped her lips. "Yes..."

"You don't know how long you were out, but when you woke, the air was thick with smoke. The klaxons were peeling and you could hear people running. Understand? You were disoriented and instead of going up the stairwell, you went down, well past the morgue level and to the containment cells below."

He tipped up her head and stared into her eyes.

"Do you know how you gained access to the containment cell area?"

Bronwyn reached down to her hip and pantomimed digging into a pocket. She brought up her hand, her fingers clutched around a phantom key.

"I had this in my jeans," she said.

"Good. What happened then?"

Bronwyn blinked for a moment, then a memory congealed in her mind. "I went into the containment area and locked the door behind me. My head was hurting so badly, all I wanted to do was lie down."

"Did you?"

"Yes," she said in a monotone. "In one of the cells."

"On the floor?"

"There was nowhere else to lie."

"Where was your pager?"

"I had left it in my apartment."

"Where was Cree during this time?"

She cocked her head, thinking. "I don't know."

"Do you remember arguing with him?"

Bronwyn nodded.

"What did you argue about?"

She suddenly felt deep regret. "He asked me to marry him and I told him no."

"Why would he have asked you to marry him?"

A blush spread over Bronwyn's cheeks. "We've been having an affair, but I had decided to break it off."

"Why?"

"He had become too possessive."

"What did he say would happen if you broke off the relationship?"

"That he'd leave and I'd never see him again."

"Did you believe him?"

"Yes."

"That's good," Danyon whispered. "Because you never will."

Bronwyn felt a deep sorrow, but remained silent.

"What happened after you let yourself into one of the containment cells?"

"I must have passed out from the pain in my head."

"How long were you out?"

"I don't know."

"Then you woke. What did you do then?"

"I went to the elevator but it wasn't working, so I went to the stairwell."

"And that will be where they will find you," Danyon said, releasing her. He stepped back. "Change your clothes, beloved."

Bronwyn moved away from him, pulling the silk nightgown over her head as she walked and slipped back into the clothing she had worn earlier in the day. When she was dressed, she turned to await his next orders.

"Take my hand," he said.

She slipped her fingers into his palm.

In the twinkling of an eye, light and sound fled.

Bronwyn awoke to find herself staring up into the relieved gaze of a firefighter.

"I've found her!" the man shouted, hunkering beside her. "Ma'am, are you all right? Are you hurt?"

Bronwyn lifted a hand to her injured head. "I think I've got a concussion."

\* \* \* \* \*

Brian closed the clinic door behind him. Sage Hesar and Brighton Wynth were talking as he joined them.

"How is she?" Sage asked.

"She's resting," Brian replied.

"Dr. Hesar has admitted knowing about those specialty cells. I think you've got some explaining to do, Dr. O'Shea," Wynth grumbled.

"We can talk about that tomorrow," Brian said. "I'm so tired I can't keep my eyes open."

"Cahill sent one of the security men to Cree's apartment," Sage said, catching Brian's eye.

"And?"

"All his personal stuff is gone."

"What about the bike?"

"It's still in the parking lot."

"He couldn't have left on the bike with his possessions," Wynth argued. "The staff car assigned to Cree is missing. That must have been what he took."

"And the dog?"

"No sign of him," Sage replied. "Obviously he took Ralph with him."

"The thing is, there's no record of Cree having left Baybridge at all," Wynth complained. "How the hell did he leave without us knowing?"

"I doubt security bothers to check his movements," Brian suggested. "Why should they?"

"Everyone is supposed to be checked in and out!" Wynth snarled. "And they sure as hell will from now on!"

"Whatever," Brian mumbled. He was tired, and although he knew he wouldn't be able to sleep, he wanted nothing more than to go to his apartment and lie down, to



think over the day's events. Relieved that Bronwyn was safe, he was deeply concerned about Cree, knowing full well the Reaper was in serious trouble.

"Why don't you go rest, Brian?" Sage proposed. "I'll be here if she should need anything."

"I don't know anything else I can do," Brian said.

"I've got a call in to her mother," Wynth said. "Perhaps I should go back to my office and wait for her call."

"Good idea," Brian agreed.

"Then that's what I'll do." Wynth slapped Sage on the back. "Call me if Bronwyn's condition changes, will you?"

Sage nodded. "You'll be the first to know."

Wynth left, nodding officiously to those he passed.

"He's already given Cree's job to Cahill," Sage grumbled.

"It doesn't matter," Brian said. "The Reaper won't be coming back."

Brian turned and headed down the corridor. His footsteps dragged and his shoulders slumped, his weariness equal parts fatigue and sorrow. Viraidan Cree was gone—a captive of the Amazeen who had tracked him across the universe—and with him, all traces of Brian's lost son Sean.

"If the Amazeen should ever get me back to their home world," Cree had once remarked, "there will be no trial. I'll die in the auto-de-fe cage."

The thought of Cree/Sean dying in such a horrendous way brought tears to Brian's eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Bronwyn woke, the urgent need to relieve herself pushing her from slumber, the clinic was quiet. The soft glow from the nightlight near the floor kept the darkness at bay. Not wanting to have to deal with a nurse, Bronwyn pushed aside the covers and got up, clutching her IV pole from which hung a plastibag of glucose.

"What do you need, beloved?" Danyon asked from the room's deeper shadows.

Bronwyn gasped. Irritated the incubus had once more infringed upon her solitude, she refused to answer. Dragging the IV pole with her, she headed for the restroom.

"Why do you insist on ignoring me?" Danyon queried from his chair.

"Because you're a pest," she said through gritted teeth. Struggling with the pole, she managed to get into the restroom. When she was finished, she opened the door, annoyed further that Danyon was still there.

"Go away."

"Not this time." He steepled his fingers and rested his chin on the tips. "The time for obeying you is long past."

She glared at him. "And why is that?"

"It would be easy to put whatever thoughts I deem necessary in that pretty little head of yours, but the time for doing that is over, as well."

Bronwyn's hand around the IV pole tightened. "What are you talking about?"

The truth of what the incubus had done shifted through Bronwyn's mind as though it was a video she had been watching. The scenes moved from the stables to the morgue to the vast, chilled blackness of the Abyss where she had been taken. The overpowering loneliness of that evil place, the harsh, howling wind, the sulfurous smell of decayed wood and stagnant primordial ooze, the wicked dampness of the rushes upon which she'd lain, rushed up to stagger her. There was the image of the morgue once again as she observed the Bugul Noz transform himself into her. She saw Danyon shape-shift into Koenen Brell, the gleaming scalpel clutched in his fisted hand. As she watched in growing horror, the scalpel was thrust into the belly of her look-alike while she heard Aidan's anguished cries of denial.

"No," she whispered, realizing her lover must believe her dead.

The scene flashed to Cree's stricken face as flames roared around him, keeping him from coming to aid the "dying Bronwyn". There was infinite despair stamped on the twisted features of Viraidan Cree. Driven to his knees by what he was seeing, he was oblivious to the spectral figure who materialized at his side.

"Do you know who she is?" Danyon whispered.

"An Amazeen," Bronwyn whimpered, tears sliding down her cheeks.

"Aye. But not just any Amazeen, beloved. She is Ski'Ah, the one whose family owns the Reaper."

Bronwyn slumped against the wall, burying her face in her hands to shut out the awful images. "No," she wailed, sliding to the floor.

"Have you any idea what they will do to him?" Danyon asked, coming to squat down beside her.

"Don't," she pleaded, choking on her misery.

"I believe you can imagine. No need for me to go into the gruesome details."

Bronwyn's keening was like that of a wounded animal. She did not have the strength to bat away the hand that was laid on her head, smoothing back her tousled hair.

"But it need not be," Danyon whispered silkily. "There is a way to save your lover, if you are so inclined."

She slowly lifted her head to search his malevolent eyes.

Danyon nodded, his smile as lethal as the fires of hell. "What would you do to save the Reaper from his richly deserve fate, beloved?"

Bronwyn saw the answer before her. She read it in his expectant face. "No," she said, knowing that if she gave in to him, her life would no longer be her own.

"Will you leave him to his fiery death?"

She shivered, a bone-deep cold settling throughout her body. She wrapped her arms around herself, her teeth chattering.

"Remember what Sean looked like when you visited him in the hospital?" Danyon probed.

Another keening cry issued from Bronwyn's trembling lips.

"Imagine the pain, dearest. The agony of the flames searing away the Reaper's flesh. Can you feel the kiss of the fire?"

He circled his hand in the air and a quick flash of intense heat wafted over Bronwyn. She gasped, the smell of burning flesh strong in that brief moment. Pressing against the wall, she stared at him with horrified eyes.

"He has felt those claiming fingers before and survived," Danyon reminded her. "This time, he will not, and the agony will be ten times ten what he felt when his ship crashed."

"Please," Bronwyn cried, knowing she had no choice, her heart breaking.

"All you need do is lift one hand," Danyon encouraged. "Lift your hand and I will take from it a single scarlet drop of your precious blood." He lowered his voice. "That is all it will take to save Cree from death."

A parchment scroll appeared out of nowhere, hovering in the air only inches from her face. Bronwyn stared fearfully at the spectral document, its page lit with an unholy, greenish light.

"Sign the Pact, beloved," Danyon whispered, his voice as sultry as a lover's sigh. "Sign and I will spare the Reaper's life."

She tore her eyes from the parchment. "How?"

Danyon smiled. "I will go to Amazeen and fetch the bastard."

Hope soared in Bronwyn's breast. "You can do that?"

"Of course."

She held his gaze. "Will you?"

"If you sign the Pact."

She knew he was as duplicitous as any demon ever spawned in the hellish realm. Trusting him had no doubt proven to be the downfall of many women through the centuries. To do so blindly would be a folly she might well have cause to regret.

"Swear to me you will go after him," she said.

"Have I not just told you I would – *if* you sign the Pact?"

"On your love for me," she said, stressing every word, "swear you will not harm him nor let anyone or anything else on Amazeen harm him. Swear you will return him to me as he was the night he and I lay in one another's arms."

The incubus's face grew hard as stone, the handsome planes creasing with hatred, anger and envy. "You ask much of me, beloved."

"Swear it, Danyon."

"I will bring him home," he said from between clenched teeth, "but I will not let him have you! You are lost to him forever once the Pact is signed!"

A shaft of hopelessness stabbed through Bronwyn's heart, but Cree's safety was more important than her happiness. She had the means to free him, to keep him safe. She would do anything to see that achieved.

"Bring him back safely. See to it the Amazeen do not come after him again. See to it he leaves in peace and I will sign your infernal Pact."

Danyon studied her face for a long time. "This you swear?"

"Only if my beloved is safe from all that would cause him harm."

"You will uphold the pledge that you will be mine?"

"Is that what the Pact entails?" she countered, having no idea what was written on the glowing parchment.

"When you sign, you swear to be my lover for as long as you draw breath. You promise to give yourself only to me, as a wife to her lawful husband. You pledge to do as I bid. This you must do as you sign."

Bronwyn hesitated for only a moment, but the thought of the man she loved standing in harm's way was the only impetus she needed to give into the blackmail. "Where do I sign?"

A feathery quill materialized in her hand.

"Give me your left hand," Danyon ordered, his voice quivering with what sounded like anticipation.

Not allowing herself time to back out, Bronwyn extended her hand. She sucked in a quick breath as she felt a painful prick on her middle finger. A crimson drop beaded on her fingertip.

"Dip the quill in the blood and swear as you write your name across the page," Danyon told her.

She put the tip of the quill to her wound and was not surprised as the blood was drawn into the hollow shaft. Her hand trembling, she put the quill to the parchment.

"Swear, beloved," Danyon stressed.

"I will be your lover for as long as I draw breath," she said and scrawled *Bronwyn* across the page. "I will give myself only to you and do as you bid while we are together." Her last words were spoken as she wrote *McGregor* upon the parchment.

Obviously thrilled that Bronwyn had signed the Pact, Danyon did not seem to notice the phrasing of her pledge. As soon as Bronwyn took the quill from the page, he snatched the parchment, rolled it up and threw his arms around her.

"I pledge to lay the world at your feet, beloved," he said, raining kisses on her cheeks and forehead. "I will forever be your champion."

Bronwyn endured his hateful touch for as long as she could stand it then pulled away. "Now, do as you swore," she said, her eyes fused with his. "Bring Cree home."

"It will take me a while to—"

"Get him *now*! Before they can hurt him!"

Danyon lifted his hands. "It will take me but a matter of moments to make the trip to Amazeen, but longer than that to bring him home."

"Why?" she asked, fearing she had been duped.

"It is much farther to Amazeen from here than it is from here to my lair, beloved," he said in a voice more befitting a grownup talking to a backward child. "I could not carry him as I carried you to the Abyss. Amazeen is beyond the boundaries of your galaxy and deep within one at the very edges of the universe."

She stared suspiciously at him. "You're lying."

"Beloved, no. I would never lie to you. I could not." He reached for her hands. "Give me time and I will bring him back here."

"How much time?"

"Five, six weeks."

"Five—"

He shushed her. "But he will be safe with me! I swear I will bring him back to Earth as he was the night he forced himself upon you."

"Then go," she said, striving to keep her secret thoughts from him. "Bring him home."

Danyon pulled her to him and kissed her, his lips hard against hers. She kept still, hating the touch of him but knowing she had no choice. When he released her, it was all she could do to refrain from wiping her mouth.

"I am yours, beloved," he said, putting a hand to his heart. "I will do as you have asked."

One moment he was hunkered before her, the next he was gone, only a lingering scent of brimstone in the air to mark his departure.

She had no choice but to trust him. In her heart of hearts, she had no intention of making good on their bargain once he returned. As soon as Aidan was safe, she would take her own life, foiling the demon the only way she could to keep from spending a lifetime at his mercy. When she had sworn to give herself only to him and to do his bidding as long as they were together, she had already made the vow to kill herself.

\* \* \* \* \*

With Sage walking quietly beside them, Brian held Bronwyn's hand as they escorted her back to her apartment. She had been silent and withdrawn upon her release from the clinic and the men were obviously worried about her. They had vowed to see her comfortably settled in her apartment before taking their leave.

At the door, Sage used Bronwyn's key and let them in. He turned on the lights, for rain was once more hammering at the windows and the day was dark, filled with thunder and black clouds.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Brian asked as he led her to the sofa.

She shook her head and was about to ask them to leave when the phone rang.

"Let the machine catch it," Brian told Sage who had started to pick up the receiver.

The trill of the instrument sounded strange to Bronwyn. When it trilled again, she told Sage to answer it.

"Sweeting, I think whoever it is can wait," Brian suggested. "You know it isn't your mother."

Sage looked from Bronwyn to Brian, for the phone was still ringing, well past the four rings necessary for the automated system to engage. He lifted the receiver. "Dr. McGregor's residence." Sage listened for a moment then cupped a hand over the mouthpiece. "It's a lady in Florida. She says it's important."

Bronwyn could not recall anyone in Florida to whom she'd given her private number.

"Did she give a name?" Brian asked, as if sensing Bronwyn's wariness.

"May I ask your name?" Sage asked into the phone. "Lauren Fowler?"

Bronwyn frowned. "I don't know anyone by that name."

"Ask her to leave a message," Brian ordered.

Sage's forehead crinkled. "Well, I don't know," he said into the receiver. "That seems —"

The hairs on Bronwyn's arms stood up. "What did she say?"

Sage scrunched his shoulders. "She said to tell you she has a Nightwind of her own and knows what you're going through."

Bronwyn shot up from the sofa and yanked the phone out of Sage's hand. "Who are you?"

As the woman spoke, Bronwyn felt various emotions, running the gamut from unrestrained fury, to fear, to absolute evil.

"I see," Bronwyn said when the woman finished. "May I ask how you got my name?"

The answer increased Bronwyn's anger.

"I appreciate your candor, Ms. Fowler, and no, I'm not angry at you. I'm grateful you called. I'm sure there are quite a few such women. You certainly are doing them a favor and helping to set my situation to rights proves your good intentions. If you'll express mail the instructions for what I need to do, I will take it from there." Bronwyn listened then shook her head. "That's not necessary. I appreciate your offer, but I don't want to put you to the trouble. If I run into problems, I'll let you know. Yes, thank you. I will be in your debt forever."

When Bronwyn hung up the phone, she turned her narrowed eyes to Brian. "I need you to go with me to Des Moines."

"Make I ask why?" Brian asked.

"There are things I need to buy."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Ski'Ah stared down into the Extended Sleep Unit and knew a moment's supreme satisfaction. The Reaper was deeply under the influence of the cinera she had administered to him on Terra. Every hour, a light dose of the drug was introduced into his system by the syringe she had placed into the carotid artery of his neck, thus keeping him under the drug's control.

"We are approaching Montyne Vex, Lady Ski'Ah," the ship's cybot informed her.

"Give me the particulars for that planetoid."

"Montyne Vex," the cybot responded, "is a harsh environment of jagged rock formations, blowing sand and a vast cave system running throughout the steep plateaus. There are underground wells, but no surface water. Devoid of humanoid inhabitation the animal life consists of—"

"I care not about the life there! Tell me what purpose it holds. Is it a refueling station?"

"No, milady. At one time, it was a penal colony held by the Daughters of the Multitude. The prisoners were—"

"Reapers." Ski'Ah smiled.

"Aye, and a depository for Reaper remains."

Ski'Ah braced her hand on the E.S.U. "What are the odds of a passing ship stopping there within the next few days?"

The cybot calculated. "One in two thousand, milady."

"And are there containment cells strong enough to hold this one?"

"There is one cell, milady. The door is nine inches in depth and reinforced with titanium locks that are impenetrable except by laser blasts."

"But will it hold him?"

"The cell was not meant to hold the Reaper for any length of time, lady. Data suggests the manacles would not hold should he go into full Transition."

"Then what good are they?" Ski'Ah hissed.

"Reapers were kept under the influence of light doses of cinera while they were being disciplined and—"

"You mean tortured," Ski'Ah breathed, caressing the top of the E.S.U. as though it was a living lover.

The cybot sighed audibly. "If you prefer that terminology."

"After the torture?" she asked, circling the E.S.U. slowly, never taking her eyes from Cree.



"They were beheaded with a Dóigra and their bodies incinerated in the Cave of Fire."

"Ah," Ski'Ah sighed, imaging such a fate for the Reaper in her grasp.

"Do you require any other information regarding the planetoid, milady?"

"Take a reading and tell me how long ago humanoids have been within the Punishment Circle."

"Four cycles, Lady Ski'Ah," the artificial intelligence unit answered. "Data reports a Serenian L.R.C. stopped to repair a hull breach. The crew remained on Montyne Vex for less than a rising. They did not venture into the cave system. Data reports no humanoids have gained access to the Ritual Chamber or those chambers beyond for nine cycles."

"Are there any ships in the quadrant nearby?" she asked, formulating a plan.

"None registering, lady."

"So passersby are not something I need worry about."

"It would appear not."

Ski'Ah narrowed her eyes. "When was the last Reaper slain on the Vex?"

It took a bit longer for the cybot to download that information from the ship's computer. "Five point six megacycles."

"Five and a half Terran centuries." Ski'Ah's gaze held on the Reaper's handsome face. "Could this one be the last of his kind?"

"There is a ninety-nine-percent chance he is."

Ski'Ah nibbled on her thumbnail as she stared into the unconscious face of her captive. She knew if she returned him to Amazeen, the Council of Elders would declare him the possession of the Terran female and never allow the execution that was due him. Neither would they administer the punishments necessary to appease the death of her ancestor. She also knew there would be Amazeens who would wish to breed by him, who would willingly take his vile flesh to themselves to produce more Reaper offspring in the hopes of discovering a way to harness the lethal power.

"That I will not allow," Ski'Ah said through clenched teeth. "Never again will a Reaper be allowed to harm an Amazeen warrioress!"

Closing her eyes and ears to her present surroundings, she went back in her mind to the Obelisk in the Shadowlands where she had conferred with her long-dead ancestors during her initiation rite into the Sisterhood. She heard again her namesake's entreaty to be avenged, saw again the anguished look on the dead one's face, felt the anger that had long denied the ancient Amazeen warrioress peace in the Afterworld.

"Find him, Little Ski'Ah," the older Ski'Ah had demanded. "Find him and punish him so I will know justice has been served for what he did to me!"

Now, staring into Cree's handsome face, Ski'Ah knew a moment of intense spite. She longed to see that handsome face ravaged, the flesh sloughing off in long,

blackened strips. She longed to inhale the fragrance of his burning flesh and to revel in the howls of his agony as flames devoured his filthy body.

"You must atone for your sins," she snarled, digging her nails into her palms. "If I return you to Amazeen, you will never know the punishments you deserve. You might even find a way to escape and return to your mate."

"Montyne Vex ahead, lady," the cybot said.

Ski'Ah weighed the chances of ever having a Sister find out about the Reaper's existence. If things went as she planned, no Sister would. Viraidan Cree would join his unholy ancestors in the Cave of Fire and no one would be any the wiser. For a moment longer, she went over the possibility of having her plans discovered, disregarded the slim chance then ordered the cybot to put down on the planetoid.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sky over Montyne Vex was a deep gray, looking bruised and battered by the fierce winds that howled across the steppes. As the cybot trudged along with the unconscious Reaper slung over its mechanical shoulder, Ski'Ah dragged her feet through the thick chiaroscuro sand. Keeping the hood of her red cape pulled over her nose and mouth so she would not breathe in the swirling dust, she shivered. The wind was ice-cold. Low banks of fog obscured the regions to the south. To the north, snow clouds were gathering. She was amazed to hear thunder in the distance and see the occasional flash of lightning stitching through the dark clouds.

"How much farther?" she asked.

The cybot turned to give her its respectful attention. "Up the next steppe, Lady Ski'Ah. It is to that plateau to which we travel."

Ski'Ah squinted against the intruding dust and looked at the vast rock formation that jutted overhead. The jagged cliffs of the plateau were forbidding. A fall from the plateau would result in being impaled by sharp cone-like protrusions rising from the base.

"A most inhospitable climate is Montyne Vex," the cybot commented.

Ski'Ah clutched the cape tighter at her throat, wishing she had thought to wear gloves, for the pelting sands scoured her fingers raw. Luckily, she had taken along her goggles or she would have been blinded by now.

As the cybot began its climb up the plateau, Ski'Ah held back. She had no desire to have a blast of wind catch her cape, sail her off the flat surface and drop her onto the deadly spires at the plateau's base.

"When you have him manacled," she called, "come back for me!"

"As you wish, lady." The cybot easily climbed the plateau and disappeared into the dark maw of a cave.

By the time the cybot returned, Ski'Ah was shivering violently from the cold, her lips trembling, her hands frigid claws that seemed frozen to the fabric of her cape.

"W-what took you so l-long?"

"I had to inject the Reaper," the cybot replied. "He was waking."

A tremor that had nothing to do with the intense cold washed over Ski'Ah. The thought of the Reaper escaping, taking out his vengeance upon her, did not sit well.

"C-carry me into the c-cave."

"Aye, milady."

The cybot lifted her into its steely arms and turned to the plateau. Ski'Ah was not concerned with being swept over the side and onto the rocks with the cybot's surefooted tread. The cybot had gyroscopes that made it easy for the A.I.U. to maintain balance. A sudden blast of wind would be measured and the counterforces employed to keep the cybot erect and earthbound as it moved.

"Do you wish me to bring supplies from the ship, Lady Ski'Ah?"

"Aye," she said, realizing the cybot had turned on its internal heating coils so that her body was being warmed in its mechanical embrace. "Bring water and a meal for me."

\* \* \* \* \*

From his perch high atop one jagged spire, Danyon Hart watched the Amazeen being carried into the cave. He was squatting on the rocky formation, his wrists resting on his knees, his body buffeted by strong, harsh winds, and reveling in the arctic cold that washed over him, whipping his black hair about his head. His open shirt flapped wildly, the cold kissing the wiry hairs on his chest. He drew a deep breath of frigid air into his lungs.

Snow was coming, and it would be a brutal fall that would cover the land with a thick carpet of numbing cold that would last for months in this clime. He had read the turbulent history of this violent land and understood that in summer, the plateau beneath him would be red-hot to the touch, the sands a scalding torment to those unfortunate enough to land there. But in the winter that was approaching on the horizon, this plateau would know blizzards unlike anything Earth could imagine while the lands to the south would be sizzling hot. By his reckoning, full winter was one, maybe two, days away.

He looked at the starjet far below.

It had taken the craft two weeks to soar its way from Earth to this barren rock, only a few thousand miles from the wormhole that led to Amazeen. It would take it another two weeks to travel back the way it had come, the Reaper at the controls. While it had sped toward Montyne Vex, Danyon had ridden the heavens unseen with the Amazeen and her pathetic captive, though neither had known he was there. Not even the artificial intelligence unit had been smart enough to discern his lurking presence.

The Reaper—unconscious in the E.S.U.—would have made an easy target had Danyon been inclined to dispatch him where he lay, but the Nightwind's promise to his

lady must be upheld. As much as he would like to see the last of Viraidan Cree, he stayed his hand from taking the Reaper's miserable life.

The Amazeen had proved an eager receptacle for the suggestions Danyon had whispered into her ear about Montyne Vex. A slight detour on her way to Amazeen, a little diversion that would make her happy and cause Cree untold agony, might prove entertaining.

"Swear you will not harm him nor let anyone or anything else on Amazeen harm him," Bronwyn had made him pledge.

"By my hand he will not suffer," Danyon said to the shrill winds. "Nor will anyone or anything on *Amazeen* harm him."

It was all in the wording, he thought, grinning. He stood, hands on hips and surveyed the barbaric lands spread out before him.

Danyon was looking forward to the next few hours.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cree groaned as he woke. The vile taste in his mouth was far worse than any carrion flesh he had smelled in his lifetime. He had a headache unlike any he'd ever known and was so sick to his stomach he dared not open his eyes for fear he'd throw up. Not that he could lift his head, he thought, for he was boneless, numb everywhere, but at the agony spearing his temples. As his head was jerked up, the back of his skull slamming into something solid, he gasped, gagging at the pain.

"Puke on me at your peril, Reaper," a harsh voice screamed.

Forcing open his eyes, Cree found himself looking into the face of his own death.

"Aye, you know what is going to happen. Do you know where you are?" Ski'Ah inquired, her eyes gleaming with victory.

He knew. The moment he saw the craggy walls surrounding him, he knew. The Amazeen called it the Abattoir, but the planetoid had been named Montyne Vex. It was the torture ground, the killing field of his kinsman, and despite himself, he felt fear. He knew he was chained with his arms and legs spread-eagle to the wall behind him. There was enough sensation in his body to know he was naked from the waist up, for the flesh of his back pressed against slick stone. Barefoot as he hung suspended off the cell floor, he felt the drag of the manacles on his ankles.

And he knew what was coming.

"I am your executioner, Reaper," the Amazeen taunted.

From the corner of his eye, Cree saw a cybot moving about, bringing in instruments of torture he had heard about as a boy.

Ski'Ah turned to look in that direction. "Too bad the A.I.U. could not find the Rods of Discipline," she said with a sigh, then looked back at her captive, her gaze traveling

to the juncture of his thighs and back to his face. "I would have taken great delight in administering them."

The cybot and its loathsome arsenal was not all Cree had seen. He was stunned to discover the incubus standing nearby, a wide grin on his evil face.

"You need a witness to my death, woman?" Cree mumbled, mortally ashamed when a helpless drool accompanied his words.

"The cybot cares nothing for what I am going to do," Ski'Ah snorted.

One look at the Nightwind's grinning face—one thick brow jutting upward in mirth—and Cree knew the warrioress was unaware of his presence. When Hart crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the cell wall, Cree understood the demon would not lift a finger to help him.

"You helped her to capture me, didn't you?" he threw at the incubus.

"Try not to snivel when she tortures you, Reaper. It would be so unmanly."

Ski'Ah frowned. She looked about, as if feeling a presence but unable to see one. For a moment, she seemed unsure of her plan then she suddenly relaxed.

"Bastard, giving her a silent suggestion..." Cree muttered.

"Silence!" Ski'Ah slapped Cree, the force snapping his head to the side.

Danyon chuckled.

Grabbing a handful of Cree's curls, the Amazeen dragged back his head and stared into his eyes. "You would tear me apart if you could get your hands on me, wouldn't you, beast?"

"Unchain me and see, bitch."

Ski'Ah snapped the fingers of her free hand. "The grata," she ordered the cybot.

The instrument placed in her hand looked like a short-handled garden tool, a six-inch-wide row of five sharp teeth, glistening in the light cast by the rushes overhead.

"Let's see how much of a man you are, Reaper!" Ski'Ah spat.

Cree sucked in his breath as the device gouged into his flesh, but he made no other sound. He held Ski'Ah's vindictive stare, refusing to cast his eyes toward the incubus.

Ski'Ah drew the tines of the instrument down Cree's chest, from his neck to his belly. As blood ran down the center of his torso, Cree felt the cuts begin to close, the parasite's healing power almost instantaneous.

"I bet that hurt," Danyon suggested silently.

Cree refused to rise to the demon's baiting, though the Amazeen had hurt him. The pain should have been minimal, but with his flesh tingling under the influence of the cinera, he realized his pain threshold had been lowered considerably. For the second time, fear formed within him.

"She's going to cause you great pain before she's finished," Danyon remarked, obviously intercepting Cree's unguarded thought.

Cree cut his eyes over to the incubus. Hatred such as he had never known drove deep into his soul. As much as he hated the Amazeen, what he felt for the demon was ten times stronger. That hatred exploded into savage fury as Danyon flung at him a mental picture of Bronwyn and the demon lying in her bed, their bodies entwined, Bronwyn's arms wrapped around him.

Ski'Ah jumped, her eyes widening as a howl of rage pealed from Cree's throat. "Cinera!" she screamed to the cybot, moving aside so the artificial intelligence unit could thrust the syringe into Cree's neck.

Despite the thrust of the needle into his flesh, the red-hot sting of the drug shooting through his veins and causing crackling noises within his head, Cree did not succumb to the injection as he knew Ski'Ah had anticipated. The cinera did not cause immediate unconsciousness, nor, he assumed, did it bleach out the vermillion glow in his furious gaze.

Danyon pushed away from the wall, as if half-expecting Cree to pull free of his fetters and come at him. He looked at Ski'Ah.

"The Dóigra!" she yelled, likely receiving another mental suggestion. "Quickly! Give it to me!"

The cybot slapped the Dóigra into its owner's hands.

Ski'Ah thrust the weapon toward Cree, pressing the white-hot bulb at its end to his belly. As the tip touched Cree, a star-shaped burn blackened his flesh. He howled in agony.

Danyon's eyes flared. Obviously, the odor of burning flesh, the ripple of involuntary muscle movement that shuddered through Cree stunned and excited the demon. "Hit him again."

Ski'Ah touched the Dóigra to Cree's body, holding it to his right pectoral. Cree writhed in torment.

"Again," Danyon whispered.

With each new press of the Dóigra, Cree convulsed, his screams reverberating through the cell. By the time his upper torso and underarms were scored by the sizzling burns, he was whimpering, his anguished eyes locked on the Nightwind. Though agony engulfed his body, he no longer struggled against the torture, for he had no strength left. Blood ran from the corner of his mouth when he bit his tongue. "Demon, please. No more."

The Amazeen laughed, jabbing him forcefully with the Dóigra. "We are just beginning, Reaper! The worst is yet to come!" She stuck him again.

"Please!" he screamed, his eyes locked on Danyon.

"Enough," Danyon said.

Ski'Ah's maniacal chortles of glee drowned out the command. She stabbed Cree again.

Cree howled in agony before Danyon grabbed the Dóigra from Ski'Ah's hands. She turned, her face contorted with rage. Outwardly shocked to see him, she did not move. But as full realization set in, her lips peeled back from her teeth.

"You!" She came at him with her fingers curled into claws.

The demon batted her away, shoving her against the wall. Her head hit the stone and she slid to the floor in an unconscious heap. Before the cybot could come to its owner's aid, Danyon spun around. With a sweep of his hand, he incinerated the mechanical being where it stood. Just as Danyon turned around, Cree, now sagging against his manacles, passed out.

Danyon drew in a long, calming breath, exhaled slowly then walked over to his rival. He hated to unchain the Reaper. If he could leave the beast, he would, but he had sworn a pledge and he would make good on his word.

Up close, the livid burns on the Reaper's flesh bothered Danyon. It was not the stench nor the blackened skin peeled back from Cree's rib cage nor the pain such wounds had brought that concerned Danyon, but the knowledge that it might take longer than a few days for the parasite to heal the numerous inflictions. It would not do to take Cree back to Bronwyn in this condition.

"You are more trouble than you are worth, beast." Danyon cursed as he knelt to break the fetters around the Reaper's ankles. He wrinkled his nose when he realized Cree had pissed himself during the torture.

Standing, Danyon removed the bands around Cree's wrists, allowing the Reaper to sag into his arms for a moment before dropping him none-too-gently to the floor. He stepped back, annoyed with the scent of Reaper feter on him, and brushed his hands down his shirt in an attempt to rid himself of the offending odor. Knowing he couldn't, he kicked the unconscious man, cursing him.

Cree grunted, then groaned, his eyelids fluttering open. He was too weak to move, wondering why he was on the floor, staring at a pair of dusty boots.

"Get up," Danyon snapped, prodding Cree's hip with his toe. "You're alive."

Though he hurt in a thousand places, Cree managed to flip over to his back, gasping as the flesh over his chest cracked open in a half-dozen areas. It was all he could do not to whimper and had to grit his teeth.

"Are you sane or will I be forced to take a gibbering fool back to my lady?" Danyon questioned.

"The Amazeen...?"

"Over there."

"Alive?"

"Aye. I've left her to your tender mercies."

Cree opened his eyes and stared up at the Nightwind. He knew better than to ask for any assistance.

"Get up," Danyon said, nudging him again with the toe of his boot. "There is a storm coming and I suggest we leave before it hits."

Cree forced himself to a sitting position, drawing in a sharp breath.

"How long will it take you to heal?" the demon asked in a bored voice.

Cree looked down at his chest and winced. It took most of his energy just to raise his head again. "A week...maybe more..."

"Hell." He looked at the Amazeen. "What do you want to do with that garbage?"

Glad only to be alive, Cree couldn't have cared less. He didn't even glance at Ski'Ah as he forced himself up to a crouch, panting with pain, his head sagging between his quivering arms.

"You disgust me almost as much as the bitch." With a snort, Danyon bent over, put his hands under Cree's armpits and levered him to his feet. "Get up, Reaper!"

"Merciful Alel!" Cree gasped as he stumbled then kept his feet. He stood wavering in pain, the support of the Nightwind's hands removed.

"You think that's pain? I will *show* you pain."

Before Cree could react, he felt the demon's hand on his arm, then found himself teetering on the edge of a vast crevice beneath which a bubbling cauldron of lava sputtered and hissed.

"That is the Cave of Fire, Reaper," Danyon said, pointing to the heaving mass of liquid flame. "From the Abattoir they brought your kin here and dropped them in. Can you imagine the agony they felt?"

Cree didn't have a chance to answer, for the Nightwind shifted them through time and space, deeper into the cave system. Cree looked at row after row of skulls sitting on ledges that disappeared into the darkness.

"Their heads might have been gone, but the parasite went into the fire pit with the bodies." The room filled with the screams of a thousand Reapers.

A momentary scene of a long-lost kinsman—his head lopped from his body by a Dóigra, his mouth open in an unending scream of agony as his flesh dissolved in the Cave of Fire—brought tears to Cree's eyes.

"You are among the last of your kind on Earth."

Cree shook his head. "Gallagher..."

"I slew that bastard long ago. Think you I would have left anyone alive who hurt my lady as did that filth? He took milady's bantling—I took his worthless life!"

Despite the pain pulsing in his body, Cree straightened and locked gazes with the demon. In the dark eyes, he read the truth of what the incubus was saying and knew that was why he had been unable to locate Alistair Gallagher all those years.



"The Amazeen would have killed you if I had not been here to stop her. If you leave her alive, she'll come after you again. Either kill or allow me the honor. Your choice matters not to me."

Cree knew the warrioress must die. "How far is it back to where...?" he began, only to find himself standing in the cell again, the Amazeen slumped at the base of the wall.

Danyon stepped back, giving Cree room. "End her uselessness then we'll dispose of the body. You need no evidence left that you were here."

Cree painfully made his way over to the woman who was waking from her enforced sleep. He squatted down beside her, took her head in his hands and twisted, snapping her neck as easily as though it was a sliver of straw.

"You were easier on her than I would have been," Danyon said dryly, and pushed Cree aside so he could lift the warrioress. As he straightened, he raised an inquisitive brow to Cree.

"I know what I'm about, Nightwind," Cree said. Though he did not have the strength to carry the Amazeen to the Cave of Fire, he wanted to be there when she was dropped in.

"You ask much of me. Put your hand on my arm and let us be done with this."

In the blink of an eye, Reaper, Nightwind and Amazeen were at the rim of the Cave of Fire. As Danyon held the limp warrioress, Cree put his face close to Ski'Ah's.

"Burn in hell, you conniving bitch," he said through clenched teeth, grinning hatefully at the rapidly blinking eyes that stared back at him in abject horror.

Danyon took a step closer to the pit's edge and released his burden to the popping, hissing lava. As the warrioress fell, her mouth open in a silent scream, the demon smiled.

The two men stood there for a moment, staring into the spot where the Amazeen's body had erupted into flame.

"She felt the kiss of the fire," Danyon said.

"Good," Cree said. "I meant for her to."

Danyon took one last look at the cauldron then turned. "Think you're strong enough to find your way to the starjet?" When Cree didn't answer, he pressed further. "Want me to transport you there?"

"Put your hands on me one more time and I'll barf," Cree snapped. "I have your stench slimed to me now."

Danyon shrugged. "Suit yourself." He pushed past Cree, chuckling. "I'll see you at the craft."

His pride refusing to allow him to ask for any assistance, Cree crammed his hands into the pockets of his dusty jeans and tightened the muscles of his jaw. He hurt so badly it was difficult not to groan with every step he took.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Cree reached the starjet, his jeans were caked with packed snow and he was shivering uncontrollably from the intense cold. His cheeks stinging from the blistering ice crystals, his chest and arms numb, his hands frostbitten, he had trouble gaining access to the interior of the craft. When he did, it did not help to see Danyon reclining shirtless at the captain's console.

"Are you cold, Reaper?" the demon queried as he swung a leg that dangled over the chair arm. At Cree's growl, Danyon made a tsking sound. "And I didn't think Reapers ever got cold. How is it you look as though you're half-frozen?"

Cree refused to answer. He yanked open the door of a utility closet and rummaged around until he found a dark green pullover. Wincing at the color, he ground his teeth and pulled the offending garment over his head, thrusting his arms into the sleeves with barely a grunt of discomfort.

"You do know that's a woman's tunic, don't you?"

Ignoring the insulting remark, Cree stomped over to the navigational panel and stared at the screen for a moment.

"It didn't occur to me that you might not know how to fly this thing," Danyon said. "I'm sure after five thousand years there have been an improvement or two. I would certainly understand if you admitted you weren't up to the task."

Cree sat down and typed in commands as fast as his stiff fingers would allow.

"Do you know how to fly it?" Danyon asked with a yawn.

"What difference does it make to you? Why don't you take yourself back to Terra and leave me be?"

"Normally I would be more than happy to, but I promised Bronnie I'd see you home in one piece." When Cree glared at him, the Nightwind shrugged. "I could easily transport you back before you could say what is on the tip of your tongue, but we're going to have to let you heal first."

The engines engaged. The dark screens scattered across the room pulsed into life. A low rumble caused the starjet to gently vibrate.

"You knew she wasn't the one I killed in the morgue," Danyon accused. "How was that?"

Cree narrowed his eyes. He had not known it was the demon in Brell's form that fateful day. In retrospect, he realized he should have suspected as much. Turning his back on Danyon, he busied himself entering the data necessary to return them to Terra.

"How did you know?"

"Think you I would not have recognized my mate's bloodscent, demon? It was not her blood you spilled."

"Damn. I did not think of that. Do you know who it was I gutted?"

"I don't know and I don't—"

“Your pet. Ralph, was it?”

Cree felt momentary hurt before he turned away, his thawing fingers moving faster across the console.

“Oh, I should explain,” Danyon said. “Actually your Ralph was the Bugul Noz I befriended long ago. No harm, no foul, as they say.”

Cree stopped typing to stare at the screen before him where numbers flashed by in a long sequence. A Bugul Noz—he knew of such creatures, but had no idea he had ever come into contact with one. That he had, that the demon was being truthful, he did not question. Things made sense to him in a twisted sort of way, and he looked down at the console pad and began inputting more coordinates. When he moved from the navigational console to the pilot’s seat, he refused to look at the smug incubus.

“Will the Reaper miss his wittle doggie?” Danyon asked in a childish singsong. “I’m so soweey.”

The starjet shuddered as the main thrusters lifted it off the planetoid, blowing the accumulated snow away from its landing gear as the struts were drawn up into the craft’s belly.

“I’d tell you to strap in, but I don’t give a Diabolusian warthog’s prick whether you do or not,” Cree said, pulling the flight harness across his chest, willing himself not to feel the pain of his numerous burns.

Danyon barely had time to grab at a nearby chair as the starjet took to the air, banking sharply to the right as it picked up speed and arced into the black reaches of space.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Deirdre McGregor Hesar reached out to cover her daughter's hands. "Is there anything I can do?"

Bronwyn eased her hands from beneath her mother's. "I'll be fine as soon as Aidan returns."

DeeDee exchanged a look with her new husband.

"What if Cree doesn't come back?" Neal Hesar asked.

Bronwyn lifted her chin. "He will."

"But, Bronnie—" DeeDee began.

"I'm glad you're back, Mama." Bronwyn opened the door. "And again, congratulations to you and Dr. Hesar."

"Neal," her stepfather insisted.

Bronwyn moved into the hallway. "Neal," she repeated, smiling.

DeeDee stepped forward, looking like she was about to protest her daughter's leaving, when men appeared in the hallway, walking from the direction of Bronwyn's apartment. "What in the world?"

Bronwyn stepped aside to let the movers pass. "Just a little temporary housecleaning while I redecorate, Mama."

Her mother stared after the men who were carrying the bedroom furniture she and Bronwyn had purchased in Des Moines. "You're redecorating so soon?" she inquired, outwardly aghast at Bronwyn's capriciousness.

"Just changing a color here and there. I'm not getting rid of anything." She smiled. "Not yet, anyway."

"Redecorating is expensive, Bronnie. We spent a small fortune and I—"

"Let me worry about it." Bronwyn looked at her watch. "I have to get going." Her mouth twitched. "I have to get ready for my guests."

"What guests?" DeeDee asked, and likely would have questioned Bronwyn further, had not her husband reminded her that her daughter was a grown woman and entitled to her own life.

"But—"

"No 'buts', DeeDee." Neal drew his wife back into their apartment, waved goodbye to Bronwyn and firmly shut the door behind him.

Bronwyn let out a relieved breath. Her new abilities—honed from spending nearly every waking hour of the last five weeks with a thick book clutched in her hands—were holding her in good stead. Glancing again at her watch, she hurried down the hall.

The movers had cleared out the room. The carpet had been taken up, the vertical blinds removed. Bronwyn looked around then turned to the man who had supervised the movers.

"Are you ready?" she asked Brian.

"As I'll ever be."

"Then let's do it!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Cree cut the engines and allowed the starjet to settle gently into orbit on the dark side of Terra's moon. He shut down all unnecessary systems and engaged the autopilot.

"I still say you should destroy this craft," Danyon fumed.

They had argued about the starjet's fate for most of the journey.

"If I'm not allowed to stay with Bronwyn," Cree snarled, "I will return to Chale where I belong."

The Nightwind rolled his eyes. "I'm not buying that. You think you'll cause us problems, but I promise, I will see to it that you won't!"

Cree ground his teeth. The argument was starting to get to him. He glared at the demon. "As much as I hate to admit it, you saved my life and I am honor bound to you for that."

"And I've told you, I don't want your gods-be-damned thanks! I didn't do it for you!"

"I wasn't thanking you! Truth told, I would just have soon died than return here to have you force *my* mate to do your vile bidding!"

"She was mine long before you ever met her!" Danyon declared. "As a Broderick clanswoman she —"

"Shut the hell up, incubus!"

"She signed the Pact!"

"I know what you *forced* her to do. What choice did you give her?"

"If you think to tell her about the Amazeen," Danyon said, his lips pulling back over his teeth, "I would think again!"

Cree's body was almost entirely healed, although a few bone-deep burns still oozed—the queen had difficulty closing the scorched flesh. His strength back, his fury and hatred as strong—if not stronger—than ever against the incubus, he wanted nothing more than to make mincemeat of the demon. The thing was, he didn't think he would be able to defeat an entity that could shift into nothingness before his eyes.

"Think hard on that." The demon chuckled, obviously intercepting Cree's reluctance.

Cree's thoughts turned bleak. There was another thing that bothered him greatly – he owed the Nightwind a debt of honor over and above the incubus having saved his life. With no tenerse, no Sustenance onboard, Cree knew he would have gone mad with hunger during the two-week flight had not the Nightwind disappeared then reappeared with what was needed.

"Where did you get that?" Cree had often asked.

"What do you care?" Danyon grumbled as he tossed the plastibags of Sustenance to his rival.

That the incubus had fed him, been there to inject him with tenerse, had irritated Cree. Shamed by having to endure being cared for by his hated enemy, the situation was barely tolerable.

"I told her I'd bring you back as you were before you were taken," Danyon declared, "and that I intend to do."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Cree snapped, tired of hearing Danyon's words.

Danyon stared at his enemy for a long time then decided he would have to find a way to kill the Reaper without Bronwyn knowing. He would never feel truly safe with her as long as the beast drew breath. There had to be a loophole somewhere in the pact she and he had made. It was all in the wording, he thought, and turned his agile mind to finding a way out of his predicament.

Cree ignored the pensive demon as he began the final check of the starjet. He synchronized the transport module with the device he had pinned to his shirt, making sure it would work should he need to return to the ship. With the coordinates set for the lower level of the Baybridge complex, it would be possible for him to transport to the containment cell area without detection.

"Or," Danyon said, "I could just pick you up and –"

"Keep your filthy hands to yourself!" Cree shouted, unnerved by the demon's ability to read his mind.

"Have it your way," Danyon quipped and disappeared.

"Damn you!" Cree bellowed, knowing the demon would arrive at Bronwyn's before him. With a howl of rage, he slapped at the transport device on his chest and grimaced as he began to dematerialize.

It hurt, and he hadn't been prepared for that.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bronwyn was sitting on the sofa of her apartment when Danyon appeared. Her hand tensed on Brownie's silky fur before she looked up.

"Danyon!" she gasped, coming to her feet.

The incubus smiled. "I am home, beloved." He went to take her in his arms but she jumped back.

"Where is Aidan?"

A frown marred the handsome planes of Danyon's face. "Oh, he'll be along." Again, he moved toward her, his arms outstretched.

Bronwyn moved away. "You told me you would bring him home!"

"I have," Danyon replied, looking hurt. "Did I not pledge I would?"

"Then where is he?" Bronwyn asked, trembling, her lips quivering. She clutched at the doorjamb behind her.

A momentary bright light pulsed through the room then Cree was standing there, swaying.

"Aidan!" Bronwyn would have rushed to her lover, but Danyon held out his hand.

"You promised to give yourself entirely to me," he reminded. "You've seen him and now he will —"

"Danny, no!" Bronwyn pleaded, her hand out to him. "Don't send him away yet. Let me talk to him!"

"I think not. You see he is all in one piece, none the worse for wear."

Cree glared at his rival and did not speak.

"Allow me ten minutes with him, Danny," Bronwyn begged, tears falling down her cheeks. She could sense the pain her lover was experiencing.

"No," Danyon said, shaking his head.

"Five minutes?" Bronwyn countered. At his continued objections, she asked for three minutes instead. "What harm could it do?"

Danyon glanced at his enemy and likely saw the same hopelessness stamped on the rugged features as Bronwyn saw. "*Two* minutes. And no more."

Bronwyn held out her hand to her lover. "Aidan?"

As if trying desperately to ignore some agony, Cree walked to her and took her hand. His gaze locked on her face, like he was striving to remember it.

"Milady," he said, bringing her fingers to his lips.

"Come with me." She began pulling him into the room behind her.

"No, beloved," Danyon ordered. "You will stay where I can see you."

Bronwyn gripped Cree's hand. "Come with me."

"I told you no!" Danyon snarled.

Bronwyn yanked hard on Cree's hand, unmindful of his gasp of pain as she jerked him into the bedroom.

Cree was obviously stunned by what he saw, for he put up no resistance as Bronwyn propelled him to the center of the room. Looking at the floor, his eyes widened.

"Do not step one foot outside the circle," she demanded.

He looked into her eyes and nodded as the Nightwind rushed through the door and came to a skidding stop.

"What have you done?" Danyon hissed.

With Cree's hand still clutched tightly in hers, Bronwyn faced the demon. "How is it my mate has suffered great pain?"

Danyon's lips parted. "How did you —"

"Did I not bid you to see that no harm befell him?"

The incubus lowered his stare to the pentagram drawn across the bedroom floor. It was a protection, a barrier through which Bronwyn knew he could not travel. While she was within the circle, he could do nothing to her, nor could he lay hands on Cree.

"Answer me!" she ordered.

Danyon shook his head. "You asked that no one or nothing harm him on Amazeen. He never reached Amazeen, milady."

"A clever twisting of my words, was it not?"

Bronwyn sensed that Danyon didn't know how she had become aware of her witchling destiny or how she had embraced it. Only an adept, such as she had become, could have placed the pentagram in the precise way it needed to be drawn. Only someone who knew what she was about could have helped her assemble the things that lay on the floor.

"I am the last of the Broderick female line," she said, her chin raised. "No further female issue shall be brought forth from my womb."

The incubus flinched, as if knowing he had been beaten at his own game. "I am sorry I deceived you," Danyon said, moisture creeping down his cheeks.

"Not as sorry as you will be!"

Cree looked from the blood-red pentagram at his feet to the doorway where Danyon hovered. He saw fear on the incubus's face and began to realize a serious change in circumstances was taking place. He moved closer to Bronwyn, somehow knowing his — and her — salvation lay in her actions.

"What excuse do you give for trying to cheat me, demon?" she asked.

"My love blinded me to the rightful paths I knew I should trod!" Danyon confessed. "You would not accept me, though I did everything I could to entice you. You chose another. That I could not allow. You are a Broderick, and as a Broderick, you belong to me. I will have you at all cost."

"And a great price you shall pay for what you have done."

"Forgive me, beloved." Danyon fell to his knees in an obvious attempt to placate her. "I am yours to command." He lowered his head, his right hand covering his heart.

"I know you are!"



Cree heard the triumph in her voice. He tore his eyes from the demon to look at her and was stunned to see true evil lighting her beautiful face.

Danyon likely saw it as well as he locked eyes with her. "Lady, no," he pleaded, putting out a hand.

"You will hie yourself back to your lair, demon," Bronwyn commanded.

"Beloved, no!"

"And there you will stay until you are called forth once more by a female born of the Broderick line!"

Tears cascaded down his waxen cheeks. "But you are the last!"

Bronwyn's smile was as evil and cold as a demon's heart. "Aye," she whispered, her green gaze flooded with fire. "That I am."

"There will never be another call for me!"

"No, there won't." Bronwyn raised her arm and commanded he leave.

"Please! I will not go!"

Cree chuckled. "Will the Nightwind miss his wittle lady? I'm so soweey."

"Go to hell, Reaper!" Danyon bellowed.

"You first," Cree insisted with a wide grin.

"Raphian, come!" Bronwyn ordered.

Cree caught the stench of sulfur only a second before the Destroyer of Men's Souls shot through the bedroom wall and grabbed the demon in Its maw. With a crunching sound, the Supreme Evil Entity fled, dragging a screeching Danyon Hart by the throat back through the gaping hole that had exploded with His appearance, sucking in on itself to close as though it had never been.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph," Cree whispered, falling back on the Sean Cullen part of him that had witnessed the scene with horrified eyes.

"They had no part in it at all," Bronwyn sighed.

"Is he gone?" Cree asked with a hard shudder.

"Aye – and will never return."

He looked at the pentagram. "Is it safe to leave this evil thing now?"

"Not yet. I have a few wrongs to right before I'm done."

## Epilogue

"And I'm looking forward to meeting you, too, Lauren," Bronwyn said.

Cree was lying with Bronwyn in her bed, in what had once been her guestroom.

"We'll see you on Saturday?" Bronwyn inquired. "Bye 'til then."

The Reaper took the receiver from her and hung it up.

"Turn off the light, please," she said.

He did as she bid then sighed as she settled against his chest, her head in the crook of his arm. He held her to him, breathing in the scent of gardenia that clung to her long hair. They entwined their toes, tickling one another.

"Lauren is anxious to meet you," she said, twirling her finger around a lock of his chest hair.

"Umm," he said, his contentment making him unusually sleepy. Since "The Night of the Pentagram", as he had labeled that fateful event, he had been able to sleep almost as naturally as any healthy human male. He knew it was having his mate at his side from dusk to dawn that eased his fears and brought him peace, making it possible for him to rest.

"She reminded me that I should put furniture in the old bedroom so no one will be tempted to lift the rug and discover what I have underneath."

He looked at her. "Are you going to leave that gods-be-damned thing in there?"

"For now." She caressed his chest. "I think I'll turn it into a sitting room, with just a wicker loveseat and chairs. Something easy to move, if need be."

He sighed, laid his head on the pillow, and closed his eyes. "If need be."

"We could use it, you know."

He frowned. "How?"

"We could send those who transgress against the laws of God and man to the Abyss. There would be no need for a trial or for sentencing or for incarceration in a place like Baybridge. No need to use the death penalty. They would simply disappear into the unknown."

Cree opened his eyes to stare at the ceiling. He found her suggestion held merit. "Not kill those offenders, but send them where they will never harm anyone again?"

"Precisely. No harm and no foul and no additional taxes to drain the people's pockets."

"No harm and no foul," Cree echoed, and tore his thoughts from Danyon.

"Of course, there would be a need for a bounty hunter, if you will, to go after the evil ones."

Cree pondered the matter a moment more then decided he felt comfortable with it. "I suppose I'll be sent to fetch these miscreants."

"As soon as we find out about them. There'd be no chance for them to do their evil a second time."

"I like the sound of that, Bronnie, though there are only so many hours in a day for a Reaper to be hunting, you know."

Bronwyn ran her foot up his leg. "Are you getting old on me, Reaper?"

"I am already older than Methuselah ever dreamed of being."

"But not as old as me," another voice said.

Cree sat up in the bed to glare at the Nightwind. "Did I tell you *not* to trespass in here again? Get the hell out of this bedroom!"

Cedric yawned as he shifted his ancient body in the rocking chair. "You say a lot of things, beast, to which I have no intention of paying heed."

"Cedric," Bronwyn warned. "Take your chair into the living room and don't sneak back in here again. You know how Aidan feels."

"Think you I care, beloved?" Cedric inquired, his lower lip thrust forward in a pout. "I am honor bound to protect you. That one is —"

"My husband, Cedric," Bronwyn reminded the demon. "He can protect me and will."

"So, get gone, you foul —" Cree snarled, but Bronwyn shushed him with a poke to the ribs.

"Please do as I ask, Ceddie," she bid the demon.

"Oh, all right." The Nightwind grumbled as he unfolded his stiff limbs. He cast Cree a nasty look then picked up the rocking chair and left, banging the chair against the door as he went.

"I'll not have that —"

"Yes, dearling," Bronwyn said, putting her fingers over his lips.

"I *am* your husband. Legal and —"

"I know, sweetheart."

"I am all the protection you need!"

"Indeed, you are."

"And get off my leg!" Cree barked, kicking at the other animal pressing against him.

The big black dog snorted and sprang off the covers, shape-shifting in midair to land in his humanoid form at the side of the bed. Ordin Gver drew in a huge lungful of air, farted loudly and walked sedately from the room.

"By the gods, I'm going to have him neutered!" Cree bellowed, fanning the air. The gas from the Bugul Noz's body was a hundred times worse than his body odor.

"Brownie wouldn't appreciate it," Bronwyn stated, as if immune to the stench.

"But I promise it would give me the greatest of pleasures! Why did you have to bring him back from death in the first place with that newfound sorcery of yours?"

"Because he's a part of us, my love, and he belongs with us. We are his people now," she said gently. "You love him. You know you do."

"Maybe, but it will give me the greatest of pleasures—" he started to say, but she stopped him with a sultry grin.

"No," Bronwyn replied, wrapping her hand around the soft flesh at the juncture of his thighs. "I promise I'm going to give *you* the greatest of pleasures, my love."

She spent the rest of the night making good on her promise.

## About the Author

Charlee is the author of over thirty books. Married 39 years to her high school sweetheart, Tom, she is the mother of two grown sons, Pete and Mike, and the proud grandmother of Preston Alexander and Victoria Ashley. She is the willing house slave to five demanding felines who are holding her hostage in her home and only allowing her to leave in order to purchase food for them. A native of Sarasota, Florida, she grew up in Colquitt and Albany, Georgia and now lives in the Midwest.

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