

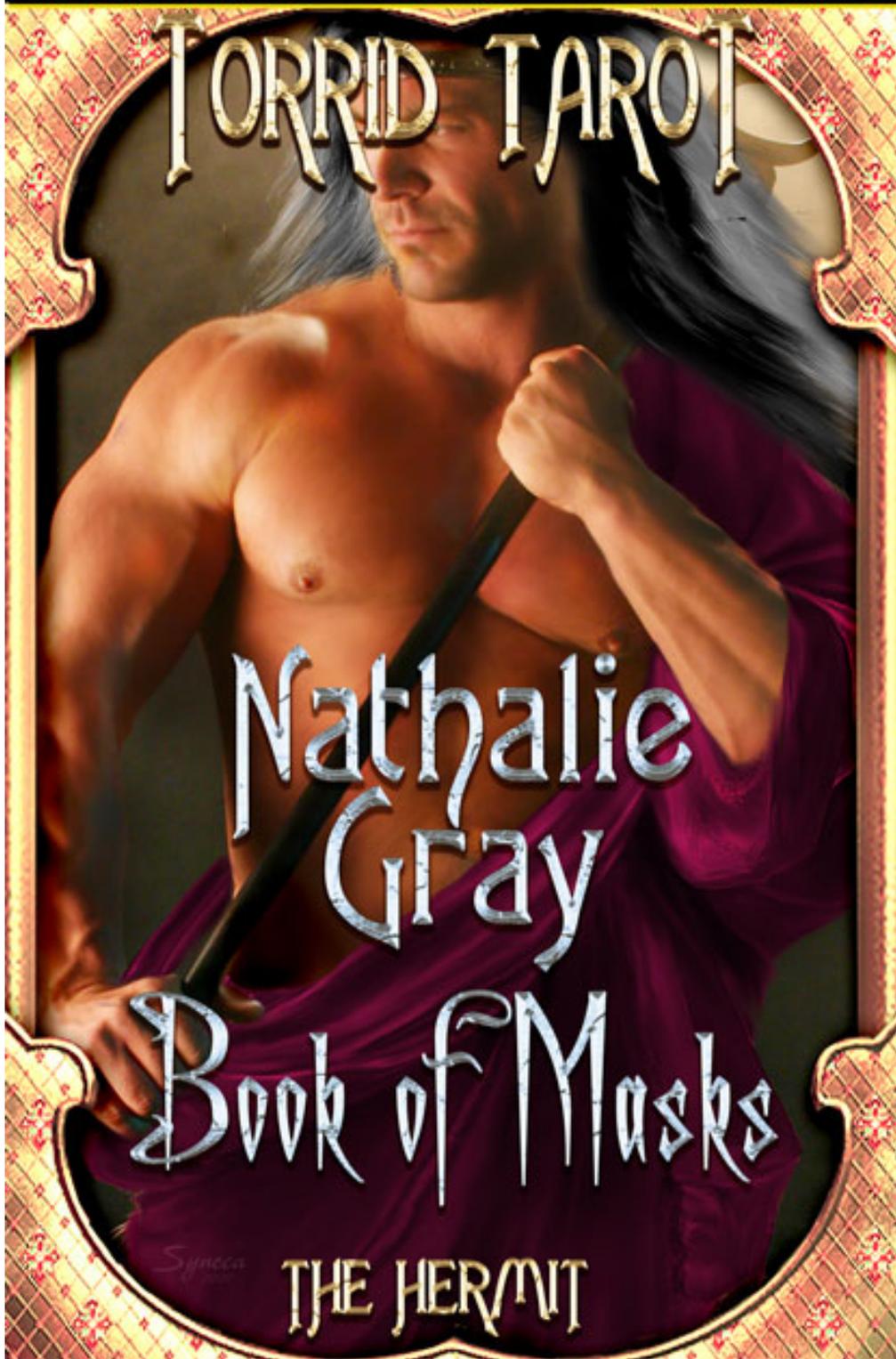
ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

TORRID TAROT

Nathalie
Gray

Book of Masks

Syneca
THE HERMIT



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Book of Masks

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BOOK OF MASKS

Nathalie Gray

Author's Note

I won't pretend to be an expert on tarot and its varied origins or uses. Some people enjoy a special, personal relationship to these cards while others appreciate their historical value. Me, I like the pretty pictures. When word at Ellora's Cave started circulating about a tarot-themed series, my inner Chihuahua became very excited. After a bit of initial research, some of the more "arcane" cards intrigued me. I mean The Devil, The Hanged Man? Oh my! But then I saw one that made my computer mouse quiver...The Hermit (or *Il Tempo* on other decks, a name I much prefer). Of course, the more I read about this particular card, the more I became convinced the figure on it could use one rigorous makeover. Why is wisdom so often associated with great age and white hair, I lamented to my computer screen? Why couldn't *Il Tempo* be a vibrant, commanding entity, a symbol of wisdom, yes, but of life as well? Because he's often depicted carrying a lantern, a beacon, I decided to make my *Il Tempo* wise and poised, a source of light but also of *strength*. What's the use having light if one is too feeble to hold it up high for others to see and follow?

Book of Masks is set in present-time Venice while my head was still swirling with all the magnificence, excess and opulence I saw on my visit there last fall. Though the official *Carnivale di Venezia* was still a few weeks away, one could feel the raw energy spreading over its regal marble walls, terra cotta roofs, its golden statues. Like a colossal heart beating faster, harder. To this backdrop add a parade of masqueraded lovers and demons, a desperate, ephemeral world that only exists for days before falling back from Time, and my sincere hope you'll enjoy the sensuous journey down Venezia's meandering canals. As I did.

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Chapter One

By the time she'd cleared customs, Jasmine was ready to drop her suitcase, sit on the floor of Marco Polo Airport and start crying. Or start tossing her handbag around like a weapon as it'd been done to her too often to count. Italians may be beautiful and wear chic clothes but they just didn't grasp the concept of a waiting line.

"Pardon," she repeated, again trying to circumvent a thick cluster of young backpackers. Some had their carnival masks on. "*Excuse me.*"

During her night flight to Europe, she'd used English, some mangled version of German—she hoped—and quite a bit of miming and pointing. But that morning, tired, smelly and bloated, she'd reverted to English...and damn the torpedoes!

A heavily perfumed young woman knocked into her, didn't apologize and walked on. Jasmine couldn't help putting a protective hand over her handbag, feeling for the zipped compartment into which she'd put the key and the old tarot card. As with every other instance, she'd put her hand close to it and a jab of excitement shot through her.

That she was in Venice still didn't sink in, neither did the idea she could own anything other than debts.

"*That key opens a lock in a door to a house on the Great Canal,*" had said the lawyer, trying perhaps to be funny. Jasmine had just stared at the man as though her brain wasn't plugged in until he'd explained everything. An aunt she hadn't even known existed had died of old age in her Vancouver home a few months before and had left her a house in Venice. Tracking Jasmine down had apparently posed a logistical problem since she'd gotten married ten years earlier, changed names then had gotten divorced, had moved twice during that period and changed her name back to Dunmore. Finally the lawyer had pinned her down after she'd registered for financial aid at the university. Since she represented the whole of the family, he'd informed her, the house was hers.

A house.

In Venice. The one in Italy.

Excitement tingled along her bare arms. *Okay, enough of this.* She too could use her elbows.

Jasmine stacked her carryon bag on top of the wheeled suitcase, squeezed her handbag between elbow and ribs, and chin up high, she charged across the terminal like she had a place to go. Maybe it was the change in attitude or some vestigial caveman thing, hard to tell, but people seemed to melt away in front of her. She cleared the backpackers, navigated a treacherous course between old ladies wearing some cruise logo jackets and sneakers, zigzagged among the many tourists looking even more

lost than she felt and emerged right onto the thick rubber entrance mat. The doors slid apart for her.

A morning breeze laced with salty lagoon scents drifted lazily to her. Jasmine breathed in deeply. Following signs reading *Vaporetto*—some type of taxi boat system she'd read about on the Internet—she walked the length of the airport to the very farthest corner then merged with the thick crowd already waiting for the boats. The old-fashioned wooden docks contrasted sharply against the modern terminal. Between heads, she spotted the passenger ferries. They bobbed a bit much for her taste.

Like cattle, the passengers were herded onto the first boat without regard for who was there first or last. Shouted destinations drowned the question she asked to what resembled an attendant. She hated chaos. Jasmine managed to jump aboard just as a crewmember was about to put the chain back on the handrail. She was the last one in.

With a cloud of thick black smoke, the boat backed away from the floating jetty, turned around and headed for Venice on the other side of the lagoon. Jasmine raised herself on the tips of her toes and watched mesmerized as the fabled city came into clearer view. Morning sun caressed its terra-cotta roofs and pointy towers, its white marble domes and basilicas, and created golden flashes on the many statues gracing the higher roofs.

The water appeared surprisingly clean. She'd expected the smell of sewers to hit her right off the plane but no, Venice didn't smell bad at all. Jasmine tried to keep her mouth closed when the boat rounded the first outcropping of city jutting out into the lagoon. Buildings, most of them industrial-looking, blocked temporarily her view of the older part of Venice. The boat connected to its first of many stops. No one disembarked but two people jumped in and created a ripple effect of shuffling feet and grumbling. Jasmine tried to read the stops at first but gave up after what seemed as if every name would end in either A or O. The only one she needed to remember, really, was the one to her hotel, which had cost a small fortune considering she was visiting right in the middle of the carnival. She hadn't had a choice in dates either and been forced to not only take days off without pay but on top of things, the only week she could get fell in February. Before she checked into the hotel though, she'd go see the house first. Just a quick peek. Nerves made her chew dried skin along her bottom lip.

When the boat powered up again, Jasmine managed to find a spot by the railing and completely forgot about keeping her mouth closed. The *Canal Grande* gaped in front of her. She'd learned the important names by heart since booking her trip a couple of weeks ago. The huge basilica *Santa Maria della Salute* to her left, built in honor of Saint Mary after the terrible plague of 1630—or so said the book—*Piazza San Marco* coming up soon to her right where, still according to her travel guide, the pigeons would gang up on unsuspecting tourists and steal their lunch. Well, they wouldn't be stealing *this* tourist's lunch.

She smiled widely, couldn't help it. If they could see her now! Thirty-five-year-old Jasmine Dunmore, secretary part-time, college student part-time and divorcee full-

time...in Venice! Her ex would fall on his ass if he knew. Maybe he did know. She shook her head.

Nah, if he knew, he would've called by now to see how much the house is worth. Ha.

Frankly, she too wanted to know how much she'd get for the house. No way in hell she'd be moving to Venice though. Not that she had much to return home to, save for a potential accounting degree—twenty-seven years from now at the pace she was going—and bills presently piling up at the door. Even if the house turned out to be a shit pit, it was still in Venice. She was bound to get *something* for it.

While part of her brain dealt with life and the logistics involved in selling a property when one didn't speak the local language, another part of her, one she hadn't used since high school, back when she had dreams and funny friends, longed for gondola rides with a hot Italian man. Hell, she'd settle for a hot man of *any* geographical origin.

Thinking of men reminded her of the tarot card in her handbag. Her aunt had had a sense of humor apparently—not something for which her father's side of the family was known—as the card had been safely tucked inside a mold-smelling book on Venetian masks with too much text and not enough images. Jasmine had discarded the musty book but had right away become entranced by the stunning wood block card.

Jasmine had spent the last couple of weeks and practically the entire overnight flight staring at it through the Ziploc bag. For some reason, she'd resisted the urge to have it appraised back home...someone else's grubby little fingers would ruin it. Made of dark wood strangely enough and not paper, about twice the length of a playing card, one and a half its width and an eighth of an inch thick, it looked *ancient*. Illuminations with crushed seashell nacre, silver leaf work and tiny engravings had mesmerized her for hours on end. The words *Il Tempo* were engraved on the bottom, right under the illustration that had haunted her thoughts for weeks. A caped man stood on a checkered floor and held a lantern in his hand. Long hair of the deepest indigo with a thick streak of silver flowed over his shoulders. Jasmine sighed. Contrary to any other deck she'd seen representing this card—mostly old monks leaning on staffs—this one exuded vigor tempered with a will of steel.

"Zaterre!"

Jasmine snapped out of her musing and checked around. She frantically went through her mental Rolodex looking for the word. *Zaterre...Zaterre?* Shit. She'd missed her stop.

After elbowing her way through the thinner crowd, she disembarked with not nearly enough grace and hauled her luggage pell-mell up the swaying platform. Her feet felt swollen and uncomfortable in the tennis shoes. Even though she'd gone just one stop too many, it represented a long distance on the map she dug out of her jeans pocket. Good thing she had plenty of daylight left. Her hotel was near *San Marco* place, chosen because of its proximity to her house. Not for the price though. She was so maxing out her card on this trip!

First though, she wanted a quick peek at the house. She wouldn't sleep that night if she didn't at least get a look at it.

Her stomach growling, she walked north or tried to, given the constantly twisting alleys and cul-de-sacs. She stopped often to consult her map, realized after a while she might as well use it as toilet paper because it wasn't useful any other way. When she reached *Canal Grande*, she was so damn glad, she could've started to jig. *Now how do I cross the damn thing?*

It was mid afternoon by the time she'd managed to retrace her steps back up along the canal, found a bridge to cross it then began to look for her street. *Her street*. She had the address tucked in with the key. She dug both out and bunched them in her fist. Sweat clammed her palms and back. Throngs of people, some tourists, others clearly locals by the way they cleaved through the crowd with a cool, superior air she'd quickly come to associate with Venetians, pressed in all around her. *Calle del Traghetto 2603*, she kept chanting under her breath, as though the memorized address would make the real thing materialize before her eyes.

A large yellow sign reading those exact words stopped her cold. Finally! All she needed were numbers on doors, of which there were precious few.

She had to wait for a particularly thick cluster of people to pass before she could enter the alley bordering a narrow canal of jade-green water. Moss and black glistening mussels rose out of the water and clung to the brick and stone foundations. Her heart beat hammer-hard against her chest.

Jesus, please let's make it a nice big one I can sell.

Some huge hotel took the corner of *Canal Grande* and the smaller one along which she walked. If she'd known, she would've tried to book there instead. *Numbers, give the lady some numbers!*

A series of increasingly narrower and more decrepit buildings stood leaning like drunkards against one another. Jasmine's heart sank by the second. Finally, she left the crowded area along the narrow canal and entered what resembled a small plaza. She made a complete rotation...not a soul to be seen. Sounds reached her muffled and dim, as if she'd stepped in another world, one filled with decaying mortar and rotten boats sunken against the sagging façades.

A brass plaque above a flaking door caught her attention. 2607. *Good, I can't be far now.*

To her right, a narrow passage between two houses made her heave a big sigh. Just her luck. She should've headed for the hotel and dropped her stuff there first. Shit.

Well, she couldn't leave the suitcases lying around for any thief to take so she lugged it all with her as she stepped into the narrow, darkened, slimy alley.

Great. Just great.

Looking up, she swore she could see both rows of flanking houses leaning in maliciously to block the sky. A shiver raced up her spine. It was dark and dank. Perfect purse-snatching territory. Even though she did forty-five minutes of aerobic kickboxing

on her lunchtime, it wasn't the same as kicking some guy's balls for real...she didn't want to get stabbed finding out.

The sound of water gently lapping against the foundations greeted her as she reached the end of the alley before it disappeared around the building to her right. Either water reached up higher there or the houses had sunk quite a bit lower than the rest.

To her left, up against the water's edge, past a rickety-looking ledge, gaped a deep porch. When she approached, this time having left the damned suitcase behind, she spotted in the gloom a pair of rotten double doors with an equally eroded lock. No address, no plaque, no fucking nothing!

Tears of frustration and fatigue welled up. Jasmine angrily wiped her nose with the back of her wrist. Should she knock? She wasn't even sure it was the right house. The ledge proved just as slippery as it looked. She knocked against the moldy door.

A tiny sound caught her ear, tightened the nape of her neck. The fine hair rose in waves along her feverish arms. She turned her head both ways, knowing she appeared as she felt—a lone woman scared out of her wits. That sound again. Eerie, high-pitched, it teased the range of her hearing. Some kid playing a flute maybe?

Trembling, she put the key in the lock, praying to god it would—wouldn't—fit and gave a forceful twist to the left. Like magic, the lock accepted the key and retracted the bolt inside the mechanism with a dry click. A wall of mold smell hit her. Without thinking, Jasmine drew back a step and nearly toppled into the canal a few feet below. She just barely grabbed an iron loop cemented into the wall and steadied herself.

Muttering curses, she gently pushed the door inward, let her eyes adjust to the gloom. A stone room. Broken slate tiles on the floor. A wide staircase at the other end of the room. Without actually stepping inside—and cursing her foolishness the entire time—Jasmine poked her head in and looked around. The smell of mold must have evaporated because a faint, sweet scent caressed her nose. Similar to roses but softer.

Leaving the door open, she retraced her steps along the ledge, retrieved her luggage and rolled it to the porch. Wincing at the sound, she pushed everything past the threshold. Then she stepped in.

At once, a feeling of anticipation assailed her—the few seconds before the rising of the curtain, that barely held breath, the eyes searching for movement behind the thick velvet.

She put the suitcase in the doorway—she'd seen enough movies to know about doors that closed all by themselves—before she ventured deeper into the gloomy entrance hall. Not at all the grandeur she'd expected. The place more resembled some service entrance to a restaurant than the hall to a house. A window with its shutters drawn in surmounted the first section of stairs.

Jasmine tucked her handbag under her elbow and marched to the first step, put her foot on it to test its solidity. She may as well have been testing the sidewalk back home. The thing wasn't going anywhere. Bolstered, she climbed up to the first landing, fiddled

with the closing mechanism to the shutters then inched them apart, tentatively testing the hinges. It wouldn't do to kill a neighbor with raining construction debris. Light stabbed into her brain. How quickly she'd gotten accustomed to the gloom. Eyes squinted, she snaked her arms through the glassless window frame and pushed the shutters all the way out.

After she checked upward, Jasmine spotted at least four or five landings. How many stories were there to this house? She repeated the process at the next landing, but when she reached the third, she noticed a door on either side. Both were opened wide.

"Hello?"

Why the hell had she just done that! Goddamn it. The place could be a drug house for all she knew. Fear was making her twitchy and none too bright. Calling out this way...*Jeez*.

Courage filtering in by tiny increments, Jasmine methodically explored the whole house, door by door, floor by floor, the last one while clutching a broken banister spindle she'd found lying about. Aside from gorgeous architectural details—a real, honest-to-god pair of gargoyles snarling heavenward on either side of a large balcony—she didn't find much of anything else. The very last floor was quite shockingly dustless and looked as though it'd been used in the last century. And the bathroom only had a sink—but with running water, thank you very much.

The floor was a checkerboard of black and white marble tiles. Something tickled her memory. A checkered floor...

"Shit," Jasmine cried out, checking her watch and cursing. It was almost five in the afternoon.

Damn, damn, damn, she muttered as she bounded down the steps as fast as she dared. She was supposed to have checked in at the hotel before four, otherwise she could lose the reservation and pay twice as much for the same damn room. She leaned the spindle against the wall, retrieved her luggage and locked everything down.

Jasmine was striding back on to the large street when the sun had begun to dip below the highest roofs. Already, masqueraded revelers filled the streets and harangued the passersby in a multitude of languages. Had she had any time, she would've stopped to admire the glittery costumes and masks. Anybody would be anyone tonight.

Her hotel thankfully proved much easier to find than her house. Dreaming of a cool shower and a lenient concierge, she walked purposefully into the foyer, noted the family of English-speaking tourists arguing with a woman behind the counter and aimed for the reception.

Five minutes later, Jasmine was standing beside the English-speaking family, arguing just as loudly about the horrendous treatment they'd all just received and how unfair it was to lose one's reservation for being a few minutes late. She was served with a cool "But it's the *carnivale, senora*, hotels are double-booked" and "Sorry this, sorry that".

In the end, a single room miraculously appeared on the woman's computer screen. She looked in turn at the family and Jasmine, who didn't have the heart to argue for the room, not with the two kids starting to show signs of advanced grumpiness and fatigue. So she let the family have the damn room.

The next half hour was lost on the lobby phone, trying to find another room anywhere close, being the carnival and all. To her credit, the woman behind the counter did look sorry when Jasmine hauled everything back out again and leaned against the building. She didn't have a place to stay that night. How rich was that. Stuck in Venice...well, stuck wasn't exactly a word that applied to being in Venice and all—but *stuck* without a place to sleep was the exact word for the situation. She toyed with the key in her pocket.

“Argh, for Christ's sake.”

She'd have to sleep in an abandoned house.

After getting a few horribly overpriced things to eat from a sandwich place in exchange for using their bathroom and a flashlight from a closet-size general store, Jasmine rolled her luggage right back to the house, getting lost only twice. She was improving.

Leaving the relative safety of the main streets and its copper *torchière* lights, she pushed through the deepening gloom of the alley leading to number 2603. She wasn't even in the worst part of it that she had to use the flashlight. Again no one in view. The narrow ledge proved treacherous as she inched toward the deeply recessed porch. The key turned without trouble as it had on the first occasion and she opened the door.

Darkness greeted her and that strange flowery smell. The beam of light chased shadows up the steps and into corners as she walked in, locked the door behind her and eyed the stairs wearily. It was with sweating and puffing and gritting her teeth that she stumbled on to the last level, her suitcase thumping against each step a form of acoustic punctuation.

She opened the shutters all the way out on all three windows in the large room so she wouldn't have to burn her batteries too much. Some light managed to filter into the room. A nice breeze floated in. Man, she reeked!

After rummaging in her suitcase, she grabbed the toiletries bag and headed for the bathroom. The porcelain sink sat crooked against the peeling plaster wall. She set her things on the floor and turned the archaic spigot a tiny bit, was rewarded with water, became bolstered and twisted it full blast. After checking the water color with the flashlight, she clicked it off, stripped and washed herself in the dark. A nervous giggle choked her. This was turning into quite the adventure. Too bad she didn't enjoy them.

Behind her, three rectangles of star-filled night sky pierced the darkness. Sounds from the carnival reached her in tendrils. A sliver of moonlight hit the checkerboard floor at an angle, the black-and-white pattern felt familiar somehow.

She brushed her teeth with bottled water, rinsed and swallowed. She was coming back into the room with the bottle still to her lips when she remembered. The floor. The card. Locating her handbag, she nervously pulled the Ziploc bag out and walked to the closest window so she could test her theory. The pair of gargoyles out on the balcony – which she didn't trust yet – stood silent guard on either side of her.

"Yep. Same."

The man on the card stood on a checkerboard floor. This was what had bothered her for most of the afternoon.

Not wanting to damage it, she slid it back in her handbag and arranged her things the best she could. Thank god for insecurity for she always brought her own towel at hotels, in case they didn't have any or those provided still had pubic hair on them, as it'd once happened to her. Jasmine pulled on clean underwear and a camisole, arranged the towel on the floor and lay on it. The dirty clothes rolled into a tight lump provided a nice pillow.

"Five stars, baby." She laughed.

She'd forgotten her spindle downstairs. Damn. What if someone tried to sneak up the stairs? Should she put something on the last step so they'd stumble and make noise? What about the adjacent roofs? Could someone reach her level this way? Any other door to this house? Back door, trap door, cellar door?

Okay, woman, cool down or you'll start sweating again and there aren't any showers.

Despite her dread at sleeping alone in an abandoned house in a foreign town – har-har – Jasmine's body clamored for rejuvenating sleep. Soon, tiny spasms tightened her tired legs. She shifted on the hard floor, found a position relatively comfortable and felt herself falling.

Jasmine sat with a start. Music? She checked her watch and cringed.

It's past midnight for god's sake! Will that kid with the flute ever go to sleep?

She stood, shook her numb legs and gasped when a soft glow coming up the stairs caught her attention.

'Kay...who's in my house in the middle of the night?

Heart hammering, blood swooshing in her ears, she grabbed the flashlight and tiptoed toward the stairs. She had nothing with which to defend herself. Looking around, she spotted the two water bottles she'd bought and grabbed one by the cap. It wouldn't be much of a missile but it'd have to do.

Sweat slicked her palm. She stifled a sob of fear. Trying to see between the banisters, she poked her head over the balustrade and leaned out as far as she dared. Definitely light downstairs. And the music sounded clearer too.

One step down. Two. Three. She reached the landing and crouched, cursing her knees when they clicked. So the flashlight and bottle wouldn't slip out, she rubbed her palms on her camisole.

I should've put something on.

What if whoever it was got any ideas...damn that aunt. Why did she have to die and leave her a creepy house? She didn't want it anymore, didn't want any of this shit. She just wanted to get the hell out of Venice and go home where everything was nice and safe and boring.

Another section of stairs behind her, Jasmine could really hear the music then, some sort of wind instrument the likes of which she'd never heard. It was so beautiful, so alluring. Who could play so well?

She was reaching the second floor when, instead of another section of stairs leading down, she encountered a long balcony that traversed the house where an apartment should have been.

What...the...hell?

The music was louder there and the golden light spilled almost to her feet. She ventured a few paces past the archway and silently mouthed, "*Holy shit.*"

A balustrade of wrought iron spanned over a large dining hall where crimson and gold high-relief wallpaper covered every vertical surface – from walls to columns – and a mammoth chandelier twinkling like a backlit shower of diamonds was hanging over an equally gargantuan table loaded with delicious-looking foods. High-backed chairs lined the long table. The coffered ceiling gleamed with painted-on stars. Even the air smelled of luxury and decadence. Jasmine clicked the flashlight off.

"I'm dreaming," she firmly told herself. *There is no grand dining room and banquet table in this house. Just empty apartments on each landing. Broken plaster, peeling wallpaper. It's been abandoned for years. Must be a dream then. "I am dreaming."*

"And what a pleasant dream it is, Jasmine," a man said from the other side of the balcony.

"What – ?"

Jasmine swallowed the rest and stared, flashlight in a death grip, as a man detached himself from a shadowy alcove she hadn't seen until then and walked toward her.

No, not walked, *glided*, a liquid shadow against shadows.

Dressed in black from long cloak to shiny boots, he wore a carnival mask similar to those she'd seen all day, except this one was *gorgeous*. Black feathers sprouted outward around his face while glittering rubies incrusting around the edge of the mask glittered in the candlelight. Its nose was pointy and curved downward and gave him a sexy, predatory look. As he drew nearer, she admired the way he cut the air, a shark through water.

Intense desire spread through her. Good god, he was stunning. Then she noticed the checkerboard floor. Just like the tarot card in her handbag.

Whew. Theory confirmed, she was dreaming. The floor, the mask. Yep. Dream.

Chapter Two

Jasmine had never, ever, experienced such a vivid dream before. She'd had plenty of the wide-awake sorts and some quite arousing ones during the near-sleep mode, but never a real wet dream fueled by her subconscious alone. Where had her mind picked up such a good-looking man? Magazine? Movie? Wouldn't she remember if she'd seen him?

The man smiled as though he'd heard her. His lips had an alluring but cruel curve to them. He stopped barely a pace away. Hair the color and shine of black silk was tied behind his head. The buttoned black velvet cloak brushed his boots and swayed when he heaved a long sigh.

"You are even more beautiful than I thought."

Tall, at least six-three or six-four, he had broad shoulders and a muscled neck. He reached out and let a gloved finger graze her wrist.

Jasmine started as though someone had put a cattle prod to her. Although she couldn't deny the man's impossibly virile demeanor, instincts forced her back a step. In her head, danger tolled with the dull clang of a cracked bell.

"I don't know you... Who are you?"

"Vespero."

The last syllable of his creamy tenor's voice reminded her of distant thunder. Feral, the amber flecks in his irises gleamed behind the mask. His gaze traced her body and Jasmine had to resist the urge to squirm.

"I have been waiting for so long. We all have."

He extended his gloved hand to encompass the room and complete shock forced Jasmine to grab the handrail. The water bottle landed at her feet with a sloshing thud and rolled a few feet away. A crowd of people sat at the table, apparently in full swing of things, as though they'd been there all along. She spotted a pair kissing near the corner. And another pair—or was it a trio—frantically clutching at each other's clothes. The snarl of limbs spilled off the chair, sending it clattering to the floor.

Jasmine stopped looking when a distinctly female moan announced someone was having a lot of fun. Across the table from the threesome sat two black-veiled women, each with an arm around the other's shoulder, each caressing an exposed breast with long, black feathers. Everyone wore stunning costumes and masks. Man, did she feel underdressed.

"You are the most radiant of gems now, Jasmine, as you should be."

She looked down at herself and "*whoa-ed*" mentally. She was wearing the most dazzling, glittery, *revealing* deep purple dress she'd ever seen. The thing barely covered

her breasts, which swelled like a pair of bread loaves. Who knew a B-cup could look this way! A mask was hanging in her hand, all smooth porcelain, fuchsia feathers and lavender-colored gems.

Nice dream.

His teeth gleamed when he smiled. "Come, let me help you with the mask."

Vespero circled her and tied it behind her head. His hot breath stirred strands of her hair, tickled the nape of her neck.

She noticed only then her hair was no longer in a ponytail but arranged behind her head in some intricate do she'd never be able to create – another confirmation this was all a dream. Brown curls rested on her shoulders.

Standing this way, facing out onto the stately room with her hands on the polished wooden handrail while he stood behind arranging her mask, proved a most erotic sensation. Erotic, electrifying...and alarming.

Argh, come on, woman. Live a little.

Despite the thick barrier her dress provided, she still could feel the heat from his body close to hers. His hands felt skilled as he tied the knot.

When he put both hands on either side of her and wrapped long fingers around the wooden handrail, Jasmine stopped breathing. His breaths slowed, became deeper. Her dress rustled when he drew even nearer, the heat of his torso caressing her naked shoulders.

"Look at them. They are so carefree."

Jasmine agreed with a nod as the woman downstairs was climbing onto her man's lap. After fishing around under her dress, she raised her face and sank down slowly. Jasmine let a long sigh through her nose.

"All that troubles them is how to get more pleasure from each other."

His voice, though significantly lowered, still made some vowels resonate in his chest. Jasmine was sure the man could *sing*.

Vespero's hands snaked closer to hers. Jasmine watched their progress while trying to keep an eye on the couple downstairs. She was such a voyeur!

"I enjoy watching them," Vespero said from behind. His hands came to rest over hers, trapping them. "And I know you do as well."

Jasmine couldn't reply. She watched as the woman writhed and bounced on her companion while he smeared her throat with something from his plate and licked her clean. Her moans were turning into sharp little cries.

"Pleasure is our only concern here, not much else matters."

After eating something a neighbor fed him, a man sitting a few chairs away from the lovers stood, pushed his way closer and climbed on the table, a saber in hand, which he used to flick fruits out of a wire basket. His jester's laugh reminded Jasmine of the forced theatrical cackle actors used to convey intense mockery. Apples, pears and pieces

of grapes landed around the closest guests. Most laughed at his antics. Some looked too busy twisting out of their clothes – or someone else’s – to notice or care.

Okay, this is turning into something else altogether.

Arousal tightened Jasmine’s sex. *An orgiastic dream? My, my.*

“Did you bring the key?” Vespero asked, releasing her hands and turning her around to face him. Such raw intensity burned behind the mask, Jasmine had to look away.

Strangely, she felt as though Vespero was trying to engage her full attention, the absolute range of her senses, until she heard only his voice, saw his face alone, felt nothing but his hand on her wrist while the spicy, musky smell of him entered so deep in her nose a headache tightened the back of her neck.

She blinked to sever the overload of stimuli. Ninety percent came from the eyes, apparently. It didn’t work. Vespero remained all she could think about. “The key to the house, you mean?” she forced between her teeth. “Sure I did.”

“No, you delectable fruit, I meant the key to the *gate*.”

He leaned over and let his bottom lip brush against her cheek and neck. Heat and goose bumps trailed in his wake. The handrail pressed against her waist when she leaned against it. Jasmine turned her head away slightly...to give him better access or to evade his mouth?

Don’t know nor care. It’s a dream, I’m allowed.

Vespero nodded. “You *are* allowed to experience pleasure in any form you wish. Have you not denied yourself long enough? Have you not let enough inept men into your bed, let their clumsy hands caress your body while your thoughts were far removed?”

Jasmine felt herself blush. Well, she had – only a few times though – let her mind wander while her lovers did their damndest to make her come... How had Vespero known about it?

He shook his head. “Have no guilt over their inflated egos, they were fools. Maladroit, inattentive fools. They did not deserve such a gem as you.” Vespero caressed her chin. “Look at them.” He stepped sideways so she could turn around and look down at the table.

Below the balustrade, the woman stopped bouncing on her man and arched back to rest completely on the table. The prancing saber-wielder knelt next to her head and leaned over, yanked her bodice down and caressed her throat. His saber rattled when he dropped it on the table and bent, his hands and mouth greedily capturing her breasts. She arched back.

With her sex throbbing demandingly, Jasmine looked on as the woman’s first companion stood, yanked the hem of her dress high over her thighs and shoved into her. Her legs spread wide on either side of his hips. She kicked him with her heeled boots, which did not seem to bother her lover in the least as he grinned and pumped

rhythmically, his wide V-shaped back rippling with muscles. A sparkling wine decanter spilled its content next to the woman's elbow. Food was everywhere.

She's ruining her nice green dress. Jasmine licked her lips and looked away.

Vespero's long ponytail brushed her naked shoulder when he leaned in to her neck and kissed her softly, his mouth lingering over her pulse, the satiny brush of his lips triggering massive arousal. Her heart launched into a percussion solo. Surely he could feel it against his lips. So embarrassing! Liquid fire spilled out of her clenching pussy. She'd never had a dream such as this.

Still not touching any other part of her body, his mouth became a velvety butterfly against her throat and the dawn of her breasts, unpredictable and light, touching down here, traveling up there, awakening urges in Jasmine until her skin felt as though it'd become a living thing.

"Are you ready to surrender yourself to pleasure, to yield to the call of the flesh in any way it will take you? I am ready to take you there." He pushed his body against hers. A hard, massive lump pressed against her waist. "More than ready as you can judge for yourself."

Hell yeah.

"The key to the gate?" he asked against her neck. "Do you have it near you?"

"A gate? I have no idea... *Ooh.*"

He'd just flicked his tongue at her lobe and caused quite a ripple of excitement down to her belly. His tongue was so...*hot*. Unnaturally hot. She'd burned herself once with a curling iron and it felt very similar, except she didn't yelp or try to pull away from Vespero. She stayed right there where that tongue could work its magic.

When I wake up, I hope I remember at least bits of it.

"You can remember as much as you want, Jasmine. Or as little."

Another languorous pass of his tongue, this time down her near-to-bursting cleavage. Jasmine shivered.

Vespero straightened. "Do you want to accompany me downstairs? They would all love to meet you." He offered his gloved hand. She looked at it for a while before deciding whether to take it or not.

Why the hell not? This is such a thrill.

Guiding her in a firm but gentle hand, Vespero led her to marble stairs she hadn't noticed earlier—nothing new there—and stepped down to the dining hall below. Expectant faces turned toward them and Jasmine had the distinct impression she was the center of attention, not the handsome man at her arm.

"She is exquisite," said a man, standing from the table and approaching.

Silver streaked his dark hair behind the royal blue mask. He bowed deeply and made to offer his hand but Vespero stopped dead in his tracks, forcing Jasmine to retreat by a step and turn toward the pair.

"She is..." Vespero's voice was so low Jasmine couldn't hear the rest.

He bent slightly at the waist and glowered, his upper lip twitching, until the man in the blue mask had returned to his chair. He didn't look up once.

Talk about authority.

Jasmine tried to ignore the perverse sense of pride Vespero's jealousy had stirred. She avoided his intent gaze when he set it on her and instead looked out toward the rest of the guests who seemed to have shrunken back in their chairs.

"Forgive me if I have offended you, dear Jasmine," Vespero said, releasing the steel grip he had on her hand.

She hadn't even noticed just how *hard* he was holding her. Much too hard. Her fingers tingled when circulation renewed.

"It's all right," Jasmine murmured as she worked her fingers in his loose hand. *No it's not*, she added mentally.

He leaned into her neck and murmured, "You kindle my desire as no one else."

Jasmine nodded. Her cheeks warmed with excitement and nervousness.

Soft music, the same flutelike sound she'd heard coming into the house, wafted in from—it would seem—the ceiling. Jasmine looked around but couldn't pinpoint its source. It could've been coming from the chandelier for all she knew.

Speaking of which, as the only source of light, it looked positively massive from underneath. When she looked up at it, at its twinkling, mesmerizing crystal drops and wrought iron work, at the way hundreds of candles glimmered like wet light, she found herself unable and unwilling to look away. The light seemed to call to her, hold her attention away from everything else. She felt drawn to it, not in the same way as she did with Vespero. No, the light *called* to her, it didn't try to *command* her attention.

Unable to explain it, she still felt as though she had a choice to make. Going back, back to the top floor and her normal life...or remain there with *them*.

A subtle shift in the light persuaded her to look at the balcony where a single candle lit the way upstairs. This hadn't been there before. Had it? It floated about chest height, near the doorjamb, illuminating half the landing beyond. She could see the first few steps gleaming white. Showing the way.

Jasmine stared at the candle until she thought she saw a hand holding it. A large hand, a man's hand. This candle, so fragile yet clear, was inviting her back toward the balcony. Something wanted her to move away from this room, something kind and reserved yet strong.

Vespero's kiss directly on her mouth broke the spell. Her world disappeared, sounds and sights and smells evaporated in the heat of his mouth. Jasmine moaned shamelessly when Vespero adroitly ran his tongue along her upper lip before sucking it in and holding it between his teeth. With no thought for the crowd probably watching them, Jasmine kissed him back just as deeply.

He pulled away, grinned and led her farther down the table. Jasmine turned to look at the lone candle but it was gone. Strangely, she felt as if she'd just failed a test.

Pushing the silly notion away, she shook her head, looked behind at the chandelier and balcony, both of which looked...well, banal and couldn't see why she would've wanted to leave the room in the first place.

Freud would have a field day with that dream. Ha.

Vespero chuckled.

They walked by the pair of black-veiled women. Both stopped caressing the other's breast with the black feathers and looked up. Or Jasmine thought they did for their heads moved upward, though the veils hid their faces. Vespero didn't spare a look to them so she just turned her attention to the scene unfolding in front of her.

A nervous giggle tugged at her throat.

The writhing couple at the table were in the thick of it. Moans and grunts indicated both were having a lot of fun but Saber Man had apparently decided to change women and was instead undressing one across the table while she fed him pieces of meat from her plate. He'd left quite a mess in his wake. Broken gold-gilded dishes while tipped crystal glasses and carafes rolled around on the rumped, red damask tablecloth.

When Vespero drew near, the man stopped pounding in his woman, pulled out and made some room between the chairs.

"All known pleasures are yours to take tonight. Would you care for a taste?" Vespero turned to Jasmine and gestured toward the lovers.

"No thanks," she blurted out, looking at the naked man as he heaved a few deep breaths. A spectacular erection hung over his thighs. He smiled at Jasmine.

Vespero shook his head and the couple resumed their activity with renewed vigor. Jasmine could hear wet sounds from where she stood. The woman's cleft glistened when the man parted her wide and shoved in. A low moan accompanied his movement. She arched back and bunched the tablecloth in her fists and pulled. Tableware and cutlery toppled and overturned. Food and drink tumbled. Around the table, the remainder of the guests were beginning to show signs of sexual hunger as well for they'd knocked their chairs back and formed couples, trios, *groups*.

A pair of men busily undressed one another, except for their masks. Jasmine noticed how people kept them on, even when they wore nothing else at all.

One spun his companion, a dark and trim figure fit for men's health magazines about, and with practiced and economical movements took him. Just like that.

"Would you prefer one of them?" Vespero asked, his gaze on her held the intensity of a hawk. "The lithe one perhaps?"

Before she could reply, both lovers stopped their activity to look at her.

"Oh huh...no, no, that won't be...it's all right."

Again, Vespero shook his head. "You are a challenging woman. What about her?"

He pointed to a stunning dark-skinned woman sitting regally with her hair all coiled back in a shiny crown. A striped mask, gold and silver, glittered with gems and crystallized feathers. Light caught her high cheekbones and reflected on her smooth

skin. She looked like a queen. She smiled at Jasmine. Everyone was so...charming with her.

A woman...? Jasmine just shook her head with as much force as she could. Come on. I'm the one dreaming, not a guy.

Vespero pointed at the head of the table. "Not a woman then. Him?"

Jasmine opened her mouth in a silent O as she watched a blond man, a scepter in one hand, gulp down a carafe of wine while someone's head—man or woman, hard to tell—bobbed up and down on his lap. It turned out to be a woman after all as she stood, abandoned the first man so she could sprawl on his neighbor. Her arm pumped furiously. Though Jasmine couldn't see anything but by the man's rapt expression, she knew what was going on.

A loud clamor erupted from the other end of the table. Saber Man was standing up, a piece of frilly female clothing dangling from the tip of his blade. Amid a chorus of laughter, he spun on himself with much flourish and flicked the garment far.

Closer to Vespero and her, a woman decided she wanted some of the lovers' fun and lay down next to the other female, but down on her belly so her behind would be offered to the man.

Well, that's bold.

Jasmine shook her head when the man abandoned his first lover to sink in this other woman, which garnered him a resounding slap in the face. Without a word, his first companion slapped the second woman, who fought back. Things were degenerating fast. Jasmine flinched when fists flew and yelps were heard.

"Vespero..."

The look on her face must have sufficed to convince him something was wrong for he whirled around and took a threatening step forward. He never said a word though. A mere look from him—that scowl could melt a swath clean through an iceberg—and everyone settled down. The couple resumed their activities while the lone woman found another companion farther down the table.

"Pardon their enthusiasm," he said through clenched teeth. The amber of his eyes sparkled menacingly. This was a man not to be crossed.

A thought occurred to her turbulent mind. "Is this all...for me?"

Vespero blew a long sigh and nailed her to the floor with his gaze alone. "Everything here is yours to take, Jasmine. Nothing you see is beyond your reach...you need only ask."

"Why? Why all of these people?"

When I'd be fine with just one man...

"You limit yourself. Why? Take it all. I do."

"I'm not used to all this," she replied, ignoring the long cry of pleasure some lucky woman let out. Cheers followed. "It's getting too much."

At once, a cocoon of silence enveloped them. Jasmine breathed in deeply, which swelled her breasts hard against the restrictive cleavage. She tried not to look down at her own boobs but failed. Man, that dress was doing *something* to them. They'd never look so damn...big.

"I offered you some of my most skilled and beautiful favorites yet you show no interest in any of them."

"Yes, I know..."

Why do I feel like apologizing? It's a dream, for crying out loud.

His expression softened and Jasmine had the distinct impression she was being manipulated.

With his amber eyes raking her from head to waist then back up again, Vespero drew near. "Can I not tempt you with anything? Is there nothing here you desire? Name it."

There *was* but she hesitated even thinking about it. Something pulled her back. She checked behind her again but couldn't see the lone candle floating by the door. On her own then.

Just throw yourself in, woman.

An image of Vespero without the damn cloak on flashed in her mind. She wondered what sort of body he had. Muscular? Sinewy? Probably the first if his neck and shoulders were any indication. She enjoyed muscled men. Whatever shape he happened to be, it must be very, very nice.

Vespero's fiery gaze settled on her, as though he were gauging her, listening in on her internal monologue. Then as if he'd just spotted something he'd lost, his eyes flared.

A toothy grin spread on his chiseled face.

Uh-oh.

Chapter Three

Jasmine stared hard and silently thanked her subconscious for sending such a sweet, sweet image to her. This dream, so vivid as to appear real, had to be the most exciting thing she'd ever experienced in her life.

I mean, who ever dreamed of a man like him wanting to please me so much, in such an opulent house, surrounding by so many beautiful people? And that dress...I mean, whoa.

"So," he murmured, licked his lips then smiled that predatory grin again. "There is something here of interest to you. I am quite impressed...and flattered. One rarely shows me this sort of attention. Not willingly anyway."

Danger tolled in her head but when Vespero began to unbutton his cloak, lust flared and drowned everything else.

She was so ready for this.

Vespero slowly unbuttoned his cloak and hooked it behind his shoulders. He was completely naked underneath except for knee-high boots. He had the mass of a body builder yet more grace of movement than any she'd seen. Jasmine allowed herself the utterly impolite luxury of staring him down, all six-feet-plus muscled length of him.

My, my...

The most glorious, hefty, thickly veined cock she'd ever seen looked as though it could weigh three pounds and visibly pulled on his abdominal muscles. She couldn't take her gaze off his hairless, shiny, muscular body.

Well.

"Nice."

Somewhere deep in her subconscious her inner voice was laughing at her. *Nice? Magnificent, outrageously big and sexy, sinister yet seductive, wickedly decadent and obviously aroused...any one word would do. But nice? Pitiful.*

His lips parted for a half smile that would make rows of women swoon. "I seem to have found something to please you after all."

"You have," Jasmine replied, tearing her gaze – with some difficulty – from his cock and setting it on his face. She knew what was coming, could feel the intensity coiled in him and in her pulling, straining, threatening, to give any moment. There was just so much sexual tension a person could take.

The impending contact of his hard-looking body against her titillated and scared her. Just what sort of sex was she going to experience in this strange dream? After all, she'd offered herself a *woman*, for god's sake.

"I will give you only what you want deep inside. Nothing else."

“What I want,” she repeated, almost in a trance. *What do I want?*

Hell, she couldn't think! The sight of him, his smell, his voice—his industrial-grade cock, by god—filled her mind with a swirl of images she couldn't control.

As if I'd change a thing. Ha.

He was just so...magnetic. She couldn't take her gaze off his body, her mind from lustful imagery. She swore she could taste him at the back of her mouth, hear his voice murmuring directly in her brain, feel that thick, glistening shaft gliding up her. A strange notion floated into her brain—and floated right out. She'd let him into her. He was already *inside* her.

What crazy notion is that? Just enjoy it while you can!

Before she changed her mind.

“I will not lay a hand on you if you do not wish me to,” he murmured. Behind the mask, his amber eyes narrowed.

A long frisson snaked up her spine, spread to her shoulders then down her front, tightening her nipples under the constricting dress. She could already see the act and hear the sound of him taking her. Oh he'd be good too, she was sure of it.

“Only if you want to.” He took a step toward her. The high boots gleamed as if his legs had just been painted.

Those muscled thighs between hers... She wanted him. She wanted him *now*.

Everything happened fast. With a feral curve to his mouth, Vespero stalked up to her, crowded her backward against the table, his hands on her shoulders, his mouth against her neck. With a swipe of his long arm, he cleared a section of the table, sent plates and cups shattering against the floor and bent her back. His vigor was overwhelming. She couldn't form a coherent thought...neither was she overly concerned about it. A dam had been breached and whatever came out of it, she couldn't stop it, couldn't ignore it and sure as hell wasn't going to miss her chance with it. Such dreams wouldn't happen every night.

“Open for me, Jasmine,” he commanded low in his throat.

For the life of her, she wanted to and she *did*. As though something had taken control of her, she bowed back and let him spread her thighs with his.

His demanding mouth landed on hers. After running a burning-hot hand up her back, he fisted her hair and forced her chin up so he could lick her neck and shoulders.

“Wider.”

She widened her stance to accommodate his body and leaned back on her elbows when he grabbed her hips and sat her on the table. She felt as if she weighed nothing in his powerful arms.

His gaze on hers, he ran his hand down to her knee, fisted the dress and brought it up. Cool air filtered in between her legs, tickled her nether lips.

Vespero took a long intake of air, his eyes half closed. “So sweet. As I imagined.”

He bent over her. His boots felt cool and smooth against her calves as he pulled her dress higher over her legs. That she wore nothing underneath but laced-up boots reaching mid calves created the most exciting sensation. Her subconscious had thought of everything.

"Take them off," he said, showing his gloved hand to her. "Slowly."

Jasmine tugged the black leather gloves off one finger at a time. They felt so warm, so thin, almost like living skin. His hands were smooth as though he'd never worked a day in his life. No calluses, perfect fingernails, knuckles smooth and regular. Such hands on a man built like this?

Silk and chiffon piled high over her lap, Jasmine bit her bottom lip as Vespero pulled a chair and sat right between her knees.

"Drink some wine while I taste yours," he said, reaching over and offering her a sparkling flute filled with golden wine.

She usually didn't drink wine but since it was a dream she could do whatever she wanted. So she drained the thing in one long gulp. Honey, apple juice and something else. Not bad at all. Licking her lips, trying hard not to grin like an idiot, she looked down at Vespero and winked.

Very nice dream so far. Not bad, Jasmine.

She pushed the nagging feeling of alarm at the back of her mind. She'd gotten married despite that little Voice of Reason roaring at her she was making a big mistake. So she could ignore its whispering for a bit. She was having the best night in her life. Wouldn't it be nice for her ex to chew on that!

A low chuckle rumbled in Vespero's chest. "Do you want him to suffer?"

The thought roiled in her head but she pushed it away. Nah, she didn't even want to think about him right then, just have fun.

"Very well."

His eyes on her face, he bent low, his chin and mouth disappearing below the edge of her dress. Intense heat accompanied his mouth against her thigh. Her pussy tightened sporadically, demandingly. She wanted that big cock in her more than anything. His burning tongue on her vulva made her gasp.

"Has a man ever done this to you," Vespero asked as he gripped her under the butt and raised her pelvis by a good foot, up to his berry-lipped mouth.

Not that I can remember right now, no. Oh my...

The slurping sound, coupled with the exquisite fire spreading from her engorged clit forced her eyes closed. She fisted the tablecloth on either side of her, cramped her thighs as she forced her pelvis outward to his hungry mouth. She heard his "mm-mm" of contentment.

The man had a skillful mouth. Oh and those hands! Those many, many hands.

Her eyes flared open. There were just *too* many hands on her.

"What are you...?"

Another man, this one dressed entirely in green, hungrily caressed her thighs. He snaked his hand past her waist and circled her clit with an adept finger while Vespero continued stabbing his tongue into her.

Holy...my oh my.

Jasmine writhed at the combined satisfaction. She had two men between the legs, one with his mouth the other with his hand, and both seemed bent on making her come for him first.

With renewed vigor, Vespero pushed against her sex with his mouth while his strong hands held her knees captive in an implacable hold. The chair ground against the floor when he forced his mouth into her. The man in green looked as though just his being allowed between her knees was beyond divine and began to finger her clit. Jasmine rolled her pelvis for Vespero. God, he was good. She never wanted to wake up.

Abandoning her throbbing pussy, he looked up sharply. "You need not to, if such is your wish."

"Damn...don't stop," she urged, knowing she sounded less than modest.

He grinned wide. "I knew you would be voracious, just as I am." He dove back in.

To her right, a third man—the one dancing on the table with the saber—approached, his cock already hard and keen. He raised his hand high and brought the tip of his blade down on the table. With a quiver, the saber stuck and held.

She watched him get down on his knees amid the broken plates and crumpled tablecloth and approach. His white mask hid almost all of his face except for his mouth and chin. He smiled.

"Turn back toward me," Vespero growled as he set his intent gaze on Saber Man.

She did, right before he resumed licking her with enough intensity to make her come right then and there, much sooner in fact than she'd ever done before.

"Is this pleasurable, my delectable little fruit?"

His tongue felt so hot, so very hot, she thought she couldn't possibly take it much longer. With a soft growl, Vespero used his elbows to part her knees wider, giving the man in green enough room to sneak in there and kiss her inner thigh.

*Oh, oh...*she was going to come. Sitting on a table, with two men between her legs. Wow!

With a shameless groan, she spilled her pleasure, which Vespero greedily slurped and smeared around her thighs.

"Bloom for me, Jasmine, let me taste your tender bud," he murmured between lashes of his satin tongue.

The man in green smiled and shouldered his way between her legs, eager for a taste as well.

While they fought for a sample of her pussy—the last confirmation she was indeed dreaming—Saber Man leaned over her face and began to kiss her very, very skillfully,

his lips the softest touch she'd ever felt. His mouth left hers too soon to graze lower, over her chin, down her neck, between her heaving breasts.

Devilishly slow, Saber Man caressed her neck and shoulders, the dawn of her constricted breasts. His blue eyes sparkled with mischief as he watched her ride the last ripples of climax with a great shiver.

Jasmine yelped when one of the men between her legs bit the inside of her thigh but the next second brought such an intense orgasm she forgot everything except the fire racing through her. Her back arched, her legs twitched uncontrollably. Saber Man began to unlace her bodice, seemed to grow impatient and tugged it down, exposing a nipple. He dove for it, rolled it between merciless fingers and lips, nibbled and sucked it hard.

Jasmine cried out when another climax tightened her sex.

"Look at me."

She raised her head just as Vespero stood regally between her knees, his mighty cock about to plunge to the hilt into her.

And she hoped he would – would take her deeply, stretch her wide, make her come like a violent storm.

While the man in green quickly climbed on the table, yanked the rest of her bodice down and captured her other breast, she watched with a mix of dread and excitement as Vespero unclasped his cloak and tossed it far.

"You wanted this, deep down inside, you wanted more than one man."

Jasmine admired his strapping figure and salivated at the thought of his taking her like this while two other men looked on and participated. The thought had never even crossed her mind before that night, but it made so much sense. It felt right.

"Am I to take you, my sweet Jasmine? Right here and now, with everyone watching?"

A quick scan around revealed everyone had indeed paused in whatever they were doing to stare at her.

"I want to, yes," she murmured, suddenly feeling quite self-conscious in her ruined dress and surrounded by three men.

"You have never tasted pleasure the way I am to give it to you." His muscles bunched when he dragged her closer to the table edge. Her backside nearly dangled over the side. "Nor will you ever."

He stabbed between her hips.

Jasmine cried out at the searing pain. His massive member felt as if it were on fire and slowly melted her cleft from the inside out. White-hot stabs shot up to her womb. Her knees trembled. She was about to start kicking at Vespero when the pain dissolved into a burning climax that overwhelmed all her senses. Another cry tore out of her, this one of erotic culmination. The two men greedily pulling and sucking at her breasts heightened the pleasure until Jasmine feared it was becoming too much.

"Do you enjoy my touch?" Vespero demanded.

She nodded, unable to force a single word through her clenched teeth.

"Say it."

"I..."

He pulled out, bent his legs and shoved in again, forcing a grunt out of her. "Would you like to savor the most intoxicating night of your life? To taste pleasure in ways you never knew existed?"

Hell yeah.

"Yess," she hissed. Another wave was coming.

"Then all you have to do is sleep with the key in your hand. The card. You understand?"

Whatever, man.

She was almost there. Jasmine nodded.

Vespero widened his stance, pulled back almost to the tip and lanced back in just as Jasmine's climax hit. The heat from his impossibly hot cock, coupled with the intense pleasure forced a cry out of her. She'd never been the screaming kind but this was just too good.

Both men accentuated their assault on her aching nipples. Saber Man gathered his with both hands, formed a peak that he covered with his mouth while the one dressed in green rolled his with skilled fingers, kissing her neck and shoulder. The dark pink areolas glistened with their saliva.

"Come for me," Vespero snarled between pushes. "*Welcome me.*"

A sharp tug on her dress made her look down. The man in green had completely torn the bustier part so he and his companion could lick her belly. Their quick, burning tongues produced the most delicious mix of wet-hot.

Another long cry erupted from her when Vespero's thrusts increased in force and speed. The clack of skin against skin punctuated each one. Under his forceful lovemaking, her breasts quivered. She bit her tongue. Incredibly, another orgasm tightened her channel. She prepared for it, knowing this one would be incredibly sharp.

Vespero must have sensed the change as well for he positively rammed her while his large hands dug in the crook of her thighs. His thumbs hurt her hipbones.

Oh god...it was near. So near.

"HOW DARE YOU!" roared a male voice from some distance away.

The air seemed to congeal around her.

She opened her eyes and saw a man dressed in gray charge across the balcony and down the steps. His long indigo hair flowed loosely behind him, except for a thick silver streak down from his temple. The silver mask he wore resembled the face of a bird of prey with slanted eyes and a long, hooked beak.

Vespero only pushed deeper, forcing a moan of pleasure-pain from Jasmine. She tried to scoot away but he fisted her ruined waistband and kept her down.

"The Hermit comes out of his hole," Vespero sneered, his handsome mouth twisting at the corner. He looked down at Jasmine and his expression softened. "Ignore him. He is jealous of something he can never have...or *be*."

As the silver-masked man stalked forward, everyone around the table, save for Vespero, seemed to melt away into the background. Even the men tormenting her breasts rolled off the table and shuffled backward against the wall—their faces appeared suddenly less than perfect, their cocks small and flaccid.

"You devil, how dare you defy me!" The dark eyes behind the mask flashed with terrible anger.

Jasmine tried to push against Vespero but couldn't move for his implacable grip on her. Shame and guilt made her want to hide her nakedness from this new man and she tried to push the gown over herself but couldn't reach that far.

Okay, this is getting a bit too weird. Can I wake up now?

"She came willingly, Lumere." Vespero rubbed a thumb against her swollen clit, creating instant, sharp climax. "See?"

A deep-throated moan of contentment escaped her. He kept rubbing and she kept coming. He pulled out then thrust back in sharply. She arched, the only parts of her connected to the table her head and butt. Fire raced up her cleft and belly. With a triumphant grin she wasn't sure she liked, he twisted his hips so his cock would rub up against her sensitive bud. Without her meaning to, she came for him, released her pleasure in an intense surge while everyone looked on.

Jasmine could've hid her head in a paper bag. How humiliating.

"See how she came to me of her own volition," Vespero remarked with a wink for her. His cock felt so large in her and when the pleasure abated, pain surfaced.

How could she have contained him all in the first place? He was so large. *What's wrong with me?*

"Let me go..." she murmured, cleared her throat. Tears of shame stung her eyes.

"She came only after you called to her," snapped the silver-masked man.

"A call she could have ignored had she wished to." Vespero's next thrust was slow and deep. Another wave of pleasure swelled. "Look at what you are incapable of achieving," he added, continuing his great thrust into her, his face turning back to hers. He licked his lips and smiled. "Look at what I can do with her."

The other man indeed looked down at her. Through the haze of ecstasy, Jasmine thought she saw sadness in the dark eyes. The beaked nose of his mask lowered when he looked down at her sex where Vespero's thumb still rubbed at her clit.

With a long, plaintive note, Jasmine came again. *Please, stop it.* Yet she didn't say a word aloud.

Vespero smiled. "What a good little human you are. Do you want more? This does not have to stop because of him." He cocked his head at the man next to him, who positively fumed.

"Enough!" roared the one in the beaked mask.

That voice would've rattled her mother's good china. The silver streak in his hair never seemed to rest in one place and undulated like a living entity, like a snake. He turned his withering gaze on her and pointing accusingly.

"I said *begone!*"

Jasmine snapped up and looked around. Sun stabbed through the windows and hit the checkerboard floor at an angle.

"Good *god*...what the...?"

Sweat clammed her back and armpits. She rubbed her hair back from her face. That had to be the strangest, most bizarre and titillating dream she'd ever had. She was directly on the cool floor, the towel having twisted sideways.

Trembling still from the sheer vividness of her dream, Jasmine stood on shaky legs and remembered the very last image she had before waking up. The man with the indigo hair...

She knew that hair, especially that peculiar silver streak.

She rushed to her handbag, knelt and sifted through it. After she pulled the tarot card out, she angled it toward the light and nodded.

"It's him."

Foolishly, she squinted at the card to see his face better for he wore no mask on the card. His face seemed sculpted with a master's sure touch. His nose was straight and strong, his chin square, his sensuous mouth curved.

Why the hell didn't I dream of him making love to me instead of this Vespero character?

Still shaking her head, Jasmine replaced the card in her bag and rubbed an itch along her thigh. A jab of pleasure flared from her tender pussy. *Whoa*. That had been some dream! When she looked down, she nearly fainted.

A bite mark reddened her skin, right on the inside of her thigh.

Chapter Four

Even after washing and changing clothes, Jasmine still felt the strange man's powerful handling. Her pussy ached and throbbed, her breasts pleasantly tingled. How she'd get anything done that day remained to be seen. All she wanted to do was lie down and hopefully experience another one of those wild dreams.

Yet through it all, the most vivid image she retained was of the one Vespero—god, she was calling her dream by name—had called a hermit. Lumere? The one from her card. His displeasure bothered her. Why had her subconscious made him chase her out of the dream? What a mind screw!

First item on her agenda today would be to get a couple more things to eat then find some lawyer office and get herself a permit to sell the house, something she hadn't been able to do from home, despite the Internet and long-distance calls. Some things just had to be done in person. And she'd wanted to see the house as well, truth be told.

That she should also be looking for a hotel room for the rest of the week tickled the back of her mind but she pushed it away, pretended she didn't really need to start until later in the day. Part of her didn't want to sleep anywhere else but here, in case she wouldn't dream. She rubbed her thigh where the bite mark had already faded away. Now *that* was weird. And for the first time in her life, she didn't have an explanation for something.

Her ex had hated this facet of her very much, how she could dredge some obscure fact about pretty much anything and spin it into an airtight argument. Poor guy hadn't been armed to deal with a woman such as her.

When she emerged onto the street, she noticed how much garbage there was lying around from the night before but city crews were already picking it up with brooms and pails. Most shops were still closed.

"Casa diabolica," a woman said from somewhere behind Jasmine.

She turned and spotted an old woman pushing a small cart loaded with fruit.

"Pardon me?"

"Bad house," the old woman said, pointing at the shadowy porch behind Jasmine.

"You know the house?" Jasmine replied, trying to approach the old woman without running and looking too eager. Finally someone with answers. "Does anyone live here?"

"Diavoli."

Devils?

She drew near and offered her friendliest smile. "Bad people lived here?" Images of squatters, druggies and other unpleasant tenants flashed in her mind. Great.

“No,” the old woman replied forcefully. “*Dee-ah-vo-lee.*” She turned heel and marched down the street, the little kart squeaking angrily.

“Yeah, well, sorry I asked,” Jasmine muttered.

She crossed her arms and looked back at the house. All the shutters were open, except at one window, a small thing near the second floor. She swore she’d done every single window in the house. She must have missed one.

After getting lost a record five times, her arms laden with supplies and a disposable cell phone she’d bought at an Internet café, Jasmine returned home. *Home.* Ha. She’d also found a few business cards for lawyers pinned to a board in the tourist office. At least, she hoped *avvocato* meant lawyer and not the fruit.

She really was maxing her credit card and sighed at the thought of having to repay all of this. A week off, flights, hotel, restaurant. Well so far, the hotel hadn’t cost much.

After she deposited her things on the top floor, she grabbed the spindle, the flashlight and made another thorough inspection of the house. The little window bothered her. There had to be a logical reason why it didn’t show on the inside.

Just as there’s a logical explanation for the bite mark on my leg. Yep.

A shiver raced up her spine. Dust made her sneeze and cough. She reached the third floor and entered one of the apartments on either side of the landing. It was there she’d come during her dream. *Vespero—the guy with the black mask, for god’s sake, don’t call him by name*—had come out of an alcove somewhere to her right. Yeah, right. There’d also been a large balcony overlooking a grand dining hall and about sixty or so people in various states of undress. All she saw then was a two-bedroom apartment with no electricity and bad, *baaad* plumbing. The building wasn’t even wide enough to accommodate the room she’s seen in her dream.

But the bite mark...

Feeling more stupid by the second, Jasmine sighed and looked around nonetheless. Empty rooms, broken plaster, peeling wallpaper. Nothing worth getting her hands dirty. Then a long crack in the wall caught her attention. Near the corner, up along the ceiling was a thin fissure, much too regular and constant to be the house shifting. She drew near, squinted at it. When she tapped the butt of her flashlight against the crack, some plaster fell off right away. Wood showed underneath. She gave another tap. More wood. Old, ancient wood. Hell, the type and color reminded her of the tarot card.

“Oh my god, like in the movies,” Jasmine sniggered as she broke off large chunks of plaster and exposed what very much resembled a door.

When she’d stripped the entire thing, she realized it was indeed an old door, much too short for present-day construction standards. She was five-seven and would have to stoop to enter...*if she’d enter, something highly unlikely.* Not without a burly man by her side armed with a big honking gun.

There was no handle, just a wrought iron loop in the middle. She grabbed the loop and rattled the door just for good measure to settle her mind about the subject. The

door would be stuck in concrete, obviously it was so old, and wouldn't open. No use trying to...

Shit.

It opened.

Jasmine cursed and backpedaled from the dark opening. But she'd seen stairs going down and a small window on the left wall inside the doorjamb. Ah-ha, at least she'd found the missing window.

Now what?

Okay, go at this with method. Start by eliminating the options.

First, she couldn't let the door leading down just...well, be opened and leading down. She had to go check it out. It was her house, dammit. Second, she couldn't go down those steps without tools. Flashlight, cell phone, spindle. What could be down there other than some cellar, cold room or maybe some half-demolished section too rotten to renovate? Not that the rest of the house had received any TLC.

Okay, so what could make me regret going down? By elimination, she struck out thieves and druggies, who would've needed to use the door, then eliminated any kind of animal. She could deal with animals and insects. There were worse things than rats and roaches, for god's sake. What else? Ghosts?

Jasmine laughed as she ran upstairs for the cell phone. Just in case, she brought her handbag and left it in the opening. The door had no mechanism and wouldn't lock behind her, but just in case.

Carefully, she managed to push the shutters outward. One fell in her hand. *Whew.* Just her luck to drop a shutter on her neighbor's head, especially when she already considered Jasmine's house a "bad house" peopled with "devils".

The wooden stairs creaked when she first tested them. She kept to the wall, where she knew the beams underneath each step would make it stronger than just the plank in the middle. Pointing the flashlight down, she noticed how the nails holding the planks together were square-headed. These had been handcrafted. She'd seen a show once on TV and remembered.

Air cooled noticeably there and smelled of humidity. After she'd gone down about a dozen steps, disrupting what had been prime spider real estate and getting her face and hair full of the clingy stuff, she looked back at the rectangle of light and sighed. Should she go on? This was getting a bit too much, even for her. She plucked one last stubborn thread out of her face.

The sound of water interrupted her mental wrestling match. Water? She reached the last visible step and sighed in relief when she spotted an archway right in front of her and a room beyond where two very large doors allowed some blades of sunlight to stab in.

"A boat garage," she breathed.

Intense relief flooded her.

So all this was — *you silly woman you* — just an underground boat garage flooded over the years. Nothing creepy or dangerous. Just neglect.

After rolling her jeans over her knees, she stepped, wincing, down into the knee-deep water and waded through the archway. And she'd just ruined her nice white shoes. She meant to walk toward the large doors but never made it there.

Soft, airy music stopped her. Oh and it was much clearer in this area. That flute again! So beautiful. She froze then swept the place with the beam of light.

I should've brought the tarot card.

"What?"

Her voice disrupted the music, which resumed with a pronounced crescendo as though it was angry she'd spoken aloud and momentarily drowned it. Why the hell should she need a tarot card to inspect a flooded garage? It made no sense at all.

Still, it's up there, where anyone can take it. Shit, what if someone takes it!

The spindle felt dumb in her hand. It was the card she should've brought.

Damn it, woman.

A narrow door stood right beside the one meant for the boat. Probably for people just wanting to get out this way and take some other boat directly in the canal. She sloshed water around as she reached the door and pulled on it. It wouldn't move.

The key.

Through the rotten, maladjusted doors, she spotted sunlight beginning to look a bit too amber for her taste. She didn't want to be stuck down there when it got dark.

"Yeah, I'll come back with the key."

She turned back, a faint sensation she was missing something scratching the back of her head.

Jasmine was up the stairs when she remembered what had bothered her about the door. There was no lock.

Then why would she need a key? What key?

* * * * *

Jasmine leaned against the handrail and looked out over the adjacent roofs. Man, Venice was beautiful. She should go visiting tomorrow instead of inspecting flooded garages and calling lawyers who never answered their damn phones. Then again, she should wait until the carnival ended two nights from then, when things would hopefully return to normal for Venetians and she'd get a few things done.

She'd stalled long enough. She'd sell the house and go back home. No more dallying. No more inspecting flooded garages. When—if—she ever went down there again, she'd be accompanied by a real estate agent and his or her clients.

That last thought brought on a sense of deep malaise. *Should* she sell the house? She wondered how long it'd been in her family. Since both her parents had died when she

was in her twenties and neither had any living family of their own – that she'd known of anyway – she'd been left with no blood relatives. Then that unknown aunt's lawyer had come out of nowhere.

No matter, she definitely shouldn't leave without bringing the key to that door in the garage and opening it. She had to at least do this much.

Wait a minute, what am I thinking? What goddamn key?

A cramp twisted her gut. She rubbed her belly. Maybe she'd gotten some of that old water into her mouth somehow. She'd been very careful to wash her hands right away and hang her shoes to dry. Wouldn't it be grand to get the runs where she had to pay fifty Euro cents each time she used the bathroom? Not to mention running a block away to the nearest one...

Jasmine sighed and returned to her bed...a towel on the floor. She was getting too old to rough it out this way. She wanted a real bed with a real shower. Washing one's hair in a tiny porcelain sink wasn't fun.

She lay down, rearranged her camisole and underwear. Despite her better judgment, she couldn't resist reaching over and retrieving the card in its plastic bag. Despite the gloom, she could still make out the man's gorgeous hair with that silver shooting star of a streak. After running a finger gently over his face, she placed it on her chest and closed her eyes.

"For god's sake, what now?" she muttered, raising herself on an elbow.

A tiny sound sent waves of hair bristling along her arms. Scraping. Something scraped against the floor, the sound of sand crunching underfoot.

The card was still where she'd left it. She grabbed the flashlight but didn't turn it on. Her vision was accustomed to darkness and she didn't want to spoil it.

The sound again, louder. Then a creaking noise. The stairs. She craned her neck to see.

Oh fuck. Oh fuck. OH FUCK!

Someone was coming up the stairs.

From the deeper shadows of the staircase emerged a pale golden glow. It bobbed, as though someone was carrying the source of light. At least, whoever it was needed light. Did burglars need light? They did if they thought the house was abandoned.

Her house *was*. Or so everyone thought.

Shit.

For some reason unable to abandon the card, she clutched it to her heart and brandished the flashlight.

I'm gonna throw it right at his head, yeah, that's it – it had to be a guy, no woman she knew snuck around in people's houses – and then I'll...have nothing with which to defend myself! Okay, change of plans, I'm gonna keep it as club – much better idea, Jasmine, go up to him and smack him on the head...

Whoever was climbing the stairs reached the very last landing before her floor for the light grew in intensity then the top of a head appeared, shoulders, an arm raised in front where dangled an old-fashioned brass lantern.

Better yet, surprise him first.

She sifted through what she could say to the guy but ran out pretty quickly. What did one say to nightly intruders? Something scary. Something witty and sharp. Something...what?!

"What the hell are you doing here?!"

It'd have to do.

If he understood, he didn't let it show as he continued to climb the steps until he stood on the checkerboard floor. In the golden glow, she could spot a stunning mask like a falcon's face and a gray cape. That other guy from her dream...what was his name again?

"Lumere." His voice was smooth, cold. Tempered steel.

Ah, so I'm dreaming again, whew.

"You are sleeping, Jasmine, but not dreaming," he said, coming into the room.

Whatever.

Looking around as he raised his lantern, his gaze settled on her. Jasmine felt herself appraised, weighed, judged.

"No wonder Vespero could not resist."

Delight flushed her cheeks and she thanked heaven for the lack of proper light. So was this going to be another dream like she'd had? A tingle of excitement spread through her.

"No, this is not going to be a dream," he replied, drawing near. "It is going to be a nightmare."

'Kay...

Excitement turned to dread when he reached out and beckoned.

She shook her head, unable to talk. *Why am I doing this to myself? Do I have some unresolved issues I need to pay a shrink for? Man, what's wrong with me? I must be losing my mind. That's it, I snorted some century-old spores up my nose and it's eating my brain. I'll get meningitis now or some other disease. Just fucking great.*

"There is nothing wrong with your mind." He took another step. "But you need to see certain things."

The bottom part of his face looked chiseled from marble. To say he was handsome was the understatement of the century. He had the perfect square chin of magazines, elegant lips made for kissing, a pair of dark eyes that could cut through steel and hair to damn a shampoo model.

Unlike Vespero, Lumere wasn't naked underneath his cape and instead wore some Renaissance-style gray velvet outfit with many buttons. For a split second, she lamented

he wore clothes but switched her thoughts right away so he wouldn't hear. Her subconscious really was playing tricks on her.

Was that a smile she saw flickering at the corner of his mouth?

Lowering the lantern, he cocked his head at her, let his gaze travel down to her naked feet then up again. It stopped midway and settled on the card, which she still held as if it were the last lifejacket aboard a sinking ship.

"Where did you find this?"

"My aunt died and left it to me, along with the house." Jasmine shrugged. "I'm here to see if I can sell it."

Talking real estate to my dream man, how rich.

Lumere shook his head. "You should demolish it, not pass it on to someone else. Not everyone has been graced with your mental energy or your strength of character."

Her ex had called that particular facet of her personality "pigheadedness".

The masked man shook his head. "He did not understand you. He was misguided."

Hurray! So she was in control of this dream after all.

This time, he smiled openly. "It is unfortunate I must show you these things. Your mind is a gem I would have enjoyed contemplating immensely. Now leave the key and come."

Key? Oh the card, yes, she was getting used to the lingo. *Key means card, gate means door, Lumere is The Hermit and Vespero is a devil. But according to her neighbor, they're all diavoli. Got it.*

Jasmine put the flashlight on the floor, carefully slid the card in her handbag and followed the strange Lumere down the stairs and onto the third floor. She'd forgotten to put some clothes on. Again. This proved her final confirmation she was dreaming...she'd *never* step outside in just her underwear and camisole.

"Are we going down there?" she asked. The flooded garage didn't particularly entice her. Especially at night with a strange man.

He's your dream man, remember?

Plus she felt safe with him for some silly reason, as though she'd met him before—she hadn't, otherwise she'd *remember* such a looker. He didn't raise any alarm bells unlike Vespero.

He nodded. "My gondola waits for us. Some things can only be seen from the water."

Lumere stopped on the second step and turned to her. They stood nose to nose. Behind the mask the dark eyes stared but not in the way Vespero did, which had made her want to look elsewhere. Lumere's intent gaze didn't feel overwhelming, demanding, something she *had* to do. She didn't feel forced. On the contrary, her impulse to try to catch his gaze came from her. She could've looked at his refined features all night. He reminded her of a statue of Achilles, one she'd seen in a book. A noble form, lean and strong, a sculpted jaw and forward chin.

Mm-mm.

For a second, she tried to imagine his face. Did it resemble the card, she wondered. His silver and gray mask glittered with diamonds and white feathers. She itched to run her hand over it. How would it feel? Soft? Prickly? Smooth? Cold? Man, she wanted to touch it bad enough to ask. Maybe.

"You may touch," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Jasmine took a deep breath and reached out toward his face. He wasn't as tall or built as Vespero, but what he lacked in solidity, he more than made up for in grace and quiet strength. And he looked *quick*. Like a fox. He was probably a killer chess player.

A flicker of a smile then he said, "I am."

The feathers felt like liquid under her fingers. She traced the contour of the mask, lingered on his cheek where diamonds had been set to make it look as if he were crying then followed the length of its hooked nose. Lumere closed his eyes for a few seconds, someone enjoying a forbidden food.

Why did he suddenly look so sad?

A deep sigh swelled Lumere's chest. He was taking too many chances. He had never had to fight so much for inner peace. Her energy had suffused the house long before she had reached the top floor and inspected it. Not just the key she carried had drawn Vespero and his minions to her, but her vigor, the light of her vibrant soul. Even Lumere, who normally would only gaze in passing at mortals, had stopped to take notice. Such keen mental intensity was a rare thing. He doubted the mortal knew her own strength.

And when he had caught Vespero with her, *in* her, doing something for which he himself hungered desperately, it had welded his jaws together with rage and jealousy. Lumere could not remember ever feeling either before. But she was a mortal, therefore forbidden to him. To his devilish brethren as well.

Without a word, Lumere turned and descended into the darkened staircase. He could smell the soap on her skin, could hear her heart beating hard, a good strong heart inside a good strong vessel. "A delectable fruit" Vespero had called her. How true.

But she could not stay there. Especially not with the key so close to Vespero's clutches. Should he get his clawed hands on it before the end of the *carnivale*, the deck of cards would be complete and the gate would open. The material plane was not ready for Vespero and his minions. It would be similar to the gates of hell suddenly breaching and spilling its demonic seed on Earth.

Lumere gritted his teeth. He had been guardian to the gate, the keeper of Time, for eons and would continue to do so, even if it meant causing irreparable harm to the mortal woman.

Jasmine.

How he had loved the sight of her earlier as she squinted at the locked gate, her beautiful face hard and intent as she dissected the situation. Not many mortals had been gifted with a mind such as hers. Unfortunately, she would never be his to savor. After tonight she would leave Venice, take the key with her and never return.

“Whoa,” she said behind him.

She must have seen the gondola. With the speed of thought, he had fashioned it so it would please her, had delved in her subconscious for hints of what she liked, colors, shapes, patterns. Surprisingly, his own demonic shape had pleased her and he had not changed it the way Vespero had. Lumere doubted she would have let the demon near her had she seen his true form. He had to give his fellow demon credit, he had outdone himself in keeping his temper under control, even his minions had forced down their wicked ways and only showed what Jasmine wanted to see. She was not the kind of mortal who relished things the true Vespero was known for.

Lumere stopped on the last step, hooked the lantern on a brass rod at the prow and turned to her, offering his hand.

She did not need his help to board the gondola but Lumere longed to touch her anyway. A small transgression he allowed himself. She took it without hesitation. Energy passed from her hand to his. They shared a look. Lumere was the first to break it. He stood behind her on the platform. The sight of her naked legs deeply disturbed him, aroused him in ways he had not experienced before. He would be very careful around this particular mortal.

He watched her run her hand along the smooth wooden carving and the midnight blue velvet cushions on the bench. A sudden urge to touch her nearly overwhelmed him. Lumere turned away before he succumbed. It had been so long since he had allowed himself pleasure of this kind, of any kind. Guarding the gate between his realm and the material plane was lonely, friendless work. But if not him, then who else? Vespero and his monstrous creations? Hardly.

They had almost succeeded once long ago when Venice was at the height of its glory. Back in those years, Lumere had found an ally in a remarkable human who practiced the forbidden science of alchemy, and together they had devised a plan to keep the demons under control. Well, mostly. Lumere had taken from each demon some of their essence—corporeal or metaphysical—and given these to the alchemist, who had cunningly infused a deck of playing cards. Seventy-eight in total, one for each stronger and thus more dangerous demon—himself included. Vespero had been livid with rage when he had discovered the scheme to keep him out of the material plane. His vengeance had been lethal. Later that year, during a particularly decadent and boisterous *carnivale*, the gate had quivered with the mortals’ carnal energy. Vespero had invaded the alchemist’s mind, had polluted him such that he hanged himself on the last night of the eleven-day *carnivale*. Lumere had come close to losing control that night and forgot his place as keeper of Time. In his rage, he had almost allowed his foul brother to cross over. The death of the alchemist still weighed on Lumere’s shoulders. Vespero taunted him about it to this day.

"It's so beautiful."

Jasmine's remark pulled Lumere out of his dark musings. His affection had cost a man his life once and he vowed again not to repeat that mistake.

She did not seem overly inquisitive about the lack of gondolier guiding their craft. She still thought it was all a dream. Then he would show her and she would be lost to him forever.

She is not mine. Never was. Can never be.

Lumere closed his eyes. Though he did not relish it, she would *have* to see the truth.

The gondola glided noiselessly along the decrepit foundations, under a rotten bridge then deeper into the city's underbelly. Jasmine sat straighter on the bench.

The light at their bow chased shadows up along the uneven foundations, into deep crevices and shadowy ledges. They rounded a corner just as several dark beings scurried deeper into the shadows. Their shiny eyes flashed. Lumere shook his head sadly.

"What were *those*?" Jasmine asked. "Thirty-pounds rats?"

Lumere could see the shiver raising the fine hair on her arms. The ache knifing at him accentuated as he tore his gaze from her denuded shoulders.

"No."

She turned to him. Clearly, patience was not one of her virtues. "So," she encouraged with a hand gesture. "What were they?"

"Vespero's creations."

Despite the poor light, Lumere saw her blanch.

Chapter Five

"His 'creations'?" she repeated, incredulous.

Lumere would have given anything to shelter her from the terrible truth of his barren world, of his kin and him. He could not. She had to see. How else could she shed Vespero's stain if she did not see his true nature?

Jasmine started when she spotted a young man sitting on the slimy ground, leaning against the wall where the dark shapes had scurried away. As the gondola passed by, they could see a syringe protruding from the young man's skin, dangling along his skinny forearm, his inert hand twitching occasionally.

"Poor kid," she murmured, looking away.

Out of the corner of his eye, Lumere saw her rubbing her nose before she straightened and crossed her ankles.

"We did this to him," Lumere said. "We murmured things in his ear, egged him on, forced his hand and played to his vulnerable soul."

"Who's 'us'?"

"My brethren and I. Those from my world."

Jasmine shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Weird dream. I've never used that word before, 'brethren', I mean. *Definitely* not as fun as yesterday."

She did not believe him.

The sound of a woman's cry of pleasure cleaved the night. Jasmine turned and stared at him.

"At least *someone's* having fun."

Instead of replying, he mentally guided their craft to the right, into a very narrow canal. He could almost have touched both sides with his hands. Along the side, on a ledge, stood three people. A woman had her dress up to her waist and a man stood behind her, both his hands in front of her and pulling her sex wide apart while a second man knelt in front of her and greedily licked. A bit farther stood one from his own plane. He wore a mask as well, like the other three, but Lumere could tell he was not mortal. He whispered things to the kneeling man.

Jasmine cocked her head at the group, as though feeling something was about to happen. She clutched at the side of the gondola.

The kneeling man shook his head as though to clear it then looked up at the woman and said something. She shook her head no. Without warning, the man stood and pulled his member out of his pants. The demon stood as well and leaned into the man cupping the woman's sex and murmured things in his ear as well. Right away, the man

growled and grabbed at the woman's wrists, forcing them high and behind her head. While she struggled and began to pull away, the first forced himself between her thighs. She cried out, twisted against the two men.

"Hey!" Jasmine called loudly, rising halfway and rocking the gondola. "I said HEY! Leave her alone!" Turning back to Lumere, she stabbed a finger at her temple. "This is crazy! Do something!"

The woman being raped was screaming then, while the man in front pumped violently into her. The one holding her wrists still listened to the demon's whispers, his eyes seemingly lost in the distance.

"Can you see him?" Lumere asked, ignoring with great pain the woman's plight.

"See two guys raping a woman?" she demanded, rising to her full height and taking a step along the gondola's middle. It rocked dangerously. She leaned as far as she could go and tried to take a swipe at one of the men. She missed by a good foot. "POLICE! POLICE!"

"There is nothing you can do for her Jasmine, you are in my plane of existence now, not in yours. They do not see or hear you."

While the gondola slid past, Jasmine put both hands over her mouth and cringed when the men switched turns at who was doing what to whom. "Oh dear god, this is so fucking sick."

By the time the gondola had reached the corner, the woman had been forced down onto her knees while both men stood over her.

"I want to wake up now. *Now*, dammit."

Jasmine sank onto the bench and held her head in both hands. Her hair spilled in dark curls around her shoulders. Lumere was already reaching out to touch it by the time he realized he had moved. He snatched his hand back.

"You need to see what we do to your people, how we can influence them, play to their weaknesses. You must understand why the gate should always remain locked."

"Whatever, man, just somebody pinch me so I can wake up." She did not look up.

"Did you see the third 'man', the one who whispered things in the others' ears? He was not a man such as you know them. He was from my world. A demon as you once called us."

She snapped her head up, stared at him unblinkingly. "A *what*?"

"A demon. They call us *diavoli* around these parts. Unlike you, we cannot dream and pass from one world to the next. We are trapped in our own with only ourselves to entertain and contemplate. We can murmur things to mortals, invade their dreams so we can feel alive ourselves. We live vicariously through them during their slumber. You bring us closer to life than we can ever be. Our world is old, so very old, it is a dead one, whereas yours is so..." Lumere stopped to search for the proper word. "Yours is blossoming. My kin yearn for it, they want to rape and pollute your young world. Hence Vespero's desire for the last key. *My* key. Because with it, with every demon's

essence assembled once again into a full deck, he will be able to breach the gate and his world – my world – will spill into yours.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Jasmine snapped, her hand patting the air. “I didn’t understand a single thing you said. Worlds, gates? What the *hell* is going on?”

She *was* stubborn.

“Through a fluke of nature, a conduit, a gate, has opened between your world and mine. I do not know how or why, all I know is this – your people are not equipped to deal with mine. As the eldest, I took it upon myself to guard the gate from my side. But Vespero and his allies scheme behind my back. They lured every single bearer close enough so they could open the gate for them. One by one. The last remaining key is the card you have been given. If this one falls into Vespero’s hands, he will have in his possession everything he needs to pass into your material plane. I believe you have a word for it. Armageddon.”

As he spoke, Jasmine’s eyes narrowed. He could tell she did not believe him and only remained silent so she could look for a place to disembark.

“Armageddon, *right*...” She stretched the last word.

They emerged onto a wider canal where many people milled about, costumed, masked, dancing and drinking. Music drifted out of a window.

“I’m getting off here,” Jasmine said, rising again.

Lumere stepped off the platform and put his hand on her arm, pulling her back. The contact sent a jolt of excitement in his long-dormant loins. Lust stirred just below the surface. He pushed it down again, denied his flesh.

“You will stay in this boat until you understand the great danger you are in,” he replied, knowing his tone sounded cold and hard to her mortal ears. If she could only see the turbulence she caused in him, the passion she raised.

She crossed her arms and stared hard. “Look, I’m getting tired of that nonsense about worlds and demons and gates. I didn’t sign up for any of this. Tomorrow, I’m selling this rotten house and going home and forgetting all this crazy shit.”

“You must take the key with you.” He waited for her reply, to see if Vespero had tainted her. He tried not to hope. It was one thing to ignore the creations’ whispers but entirely different to endure a demon’s touch. Mortals could not be expected to resist such a strong demon as Vespero, the only one able – and ever willing – to oppose Lumere.

A vacant look flashed in her normally clear gaze. She shook her head. “The card, yeah, I’ll take the card too.”

Lumere was not convinced.

“He poisoned your mind, Jasmine,” he said softly, leaning closer and looking deep into her mortal eyes. “You *allowed* him to pollute you.”

Her cheeks flushed. She looked away, muttered something he could not hear.

"The key," he repeated, forcing her chin to him. "You must take it far from here. You must leave and never return. Do you understand how dangerous it is for you here with the last key left on this world so close to the gate? Do you know what Vespero would do, has done in the past, to get a key? Try to imagine the vilest, most malicious and brutal things and you would only scratch the surface of his 'talent'. For your people he is The Devil, that is his card."

She hissed a word he had never heard before. Something that began with "mother". "I'm sick of you people—*you people in my head*—pushing me around! Okay? I don't understand why you're all getting inside my head and telling me this and that."

Patience. Lumere inhaled deeply. Perhaps there was hope.

"Seventy-eight cards, one for each major demon. Mine is the last one still in the material plane where it must remain. Vespero has tried repeatedly to get it close enough to the gate so he could manipulate the bearer into opening it. He will do the same to you."

"I'm a big girl. I'll be okay."

"Prove it and leave this city tonight."

She stared into his eyes, her mouth parted. Already he could sense Vespero's seed growing. Even if Jasmine was a strong-willed mortal and could eventually shed the dark touch, it would not be soon enough. The *carnivale* would end the next night. Not enough time.

He would have to force it out of her.

Lumere had to undo the damage, had to set her on the right path again. He had to erase Vespero's mark from her flesh. And the only way to do this would be to replace it with his own. Unfortunately, Lumere's lesson would involve frightening—hurting—Jasmine so she would leave and never return.

Slowly, so as not to startle her, Lumere gently ran a finger down her arm where he let his hand rest. Heat from her mortal coil seeped into his. Shame forced his gaze down from hers.

"Forgive me."

"For what?"

"For this." Lumere closed his eyes briefly.

Jasmine gasped and collapsed into his arms.

* * * * *

She woke with a sensation of fullness in her sex. Jasmine meant to reach down between her legs but was prevented by something holding her wrists. She opened her eyes. Fear crept up her spine with the tingly march of a stiletto-wearing spider.

Purple lace clouded her vision. She wore a mask. Looking down at herself – she lay on some hard surface, spread wide, her legs dangling almost completely over the edge – she spotted the top of a dark head bobbing side to side and up and down.

“Where am I?” she asked just before a powerful orgasm rocked her. She gritted her teeth.

A naked Lumere rose from between her knees, his lips glistening. He wore a different mask, more of a real carnival mask with gray and silver ribbons dangling on either side. “In my home, deep beneath yours.”

If Vespero had a hot body, Lumere surpassed him by a mile. Lean muscles played under his smooth skin. He really did bear a great resemblance to that statue. But it was his cock that stopped her brain from processing everything else. It was dark with swollen veins circling it like a cluster of snakes. It glistened invitingly. And it was *big*.

“Why this?” she demanded, pulling at her wrists. Whatever bound them was soft and cool. A stone ceiling covered the dimly lit room. She thought she could hear voices in the shadows.

“Because I know you enjoy it.”

Embarrassment flushed her cheeks. “That’s not true. Untie me.”

“No.”

He resumed his feast, though his gaze was on her face the entire time. Pressing long and strong hands inside her thighs, he spread her wider. As much as she hated to admit it, she did enjoy being tied down once in a while, something her ex had never understood.

Sounds from Lumere eating her excited and titillated her senses. Then out of the gloom walked two naked men, each wearing a red mask. After a nod from Lumere, they stood on either side of her and bent over her, one coming down on top of her face, the other her chest.

Jasmine gasped when Lumere inserted fingers into her, splayed them then resumed his assault on her clit with his tongue. She’d never known she could stretch so wide.

The one near her face smiled and let his luscious lips gently graze her cheeks and chin, occasionally brushing them against her mouth. After a while, Jasmine raised her head slightly, which the man understood for the overture it was. He captured her mouth with his teeth and tongue and lips. Breath rasped out of her.

“Oh...”

One of her breasts tingled when the other man bit her nipple and pulled on it. Below their faces, she watched Lumere dip his fingers in her and spread her honey over her belly and breasts, a gesture that triggered a feeding frenzy with the other two. Jasmine writhed against her bonds as the pleasure accentuated several notches.

“Have you ever been taken this way before?” Lumere asked. His hair spilled over his rippling shoulders, the silver streak shined brightly.

“No,” she snarled through clenched teeth. *Oh, oh god.*

Her panting cries echoed in the stone room. *Ah, ah, ah, ah.* Jasmine spilled her pleasure, felt it gush out of her like a breached dam. Baring perfect white teeth, Lumere dove between her knees. She felt his vigorous assault on her cunt, in her anus, around her clit. His fingers were everywhere, into every orifice, each nook and crevice. His tongue and teeth caused wave after wave of fierce pleasure.

She wanted him with a violence that shocked her.

"Leave us."

Both men disappeared with the speed of thought, as though they'd never even been there.

Their sudden departure left her body ringing with unspent pleasure. She twisted, arched her back.

Between her knees, Lumere stood regally, his chin high, his shoulders squared. "Did you enjoy what my brother was doing to you?"

It took her a second to realize what he meant. They were brothers? Vespero's forceful handling had indeed excited her until he'd pushed too deep, too hard. "You're brothers?"

"Not blood brothers. Only as in kinship. So, did you enjoy it?"

"At first."

"What did you enjoy most? That others could watch him enter you?"

Jasmine yelped in shock when their surroundings changed. They weren't in the stone room anymore but directly in the center of a large square filled with costumed people. She still lay naked, bound to the stone altar. Yet, the revelers walked by as though neither Lumere nor she existed.

"How? Where are we?" She raised her head and spotted a couple happily going at it in a shadowy corner. The woman's leather skirt was high over her legs.

Jasmine closed her eyes. *Argh, man, this is too weird.*

Lumere's eyes gleamed behind his mask. "Not here then? Elsewhere?"

Again, everything changed. Indoors then, in a posh restaurant where the staff wore tuxedos. Her mind reeled with the possibilities.

"Too stifling?" Lumere demanded, for some reason looking angry with her. "What about here?"

People in various states of undress filled this rich-looking, shadowy room. It could've been a cigar lounge, without the smoke. Some screwed standing against the wall, another couple were on their knees while a trio was using the piano in a corner as a mattress. A woman knelt before another eating her cunt while her companion drank wine and played with the first's hair.

A fire breather in a corner was dipping the burning end of her stick into her pussy, extinguishing the flame with a hiss. Jasmine stared in shock. Women could *do* that?

“Too tame?” Lumere demanded, coming closer between her knees and pressing his thumb against her clit. A zap of energy made Jasmine grit her teeth. “Something a bit less civilized perhaps?”

They moved to a shadowy place then, where the unmistakable sound of a whip against skin clacked rhythmically. A woman walked by, towing a man on a leash. Lumere looked in a corner and, as though his gaze could shine light in dark places, a scene emerged from the shadows.

A woman was chained to the wall, facing it, arms and feet spread wide while a man grabbed her butt cheeks and pulled her wide. He rubbed his cock against her glistening cleft, bent and licked it then stood. Poised below it as a submarine about to surface, he straightened his legs and took her. A long cry cleaved the air.

Jasmine couldn't tear her gaze away, her pussy clenching as if she were milking a man. She threw a peek at Lumere, noticed he was looking back at her and not the other two.

A third man approached, his skin gleaming in the dim light. While the first pumped violently, the woman's chains clinking, he spread the man's feet wider with his own and guided his cock in. With a grunt, he pushed in, nearly lifted the other man off the ground who in turn transferred the brutality onto the woman. Both men presently held on to her waist, each shoving in his assigned hole.

“Do you enjoy watching them?” Lumere asked softly. He bent over her thighs, used his thumbs to spread her lips outward. His tongue felt like fire inside her entry, along the cleft, around her clit.

Jasmine's cry echoed that of the woman against the wall.

Cries of pleasure came sporadically from different corners. Smells of male musk and female salty honey drifted to Jasmine, tightened her vagina with quivering excitement. But no one paid attention to them.

Circling the altar once, Lumere stopped near her face. Cupping the nape of her neck in his long hand, he brought the tip of his cock right against her mouth. With a snarl of contentment, Jasmine opened her mouth wide and pushed against the length of him. Her teeth raked along his shaft for the thick girth of it, yet Lumere didn't seem to mind. Moaning, Jasmine pushed, retreated, pushed again. Her tongue pressed under his glans, flicked the tip of it when she pulled out for some air. Pre-cum glistened.

“Again,” he said, reaching over and stroking her dripping cleft.

She took him all in, deeper, gagging but not caring for anything else than swallowing him whole.

Lumere's fingers reached lower between her legs, found her anus and pressed against it. While he kept his palm against her vulva, he slid into her nether hole, his fingers supple and skilled. Jasmine squeezed her eyes shut against the wave of pleasure about to hit her.

“That is the way, Jasmine, open for me, take me in.”

A series of tiny pulsations heralded his climax. She growled when she felt Lumere's liquid fire spurting salvoes against the back of her mouth and swallowed the surprisingly large amount of semen. He pulled out, leaving a trail of cum along the corner of her mouth. With a snarl, he stabbed his fingers deeper. Jasmine arched back.

"Do you want more?"

She couldn't even answer and hoped he wouldn't stop whatever he was doing. Bursting suns flashed behind her eyelids. Another climax ripped through her. She cried out.

Lumere's smile was feral when he stood—a Greek god—between her legs. Jasmine noticed he held something in his hand. He showed it to her. A green dildo? Where did he get that?

"A jade phallus," he said, as though he heard her question. "They used to be very popular on your world."

Sweat clammed her back and legs. Pleasure still roiled along the walls of her cunt, cinching, yet milking nothing. She wanted him in. Jasmine's eyes grew proportionally larger as Lumere showed her the size of that jade phallus.

"It's big," she breathed, her sex throbbing delightfully.

"Lick it." Lumere reached down between her knees and brought it against her mouth.

His cock pushed against her. With a buck, she tried to trap him inside but he twisted his hips. "No."

So she licked the jade rod. This dream hadn't started very well, but it was improving. *Fast.*

Lumere scowled as he let the smooth rod glide in and out of her mouth then sideways like corn on the cob. When it gleamed with her saliva, he straightened and rubbed the thick bar of jade along her fissure. His cock looked ready to burst, despite his recent release. Fisting the jade dildo, he looked up into Jasmine's eyes then slowly, inch by inch, penetrated her.

She cried out when he thrust in sharply. Fire spread outward in tight rings. Too much.

"Again?"

"Yess!"

Lumere's eyes closed as he pumped his fist harder.

Pleasure soon gave way to pain. Jasmine's moan turned into a strangled sob. "It's too much," she snarled through clenched teeth.

Lumere continued his push, but slower.

Fire spread to her anus. "It hurts..."

Why was he hurting her? He was supposed to be this guardian or something yet he acted just as Vespero had. Jasmine squeezed her eyes shut.

“Lumere. Please.”

He froze.

She opened her eyes and watched through the haze of unshed tears as he held her gaze then bowed his head and pulled the jade rod out. His hand was gentle when he placed his palm over her vulva. The ache disappeared right away.

Jasmine’s belly quivered, her knees shook. But at least the pain was gone, totally gone.

Lumere came over and untied her wrists. He blew on them, rubbed circulation back into them. He helped her sit up and untied her ankles. The whole time, he avoided her gaze.

Why would he want to hurt her? Why hadn’t he *listened*? After the orgasms he’d given her, the pain was a betrayal and Jasmine felt close to tears again.

“I could not go through. I failed,” he said. He’d heard her thoughts of course. Nosy subconscious.

“Failed at what?”

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and drew her against his chest. She felt his chin resting on the top of her head.

“I wanted to force you to leave, frighten and hurt you enough that you would flee. I thought that if I caused you pain, you would leave and never return, that this way you would be protected, safe. I was mistaken. I could not go through with my plan. Forgive me, Jasmine, for I fear I have put you in even graver danger.”

Chapter Six

She did believe him about the danger part. She was in danger all right but not because of some demon or other...it was losing her mind, her grip on reality that loomed over her. Already she was having doubts. Could it all be real?

Come on.

Just as with the bite mark on her thigh, the ache in her sex remained only in her memory. But the earlier pleasure quite surprisingly still throbbed just as vividly. The pain he'd caused was gone but not the pleasure...? She really did need to see a shrink. And get sleeping pills too. These kinds of dreams would get her in a straightjacket.

"Let me take you home."

"You're kicking me out, just like that?" she countered, her fists shaking.

"You cannot remain in my world, not safely. My gravest mistake was thinking I could resist the temptation. You are not safe here, not even with me it would seem."

"I feel perfectly safe..." Jasmine blinked when their surroundings changed again.

They stood in the great dining hall of her first dream, only there were no table or chairs, nothing but the smooth black-and-white-checkered floor.

"Here," he said, pointing to the candle at the top of the steps. "Follow my light. It will guide you back to your world."

Jasmine crossed her arms. "Could I have some clothes first?"

"Pardon my thoughtlessness."

Lumere suddenly wore a stunning black pearl gala outfit, complete with an elaborate mask framed by black and silver feathers. After she looked down at herself, Jasmine silently mouthed the word "*wow*". The crimson dress glowed. It didn't shimmer or sparkle. It really *glowed*. She ran her hands over it, smoothed the satin and gauze, marveled at the way tiny rubies glittered along the seams. A mask covered the upper part of her face as well.

"I don't know where you guys dress, but these clothes are just fa-bu-lous." She smoothed the front of her dress.

"It all comes from in here," Lumere replied as he pointed to her temple. "I merely add a personal touch here and there. Like right now."

Light from the chandelier overhead dimmed considerably until only a soft glow reached them in a golden cascade. Eerily soft music wafted in on the soft breeze from the opened windows. Had there been windows there the last time? She couldn't remember any. The one thing—aside from Vespero—she remembered vividly was the

lone candle at the top of the stairs. The one she'd ignored. Jasmine looked up at Lumere and nodded. One piece of the puzzle clicked into place.

"So that was you yesterday night, that candle up there?"

"Part of me, yes. A ward I had left in case Vespero lured a mortal too close. But you did not follow it, though you wanted to very much."

"How could you tell? Were you watching?"

The thought of Lumere witnessing how she'd writhed beneath Vespero didn't do anything for her. It was enough he'd seen the end of their little encounter.

"No, but I did feel the pull on the ward. It usually only flickers, but for you it stayed a long time until I began to feel the drain in my energy. I knew something significant must have been happening."

"I *did* want to follow the candle but Vespero was just...everywhere, you know. I couldn't think, like he was in my head playing electric guitar or something."

"A fitting analogy. That is his favorite ruse. He overwhelms mortals—*people*, pardon me—and since he knows what they want most, their deepest desires, their basest urges, he uses his insidious knowledge against them."

Jasmine looked down in embarrassment. First an orgy dream and now a psychoanalysis? *Whew*.

"Do not be too hard on yourself. You have resisted much longer than anyone else. In fact, I believe you have not entirely succumbed to him."

Yeah, well, she wasn't sure about that.

He looked sad and offered her his hand. When she took it, tentatively, still not trusting him, he encircled her waist with his other arm and pressed her close. Swaying gently from left to right, he pressed his cheek against hers. The music played softly as they followed the liquid notes.

Quiet strength emanated from Lumere, a strength Jasmine was glad she could bask in for she needed all of it right then not to throw herself at him. Literally tackle him down to the ground and make a complete, hormone-driven fool of herself.

"We should not be doing this."

"Why not? This is very nice." So her dream wouldn't be a complete nightmare after all.

"Shh," he said, putting his finger to her lips. "They are listening."

His forefinger lingered on her mouth, traced the fleshy peaks on the upper lip. "Have you any idea of the power you hold over us? Over me?"

"I guess not."

Glitter along the feathers' central shaft caught the light, mesmerized Jasmine for several seconds before she tore her gaze away to follow the contour of his statuesque face where shadows pooled along the bottom edge of his mask. It wasn't looking at his luscious mouth or how his skin looked perfect and smooth, neither was it how his hair

spilled in glossy indigo waves over his athletic shoulders that interrupted Jasmine's arrhythmic heartbeat and froze her to the spot. None of that. The one detail that forced her to contemplate the notion this whole place might – just might – be real after all was Lumere's gaze. Despite the blackness of the irises, there shined a radiance in them, a beacon, wisdom as old as time itself. Jasmine felt drawn in. Willingly, wholeheartedly.

He must have felt something as well for he nodded almost imperceptibly, licked his lips and bent close to stop a hair away from her, as if he were no longer sure. Then with a sigh, he closed his eyes and pressed his lips against hers.

Energy like an electrical jolt stabbed through her chest. His touch so differed from his sexual attentions of just a few moments past. He was just as skilled, just as precise, but tenderness slowed his movements, as if time ticked away each grain of sand individually.

Unlike Vespero's dream, in which all that mattered was lust, being with Lumere felt different, especially when it was taking such a lovely turn. It didn't feel wicked or forbidden, as if she had to hide in shame. Being with Lumere felt *right*.

How could such a man exist...how could such a place – plane, world, dimension, domain, whatever – exist?

He looked almost too weary for words when he pulled back to look at her. "We exist. We are a danger to your world, to *you*."

She didn't want to listen to any more of his arguments. Raising herself, she clamped her mouth over his.

Lumere.

Just thinking his name triggered tiny bursting suns of passion in her heart. Contrary to last night, she not only wanted to make love to this beautiful man, she wanted to hold him, talk to him, share her soul. She knew he would understand everything she said, anything she shared.

Jasmine clung to his shoulders, pressed herself harder, wanted to mesh them both into one person. With fierce, almost desperate craving, she opened wide for him, let him claim her mouth with his tongue, let him bite and suck her lips and returned every gesture with her own.

How could she have gone from pleasure, pain then back to pleasure again? All in the span of a few moments with him? What sort of man had she invented in her mind who would do these things to her? Did she have a love-hate thing with herself?

After framing her face with his long hands, he abandoned her mouth to look at her. "It is not a dream, Jasmine. Why can you not believe me?"

That silver streak in his hair was just so tempting. She weaved her fingers in it and let it gently slip along her palm. He closed his eyes, that rapt expression on him again. He must have enjoyed this very much.

"I want to, you have to believe me...but, well, how can it be anything else but a dream? I mean, people with masks traveling from place to place like we're ghosts or

something." She looked around at the opulent room. "None of this is real. I'm not even real. It's all in my head."

Lumere pulled his hair from her hand and stared at her with a dark, burning gaze. "Am I real to you?"

I only wish.

"Then I am."

Shaking her head, she stared up into his beautiful face. "Prove to me you're real."

"I thought I already had."

"No you didn't. You just keep *telling* me to believe you but I'm not like that. I need proof. What can I say, I'm a doubter."

Lumere cocked his head. "You would doubt my sincerity? I am the guardian, the only one able to hold my kin at bay, the only protection your world has yet you doubt my word? You need to show more trust."

Oops. This wasn't going the way she wanted. Mentally backpedaling at a furious pace, she shrugged. "There has to be a way for me to believe you."

"In your heart, you believe me." His tone felt harder, colder.

"The problem is, a woman's heart isn't always her best friend. I've become more, let's say, skeptical over the years. I need a proof. Show me your face."

He recoiled as though she'd struck him. "No!"

"Why not? Why can't I see your face?" Horror and fear flashed in his obsidian eyes. She hadn't asked for one of his hands, for god's sake.

"It is not my face you cannot see, it is the mask I must keep on."

Jasmine shook her head. "Not that I understood that but I'm not buying it anyway. That means you're just a dream and I want to wake up now."

Lumere traced the contour of her own mask. "Our masks are symbols only, things your mortal mind can understand and process, just as these clothes, the period they represent on your world, and this room. I am wearing neither mask nor garments to the other demons and neither do they to me. Only you see them. And if I were to remove the mask, shed the last barrier between you and me, your mortal eyes would see me as I am. A demon. Your mind could not process that."

"Now who needs to show a little trust?" she asked, half jokingly.

A demon. Well, if all demons looked like him, she'd start packing and move to hell the very next day!

"Be careful what you wish."

What could possibly be so bad, so *big*, that she couldn't see his face, that her brain couldn't wrap itself around the thought? This was just her unimaginative subconscious trying to weasel out of giving the man of her dream a real face. Just in case it came up looking like her ex. The thought made her grin.

Lumere pushed her away. He looked *very* angry. "Is this all a game to you?" he demanded. Then before she could reply, he ripped the mask from his face.

Chapter Seven

Lumere threw the mask to the ground where it disappeared as though the checkered floor had swallowed it.

Expecting some sort of cataclysmic event, Jasmine flinched. Nothing.

She allowed her gaze to slowly trace the majestic length of him, bottom to top, from black shiny boots to velvet pants, buttoned jacket, high-collared white shirt, a forward chin just square enough, a mouth refined and decadent at once, a Grecian nose, the forehead high and smooth and eyes...

Like two windows into an abyss.

Her breath fluttered to a stop before it resumed in quick shallow pants.

Jasmine didn't think there was something on this Earth she couldn't catalogue and tag and put away in neat little boxes in her head, that a man could be standing before her as did Lumere and resemble a Greek god yet stupefy her mind with fear and awe and all-consuming passion.

She squinted yet kept her gaze on him. "Oh...dear...god."

For the life of her, she couldn't focus her mind on the sum of him, as if he didn't fit in her brain, as if she could only process a tiny portion of him at once. A diamond with endless facets. She sensed his true age, *ancient*, yet saw a man in his prime, could sense his great power—a tidal wave ready to sweep her into madness, tumbling, twirling, lost—but knew in her heart he was a gentle being. Slowly she set her gaze on his, forgot everything else, overlooked the aura of energy crackling around him and focused on the man and the man only.

"You are so..." she stopped, took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "You're like a light. So *bright*."

Then she saw everything else around them begin to change, to fade, twist into something out of nightmares. Beauty turned to rot, light—except his—to shadows, the grandiose room crackled, peeled away, fell outward in a dried husk to reveal decayed timber and floating ashes. Beyond, a ruined Venice sprawled wide with the bankrupt beauty of an old whore, its jade-green canals veins of raw sewers.

But when Jasmine looked back at him, focused on his quiet strength, whatever stood near was still preserved in a luminous and fragile bubble of peace. She drew near, sought the safety of his embrace. And when he closed his eyes and opened his arms for her, Jasmine leaned against his chest.

"How can you look at me?" Lumere murmured. "You are a mortal. You should not be able to sustain the sight of me even for just a few seconds."

Strangely enough, she didn't even need to think about her response. She knew him. Had known him.

"It's like I already knew what you'd look like. I think it's because of the key, I've been looking at it since it was given to me. I couldn't put it down, couldn't let anybody near it. So in a sense, I *did* know your face."

"It still cannot explain how you can bear the sight of me. I do not understand."

She chuckled. "I don't care how. And believe me, that card doesn't do you justice."

A sort of half uncomfortable, half proud smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "If you knew the risks involved, you would not be so flippant."

"Yeah, well, life is short for us on my side." Jasmine raised her face to his.

He shook his head. "They are listening intently now, they know you are here, whole and aware. They can feel your energy." He stopped, looked in pain for a second. "Vespero is jealous. You are like a drug to us."

"I don't give a shit about Vespero or the others, it's you I want."

"It is forbidden, dangerous. I should have sent you back long ago."

When he made to step away, she grabbed the lapels of his jacket and pulled him down to her face. "I'm not ready for this to end yet."

And I don't think I'll ever be.

She drowned the last of his arguments with her mouth.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a large bed appear. For a man trying to send her away, he wasn't being very convincing. It was huge, a cross between some Victorian monster and something out of a princess movie. She loved it!

Then thin red drapes fell around the bed as though they were hung directly from the ceiling. She'd seen something similar during a mesmerizing performance in an all-acrobatics circus. The acrobats had hung and tangled, rolled up and down the length of the shiny strips of material. She could still see vague shapes through them but barely. *Whoa.*

"I thought you would enjoy this."

"I do, you picked my brain again," she replied while still eyeing the shimmering red bands. "Didn't you say it was dangerous to stick around?" Jasmine kissed his neck. His skin was so smooth.

"It is. This is the only thing between you and them." He pointed to the drapes.

Jasmine chuckled. "Not that I'm complaining, but I'm protected against a horde of demons by sheer curtains?"

"Like the masks, these are symbols only. As long as I stay in control, the barrier will remain and the others will not get inside."

"Control of what?"

"Myself."

Jasmine tried not to smile. *Good subconscious.*

With a mocking smile, Lumere picked her up in his arms and deposited her on the bed. She sank by a good three inches. It was *soft*.

Then the thought occurred to her that should he let the barrier fall, she'd really be in shit. *Argh, come on. It's a dream, woman.* A strange and vivid dream but nothing was really going to harm her. *Enjoy it.* This was going to be nice.

The music followed them in their voluptuous shelter, wrapped them in thin wisps. Lumere sat against the bed and for a while just looked at her.

"You are so vibrant, so alive."

He put his hands on either side of her head and leaned over, blocked the golden light of the chandelier, his weight creating deep recesses in the pillows. Indigo hair spilled over his shoulders when he kissed her cheeks, her eyebrows, her chin. She couldn't pinpoint his scent, a mix of man, musk and something else...mint?

Jasmine reveled in his gentle attention, much more than what he'd previously done to her. She pushed those thoughts away. *Live here and live now.*

Delicately, he pulled her mask off and let it rest on the pillow by her side. Lumere spent a while looking at her again, as though he hadn't just spent a good five minutes doing so.

When he drew near and his mouth landed on the dawn of her breasts, Jasmine inhaled deeply. Her palms tingling with excitement, she reached out and unbuttoned his collar, snaked a hand inside and undid another until his jacket was hanging open over his chest. His skin was so hot. Lumere angled his arms back and let the jacket fall off his shoulders. Muscles rippled with the movement. Just glorious.

Jasmine spent a while running her hands over his long and sinewy arms, his athletic shoulders, that sculpted chest. He really was a statue come to life. Just as firm, just as smooth. Man, she wanted to see *him*. Damn clothes.

And they were gone.

Lumere smiled when Jasmine opened her mouth in a silent O of shock and excitement. Both were naked.

"Strength of mind is the only power in my world, Jasmine. Nothing else counts for much. You are lucky to be so gifted."

"That's all it takes, a thought?"

"For someone such as you, yes. Most of your people lack the focus and mental energy to achieve much on this side."

"So I just did it with my thoughts?"

He trailed kisses down between her breasts. "Not entirely. I heard your thought and helped it along."

"But didn't you just say..." Jasmine didn't finish when Lumere's lips closed over a nipple.

Time to shut up.

He lay down next to her, the length of him pressed against her side and leg, his fingers lightly circling her breasts. Nipples hardened into aching pink marbles, Jasmine rubbed her thigh against his hard-on, teased the inside of his thighs with her knee and calf until the top of her foot came to rest in the crook of his knee. She pushed against it until Lumere rolled onto his back. With a sigh of contentment, she rolled with him and straddled his middle.

Hot, soft, his skin rubbed pleasantly along her cleft. Not dry-humping the man was proving very hard.

I wonder...

An image of Lumere caressing her breasts with a feather flashed across her mind. Had he heard her, she wondered.

A long, fluffy ostrich feather appeared in his hand. The grin on him would've powered a small city. Oh he was proud of it too.

"I hear them all, Jasmine. Every one."

She closed her eyes and sat more fully on him when he passed the feather under each breast, teased the nipples into feverish, aching knots then tickled her neck and jawline.

What about this one?

A long string of pearls replaced the feather. Lumere used it to trap her wrist and pull it against his mouth where he mock bit the inside, up to her elbow. Shivers raced up her arm. She bent forward and pressed her breast against his mouth. Gasping, she let him lick and suckle it with increasing force.

His chest swelled more rapidly then. She could tell he was getting very excited. Good. She liked him this way.

Jasmine switched breasts, presented the other for his mouth to take. Leaving her wrist and the pearl necklace, Lumere trapped her breasts and forced them close together in the middle so he could devour both in turn, in rapid succession, leaving her flesh quivering and covered in goose bumps.

When she began to roll her pelvis against him, his breath caught in his throat. He stared at her, his hands still around her breasts, his mouth working always harder, faster. A flash of teeth...he'd bitten her. Jasmine moaned and rolled her pelvis fiercely. She felt him spread his legs underneath her. His hands snaked down her sides. One traced her hipbone while the other curved down toward the middle and cupped her mons. Agile fingers followed the natural curve of her vulva, parted her lips then entered her.

"Jasmine," Lumere breathed, his eyes closed. He pushed his fingers deeper. "My bright, radiant light. I could lose myself in you and never regret a second."

She knew what he meant. She too could lose herself in him, wondered for a second what it'd feel like to have a man—*demon*—like him all to herself. *Proud, that's what. Proud and lucky and—*

“Cherished, Jasmine. You would feel cherished, inestimable, the rarest pearl.”

Loved...?

“Shh,” he replied, finally opening his eyes. He looked sad. “Some things are not meant to be.”

Unfortunately.

With a sigh she sat up, wrapped her arms over her head and arched back. A slow rubbing motion from his fingers triggered sharp little points of pleasure. She rode his hand, spread her thighs.

Oh nice, oh yes. Very, very nice. If I could only...yes, that'd be incredible.

Lumere inhaled sharply when Jasmine sat astride him with her hands tied above her head by one of the red drapes. Power of the mind indeed!

“I did not will this to happen.”

Jasmine looked down at him and smiled. “No, I did.” She rocked her pelvis in a pronounced figure eight that forced a long groan out of him.

He came up against her chest, sit-up like, and pushed her away so he could kneel. “You are magnificent,” he murmured, his eyes so intense they could’ve been pits of black flames. “So magnificent.” His hands were hot and hard when he seized her breasts and squeezed them together. A nipple disappeared behind his teeth. Then the other.

While she hung on the strip of fabric coiled around her wrists, Jasmine undulated and swayed, a sharp little cry escaping her when Lumere grabbed her butt cheeks and crushed her to him. His massive erection was hanging along her lower belly and he pressed it against her, rotated his hips so the tip would rub against her cleft.

Jasmine closed her eyes. She was kneeling on a fabulous bed, her hands tied over her head by silk bands with a gorgeous, skillful man...what more could a girl want?

With a grin, Lumere lay back down on the mattress but this time he put his head right between her thighs and gorged on her already throbbing pussy. Whining, Jasmine pushed against his face in an arc, front to back, side to side then in slow circles. His fingers dug in her thighs when he grabbed her and forced her down harder against his mouth. His tongue felt like a hot poker in her, probing, branding. When she spilled her pleasure, she heard his greedy pulls and sucks.

“I want you,” she whimpered with a forceful buck forward. “I need you.”

A few more licks of his burning tongue and Lumere knelt in front of her. His gaze on hers, he seized her hips and pulled her to him. His cock stood proudly between them. Holding it in a fist, he guided it along her lips, stopped to give a few pats to her swollen clit. Another climax made her want to spear herself on him.

Jasmine “*ahh-ed*” loudly when he did just that, thrust in deeply, stretched her to the limit. He was so big inside her, filled her, unfurled her. He stopped, looking unsure.

“More,” she snarled with a brusque roll of her hips.

He pushed her knees outward with his. Her waist almost completely encircled in his large hands, Lumere retreated then pushed back in again. Fire accompanied his rod and felt as though it would melt her from the inside. A loud cry left her.

“Again, AGAIN!”

Jasmine whimpered and mewled as she withstood Lumere’s powerful shoves. She let her head loll back between her upraised arms and pushed her breasts in his face, forced him to gorge on them while he pushed in deep, shoved himself in so hard she left the mattress rhythmically. Her nipples stung between his teeth, her nether lips burned around his shaft, but Jasmine wouldn’t change a thing in the world.

She came again, spilled her pleasure on him, which he used as lubricant for a finger he slowly inserted in her anus. The added pressure made her groan in satisfaction. Oh what she wouldn’t give for him to take her from behind, rub his...

Whoa, talk about perceptive.

With the speed of thought, Lumere was kneeling behind her, already his cock pushing inside her cunt, his thumbs digging deep in her butt cheeks and parting them forcibly so her cleft burned delightfully from the strain. Rhythmically, Lumere pumped. Jasmine encouraged, urged and stimulated with a crescendo of sharp little cries. Somehow, she knew he enjoyed hearing her pleasure.

“Jasmine, Jasmine,” he kept repeating. Sweat clammed his hands and thighs.

He pulled her back so her spine would arch in a sharp curve. The ribbon dug into her wrists. She felt so completely exposed, her backside thrust up against his belly, his hands secured around her waist, that she never wanted it to stop. She never wanted to leave this place...or him.

Around the bed, one of the drapes fell down then another. She didn’t care and continued to hang on with all her strength.

“Yes,” she hissed, “yes, that’s it, Lumere...yess.”

When she curled her pelvis to match his push, she felt him quiver. Stretched to her fullest, she rolled her hips again then again until she felt Lumere want to pump even harder.

“Say my name again,” she murmured between bucks against his lower belly. “I want to hear it.”

Lumere grabbed her waist hard and forced her still as he heaved her with the force of his penetration. “Jasmine.”

His knees between hers pushed out even wider until she sat astride his lap, her arms still over her head by the wrists. Lumere wasn’t taking her from behind anymore but from underneath. She used her weight to plunge down on him. They gasped in unison when his cock sank deep enough to press against the end of her channel. Her cries mixed with his groans.

In the back of her mind, Jasmine noticed the music had stopped. A strange smell wafted in to her. Like ash.

After a thrust that triggered blinding ecstasy, Lumere wrapped his arms around her torso, wedged his chin against her neck. "How I shall miss you," he breathed harshly.

Another searing orgasm sent Jasmine reeling. God. Good god!

How was it possible to feel so deeply both physically and emotionally for mere a figment of her imagination? Lumere was a dream, right? Yet she couldn't deny the pull, the inexorable attraction she felt for him and knew deep down in her heart she was desperate to believe in him, to believe he was real. So what if she had a crush on some man in her dream! He felt just as real – more so – than anyone else she'd known. He felt *real* and he felt *right*. For the first time in her serious, sensible life, she wanted to have faith in her own heart, trust it instead of constantly relying on her head.

Burning pulsations deep in her announced Lumere had also reached his own paroxysm of sexual release. She milked him spasmodically while he slowed then stopped. Sweat covered them both.

His breaths stirred loose strands of her hair when he leaned in close to her ear. "I had no idea it could be this way."

She "*mm-ed*" in agreement.

With gentle hands he cupped her breasts and massaged them.

Feeling more alive in her dreams than in real life, Jasmine blurted out what she'd been contemplating for, oh, a minute or two. Why waste time, right? "I want to stay with you, Lumere. I don't ever want to leave."

To think it was one thing but to say it out loud meant something entirely different. Her words seemed to shock him as much as they shocked herself. But dammit, she *did* want to stay with him.

He stiffened. "You cannot *want* to stay, you must leave, even if your absence will forever dim my world and my spirit."

"Why...?"

At once, the remaining drapes around the bed grew limp and fell to the floor, the one around her wrists as well. She looked about and gagged with sudden, primal fear.

"I have not been *this* entertained in a long time," Vespero said through a feral grin. "I never knew you had it in you, Hermit. Such passion."

Such passion, hissed the beings around his feet. These were deformed, shadowed, groveling little *things*. Lumere had called them Vespero's "creations".

He stood only a few feet off to one side, a sadistic smile stretching his glistening lips wide. The black of his exquisite garments underlined his ruby-colored mask. Others stood near the bed as well, beautiful men and women wearing masks and nothing else.

They completely encircled the bed. Jasmine cried out in shock and revulsion.

Lumere put his mouth next to her ear. "Forgive me," he whispered.

"Why –"

He stabbed his erection hard, deep, too deep. She cried out.

Growling, he pushed himself out of her, stumbled back off the bed a few paces with his arms outstretched as though he wanted to create a barrier between her and the rest. He landed in Vespero's waiting arms.

The bed disappeared. She fell to the floor naked and instinctively scooted away and stood. The pain knifed at her. She staggered sideways, clutching at her burning cleft. The hurt was an anchor to her reeling mind. When everything else was blurry and confusing, obscuring her vision, even her thoughts, the pain held her mind focused. She concentrated on it and her head cleared almost at once. Had Lumere done it on purpose?

"Leave!"

Lumere's thunderous voice filled her brain, rent at her soul. She flinched, felt herself reel back as if something had catapulted her up and backward.

The last image accompanying her into oblivion was Vespero grabbing Lumere by the hair and forcing him back while countless people threw themselves on him, pulled his arms out wide. The deformed little things climbed along his legs and clawed at his skin. Yet through what must have been agony, Lumere's radiant gaze remained on her face and escorted her into oblivion.

Chapter Eight

Jasmine knocked her forehead against the floor when she flopped on her side. Sweat and tears stung her eyes. She knuckled her nose and eyes and sat.

“Holy...”

She panted so hard, a gag reflex made her flounder to her feet and rush for the crooked little sink.

It took a while for her to breathe normally. With a dry heave, she sank to her knees and leaned her feverish cheek against the porcelain.

“I’m going crazy, I’m going *crazy*,” she chanted repeatedly under her breath.

A nervous sob-giggle made her want to throw something. Fists shaking, she forced air in slowly, let it sit there for a while then released it.

Slowly, woman, breathe.

She had to get out of there. Pack her things and get the *fuck* out of this crazy house. After splashing cold water on herself, making a big mess and not giving a shit about it, Jasmine took her camisole and panties off, rolled them and tossed them in a corner of her suitcase. Shivering with adrenaline, fear and...she wasn’t sure she should go there...remnants of erotic stimulation, she pulled fresh clothes on and realized she had to use the bathroom bad.

“Goddamnit, everything is turning to shit.”

This was supposed to be her ticket out of post-divorce debt. She’d maxed out her card to come to Venice, took days off work she couldn’t afford to, had put her semester on hold...and she was going to end up selling the piece of real estate crap for nothing just to be rid of it.

After she angrily shoved her things back in the suitcase – which must have shrunk, Jesus Christ, because nothing fit in the goddamn thing – she slid the Ziploc bag out of her handbag to take another obsessive look at the tarot card. She froze.

“This is not happening...” she murmured as she gingerly picked up the bag by a corner.

But it was. She wasn’t dreaming this. The image had grown faint and flaking...like the old patina of paintings in museums.

“It’s not happening,” she repeated, closing her eyes. A trick of the light. Nothing more.

When she looked at it again, she hissed a curse. No. Impossible. *Please...*

There was no mistaking it – the paint had *aged*. Lumere’s hair was no longer indigo but a washed-out shade of lavender with the silver streak all but gone while the light

from his lantern barely looked yellow when it used to be bright gold. Thin scuffmarks on the image made it appear as if something had torn at his clothes.

Like the claws from those awful little things...

"No," she told the card firmly. "No. You hear? It's not real."

She collapsed on her knees and angled the card left and right, tried to see if she was indeed going mad or if maybe some water had gotten into the bag and damaged the paint overnight. It was so old, even a tiny bit of moisture would ruin it. But no, the wood seemed healthy and strong. Only the painting was damaged.

Okay, this is it, I'm leaving NOW!

She was packed in no time and rolling her suitcase down the steps with satisfying thumps to punctuate her mood. The carryon bag strapped to the suitcase's handle bounced crazily. Yet her resolve to sell the house—indeed to just leave it period—dwindled proportionally to the distance separating her from the front door. When she was closing her hand around the wrought iron handle, she had to literally drag her feet just to cross the threshold and could've sworn something was pulling her back by the hair, by the clothes.

As they'd done to Lumere, little clawed hands everywhere on him, yanking him back...

"Calm down."

Fear gnawed at her. She kept looking back over her shoulder. A tiny sound similar to the buzz of an insect made her whirl around and whip the air with her hand. This wasn't the time to get stung by a bee or something. Nothing.

She was almost sobbing when she burst out of the house. But the damn suitcase stuck against the doorjamb! With a curse, Jasmine pulled it hard and it slipped from her grasp. She watched, horrified, as both the carryon and the suitcase tumbled over the edge and into the canal where they sank like bricks.

"Shit!"

Jasmine crouched down on her knees and stretched an arm out but it was too little too late. Apart from some bubbles, she couldn't even tell where they'd sunk.

Okay, think. Think.

"Passport? Purse. Money? Wallet, which is in the purse. Card? In the purse as well. Flashlight, cell phone and city map..." Jasmine hurriedly yanked her handbag open.

All pell-mell and hurriedly stuffed in the outer compartment of...

"The carryon."

Argh!

At least she had the key.

Jasmine swiped the air around her head again. Damn bugs. It was February, for Pete's sake. Couldn't they leave her alone?

After buying a horribly overpriced chocolate croissant and coffee just so she could use the bathroom, Jasmine spent the next hour getting lost in the same little

neighborhood. The same houses around the same corners over and over...until she started to believe *somehow* she was getting lost on purpose. She kept coming back to the narrow alley leading to her house.

"What's going on..." she snarled, looking around at the closed shutters and empty plaza. "I'm *so* getting out of here."

Her teeth gritted, she followed an older man with an umbrella, never letting her gaze wander from the back of his head until he turned a corner she swore she hadn't seen despite having walked past those houses repeatedly. *Canal Grande* gleamed in all its splendor. She could've cried. Almost did.

As much as she tried to find a water taxi to take her to the airport, she didn't manage to get one. Either the guys didn't see her or they superbly ignored her increasingly louder requests. After a while Jasmine marched down the gently swaying dock and came up right nose to nose with the closest one. Italian men weren't that tall for the most part.

"Excuse me," she said loudly as she put her hand on his elbow and steered him around to face her.

The look in his eyes stopped her cold. Pure fear gripped her throat and squeezed. He didn't smile, didn't say a word, only stared with the coldest expression, the darkest glint in his eyes. Muttering an excuse, Jasmine backed up several paces, turned and jogged back up the dock to the promenade.

Her heart beat madly. She tried again some distance down the promenade, to see if she'd have more luck there. Same outcome. Either everyone was too busy for a lone female tourist or there was *something* going on.

Her watch beeped. She looked down and cursed. Noon. Shit, she hadn't accomplished anything. She couldn't seem to find anyone anywhere willing to talk to her. Either they didn't understand what she was trying to say or...

Or what? For Pete's sake, the *demons* wouldn't let them speak? *Paw-leeze*.

The Internet café!

She could perhaps find the schedules there, could even try to change her flight online. Bolstered, Jasmine cleaved the thickening crowds and easily found the little place flanked on either side by masks and Murano glass shops. She entered, looked around and noticed she was the only customer.

With a smile, the same young man she'd seen the day before indicated she could use any machine she wanted. She chose the one closest to the door. Man, was she getting paranoid.

She accessed her flight info, cursed when she realized she wouldn't be able to change her flight without paying a hefty fee and was on a search engine before she realized she'd typed anything. *Hey*.

Looking over her shoulder at regular intervals, she entered the search words "haunted" and "houses" and "Venice". She looked in shock at the keyboard. Why had

she just done that? She didn't care about the goddamn house. She just wanted to change...

An interesting hit caught her attention. She clicked on it and stared in mute awe at her house, only the picture looked old. It was in Italian and some of it she could get. She already knew much of the important words anyway. *Diavoli, casa diabolica* and *insania Jasmina...*

Jasmine sniggered. She really was losing her mind. Who would've guessed? Maybe her ex had been right all along. God that sucked.

The part she couldn't get, she tried to dissect using what little Latin she still remembered from high school but she wasn't going anywhere. She turned to watch the young man busily arranging business cards on the board.

"Uh, excuse me, sir? Could you help me, please?" She scooted aside from the computer screen when the young man smiled and approached. "What does it say, right here?"

She pointed at the screen, near the bottom at the caption under the picture. After squinting at it for a while, the young man nodded.

"It say the house belong to Renaissance...how do you say? *Chimica uomo*, a man who does chemistry and *astronomia*. Chemist?"

Jasmine's eyes flared. "Oh an alchemist, you mean? Oh yes. Please go on."

"The alchemist say he find, uh, *portello*, a door, for an other *mondo* with *diavoli* in it. He *omicidio*, kill himself, the alchemist. By the neck, *si*?"

Jasmine's hands grew clammy just hearing the words. An alchemist claimed to have found a gate to another world, one peopled with demons before killing himself. Could it be...? Nah.

"What else does it say?" she asked, turning toward the only helpful person in town. The smile died before it reached her eyes.

The young man was looking down at the computer as if it'd killed his mom or something. There was such rage, such loathing as he rolled the mouse toward the end of the screen to the drawing of a man—the exact picture of what she thought a Renaissance alchemist would look like. She couldn't read the name nor did she try very hard. The plastic mouse creaked when the young man squeezed it.

"The interfering mortal did not take his own life, I forced him to hang himself and watched while his light died out."

He still had an accent, but the inflection was completely different. Jasmine nearly jumped out of her chair. She backpedaled to the door, the straps of her handbag solidly wrapped in a fist. If she had to, she'd swing that thing like there was no tomorrow.

Impossible. "*V-Vespero*?"

"Give me the key, Jasmine. Give me the key or I will hurt this friendly young man."

Swallowing was hard. She cleared her throat and feared for a second she would throw up. She needed to think. This was all too crazy. *Stall for time*. "What key?"

The young man frowned, grabbed a pen from a nearby worktable and put his hand on the counter, palm down, fingers extended. He poised the pen's tip an inch above and looked at Jasmine.

"I want it with a passion that frightens even me." He smiled then stabbed the pen in his hand.

Jasmine yelped as if the pen had pierced her own skin. Blood seeped out of the wound, skin wrinkled and tore. With a sob, the young man violently twisted the pen, yanked it out and stabbed back in.

"Stop it! Please!"

He did, his gaze on her, half pleading, half triumphant. Poor kid, what he must have thought. Jasmine couldn't even look him in the eye, not because she saw Vespero but for the guilt gnawing at her. If she'd given the card, he wouldn't have suffered this way. If she'd given the card, Lumere wouldn't presently be suffering.

He grinned through his tears. "Indeed. You would abandon this young man just as you have my hermit brother with much more ease than I would have expected. There is hope for you after all."

Lumere's defaced card flashed in her mind. She *had* abandoned him. Had he been waiting for her to return with the key, knowing the consequences? Was he waiting still? Hoping?

"I haven't... I didn't think any of it was *real*. I didn't know."

A look of frustration twisted the handsome young man's features. He hissed something in Italian. "Mortals never used to be so hard to convince. I remember when a shadow and a whisper sufficed to send entire families to the pyre. You modern mortals, you are so sanitized, rational, you cling to your logic and your artificial laws, thinking it will protect you, shield you from what you know is just beneath." He closed his eyes as though he envisioned some blissful vision. "The rot is starting to show through, is it not? You can feel it too—I know you can. The decay and violence you modern mortals so desperately pushed below the surface are seeping back up. I cannot wait to help you achieve your potential."

The weight of his words felt like individual stones being added, one by one, onto her shoulders. She could hardly stay upright for the terror and shame at what she'd caused. She was the one who'd let Vespero pollute her mind. God, she'd even let him...

His gaze grew hard as he poised the pen in front of his eye. A drop of blood dangled from the tip. "Now, Jasmine, it is time to relinquish the key, it is time for you to embrace the inevitable. As you have done for me the other night, open wide."

Jasmine stared in mute horror at the pen almost touching the young man's eye. A mix of panic and silent supplication flared his gaze, his nostrils. He began to sob.

"I'm so sorry!"

Jasmine ran out as fast as she could. The young man's shriek of pain chased her down the street. She ran. She ran and didn't stop when she collided against several

people, didn't slow down when a particularly thick group of tourists turned a corner, blocking the narrow street and only skidded to a halt when she'd put several twisted alleys between her and the kid from *The Exorcist*. She panted hard.

"Ohmygod, ohmygod," she snarled as she sandwiched the handbag between her thighs and rubbed her hair back from her face. That poor kid...

Her cheeks were numb and Jasmine feared for a second she'd pass out. Leaning against a wall, she put her head between her knees and took a few long breaths. *Oh man, oh man*. She'd never, ever, been so scared.

She looked up just as a man glanced at her in a way she didn't like at all. A long shiver tightened the back of her neck. Jasmine threw him another quick peek as she pretended to squint at some sign above his head. He wore a plaid shirt and khaki shorts. Another confused tourist perhaps? He didn't look confused at all though, just very, very *focused*. Were those creepy little things murmuring things in his ear as well? Was it Vespero again? Chasing her through these different people? Was there no one who could deny him? No one he couldn't control?

Okay, shit, I believe. I BE-LIE-VE!

A quick check around revealed nothing of particular interest save for the guy still staring at her. Things were rapidly spiraling out of control. She rubbed sweat out of her eyes and blinked repeatedly. For the first time in her life, Jasmine Dunmore didn't know what to do. She didn't know where to go, who to talk to, what to say if she found someone who'd listen. While she came up blank for ideas on how to get out of this mess, in the back of her mind, she kept telling herself how the house would make it all right. She could go there, wait a while, at least have something to eat and drink. No one could think clearly without food and something to drink. Then she could calmly examine the key again and see what the deal was with it.

Yeah, that makes sense.

Jasmine peeled her shaking frame off the wall and turned right, toward an alley leading to another, which led to another, which would eventually take her home. In her mind's eye, she could see the entire course. How she remembered it...? She couldn't tell. Hadn't she just wasted the morning getting lost in the same few blocks? So why could she map the way home from there?

Hey, wait a minute...

"It's *not* my home," she growled under her breath.

Just at the edge of her hearing, she thought she heard insects buzzing around her head. But there was nothing there. Not a single fly. She closed her eyes for a second to try to focus on the sound. Not insects. More like...burning paper, ashes disintegrating under the touch. The same dry, brittle sound. Was this the sound they made, those hideous little things?

"Fuck off," she snarled under her breath, ignoring the look of outrage from a passerby. Another English-speaking tourist or one of *them*?

“Yeah,” Jasmine repeated, coming off the wall and pointing an accusing finger at the retreating woman. “Get the fuck away from me!”

A pair of men skittered away to the other side of the alley so they wouldn’t come close to her. Jasmine stifled a laugh. A hysterical laugh.

I’m going nuts, totally losing my mind.

“They” wanted her to go back to the house so they could control her better. She remembered how difficult it’d been just to make it downstairs into the lobby. If she returned to the house, she didn’t know if she’d be able to get back out again. Why didn’t Vespero just invade her head as he’d done to that poor kid? Why?

Jasmine looked around. Everyone looked suspicious, anyone could be one of them. The man still stared at her. Fear crept back over her rising anger. Just to gauge the man’s intent, she turned left and away from the house, back toward *Canal Grande*.

He took a step toward her.

I’m not someone you can push around, you got that, you creepy little shits, she roared mentally. She stared guns at the man who took another step. He was a *big* guy.

He frowned, angled his torso a bit forward. Gravity never lied. He was getting ready to charge.

She was running a split second after he did.

Jasmine couldn’t believe how fast she could run when she thought the devil was after her tail. And it was, wasn’t it? She really did have a devil after her.

For the first time since she’d arrived in Venice, she believed in everything. In the card, the gate, demons, Lumere. Oh god, she believed in him the most and if she could, she’d undo the damage. But right then she believed wholeheartedly this madman would hurt her if she didn’t run really, really fast.

Her mind clear as never before—abject fear did that apparently—Jasmine tore across a small plaza and charged down some slimy alley leading god knew where but at least it shook the guy off her tail. Backs of restaurants, judging by the smell and garbage piled high, lined one side of the cobbled alley. The houses were so high there and the alley so narrow light barely touched down at all. Putrid smells hit her. Jasmine breathed through her gritted teeth as she sprinted to the end of the street, used a post box bolted to the wall for support so she could take the corner faster.

And collided against a man’s chest covered with a plaid shirt.

His hands were rough when he grabbed her handbag and yanked on it. Her watch broke in several pieces and landed on the ground with small clicks. Jasmine yelled as she tugged back, practically hanging on the handbag.

“Senora?” cried someone behind her.

She had neither the inclination nor energy to spare and just ignored whoever it was. A pair of women poked their heads from a doorway to her left then started screaming and pointing.

“Fire! Fire! Policia!” Jasmine screamed at the top of her lungs.

One of the straps gave. *God no, Lumere's card!*

A grimace of rage on his face, the man spared a hand so he could grab at her hair.

"You're not taking it, you jerk," she snarled, suddenly feeling more enraged than afraid. Maybe she truly was losing her mind.

This was Lumere's card and that brute wasn't going to have it!

Looping her arm in the remaining strap, she kned him in the balls—or she hoped she did—and shouldered him aside. With a "*humph*", he knocked back against the wall. She took off without looking back. A narrow canal she thought she remembered gleamed menacingly to her right. She ran along the ledge, her hand against the wall for balance and support.

God her elbow and arm hurt.

Jasmine barely managed to yelp before she slipped on the slimy cobbles and tumbled in the narrow canal. She heard people yelling but couldn't see anything.

"Argh! God!"

Sobbing and cursing, Jasmine swam across the five-foot-wide canal where a tiny set of stairs rose from the green water. Hands full of sharp, glistening mussels, she tugged and hoisted herself on the steps one by one. Panic gripped her throat when she managed to collapse on the moss-covered landing.

The card!

After she knuckled some water out of her eyes and face, she yanked the handbag open and delicately pulled the Ziploc bag out.

"Oh no..."

It looked worse. Lumere's radiant lantern was all but gone and so was he. His hair was white, he had no facial features, just an empty face, while wide black marks defaced the rest of his image.

"They're killing him," she breathed, transfixed by the card.

Because of me. He used the split second he had to push me out of harm's way, back into my own world. And that left him at the mercy of Vespero and his...things. Lumere sacrificed himself for me. I did abandon him as Vespero said.

Despair forced her eyes closed. She wrapped her arms around her knees and ignored people as they gathered around her and patted her shoulders or head. Someone spoke English to her. She didn't reply. She didn't care.

Lumere is dying.

And it was all her fault. She hadn't wanted to listen, to believe. She did then but it was too late. Wasn't it? Shame pricked her heart. And something else too...a deep sense of loss. She'd lost him, the only man—demon—who understood her completely. Somehow, she felt as if she were losing even more, right at the very moment, that every second she spent away from him was lost, one she'd never get back. Acute sadness forced her to cling to the card. She was losing him.

Jasmine stood and walked out of the tight circle of confused people. If there was one in there listening to some demonic whisper, she didn't know nor would she care if they got their hands on her. She didn't care for anything anymore. They could go to hell.

Ha.

She looked down at Lumere's card through the water-beaded plastic. What were they doing to him? Obviously, they didn't need him alive to get at his key. In truth, they cared about neither Lumere nor her nor anyone else. All Vespero wanted was the card so he could open the gate. Just the card.

All *she* wanted was try to undo the harm she'd caused Lumere. But she couldn't bring the card inside.

Her head hurt. She kept trying to think logically but all she ended up doing was arguing with herself. No, not with herself. She felt as though three different voices fought for control inside her head. Her own Little Voice of Reason, which she recognized because it tended to sound a little nasal, and two other different voices, older.

I have to get them off him.

"How the hell can I go inside, anyway? Lumere's not there to take me."

Would she end up in the demonic world if she just went to sleep? Would she be able to get back out again? Did she care more about some dimensional gate and the fate of the world or Lumere?

Ironic how the world's destiny would come to rest on her hormones! Estrogen missiles, libido bioweapons... Jasmine barked a quick, mirthless laugh.

Yep, I really did go mad. Maybe I'm already in an institution talking to myself and flinging my own shit at the walls.

She must be, for an idea had just popped into her brain. She hoped it wasn't one of those creepy things murmuring stuff in her ear. She hoped it really was from her own concoction.

It was so desperate, so extreme, so improbable, it *had* to come directly from her and not them. They wouldn't see *that* one coming. What sane demon would?

Lumere's words came back to her then. "*Seventy-eight cards, one for each major demon. Mine is the last one still in the material world where it must remain. Vespero has tried several times to get it close enough to the gate so he could manipulate the bearer into opening it. He will do the same to you.*"

Well, she was going to bring it a hell of a lot closer than they could have imagined!

Chapter Nine

"Jasmine knows what she must do," Lumere said softly as Vespero peered into the mortal realm through the young man's remaining eye.

Lumere was glad Jasmine had not been there to witness the terrible deed although he knew she must have heard the scream. Only a handful of demons were strong enough to openly contact a human on the mortal world – Vespero, The Fool, The Veiled Sisters, perhaps a couple of others and of course himself.

With a shake of his head, Vespero pulled out of the mortal's mind. The young man's image shredded. Smoke in a strong gust.

The demon crouched on the floor where Lumere knelt, shackled to thick iron rings in the floor, and absently toyed with the silver streak in his hair. He looked tired. Lumere silently applauded Jasmine's mental strength. No other mortal had ever forced Vespero to exert so much energy, had ever been so resilient against his influence. She probably did not even know her own strength nor the power it gave her against the demons.

"Of course she does not. How could she?" Vespero demanded angrily. "They know nothing, *feel* nothing. How things will change when the gate is opened. They will feel again, I assure you, starting with my delectable Jasmine."

Delectable Jasmine, whispered the atrocities, crawling around just at the edge of light. Some of them scurried up the walls and ceiling. Clicking sounds accompanied their sharp little claws against the stone.

"She is not yours."

Why had Vespero's boast so bothered him? She was not his brother's. She was not his either. He looked away so the devilishly shrewd demon would not see the pain. And the fear. Jasmine was in terrible danger. The minions were pursuing her without pause, defiling every mortal within reach. Any one of them could harm her.

Slowly, Vespero coiled his long, clawed finger around the silver strand of hair, forcing Lumere increasingly closer to the other's face, reeling him in. His amber eyes blazed. He put his mouth a hair's breadth away from Lumere's. "I have seduced her once. She spread wide for me, writhed beneath my touch. You were there...or have you already forgotten the sight of such a juicy, luscious fruit?"

Luscious fruit, came the whisper.

He had not. The image of Jasmine sprawled on the table, the vile Vespero between her legs, still burned him. Had she only known the demon's true form, she never would have let him near her. Only on rare occasions did he show himself to mortals, shed the pleasing shell to bare his hideousness to them, or right before they died, those

unfortunates or misguided who came too close, then he would reveal himself to them. Every single mortal who had come to the gate carrying a key had died horribly and become one of the...*things*—soulless, abominable creatures. Lumere would not let Jasmine suffer the same fate.

“She only allowed you near her because you tricked her mind into seeing what was not there.”

“She *wanted* to see,” Vespero countered, for a split second switching his appearance to the black-haired handsome man he could be. He grinned then switched back. “They all want to see beauty where there is none. They *hope*. Such is their weakness.”

Their weakness.

“Jasmine is not weak and you know it, this is why we are here. You cannot do it by yourself. She will not return to the gate. You have lost her.”

So have I, he added deep within himself so Vespero would not hear.

“Have I?”

Silence. None of the things spoke.

Lumere did not trust the sudden glint of triumph in the other demon’s eyes. “I think she will come back. And if I cannot seem to convince her fast enough, perhaps she will listen to your wise voice instead of mine.”

Instead of mine, the things murmured as they shuffled closer, sensing something was about to happen.

“I will not help you lure her back.”

Vespero grinned before planting a long, rough kiss on Lumere. He withdrew and cocked his head. “You would not be luring her back, just screaming in pain.”

Pain, came the chorus of whispers. *Pain, pain.*

Lumere lurched forward when several of Vespero’s monstrous creations dropped from the ceiling and onto his shoulders and back. The chains clinked when he tried to reach up and pull them from him. One sank its teeth in his neck. He growled and managed to yank it away by leaning his head closer to his hand.

While Lumere fought them off, Vespero sat back on his heels and watched, clearly aroused. His reddish, leathery skin gleamed amid the glistening black hair covering his chin, lower belly and thighs. With a snigger, he wrapped his taloned hands over his member, all inflamed-looking ridges, and satisfied himself with brisk, short strokes.

“I love to see you suffer, Lumere, it makes you look less perfect.”

Less perfect.

A cry of pain struggled up Lumere’s throat when several of the beasts started to scratch at his back and legs. Something tried to get inside him, every orifice was on the verge of violation. He squeezed his eyes shut as he ripped away those he could. His blood made their bodies slick and hard to grasp.

Do not scream. Do not let her hear you.

Lumere knew Jasmine would “hear” his pain since she carried his key. He had already seen her reaction—through one of Vespero’s borrowed hosts—when she had pulled the key out of her bag and glanced at it. It hurt him how she blamed herself for his plight. She had not caused any of this. Demons had. *He* had.

“Come now,” Vespero urged between strokes. His member pulsed with diseased seed. “Let it out. You want to.”

You want to, whispered his abominable creations.

“It will take...more...than your pets, Vespero.”

A guttural laugh shook the other’s thick shoulders. “You think taunting me will keep my attention off her? You think you can deceive *me*? I am the devil to them, *The Tempter*, Christians’ Satan, Muslims’ Iblis, Kroni to the Hindus, Mara, Belial...more, Lumere? I am the one thing they all fear deep down inside, even the unbelievers. They see my work, my mark on their world and in their hearts. And they fear.”

The things roiled and tossed excitedly, repeating, *And they fear*.

As he spoke, Vespero crawled closer, one of his hands still pumping. “I will lure her in as I have done the others and let her think she has me fooled. Then when she opens the gate, wise one, and she *will*, I will sweep through that mortal and her young world...” He stopped so he could concentrate on his hand. Then his eyes bore into Lumere’s. “And I will savage it, ravish and rip into it...my own sacrificial virgin.”

Sacrificial virgin, came the hissed echo.

Lumere snarled and turned his face away just as Vespero climaxed. The dark seed splattered across his thighs and belly burning. For the split second he let his guard down, the *things* overpowered him, violated him while the other demon reached forward, viscous threads still dangling from his fingers and cupped Lumere’s chin.

“Will you call her?”

Call her, urged the raspy little voices.

Lumere arched back, bit one of the things and threw it far. Panting, snarling, he yanked on the chains so he could get at Vespero and closed his hand over the other’s wrist.

For a split second, Vespero and Lumere knelt face to face, the old enemies, and just stared.

Vespero looked up as though smelling something in the air. “Quiet!”

The things retreated at once, licking their clawed limbs, hisses of frustration filled the room.

Lumere stopped struggling. He could feel it too.

Clearly shocked and pleased, Vespero grinned wide. “My brother, how subtle you are. I did not even hear you. What did you tell her?”

Fear spread through Lumere as he squinted through the haze of pain and the blood in his eyes. The demonic seed still burned his skin like acid. Yet through the agony in his body, his mind—and his *heart*—he felt the difference. Sharp, acute, it felt to him as

though someone carrying a bright light had shone it in his face. Heat followed. A selfish part of him rejoiced while the rest shrank in horror.

"I did not tell her anything," he whispered. He had been very careful, despite the shame and the grief, not to reach out, to just close down and wait for the end.

His hopes sank.

Jasmine was coming.

* * * * *

Jasmine was still dripping water when she slid the key into the old rusted lock and pushed the door in. That sweet smell drifted to her as did the soft, airy music, both of which she'd come to associate with the house. Everything looked the same, *felt* the same. Rotten wood, rusted iron works, dusty marble stairs going up, that sense of anticipation. Just as her first day inside *Calle del Traghetto 2603*.

With the handbag tight against her side, she closed the door and faced the steps. Nothing buzzed around her head, as though even the house itself was holding its breath. She yawned.

I'm so tired.

She really was. Jasmine shook her head and climbed the first landing. Late afternoon sun filtered in through the windows. She pulled the shutters in on each one. Darkness deepened behind her as she went through the house, retracing her steps in reverse order, closing what she'd opened, even the door to the flooded boat garage. The urge to climb down the rickety steps nearly overwhelmed her. She closed the remaining shutter to the small window and wedged the other one in as best she could.

"I need to sleep first, okay," she murmured, half to herself, half to...whoever was listening. As she exited the apartment, she spotted the water bottle she'd let drop during her dream of *Vespero*.

A sense of release allowed her to climb to the last level. The checkered floor reminded her poignantly of the card in her handbag and forced Jasmine to grit her teeth and push images of *Lumere* far from her mind.

To wash the smell of salty lagoon water from her, Jasmine stripped, rinsed her clothes and herself in the tiny sink and slipped them back on. It wouldn't make any difference anyway. Not after...

As with the other days before, the sound of revelers filling the streets grew proportionally to the darkness stretching over the graceful city. Tonight was the last night of the carnival. People would be going *crazy*. Already she could tell the difference just by sound. The music from the streets was louder, livelier, the voices higher-pitched. There'd be fireworks too apparently.

She stood on the balcony and watched the sun veil itself behind the marble dome of *Basilica Santa Maria della Salute* across the canal. Sunrays stretched over terra-cotta roofs

and statues. The gold winged lion, Venice's venerable emblem, gleamed atop *San Marco* tower.

"It's so beautiful," Jasmine murmured. She threw a look at the pair of gargoyles standing silent guard on either side of the balcony and snorted. "You're not too bad either."

She shouldn't laugh. Not at a time like this.

With a last look at the fabled city that had so rightly inspired many paintings and works of art, she retreated inside the room, closed the doors and slid the weather-beaten slats of wood across the iron loops. Some lock. One by one, she pulled in and secured the shutters on all three windows. The house was closed. In the eyes of anyone standing outside, it could've been abandoned once again.

After making sure the zipper on her handbag was secured, she slid the remaining strap over her forearm and lay down directly on the marble floor. She was just so damn tired. Wasn't she? She'd run around all day, had been chased by madmen, taken an impromptu swim class in a canal...she didn't have any fight left in her. Didn't she?

"I just want to sleep," she murmured as she closed her eyes.

She kept her hands secured over the precious handbag when the first signs of sleep filtered in. Her legs twitched, her jaw relaxed. She wondered how long it would take to fall asleep and if it would make any difference. Perhaps it would. She hoped so. For her sake and that of Lumere.

Jasmine opened her eyes and looked around. Nothing. She sat.

Down into the streets, the festival was going on full blast. Medieval music floated up to her windows while voices raised in song and laughter reached her muffled and distorted. The handbag was still in her hands. She checked inside but didn't pull the card. She couldn't bear to see how much more ruined the image would surely be.

A faint sound from the balcony doors made her turn her head. Just as her gaze swept across the rotten slats, she spotted smallish forms outside scurrying away in all directions. The tiny clicking sounds accompanying their retreat stopped soon afterward.

So I am asleep.

She clutched the handbag even tighter then stood. The tennis shoes felt sodden and yucky on her feet. Rearranging her still-damp bra and T-shirt, she crept closer to the balustrade and checked over the edge. Complete darkness engulfed the staircase. Her heart gave one great thud before beating increasingly faster. Jasmine swallowed.

Some light would be nice.

At once, a soft golden glow reminded her acutely of Lumere's lantern when he'd come for her, illuminated the stairwell right down to the tiled landing.

Behind her, a series of tiny rasping sounds raised the fine hairs on her arms. Then it changed to small clicks, like tiny dogs with too-long nails walking on concrete.

"Go away, you little creeps," she growled through clenched teeth.

The sound stopped, the sense of dread lessened. They'd listened.

Lumere's words came back to her. "*Strength of mind is the only power in my world, Jasmine. Nothing else counts for much. You are lucky to be so gifted.*" She was going to test that theory very soon.

Jasmine put her hand to the rail and climbed down a couple of steps. Music and laughter filtered up to her and she knew it didn't come from the street but from inside the house. With a quickly stifled gasp, she saw a few costumed people holding sparkling champagne flutes walk across the third-story landing. Rich perfume tickled her nose. She didn't even need to look down at herself to realize she now wore a ball gown. Black this time, with red trim and a large, elaborate mask covered in long black feathers. Thankfully, she still had the brown leather handbag—and it *so* clashed with the rest of her outfit—clutched under her elbow. She tied the mask behind her head and arranged the long satin ribbons on her denuded shoulders, some in front, some behind.

As she reached the landing, a man wearing emerald green pranced out of the room to the left and grinned widely at her. A saber gleamed at his hip. He bowed low, mockingly and skipped up the first step. His gloved hand reached out to her, steady, palm up.

Jasmine looked at his eyes, two sparkling blue sapphires, and down at his hand again. "Vespero?"

The man appeared mortally insulted. He put his knuckles over his eyes and let out a theatrical sigh. "I am not that unsightly, am I?" He laughed a hyena's laugh.

With a look around at the other people, Jasmine took the man's hand. "What's your name?"

His eyes twinkled mischievously. "No need for names. I am but a fool."

Wasn't there a tarot card with a jester on it? Jasmine couldn't remember.

"*Lo Sciocco, The Fool,*" the man replied with a pronounced bow that made the feathers on his mask sweep the floor.

He snapped back up, pulled his saber out and flicked the hem of a woman's dress to reveal pale thighs cinched tight with black garters. She cried out and hurried past. Her companion, a man dressed entirely in white, laughed.

The Fool turned toward Jasmine and brought the tip of his blade right along her neck. His eyes grew hard.

"You have something we want." He flicked his wrist and a length of red ribbon fell to the floor. Jasmine resisted the urge to recoil.

As though he'd suddenly remembered something highly amusing, he winked and beamed at her. "But we cannot take it away, no, we cannot. It must be given. Yes, freely." He whirled Jasmine around and sent her waltzing inside the room.

He followed her inside. The door closed behind him, the sound echoing inside the large ballroom.

As she backpedaled from him, she bumped against another one, who turned and steadied her with a firm hand on her elbow. His fingers grazed the handbag. She saw the hunger in his eyes and stepped back hurriedly. Below his gleaming purple mask, his sexy mouth curved at the corners.

Jasmine felt herself flush. She remembered him. He'd been busy making love to his woman on the table when she'd walked by with Vespero. The demon had offered her "a taste".

"An offer that still stands," the man in the purple mask said. Licking his lips, he drew near, let his finger graze her shoulder.

Stay focused, she mentally urged herself.

"But you cannot, Jasmine," replied The Fool. He stood right behind her, his fingers lightly tracing the collar of her dress as it plunged below her shoulder blades. "This is all so...tempting."

Damn, it is.

Renaissance-style music—or what she thought was Renaissance anyway, harpsichord, flute, lute and viol—rose in a corner. Where there'd been nothing but polished black marble floor was a small orchestra with wind and string instruments, and throning in its center like a royal jewel against a cushion, an organ all gleaming polished wood and gilded relief. No musicians played on the instruments, despite the lovely music emanating from them.

People immediately formed two lines, one of women, one of men. Jasmine spotted the two veiled women at the end of their line.

"Please join us, Jasmine," The Fool said. He grabbed her wrist and gracefully spun her in place. He must have been a great dancer.

A wide grin announced he'd heard her remark. She avoided his searching gaze and let him guide her to the line of women. The closest ones smiled graciously and made room for her between them.

At some cue she didn't get, the lines moved closer together, in a sort of pretend-confrontation then retreated. The second time they grew near, Jasmine took a few tentative steps but the man across her, the one with the purple mask, walked farther so he could wrap his arm around her waist. Likewise, the other men each encircled their companions' waists and spun on the spot once.

"This is all for you," he murmured in her ear. He smelled of spices and some exotic scent she couldn't place. The image of his naked body danced in her mind. He'd been graced with a fine network of muscles and a spectacular member.

Perhaps she should've taken his offer for a "taste".

"We have all the time in the world," he replied. "*Time* is without a master now."

Jasmine ignored his intent look as she concentrated on the orchestra. Surreptitiously, she stared at the violin hovering in midair and willed it to float from

the left of the orchestra to the right. No one seemed to notice the violin's sudden change of position.

"Would you?" he asked, his hot finger following the red trim along her cleavage. "Enjoy a taste, I mean."

"I'm...uh, well, it's all very sudden. I'm not even sure it's all real." She looked away when he bent to kiss her.

"Then let me refresh your memory."

His female companion from the other night glided in closer, the same green dress glistening with pearls and satin adornments. She curtsied for the man, let him dip her low and kiss her throat.

Jasmine stood rooted to the spot as the pair proceeded to exchange one long, passionate kiss. He straightened, widened his stance and using both hands, yanked his companion's corseted gown cleanly in half, right down to the waist. She smiled below her white mask as he leaned over and gathered her large breasts in the middle of her chest, squeezed them hard and licked each in turn.

Arousal throbbed in her pussy. Jasmine tried to ignore it as much as she could, just as she tried to ignore the wet sounds he made as he suckled on his woman. The nipples glistened with saliva.

While she cradled her lover's head between her arms, the woman looked at Jasmine and smiled just as the two lines of dancers began to disintegrate and converge into clumps instead. Jasmine knew where this was going. For the life of her, she couldn't stop watching.

The lovers knelt. While the man continued lavishing attention to her breasts, the woman dug her hand inside his pants and pulled them down around his thighs. That spectacular, smooth cock emerged from the purple velvet with the splendor of a long-awaited diva from between theater curtains. The woman mewled her pleasure and captured it with both hands. Even Jasmine wanted to touch it.

"See how it pleases her," The Lover said to Jasmine. He closed his eyes when his companion bent down on all fours so she could swallow his cock.

While she sucked her lover, another man knelt behind her, lifted the hem of her dress and snaked a hand among the many folds of lustrous fabric.

Jasmine clutched the bag against her chest when the new man angled his hand slightly lower and slowly moved back and forth. His efforts were rewarded by a pronounced undulation in the woman's spine.

"Are you sure you do not want a taste? I would oblige," The Fool asked Jasmine after he materialized by her side. "It would be repugnant but I would sacrifice myself." He laughed at his own joke.

When both men began to pump into the writhing woman, each in their own end of her, Jasmine's breath quickened. Arousal tightened her sex, hardened her nipples. She threw a quick peek at the man by her side and caught him smirking.

"Maybe just a little taste?" She hated how she sounded. And hated that she was aroused at all. But she had to.

Someone cried out behind her. Jasmine turned to watch a pair of men vigorously undressing a third while beside them another duo clutched at each other's hips and sank to the floor.

She felt fingers undo her hair, let it fall on her shoulders. After he put his hands over her shoulders, The Fool turned Jasmine around and pulled his saber out. She wanted to step back but couldn't move.

"Do not be afraid," he said with that smirk again. "I am not here to hurt you. Such is not my place."

The tip of his blade flicked the first set of laces holding her bodice together in front. She breathed deeper with the sudden release. Another flick and a second set gave. Shamefully, Jasmine took a deep breath so her breasts would swell above her cleavage, forcing the fabric wider apart.

Without looking directly at the orchestra, she moved the violin again. No one noticed. Theory confirmed.

His sparkling blue gaze fell to her chest. Another flick. "You are so...*alive*."

After he slid the weapon back in its sheath at his hip, he drew near. The emerald of his mask and close-fitting satin doublet highlighted his narrow chin and long neck. All in all, he *was* a handsome man.

"Thank you." He cocked his head, poised his mouth over hers but waited. "It must come from you."

With the handbag a flimsy barrier, she angled her chin higher and met him halfway. A sudden urge to run spread through her body. She tightened her sweaty fists over the strap. Her lips were a mere hair's breadth away. She had to.

For a split second, every sound in the room ceased. No one moved. By the corner of her eye, she spotted several faces turned toward her and the man she was about to kiss. Closing her eyes, shutting her mind against everything else, Jasmine pressed her lips against his.

Music resumed, as did dancers and lovers. Heat seeped through her. Heat and *thrill*. The split second exhilaration of a dive off a building, the nanosecond before a car plunged over the railing, a flash of pleasure before the wave of pain washed over and ripped everything out.

Jasmine mewled when he left her lips and raked his bottom teeth along her jaw, down her neck. She arched back and let him separate the ruined bodice farther until air caressed her nipples, which he enveloped in soft, warm hands. She let him do it to her, all the while imagining it was Lumere.

Lumere's mouth on her throat, gently licking the little concave spot above her sternum, Lumere's hands seizing her breasts, his lips joining his fingers to reduce her nipples to throbbing buds. His fingers again when one of his hands slithered lower and

cupped her mons through the dress, pressing against the natural curve. It was for him that Jasmine felt herself melt between her legs. Lumere's skillful fingers bunching up her dress, slowly, inch by inch, until one of her legs was denuded to the hip. Jasmine willed it to be Lumere when a hot hand landed on her pussy and pushed against it with a palm already moist with her honey. Not a stranger's finger entered her slowly, teased her clit along the way, but Lumere's, all skill and patience.

And it was Lumere's name Jasmine exhaled.

The caresses slowed.

"Why do you deny yourself this way?"

She opened her eyes and found The Fool staring at her intently. He looked sincere, as shocking as this was. No one paid attention to them.

Jasmine held his gaze with her own. "Because I have to."

He pulled out of her, let the hem of her dress fall. "It is no use, the light is gone."

"What do you mean?" Her heart beat so hard it hurt. Unspent sexual energy fizzled along her skin. She felt feverish. "What light?"

The Fool pointed at her handbag. "His. It is gone."

She tilted her chin to make it appear as though she was kissing him. "I don't think it's gone," she whispered.

"Oh?" A sparkle danced in his blue eyes. "Why not?"

"Because I'm the one carrying it."

He looked shocked for a second then his eyes narrowed until an impish grin tugged his thin lips. "You will be severely punished for this."

"I know."

"Pain is the best shield. Use it."

Of course. Lumere had hurt her when they'd been about to be captured by Vespero, hurt her so she could focus on the pain above anything else.

Bolstered by her successful trials with the violin and hoping to god she hadn't been deliberately played with, Jasmine drew on every fiber of mental discipline in her body and bit the inside of her cheek hard.

The next second, she stood outside the ballroom, her foot on the first step leading down. A thick wooden beam barred the ballroom door. She'd locked them in.

She was about to run for the lobby three stories down when she spotted the dark little things crawling up the stairs, on the steps, on the walls, a couple clawed directly along the slanted ceiling.

"Shit!"

She'd been hoping to materialize right at the front door. The buzzing sound preceded the horrors up the steps. She whipped her hand around her head. She'd never get past those. She closed her eyes again and visualized the landing, the broken tiles,

the rotten doors, all the while keeping that beam against the door. It was getting more difficult.

Pain is the best shield.

Jasmine dug her nails in her palm, filled her mind with an image of the front porch. When she opened them again, she gasped. The beam was gone, the door to the apartment was inching open and a mass of snarling faces and clutching hands threatened to spill onto her.

Cursing, she ran down the first few steps, gritted her teeth when the quicker of the clawed things reached her. They scratched at her ankles, tried to trip her, ripped her dress in several places. Two crawled up on the wall and tried to leap at her. She just managed to avoid the pair and they fell over the balustrade. Angry hisses filled her ears.

“Get away,” she snarled, batting a hand while the other clutched at the handbag. “You disgusting little... Argh!”

One had latched on to her shoulder and dug amazingly sharp claws into her. Jasmine only managed to rip it out by running down the steps with her shoulder against the wall. Behind her, several voices called her back, some threatening, others cajoling. Amid them, a hyena laugh she recognized well. Crazy bastard. She ignored them all in her wild flight.

More and more of the little things packed the landing to the second floor. She waded knee-deep in them, kicked and crushed and clawed at their squishy little bodies with savagery. She made them responsible for Lumere’s pain, these sickening little monsters. Their fault!

Jasmine knew she wouldn’t get to the front door. For a split second, she felt hope leaving her. Panic threatened to engulf her whole.

Focus. Focus.

Finally, she managed to reach one of the apartments on the second floor. Her dress was in shreds, her head a throbbing mess of disheveled hair and askew mask. She ripped it off her face and threw it at them. Hissing and snapping their jaws, they folded over it as a black swarm of giant insects over a fruit. The sound terrified her. With a sob ready to spill out of her trembling lips, she pushed herself off the wall and leaped over the main body of the diabolical things.

Jasmine cried out in pain when she knocked against the doorjamb and tumbled inside the apartment. The water bottle jammed in her the thigh. She picked it up by the cap and flung it at the roiling mass of dark creatures. With the hiss of water on a burning log, they angrily scattered away and cleared a small section of floor occupied only by the bottle.

It’s just water...

As they threatened to crawl back closer, Jasmine stood and put her hand up, palm outward and willed—literally screaming in her head—for them to stop. Remarkably,

none of the little things ventured inside the threshold although they clearly hungered for it. They hissed and spat and clawed at the doorjamb.

Despite the gloom, she saw several of the demons walk down the shadowy stairs toward her. Some of them didn't look as beautiful as they once were. Shadows of weird appendages stuck out incongruously while some had heads that looked elongated and ossified at strange angles.

"Where is your light now?" cried The Fool as he pushed between the massed bodies at the door. He looked taller more angular. Was this his true form? Was she seeing them for what they really were? Had she finally, *finally*, managed to get some control back on her side?

A subtle change in their attitude forced Jasmine farther into the darkened apartment. Subdued silence pressed in on her. She looked around, saw nothing but the door leading down to the flooded garage.

"My delectable little fruit," a man's voice said from amid the crowd at the door. A very deep voice. A tenor's.

Vespero.

Chapter Ten

Oh god.

Panic squeezed Jasmine's chest. She couldn't go back out into the stairwell where those awful little creatures would attack her again. She couldn't stay there. Her mental focus wavered. A series of high-pitched keens cleaved the air as the little things tried to push inside. Even some of the demons reached in with their hands.

She'd never get past them all, especially not if Vespero was there too.

Lumere.

Drawing strength from the mere name, Jasmine felt her focus solidify. As she kept her will bent against them, Jasmine backpedaled to the low door and the steps leading to the garage. She'd try this way. There wasn't anywhere else to go. Maybe that's what Vespero had intended all along.

Maybe he's just playing with me.

She pushed the feeling of powerlessness down, down under her main goal. Help Lumere. If she achieved that, then nothing else would matter. She willed her clothes back on and the dress disappeared with the speed of thought.

Complete darkness enveloped her as she descended the unsteady steps to the flooded boat garage. What she thought was a trick of her mind turned out to be a soft blue glow emanating from the water. It resembled a neon tube illuminating the water from deep down. She followed the wall with her hand.

CLACK!

"Shit!"

A faint disturbance in the air touched the back of her head. Someone had closed the door above her. No turning back. Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea to come back. Vespero was too strong. She'd lose. In fact, she may as well open the gate and be done with it.

Yeah, cut to the chase.

"No," she growled between her teeth.

Her heart in her throat, she stepped down to the flooded garage and stood in a foot of water. Her brain refused to believe her eyes.

What was that? A gondola?

What bore frightening similarities to a funeral barge, long and narrow, all black lacquered wood and gilded ornaments, bobbed gently along the recess made to receive the gondolas. The water illuminated it from underneath and gave everything a surreal effect. And atop the long platform lay Lumere.

A gray shroud covered him from chest to ankles. His hair was fanned around his head. A simple mask of gray satin covered the upper part of his face.

A mask? Was she clinging to some last shreds of humanity inside her own mind, afraid to see what state he was in? Was it he who somehow managed the strength to try to protect her from the sight of him, despite his catatonic state?

No time for this.

Jasmine splashed water everywhere in her haste to get to him. "Lumere," she breathed as her hands went for his face. So cold. So hard. He could've been made of alabaster. She was reminded once again how much a statue of ancient Greece he appeared, especially...

Was he dead? Sleeping?

Jasmine checked for a pulse and thought she could feel a faint fluttering against the pads of her fingers. A long sigh of relief stirred strands of her hair, which brushed against his forehead.

Above, a faint rasping sound sent her heart into a crazy arrhythmic tempo. The *things*.

They had to get out of there.

She waded to the garage doors. As Jasmine passed by, she collapsed on her knees. She'd forgotten the little door to the left...

"The *gate*."

The urge to pull out the key and forget about everything else tempted her for quite a while. She didn't know how long she knelt and just stared at the door. After a while, she dragged her heavy body toward the boat doors and pushed against them with a snarl. Lumere depended on her. She had to be strong. She had to be *focused*.

He'd taken care of her, saved her at his own expense. The least she could do was to keep it together while she found a way to revive him. That she had no idea how to achieve this – she tried to ignore.

Finally, the boat doors opened. Night air floated inside the humid garage. Jasmine ran back to the barge and stepped on it. The narrow ledge for the gondolier provided the perfect launching point as she knelt on it and pushed off the recess with her foot. Slowly, the barge glided out of the garage and was about to thud against the other side of the canal when she remembered how everything was about willpower in this place or so Lumere had told her.

A foot before the prow touched the next house's foundation, Jasmine gingerly stood on the narrow platform, tucked the handbag tighter under her elbow and willed the barge to the left. It angled leftward an inch at a time and scraped the stone foundation as it went, but at least it turned. Bolstered by her small success, Jasmine bit her lip so she could focus on steering the barge and not the clicking sounds coming out of the garage. Unable to resist, she checked back quickly and cursed.

The things crawled along the ledges and foundations but never went into the water. They were close. Maybe thirty feet behind.

Fear tightened her stomach into a knot. She feared she would throw up. Another good chomp down on her lip brought her mind right back where it ought to have been in the first place...how to revive Lumere.

Along the way, Jasmine could tell the carnival was at its height. Music, camera flashes, fireworks and people dancing in the streets. The things couldn't seem to keep up and fell behind then disappeared. The clicks of their claws faded away.

She ignored it all and only allowed herself a bit of rest when she'd put several bridges and turns between her and the house. Using her foot again, she slowed the barge down and stopped under one of the many bridges. Lumere had told her no one from the mortal world could see them but just in case. Paranoia was never far from her that night.

"Lumere?"

She sat by his side. Under the shroud, he wore nothing. His hands were crossed on his belly. Like the dead. Jasmine gritted her teeth and pushed that last thought aside. He wasn't dead. She wasn't going to let him die.

Reaching out slowly, she lifted the mask, noticing how his skin changed by increments and when she'd completely removed it, marks appeared over what portions of his body she could see. She folded the shroud down over his waist.

She didn't even try to rub the tears away. They rolled down her cheeks and splattered his shoulder. Tiny cuts – a lot of them – covered his torso and arms.

"What have they done to you?"

He looked as though someone had dragged him through hawthorn bushes. Repeatedly. There wasn't any blood though. And his hair was perfect, long and lustrous except for his silver streak, which looked dull and gray, resting limply over his shoulder.

Jasmine placed her hand over his chest and leaned closer. "Lumere? Please wake up."

No sign he'd heard disturbed the marble quality of his features. Closer still until her lips hovered over his. A faint ribbon of breath caressed her skin. Jasmine pressed her mouth over his in a gentle, featherlight kiss. She sighed in relief when his eyelids quivered.

"I'm here, I've come back for you. Please wake up."

Jasmine brushed the shroud farther down to denude his hips and thighs. Cuts covered him there too. When she ran a tender hand over his chest and belly, another quiver from his eyelashes rewarded her. Some heat transferred to her palm.

She understood then. Everything. Mortals' energy was what kept the demons alive. The more vibrant, the more nourishing to them. Lumere had told her how she was a

drug to them, how her energy could be felt throughout their realm and how they hungered for it.

Trying not to rock the barge, Jasmine slipped the handbag under Lumere's knees, pulled her T-shirt off and unclipped her bra. She kicked the shoes off and snarled a curse when one went overboard. It couldn't be helped anymore. Nothing could. The jeans and underwear, because they were still damp, didn't come off easily. She twisted out of them and laid them on the platform at his feet. When she was completely naked—and foolishly realized only then she could've "willed" her clothes off—she sat astride Lumere.

With her mouth, she covered every single square inch on his face and throat, his shoulders and chest, his arms. She kissed and licked his glorious hands, each finger. She blew on his palms and the insides of his wrists. Her tears mixed with her saliva. His pale skin soon glistened with the smoothness of polished marble.

"Please, Lumere, please, come back to me," she murmured in his ear as she nibbled on his lobe.

His hair felt cool and soft when she raked her fingers in it, bunched it in her fists and kissed it savagely. Half moaning, half sobbing, Jasmine lavished attention to every dormant part of him. When she stopped to gauge his reaction, she noticed how some of the cuts had disappeared. One side of his face was once again smooth and intact.

Her spirits lifted higher than in the past several days, Jasmine trailed kisses down his belly and flanks, followed every curve on his sinewy torso, kissed each cut marring his skin. One by one, they disappeared under her caresses.

"That's it, Lumere, fight it. I'm with you, I'll help you."

Down to his lower belly then, she rained kisses there too, gently stroked his dormant shaft until warmth seeped through her fingers. She looked down with pride and amazement when his cock showed signs of life, bobbing up, up, by increments too small to notice at first, but by god, there it was stiffening! Jasmine laughed through her tears and wrapped her hands over his splendid hard-on. In her mouth it went.

Jasmine sucked and pumped, drew on every ounce of carnal energy she had to tow Lumere out of his sleep. Her mouth was a perfect home for him—her hands perfect companions. Moaning deep in her throat, she took him in all at once and pushed against the length of him, his thick girth tickling a gag reflex she fought valiantly to suppress. She wanted him in her. Her body, her determination and her *heart* would bring him back.

Jasmine relinquished his cock so she could pleasure herself as well. Her energy level would mean everything to him. On all fours, she rubbed her pelvis against his erection, parted her lips over it, used his glans like a toy and pushed, pushed harder, quicker. The first flicker of pleasure tightened her thighs. Figure eights accentuated the budding satisfaction.

"I'll bring you back, Lumere," she whispered as she gave a long thrust along his hard-on.

Mewling, she lifted herself up, grabbed his shaft and tapped it against her throbbing clit, her entire pussy. Wet sounds accentuated the pleasure. With a long sigh of bliss, she sheathed him to the hilt. His massive cock stretched her to the point of burning. Jasmine stopped for a second so she could measure his response. His lips didn't look as pale nor did the rest of him. His eyelids fluttered continually, as if he'd open his eyes any instant.

"That's it, come back to me," she urged with a languorous roll of her pelvis. "That's it, Lumere."

After she anchored her palms on either side of his face, making sure she didn't pull his hair in the process, Jasmine pushed off then drove back down slowly, deeply and allowed his cock to delve into the deepest recess of her for a great and profound penetration. She hissed with each upward movement. She exhaled his name with each downward thrust.

His mouth twitched at the corner. Jasmine broke her rhythm so she could kiss it. "Come back for me."

Back to her previous task, she concentrated on her sex and how the folds—stretched as they were—throbbed increasingly harder. Another long and intense penetration. Another step closer to orgasm. Gritting her teeth then, Jasmine began to thrust harder, quicker. Her thighs shook with the strain, her ankles burned from the awkward position. Still, she worked her muscles mercilessly.

His thick shaft rubbed in all the right places as she angled her pelvis outward and back. Each plunge was a tongue of fire licking her swollen clit. She bucked down violently. Oh she was close.

She grabbed his waist and tried not to dig her nails in his flesh as she bounced and pumped with all the energy and passion she could muster. So close. So close.

A deep-throated moan in a crescendo filled the air under the bridge. Jasmine closed her eyes when the climax tingled every nerve ending in her body. The near pain of it served as an anchor to her reeling mind. She rode Lumere with enough force to rock the barge. Sweat clammed her palms against the lacquered wood. Her knees hurt like hell as did her lip from biting it.

"Come for me, Lumere," she urged as she impaled herself again and again over him. "Come, *come*."

Jasmine arched and let her head loll back. Undulating, twisting, gyrating, she clutched his shaft with every fiery ring of pleasure gripping her. She gasped in shock when she felt a tiny but powerful jet of burning semen shoot inside her.

She looked down at his face. His eyes were closed but he wore a very faint blush on his high cheeks.

"Lumere?"

Ohh.

Another orgasm rocked her. She cried out his name.

“How I wish you would say my name this way.”

Jasmine froze.

Her mind reeled with the possibilities. Could she? *Should* she? What about Lumere...she couldn't leave him there. He was so close.

While fear replaced pleasure, she opened her eyes and stifled a sob of despair. They were no longer underneath a bridge but along a stone dock. Vespero stood right at the edge, barely three feet away, an exquisite Renaissance-style black suit molding his muscled body while a feathered mask of the deepest red hid his face. Only his chin and bottom lip were visible beneath the ruby-encrusted silk mask. His long black hair glistened when he tilted his head down at her.

“Your attentions are wasted on him, they always were. He is incapable of any feeling. Nothing stirs him. Not a woman's passion nor her body, even one as exquisite as yours. Lumere is The Hermit, Time, the keeper of balance. Neutrality and numbness incarnate.” He shook his head sadly. “I pity him. As should you.”

Jasmine shook her head. “I don't pity him. I love him.”

There. She'd admitted it to herself and anyone else she could scream it to. In spite of the short time they'd spent together—a whirl of sensations all crammed into a single night—she'd come to the realization saving Lumere transcended repaying her debt to him. She *loved* Lumere and would do anything for him. Anything.

A laugh shook Vespero's thick shoulders. “Suit yourself. Love a statue if you wish. But while he lies there, I intend to taste what he so foolishly let slip away.”

With a gasp, Jasmine stood on the dock beside Vespero, once again wearing the black gown. She willed it away and couldn't suppress a small lift of her chin when her real clothes replaced it. But she wore only one shoe. That she wasn't strong enough to will it out of the canal stung her...and it frightened her. She willed the handbag to her and clutched it against her chest.

Vespero licked his lips. “So you have mastered some of our ways. This will be even more enjoyable.”

Clicking sounds heralded the things' approach. They swarmed over the cobbled street and spilled out of dark recesses between houses, converged toward Vespero and her only to stop a few paces behind. Their dark bodies glistened like beetles.

“Finish him,” he said. His voice had become amazingly deep and barely registered in her brain. It could've been modulated thunder rumbling out of his chest.

Finish him, came the hissed whisper from the abominations.

“NO!”

Somehow finding strength in Lumere's presence, albeit muted, Jasmine willed the barge from the dock. It slowly glided farther away, right in the middle of the twelve-foot canal.

“How did you know?” Vespero asked, clearly shocked and none too pleased.

Did you know, murmured the things in unison. They sounded afraid.

"About the water?" Jasmine countered as she took a step away from him. The things behind him stirred angrily. "I threw a bottle at them and they scampered back like the little rats they are. Water is life, right? I don't think they enjoy *that* very much."

A wide grin spread his luscious lips. "How smart you are. Let us see just how much... Did Lumere tell you what they are?"

Jasmine climbed the three steps to the street and backed away several paces. Mortals—*people* for god's sake, same as her—walked around and through them as though they didn't exist. The effect unsettled Jasmine. She looked down at the handbag then back up at Vespero. He couldn't hide the hunger flashing in his gaze. Oh he wanted it bad. But if The Fool was telling the truth, she had to give it to Vespero. "*Freely given*" was what he'd said.

"No," she replied, desperate to buy herself precious seconds to think. Any second would be good enough for her. Yet she could buy herself an eternity and still not know what to do. She was doomed. Despair closed in on her. She dug her fingernail in the quick of her thumb, focused on the pain and fought back. "No, he didn't." Her voice was louder, calmer.

Vespero must have noticed the difference for he squinted at her, his head cocked as though he were listening intently. The things closed ranks around their master's feet.

Think of Lumere. Nothing else. Just him. His face, his hands.

"They are mortals, *were* mortals. The bearers of keys, to be exact. Every single one of them."

Every single one, the raspy little voices repeated.

Her gasp of shock must have spurred him on for he stalked forward. "Yes, Jasmine. I lured every bearer of keys to the house where I seduced them. They were *happy* to give me the keys because they knew it would please me, and pleasing me was the one thing on their little mortal minds." Vespero grinned genially. "And when they had given me the key, I rewarded them, *again and again*. Some lasted longer than others. When I was done with them, after I stripped away every layer of lie and denial, this is what remained. This is what you mortals look like underneath the flesh masks. Shocking, yes? Nothing pure or virtuous, no hope. It is all gone. Look at what awaits you, my delectable fruit. Look at your end."

Your end, the horrors that were once people intoned, *your end, your end*.

They crawled closer.

Jasmine knew she couldn't hope to get to the water before Vespero would will her right back on the spot. She couldn't outrun either him or his monstrous creations, she couldn't defeat him in a battle of will, she couldn't even think clearly. All she could focus on was one single thought.

If she failed, Lumere would die.

"Why don't you come and take the key, Vespero? It's so close."

“Ah, the bravado of the doomed. Even after eons, I still find it *charming*,” Vespero replied with a pronounced emphasis on the last word.

Jasmine bit her tongue hard. Blood seeped inside her mouth while simultaneously she willed herself on the other side of the canal, across the bridge.

Then she ran.

Chapter Eleven

Lumere opened his eyes and saw nothing but ashes falling from a colorless sky. He sat.

He did not recognize his surroundings and only knew that he was on some sort of water vessel gently bobbing on dark, detritus-filled water. Around him, no wind stirred the gray particles floating down to the ground. Dust covered the cobbled streets and decrepit houses. Timber showed through plaster like bones through rotten skin. Then he remembered. Venice. The *carnivale*. Was it already all over?

“Jasmine.”

Fear tightened his throat. The last he remembered, she was coming toward the gate. He flung his legs over the side and tried to will the barge to a dock some distance down the canal but could not. Something – someone’s will – kept the barge in the middle.

“Vespero!” he yelled.

His words did not echo but fell flat barely out of his lips. Ashes entered his mouth. He coughed.

Using his foot as a paddle, he propelled the barge closer to the decaying foundation then pushed off it. Water sloshed thickly around him. A black viscous ring circled his ankle where he had dipped his foot.

Finally he reached the dock and jumped onto it. He was naked and barefoot but felt even more exposed because he did not have his light. No shadows would remain with his light. Something else bothered him.

He was alone.

Truly, utterly alone. Not a soul, mortal or demonic, stirred the air. He heard nothing, saw no one.

Was it already too late? Had she given Vespero the key? Was Jasmine already...?

Lumere shook his head, unable to even hold the notion. No, this was something else. *Somewhere* else.

As he climbed onto the street, he looked down at himself but could not believe what he saw. Extreme pallor made him almost a ghost.

“Where am I?”

The deserted street provided no answer to him, although he did know where he was then. Far from the gate but still in the sinking city. Relief coursed through him. The gate had not been breached. Yet he felt so alone.

A faint sound caught his ear. He froze to listen. A woman’s voice...calling his name.
Jasmine.

Lumere jogged toward the sound, which he gauged came from ahead. Empty windows inside house façades looked like vacant eyes in desiccated faces. They stared at him, silently gaped on either side of the narrow street. When he looked behind, he noticed how his feet did not leave imprints in the thick coat of ashes. As if he did not exist.

A fountain depicting a quartet of dolphins joining their tails in the center sat forlornly in a small plaza. Lumere tried to ignore the way they seemed to scream in pain instead of spouting water. The cracked fountain looked as though it had been dried for centuries.

At the corner of the street, he stopped and listened again. Despair threatened to close in around him. He crossed his arms to ward off the cold that seeped into his frame. He realized he shook.

Lumere heard it again and this time sprinted toward it, slipped when his feet did not connect properly with the uneven street, to finally reach a large square where a crumbling tower leaned dangerously to the side. A dull yellow winged beast surmounted it. He recognized it immediately as *Piazza San Marco*, the heart of the *carnivale*. Not today.

Should he follow his elusive guide or try to make his way to the house? What if the woman calling his name was not Jasmine but one of Vespero's allies?

A flicker of movement forced him to turn his head toward the arched gallery stretching to his right. Someone with long dark hair ran into one of the many doorways. He chased after it. Warmth greeted him as soon as he stepped inside.

"Lumere."

This time his name reached him clearly. It was indeed Jasmine and she sounded worried.

"Where are you?" he asked, again his words dying right off his lips.

"I'm here, I've come back for you. Please wake up."

He whirled around but saw no one. She had sounded so close.

Something touched him on the shoulder, triggering ribbons of goose bumps down his arms. He knew right away it was Jasmine touching him, yet he could not see her.

Lumere put the pads of two fingers to his lips when he felt a soft pressure there. She was...*kissing* him?

Astonished, he watched as around him cracked tiles repaired themselves, crumbling mortar reassembled over timber that did not look rotten but healthy and whole once more. The portion of sky he could see through the doorway revealed a few sparkling stars. Something was happening.

Life was coming back to this place.

A great shiver coursed through him, from his throat to his chest, down his belly, his member and legs. Heat suffused his entire being. He ventured a smile.

"Please, Lumere, please, come back to me," Jasmine's voice reverberated in the large room.

"I cannot see you. Where are you?" he replied, wanting to turn his head but unwilling to sacrifice her touch for it. He would much rather stay immobile and let her caress him.

But he had to show he had heard her, had felt her presence. Where was she? He turned on himself, noticed how moonlight had begun to peek through the doorway at an acute angle. Dust particles floated in glittering swirls. His footprints in the coat of ash were the only ones there. That he left any encouraged him...he was coming back to life.

He walked back outside to look at the sky. Atop the tower, the winged lion gleamed gold as it should. When something very soft and gentle ran down his front and stopped around the base of his cock, Lumere had to lean back against the wall and close his eyes.

His mouth opened in a silent O when he felt as though she had just slid her lips along his cock, which showed signs of alertness. He grinned.

"That's it, Lumere, fight it. I'm with you, I'll help you."

Lumere panted when the pressure accentuated around his shaft. Then the feeling changed, too soft and pliable to be a mouth. She was mounting him! He reached out to grab at her hips, even if he knew deep inside he could not touch her. His palms tingled at the memory of how her body felt against his.

Intense heat accompanied the forceful thrust down his cock. Her heat transferred to him and he knew without a doubt he was the one lost somewhere, not she. Jasmine was trying to bring him back, to *love* him back to her.

"Come for me, Lumere," she urged as she impaled herself again and again over him. *"Come, come."*

"I'm coming, Jasmine. My love," he snarled through clenched teeth. He really *was* coming.

Lumere arched his head back as the force and rhythm doubled. A moan left him. He was there. The back of his head and his palms pressing against the wall, Lumere tilted his pelvis forward and forced his spine in a tight curve. His seed burst out of him in violent jets.

Instead of feeling empty or satiated, he felt full...*alive*. Without her voice to guide him, he knew he would have roamed forever in his own personal hell. He would have walked this ash-filled world until some great lassitude would have claimed him. Then he probably would have lain down never to wake again.

"Jasmine," he breathed. Could she hear him, he wondered.

Then everything changed quickly. Her muscles contracted sharply. He gasped at the sudden pressure, almost painful. What had made her react this way? Then she left

him. From bliss to misery, Lumere peeled his shaking frame off the wall and looked around him.

Colors returned to his surroundings as did sounds from people and things. The clock atop the tower bonged. He emerged from the covered gallery to find the *carnivale* in full swing with masqueraded people dancing and singing and laughing.

Lumere did not understand. What could have made her leave so abruptly?

Then he felt it. Fear.

She was afraid. And he knew of only one who could cause so much fear in someone as brave as Jasmine.

* * * * *

Jasmine didn't even stop to kick the lone shoe off in her mad dash along the narrow alley. She was reaching the corner when she collided against Vespero. He grabbed her by the arm and twirled her around in a parody of dance.

With a snarl of defiance, she kicked him hard in the legs— aerobic kickboxing be blessed— and willed herself farther away. She started running again. Jasmine succeeded but only for a second before he brought her back right where she'd been.

He's playing with me.

"Why do you fight me?" he asked in a gentle voice. "You cannot hope to win. Such is the way of things. You are a *mortal*."

He made it sound like a disease. Without looking into his handsome face, she pushed him off and ran back down the alley. Panic gnawed at her frayed nerves, she could feel it gaining, floating up to the surface. Vespero was right. She'd never win.

"I'll sure as hell try!" she screamed just so she could vent the fear threatening to paralyze her.

Again, he willed her back by his side before closing a substantial hand over her arm and yanking her to him. Vespero forcibly embraced her as he wrapped his powerful arms around her shoulders and squeezed tight. Very tight.

Jasmine's ribs felt as though they'd pop in on themselves. She "*humphed*", tried to breathe but couldn't. Stars fizzed at the edges of her vision. He suddenly released her. To her shame, her first reaction was to cling to his doublet when she felt her legs buckle. His strong arms kept her from sliding down into a miserable heap. Tears ran down her face. The handbag felt so heavy, she almost wished she could relinquish it to someone else. She couldn't carry it anymore. Too much.

"I could carry it for you," Vespero murmured against her ear. He traced the lobe with his lips. "You do not have to carry this burden any longer."

Jasmine buried her face in his chest. "But then...everything would die."

At the edge of her hearing spectrum, the music she'd heard at the house wafted in to her. So it'd been him causing the music. She closed her eyes.

“Of course not. I would touch no one who did not show the proper *inclination*.”

His lips traveled down to the nape of her neck. He was so tall, so strong. How could she hope to defeat him?

“You cannot.”

Jasmine felt herself nod. She was so very tired. She no longer had the strength of mind to fight him. Vespero would win.

A crazy thought flashed in her mind...something she was losing at an alarming rate. She felt as if she were contemplating the last chocolate in the box, salivating over it. She'd already eaten all the others and so for a while she could pretend she'd resist the temptation and deny herself that last one. Yet the entire time she knew in the back of her mind she would eventually break down and eat that damn piece of chocolate. Trying to resist Vespero felt exactly the same. She could push him back for a while but in the end, she would succumb and go to him. Jasmine knew it. Vespero knew it as well, the detestable brute.

“It is no weakness on your part. Mortals cannot resist us, we are too strong. You have already lasted much longer than any one of the previous bearers. Such a gem you are. So vibrant, so lovely. Are you not eternally weary?”

His soothing tone lulled Jasmine's nerves just as it muddled her mind. “I *am* tired. So tired.”

“Yes, you are, you delectable fruit,” he replied as his hand reached for the handbag. “Give this burden to me. I shall bear it for you now. You have done more than your share.”

She instinctively clutched it tighter under her arm.

Don't give it to him, don't...

His hands on her lower back pressed her pelvis to his belly, until his rock-hard member pushed against her. The memory of it triggered a shameful little throb in her sex. He was so *tempting*.

A tempter, wasn't that his card? The Devil.

“Why deny yourself any longer?” His breath was so hot.

Any longer, repeated the things as they congregated around Vespero and her.

Their approach made her skin pebble. Clicks and hisses surrounded her. She spotted a few crawling up the wall behind Vespero, as though ready to fall on her at his command. She'd never been so scared. So hopeless.

Vespero slicked her hair back with his hand and looked into her eyes. The mask gave him a sexy, enigmatic air that awoke her senses. She tried to look away from his amber gaze but discovered she couldn't. She wasn't even sure she wanted to.

“Give me the key.” His luscious mouth grazed her temple, her eyebrow.

The key, whispered the things.

She snaked a hand in her handbag and fisted the card. *An eighth of an inch, easy to break when you're desperate.* Vespero must have felt something for he pulled back to arm's length and narrowed his eyes at her.

"Destroying the key will also finish Lumere. You would not want to be responsible for his demise, would you?"

Another measure of force went into her fist. The card bent dangerously close to breaking. "I'll give it to you," Jasmine said through clenched teeth. "I'll open the damn gate for you, but only if you don't hurt Lumere."

Vespero grinned. "'Damned gate', how fitting a term. You are astoundingly persistent but...agreed. The key in exchange for the light." His eyes grew hard. "But you do understand how you will not benefit from it for your fate will already have been sealed long before Lumere manages to come back. If he does at all. He will not be able to save you."

Save you, his monstrous creations hissed.

Card still in hand, she nodded. "I understand."

"Very well, let us prepare."

A ripple along the things' black glistening surface coiled and spread outward. *Prepare.*

Vespero held her tightly as they reappeared inside her house—the house—at the bottom of the rickety stairs. The things stayed clear of the water as they massed up the stairs and along the walls. Jasmine spotted the rest of the demons standing around the garage. Expectant faces turned to them. The Fool was the only one who seemed utterly bored. Someone sitting on a good joke but not sharing. He winked at her.

With a toothy grin as sinister as it was triumphant, Vespero indicated the small door to the left. Such a nondescript architectural detail for such an important gate!

Jasmine slipped the plastic bag out of her handbag. Lumere's lantern gleamed as burnished gold in the gloom. The silver streak in his indigo hair looked like it was moving. So Vespero had kept his word after all... Lumere would live. At least she'd saved him if nothing else. Jasmine took a big breath. Her hands shook when she grasped it tightly. How she'd ever gambled with it was beyond her understanding. Somehow, she'd known threatening the card would work against the demon. But it would work only once. She'd already used that option.

No turning back now.

Silence settled in the room. Even the things stopped fretting. Jasmine looked back at Vespero. "What do I do with it?"

His gaze never left the card he as pointed to the door. Was it her imagination or was his hand longer than usual? His fingers curved downward at the ends. "Open the gate."

The gate, the gate, chanted the things as they roiled and trembled.

Her heart in her throat, her ears buzzing with the liquid drum of her arrhythmic pulse, Jasmine walked away from Vespero, from the rest of the eager demons and toward the gate that would mean the end of her world.

And my life.

With her thumbs pressed hard on either side, she looked down as Lumere's lantern on the card illuminated the rest of him. His cape bloomed gently behind him. He could've been *breathing* for the vividness of the image. Jasmine closed her eyes when tears spilled down her cheeks. *He's safe now.*

The last chocolate from the box. Some metaphor for the end of the world!

She drew near the door and could feel right away how strongly she was compelled to open it. Somehow she knew what was expected of her. Everything was clear. Because she was now in the demons' realm, she had to hold the card, open the door and step through the mortal world. No special chant or dance, no arcane words and incantations. Not even a real lock to speak of. Just the door. Devilishly simplistic.

What if I broke it?

If she broke the card, she'd save her world. With the last key gone, the gate would be sealed forever. She herself would be doomed whichever way she looked at it so it wouldn't matter.

"But it would be the end for Lumere," Vespero murmured softly. "No more light."

Jasmine sighed. She could no more break Lumere's card than she could evade his brother's clutches.

Say goodbye to your life, Jasmine Dunmore, 'cause it's over.

She reached out for the rusted loop. Jasmine pulled on it slightly, gingerly. It opened by a crack. Behind her, someone gasped. Light and music from the last hours of the carnival filtered into the damp garage. She couldn't tell she'd just created a fissure between two worlds...everything looked so banal, so ordinary. Except for the sense of expectation stifling the air. Those demons had waited a long, long time for this. She could tell. There'd be hell to pay – literally – if someone messed up their day.

Her heart beat so hard it hurt. Jasmine looked down through the hermetic bag at Lumere's radiant face etched in the card. He was so beautiful, such gentle power emanated from his chiseled features, she could've stared at it her whole life. She loved him so much.

How she could love a man so quick and so hard was beyond her. She'd never been the overly passionate type either, preferring to let things click into place instead of pushing them along. Yet looking at an image of Lumere had been enough to set things into motion. The angular stone in her increasing fascination with him, that card had haunted her day and night since she'd first set eyes on it inside the book on Venetian masks her aunt had left behind. She'd felt as though she'd already known him and when they'd met for real, her sense of recognition, of knowing him had deepened. She knew him, she trusted him and now she'd learned to love him.

Okay, woman, the very, very last chocolate.

Jasmine grinned. She pulled the door wider, took a big whiff of fresh air. "The thing is, I was always too stubborn to eat the last one."

She tossed the bag containing the card beyond the door and slammed it shut.

Chapter Twelve

Even in his near-catatonic state, Lumere felt the tremor traverse his realm, sensed the deep turmoil. *Something* had happened. His looked around at the mortals going on with the last few hours of the *carnivale*, oblivious to the danger looming over them. For Lumere realized then what had just happened.

The gate had opened.

It had done so before the *carnivale* had ended...the demonic realm would spill into this one. Everything was lost. He had failed to guard the gate.

He could feel Jasmine's essence, as that of every other being in his realm. Vespero could not have breached the gate himself. She had done it for them.

Lumere wondered what the devious demon had done to convince her to doom her own world. She'd just doomed her race...and herself.

No...

With the gate opened, her seconds were numbered!

Undoubtedly Vespero would destroy such a dangerous mortal right after she had performed the one task he could not do himself.

Shaking, Lumere willed himself across the old city then froze when he reached the neighborhood where the gate stood. He had expected to see his brethren spilling out into the streets, the minions chasing after humans and tormenting them. Nothing.

For a split second, he doubted what he had felt. Could he have mistaken? Could the gate not have opened as he had feared?

An image of Jasmine's smiling face flashed across his mind. She must have been thinking about him extremely hard to elicit such a response. She was so afraid.

"No..."

Lumere squinted. He could feel a sweeping sense of calm entering her, calm and *resignation*.

What was she doing?

Then another wave hit him. This one so powerful it sent him to the ground. Like an ever-expanding arc of silence, the shock wave blew through him and all things around him. Lumere floundered to his feet. He yelled her name without thought or will to save himself. He had to stop her before she damned herself, let Vespero turn her into one of the *things*. Conversely, sharing the fate of every other mortal on the material plane would be far from enjoyable but at least, she would not receive Vespero's exclusive attention.

She had no idea.

“Jasmine! Stop!”

* * * * *

Silence settled in the flooded garage. Even the things stopped fretting and hissing. Then a great roar forced Jasmine to cover her ears. She pressed her palms so hard the earrings dug in her skin. Ripples appeared over the dark water, dust floated down from the rafters. The terrible sound passed through her, the sheer magnitude brought tears of pain to her eyes. She hunched over and turned toward the demons.

The great bellow had come from Vespero. His fists had curled in on themselves, his arms shook as did his thick shoulders. When his roar died down, sounding raw and anguished near the end, he panted hard and his eyes...his *eyes* sent flashes of such malevolence Jasmine thought the stare alone would kill her, that it'd stop her heart, freeze the blood in her veins.

Before she could turn away, Vespero ripped the mask from his face.

Jasmine sank to her knees.

Terror. It had a face. The moment Vespero's true form surfaced from under the handsome shell, she understood evil in all its vastness. In Vespero's leathery face she saw wickedness and malice, in his muscular torso and limbs she saw carnage and war, his clawed and warped hands were meant to spread plagues and in his erect and grotesquely disproportionate member she saw depravity and vileness. Jasmine, though she'd never before believed in anything spiritual, knew she presently looked at what others called the devil. She believed it now. And it frightened her to her soul.

“You,” Vespero growled deep in his chest as he advanced on her while the rest of the demons cowed in obvious fear—except for The Fool who just shook his head sadly at her. “You wretched little creature, how dare you deny me my victory!”

The abominations' silence was deafening.

His clawed feet leaving gouges in the stone, he stalked forward until Jasmine thought he would lean down and rip her throat out with his fanged maw. His face could've been a diseased mind's rendition of a man-beast with pronounced bone structure under the leathery, reddish skin and a ridged nose. Glistening bottom canines jutted out between his desiccated lips. Like a beetle in the throes of death, his black tongue seemed imbued with a life its own and restlessly jerked behind his teeth.

And to say that she'd let him...*argh*.

Vespero crouched near Jasmine, his pulsing glans coming horribly close to her knees. She shrank back against the wall and squeezed her eyes shut. She was going to die a horrible death. If she was lucky.

Better that than living a horrible life knowing Lumere was gone.

The notion she'd saved him brought some small comfort to her heart and her mind, which tottered terrifyingly close to madness. Already she could feel her mental grasp slipping. The only thing that kept her from screaming and running in circles was the

image of Lumere and how radiant he'd looked on the card before she threw it beyond the gate.

"Enjoy your little triumph while you can, Jasmine," Vespero murmured very close to her ear. His breath smelled of roses and putrefaction. "For I intend to devise a death for you that will shock and disturb even demons who have witnessed every mechanism of torment in existence...your species is so imaginative. Pain is a very small and weak word to define the things I shall do to you. Your existence will become one long, uninterrupted nightmare, your days and nights will blend into a single wound, you will not know if you are insane or lucid, alive or dead. I shall rape your body and soul until you are too torn to please me, too inert to torment. Then after I heal you, it will all come to pass over again. And again."

Jasmine couldn't form words in her mind, she couldn't do anything else but cling to Lumere's image. A sob passed through her clenched teeth when Vespero grabbed her arm and yanked her to her feet. He towered over her by a good foot.

"Begone!" he roared at the other demons who slinked back into darkness.

She gritted her teeth when the garage disappeared and was replaced by a stately room occupied only by a single but large circular table. Its massive, central leg ended with four clawed feet and gleamed as if oil had just been poured over it.

As Vespero propelled her forward with a powerful shove in the back, Jasmine saw a series of cards neatly arranged in two circles, one large and using the circumference of the tabletop, the other smaller and concentrated near the middle. One was clearly missing from the inner ring.

"See what you have cost me," he snarled as he stalked forward and stood by the table. His taloned finger gently traced one of the cards. Jasmine noticed the words *Lo Sciocco* glittering in silver against a green background surmounted by the image of a prancing man wearing all green and balancing a saber on the tip of his index finger.

At once, The Fool materialized by her side. He looked neither scared nor concerned. Just his usual nonchalant self. She envied his poise. But then again he *was* a demon. Although when he looked down at his card on the table, his hand twitched at his side. Jasmine could tell he wanted to touch it very much. He cast a glance at Vespero and widened his stance.

"You played your part in this," Vespero said while he circled the table. Long black hair hung down his back and grew along his spine in a strip that ended on his coccyx. Like the mane of a horse. Jasmine couldn't recognize the handsome man.

"I play a part in many things, Vespero," The Fool replied as he winked at Jasmine. "The Fool is everywhere The Devil is and many more."

Vespero didn't seem to enjoy the glib remark much. He caressed another card where stood a beautiful couple dressed all in purple and jade green. Jasmine recognized this card readily as The Lovers.

"The Fool may end up in yet another place...perhaps you could join our dear brother Lumere into banishment. A few eons trapped in your own personal hell may help you remember your place."

The thought of Lumere in such a horrible place—or state, she wasn't sure which—forced Jasmine out of her fear-induced trance. So this was what Vespero had done to Lumere? Banished him into his own hell? Was he presently suffering, she wondered. Had she helped him much, if at all? His card had shown every sign of renewed vigor yet he wasn't there. Had it been enough? Had she been in time?

At Vespero's dire warning, The Fool's grin seemed to crystallize around the edges. Yet there danced in his eyes a sparkle still. He bowed low, until he came close to toppling over and landing on his head. "I would not be stubborn enough to remain."

"Perhaps not."

Vespero flicked his hand outward as if he wanted to shake water off his fingers. The Fool yelped a split second before his outer shell shredded off him. It only lasted a second. Jasmine put both hands to her mouth to stifle her scream, but for a terrible moment The Fool stood there with every strip of skin gone, his muscles and tissues exposed, his bulging eyes rolling in his head, his bare teeth glistening against the reddish stringy mass of his face. He collapsed and disappeared.

"He was always fortunate that one," Vespero said as he turned toward Jasmine. A smile twisted his shriveled lips. "I cannot spare one so powerful as he, but The Fool must sometimes be reminded of his place."

"As you reminded Lumere of his?" she asked in a low voice.

The determination in her tone must have surprised Vespero for he stared hard at her...almost sent her screaming from the room. She bit down on the side of her tongue when he approached.

"Your audacity is not only surprising but also exceedingly arousing. So please, *indulge* yourself and keep opposing me."

In a corner of the room, a large wooden apparatus appeared. It reminded her of "the rack", some medieval instrument of torture she'd seen on television. Black leather straps dangled from several places. She swallowed hard.

"See how I can pull out of your mortal mind every little detail I need to make this situation uniquely yours. For example, I know you fear heights yet would deny it to the end, I also know how you wanted your mate to do certain *things* to you...things he could never understand. I *do*." Vespero leaned in to her neck and licked her under the ear. His whispers filled her mind. "I understand about mortals' vices and basest urges, I share them. Nothing is beyond my grasp, not your most wicked wish or the things that excite you."

Through cracks in the floor and walls, the things crawled into the room. The way they fretted and angrily spilled over themselves to reach Vespero hinted at trouble to Jasmine. What could be making them behave this way? While she desperately clung to

her tattered mental cohesion, she watched them hurriedly slink along the floor and pool in a corner, their massed bodies forming a glistening black mound.

Vespero didn't seem to pay attention to them as he licked one of his taloned fingers. Grinning widely, he poised his thumb and index finger in the air. "I know what you mortals fear the most," he whispered. The sibilants whistled through his protruding fangs. He pinched the air with his fingers as he would the wick of a candle.

Fear the most, the things repeated, a hint of triumph in their broken voices.

"Darkness."

Darkness, came the long hiss.

Light died out. Jasmine hadn't seen where it originated, only that it was now presently gone. Utter darkness pressed on her face and ears, touched her arms, her back, tickled the ends of her hair. Because she didn't know what else to do, she hugged herself and backpedaled by a few paces.

Clicking sounds heralded them, the *things*. She willed them away but couldn't concentrate on the thought for long. Primal terror was choking her. The cold fingers of abject fear crawled over her skin, clutched at her heart. She was losing the battle. Already the clicking sound intensified, drew nearer. The aberrations Vespero had created were close then, she could feel their fetid breaths on her naked foot. She curled in her toes impulsively.

"And I know what *you* fear the most, Vespero," said a gentle, smooth but cold voice. Like tempered steel. "Light."

That voice...

A golden glow illuminated Jasmine and her immediate surrounding. She let out a yelp of fright when she realized the things had crawled almost on top of her feet, to within an inch or two. But they were retreating then, fled hissing and spitting at the glow emanating from the lantern hanging high in the air. Corners provided little shadow for them to hide. She could tell the light hurt them.

As the darkness receded, repelled by the brilliant light, Jasmine saw a hand, a gray sleeve then Lumere's head appear in the golden halo. He didn't look at her but she could tell he'd seen her. She found strength in his mere presence. Emboldened, feeling as though something had just pulled her back from the edge, Jasmine took a step forward. A tiny, barely perceptible step, but forward nonetheless.

Vespero bared his fangs at Lumere. "No, you cannot *be* here. You cannot have escaped from that prison. How is this possible?"

How? repeated the things. They no longer sounded exultant.

"It is not something you would understand, brother," Lumere replied as he raised his lantern higher until its radiance illuminated even the remotest places in the large room. The things shrank back farther and hissed as though in pain. "It is called love."

Lumere looked at Jasmine to ascertain her wellbeing. Aside from a good measure of fear—which was expected in any mortal faced with Vespero in his true form—he could not detect the rising madness that had condemned every other human before her. A few seconds with his demonic brother had sufficed in sending those poor mortals into hysteria, insanity or catatonia. But she calmly stood there, her arms crossed over her chest, her eyes wide but focused. She wore her own clothes and not some creation of Vespero’s—Lumere knew then just how mentally strong this woman was. That she had lasted this long without his protection astounded him...and he was not someone easily astounded. His heart swelled with pride and affection. She was *amazing*. Yet he wondered why she wore only one shoe.

In case the other demon tried to hurt her to get at Lumere, he extended his protection to her. He saw the goose bumps on her forearms when the heat from his shield enveloped her. His body hungered to touch her as well. For a split second, he remembered how she felt in his arms and felt his anger dissipate.

Everything happened quickly. Jasmine cried out. Vespero roared.

In an explosion of ashes, he charged at Lumere, who barely avoided the violent collision by whirling on himself, his cape swelling around his legs. He released the lantern and sent it floating onto the tabletop where it settled in the inner circle of cards.

“She cost you your life once and she almost did again,” Vespero sneered as he turned around and readied for another charge. His powerful shoulders banded with thick muscles.

“And she was the one to breathe it back into me.”

Vespero laughed. A terrible sound. “She is your weakness, your flaw, the one thing that makes you imperfect. You are broken, Lumere. The keeper is no longer neutral. Time has been corrupted. She took your strength away and it is only a matter of *time*—how I love the irony—before the gate is breached, before our world spills into hers.”

No wonder they called him The Tempter. His demonic brother knew what triggered a reaction. It had always been his strength. And the worst thing was, Vespero was right. Lumere had lost his neutrality when he had chosen to love a mortal. Instead of viewing this as a flaw though, he knew it filled him with renewed desire to see the gate protected from his race. Mortals were much more than oblivious travelers between their mortal world and his—their realm of dreams—some, like Jasmine, harbored inner strength demons should do well to heed.

“Your words do not affect me, Vespero. They never have.”

“She will bring your downfall,” the other demon spat then threw a pointed look at Jasmine. “Like Achilles and his unfortunate heel.”

“How dare you address her?” Lumere demanded as he took a step forward.

Lumere sidestepped when the other demon swept past, claws coming for his face, and seized his arm to use it as pivot. He sent Vespero twirling far into the room. His taloned feet dug in the checkered tiles when he skidded to a stop. A split second later, he was on Lumere, his powerful arms encircled around his waist while he sought to

sink his fangs into him. Clutched in a parody of a lovers' embrace, Lumere battled Vespero, the only one able—and more than willing—to oppose him. While the devilishly cunning demon tried to feign attacks, only to retreat at the last possible moment, Lumere calmly denied every lie while he forced, with inexorable strength, the other to bend back with force of will alone. One of Vespero's knees touched the ground. He snarled curses in several tongues.

"You cannot control the balance, you cannot stop Time," Lumere said calmly while the other struggled to break free of his implacable grip. "And you cannot defeat me."

Vespero laughed. "Perhaps not, but I can *hurt* you." He arched back so he could look at Jasmine. "Rip her apart!"

Lumere gasped. "NO!"

At once, the vicious things detached themselves from the corners of walls and ceiling and converged toward her. For a split second, fear for his love's safety forced Lumere's attention to waver.

With a howl, Vespero sent him flying back against the wall. Broken plaster showered his shoulders and back when Lumere crashed through it and landed in another invented room beyond. Pain blazed in a radiant sun behind his eyelids. Jasmine's scream forced him to claw his way back into the card room. What he saw made him want to stand and watch.

Jasmine stood with both hands outstretched in front of her where a wall of Vespero's aberrations had piled, seemingly bent on spilling over her but yet unable to do so. They writhed against some invisible barrier. She was holding them back. *All* of them.

But he could not afford the luxury of wondering about the inner strength required for such a feat. Already Vespero realized his ruse had failed. He bellowed his impotent rage.

Lumere threw himself at Vespero, anger spurred his usually stoical nature into a flurry of movements. He struck the demon with his fists, his feet, his mind. He flayed and whipped him, tore at the infected shell. He had hurt Jasmine, had defiled and polluted her. He would pay for it.

When he had reduced Vespero to a snarling mass of bleeding wounds, when his demonic brother was kneeling and coughing up black blood, Lumere stopped and cupped his chin so he could raise it to his face.

"You cannot destroy me, brother," Vespero snarled, putrid blood oozing out of his nose and mouth. One of his fangs was gone, in its place a dark, viscous tear. "You must preserve the balance."

"You have tilted it so much to your side, I doubt the balance will be affected by your destruction."

He willed the lantern into his hand and shined it in Vespero's face. A roar as deafening as it was anguished left his mouth. He arched back as if he had been violently

struck. His eyes rolled in his head, his swollen black tongue dangled out of his slackened mouth.

"You should not have tried to harm her, brother. I might have only banished you. Now I will utterly destroy you."

A golden beam from the lamp hit Vespero right in the chest. He jolted mid fall, his hands twitched.

His minions collapsed back from Jasmine's invisible shield, slinking toward their fallen master's form and caught him before he hit the floor. A hellish mosh pit, Vespero floated ungainly over his minions' heads, supported by countless clawed appendages. Then the malevolent spectacle disappeared.

Lumere willed the cards into his hand. He looked down at the incomplete deck then up at Jasmine. "I could never find them. Vespero took you deep into his home, a place I could never discover."

He shook his head and slid the cards into his cape where they would remain until he found a safer hiding place. Far from the other demons' greedy clutches. Vespero may have been the strongest of them, yet he had not been alone.

"You have saved us all, Jasmine. I owe you my life as does everyone on your world."

She tried to laugh, winced instead then collapsed to one knee, bracing a fist against the floor. Blood dribbled from her nose when she looked up. "I'm just so ti—"

Lumere willed her in his arms when she sank slowly to the ground. Her eyes were closed. For a panicked second, he thought he had lost her but no, her pulse beat rhythmic and strong.

Leaving Vespero's darkened home behind, he brought her across the great hall, where most of the other demons had congregated then he stopped so he could stare at them one by one, the seventy-six of them. The Fool sat on the floor, cross-legged. His smile looked forced.

"If one of you ever tries to harm this human," he said in a tone he knew frightened them with its dullness and neutrality, "I will destroy you just as I have Vespero."

He left them to ponder on this while he willed Jasmine and him into his own home where he created a lush interior so she would feel safe—the entire time Lumere fought against the mounting desire torturing his body. A large fireplace followed with a bed close to it and a table laden with food and drink. Jasmine would no longer need to eat but would probably want to just so she could feel...*human*.

The magnitude of her sacrifice impressed and troubled him. Unless she had done it to preserve her world, a lofty and selfless act...one which left Lumere confused about his own motivations for destroying Vespero. The demon had forever plagued mortals and undoubtedly another would take his place—he could see The Veiled Sisters or even The Lovers—but Lumere, as keeper of Time and the balance, had never been piqued enough to move overtly against his brother. What had been so different? Was it that he had come too close to opening the gate? Well, it *had* opened, even for a mere moment.

He looked down at the unconscious woman in his arms and instantly knew the answer. He had known all along but felt he ought to try to rationalize his actions first. Emotions were so foreign to him. Anger, jealousy, rage, lust, love. He had known them all within a few days – the lifespan of a spark compared to his longevity.

He laid her gently on the bed, changed his mind then willed her naked into a warm bath he made materialize by the fire. His own doublet and shirt disappeared. He easily could have washed her body in the split second needed to think it but he would rather do it for “real” with his hands instead.

Kneeling by the copper bath, he opened his hand palm up and a soft sponge filled it where there had been nothing a moment before then a bar of scented soap followed suit. Lumere knew just the kind she liked best, as he knew most of her likes and dislikes. Some things he did not know as her mental powers were astonishing for a mortal, but he vowed to learn about and *from* her every angle, each layer, individually.

His hands worked diligently over Jasmine. He did not want to use this precious moment to his advantage. She had already shown a penchant for him and if it proved to be the only thing she would consent, it would be enough.

He washed her hair, her body, rinsed abundantly with water he kept at just the right temperature. When he was done with her – himself frothed into intense arousal – he returned Jasmine to the bed and pulled the covers up to her neck. As much to keep her warm as to hide her delightful figure from his hungering gaze.

“Thanks,” she murmured, opening her eyes and staring up at him.

Lumere’s heart leaped with relief. He sat on the edge of the bed and patted her shoulder. He appeared awkward and he knew it. Her life was forfeit. She had voluntarily damned herself, would forever live among demons...what could he say to her? He had nothing to give to compensate for her sacrifice. Nothing *could* be given for such an act.

“What’s wrong?”

What is wrong, she asks.

Lumere sighed as he ran his fingers gently down her jaw. Perhaps she did not know she could never return home...she had obviously not thought this through. Anger needled him at her rash behavior. Reckless mortals, so bent on speed and...

Or perhaps what frustrated him was the thought she might not have done this for him at all but on some instinct or impulse enmeshed in her mortal coil.

“Do you know the consequences of your actions?” Lumere tried to keep the judgmental edge to his voice from showing but he suspected he had failed. He had been the stoic guardian for so long he did not know how else to ask questions.

Jasmine’s mouth tightened. “He was just too close. I had to stop him *somehow*.”

A knife through the heart would have hurt him less. She had not thrown the key beyond the gate for him but for her mortal world. Sensible. Noble. Heartbreaking.

“You can never go back.”

"I know," she replied, her eyes filling with tears. She knuckled them away and sat in bed.

The sheet slipped below a shoulder, revealing glorious skin he so desperately wanted to love. When she had been unconscious, Lumere had pushed the temptation down, but now that she was awake...

He tore his gaze away from her shoulder and planted it on her face. "How could you throw away your life? You are mortal, you *belong* on the other side." How had anger and frustration and pain surfaced so quickly and easily? He denied himself the luxury of feeling. Anything.

"I won't pretend to know shit about this place," she said through clenched teeth. Anger made her so beautiful. She glowed. "But I know this, I'd do it again."

"You stopped him from passing into your world but it cost you your life."

She shrugged. "Yeah, that too."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, yeah, sure, I stopped him from pillaging my home, that too." Her cheeks blushed deep red.

Lumere could not read her thoughts so deep below the surface. Whatever it was, she was holding on as though her life depended on it. If only he could tell her how her presence made him feel more alive than he had ever been, how a mere look from her could send him flying with the birds or crashing in broken misery. If only she knew.

Chapter Thirteen

Telling Lumere how she'd thrown away her life as a mortal because of her love for him ranked very high on the "pathetic scale". Jasmine didn't even know how to tell him.

"Stopping Vespero was not your first intention?" Lumere asked.

The silver streak in his indigo hair spilled from behind his shoulder and came to rest over his chest. She wanted to touch it so much it tingled the pads of her fingers.

"Well, I guess it should've been... I mean, of course it was. Saving my world and everything." Jasmine cleared her throat and looked down. She'd always been a bad liar.

"Indeed."

"I came back for you actually."

There, the milk is spilled.

"It is one thing to return but an entirely different one to stay," he replied, once again running his fingers down her jaw in a way that made her want to tear off what was left of his clothes. That he only wore adjusted velvet pants didn't help her resolve any. She tried not to stare too long at the bulge under the buttons. Failed miserably.

Lean muscles swelled over his pectorals when he bent closer and looked at her through squinted eyes. "Why did you choose to stay?"

She couldn't worm her way out of this one. He obviously wanted or needed to hear her say it. "I stayed for you."

"You guarded it so well, I *did* need you to say it to be sure. And now I am."

Lumere closed his eyes and kissed her.

Jasmine wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down on her. His weight provided all the security and shelter she could ever want. When he lay down on top of her and pushed his thigh between hers, Jasmine felt how his need was as pressing as her own.

"You must rest," he said in her ear.

She snorted a laugh. "I don't think so."

Her fingers traveled through his lustrous hair and coiled around that silky streak so unlike the rest. She kissed it.

Lumere pulled the annoying sheets from between them and let his hot flesh compress hers, allowed his oh-so-ready erection to come to rest between her thighs, which she squeezed together hard to sheath him. His lips proved both gentle and demanding as they roamed down her throat, along her jaw, below her ears. His entire weight bore down on her when he snaked his hands from her hips to her breasts,

squashed against his hard chest. Lumere angled his upper body so he could access her nipples. He trapped one, rolled it.

Without a hint of inhibition, Jasmine humped him with everything she had. Her pelvis pressed hard against his cock. She couldn't take this anymore. With a grunt, she nudged him aside so she could roll over him. He let her turn him onto his back but never relinquished her nipple. It tingled pleasantly. Jasmine "aah-ed" in contentment when she managed to straddle him.

Pushing herself up at arm's length, she looked down at him, his rippling chest and shoulders, his smooth skin. He was so hard for her. A wonder his pants hadn't exploded!

Lumere smiled.

"Oh you heard that, did you?" she demanded as she teasingly ran a hand over the bulge. A wet spot indicated she'd done her work well.

One by one, she undid the buttons holding him captive. When the last one gave, she pulled the flap and tugged down so she could dislodge his magnificent cock and seize it in a two-fisted hold. Her leisurely pumps made him arch back against the mattress. His eyes closed. Jasmine took her time admiring him. He looked so much like Achilles' statue, she wondered for a while if he hadn't been the model for it. Vespero's poisoned words rang in her head. "*Like Achilles' unfortunate heel.*"

Would she prove to be his downfall as the devilish tempter had predicted?

"No," Lumere replied. "He can no more predict the future than any of us can. He was only trying to drive a wedge between us. And he failed."

The finality of his tone and his words settled Jasmine's doubts. He *had* failed, the two-faced bully.

Back to here and now please.

Jasmine rubbed her hands up and down, his glorious cock throbbing between her palms while the swollen veins pulsed rhythmically. It glistened so invitingly. Jasmine could resist no longer and filled her mouth with him.

A sharp intake of air announced he'd enjoyed that very much.

Jasmine pushed her forehead against his belly, worked her jaw to accommodate his thick breadth, used her tongue like a whip when she pulled back toward the tip. While one hand kneaded his balls, she pumped him with the other, increasingly faster, harder, in the end hitting her fist against his groin. A series of tiny pulsations announced his climax. Jasmine growled and wrapped her lips around his shaft, glided down deep. She felt Lumere's seed erupting in salvoes against the back of her mouth and swallowed repeatedly.

She wasn't even done licking him clean that he was fisting her hair and pulling her up so he could kiss and bite her breasts and belly. Lumere's hands were forceful when he wrapped them around her waist and brought her upward until she straddled his

face. His forward chin pressed against her vulva when he began to eat her. She was already so wet. Jasmine sighed.

“Move against me,” he urged while he shoved his tongue in her.

Jasmine answered his request with a pronounced roll of her hips. He “*mm-ed*” deep in his chest. She rocked again, squashed her sex against his mouth. He devoured her pussy, pulled at her lips with his teeth, used his fingers to spread her wide. She was coming.

“Don’t stop,” she moaned as she rolled in quick, abrupt strokes. Figure eights provided just the right amount of pressure and brought her even closer.

Lumere snaked his hands between her thighs and used his thumbs to widen her cleft to its maximum. Fire spread to her thighs. While she held on to the headboard, Jasmine recoiled and slammed her pussy down onto his face, legs cramping when her climax finally hit.

Her moan drowned the fire’s crackles. “Ahh.”

She yelped when something pushed against her anus and entered. Looking down between her legs, she noticed a portion of something green and gleaming in Lumere’s fist.

“The jade phallus, Jasmine, you remember,” he answered her unspoken question.

With a nod, she rode this new wave. It was much smaller than the first one to which she’d been introduced—literally—and much more manageable. Lumere pushed it in slowly, inch by inch.

As much as she enjoyed the smooth toy, it was Lumere’s massive cock she wanted up her! The thought hadn’t sat in her brain for a second that he knelt behind her, his knees wedged between hers, his hands on either side of hers against the headboard.

“Stop picking my brain, would you?”

He chuckled. “It was so loud, I could not ignore it.”

The potential of having a lover who could hear one’s thoughts started to sink in. Jasmine felt herself blush. Oh this would be good.

“Yes, it will,” he replied in her ear. His cock pressed against her vulva and slid in smoothly.

At once, he began to push in and out, the bed rocked with each thrust, her pussy clutching and milking to its little heart’s content. Pulsations soon turned to throbbing. Jasmine couldn’t believe it...she came again in a long snarled whimper. She was so wet, she felt as though she’d melted between her legs.

An image flashed in her mind.

Immediately, her wrists were behind her back, held securely in place in one of Lumere’s large hands while he continued pounding into her. His increasingly violent yet precise shoves corresponded exactly to the thoughts swirling in her mind. Jasmine couldn’t believe how perceptive Lumere was proving to be.

Another detail materialized...

She now had her back against the headboard and Lumere no longer knelt behind her but in front, with her knees wide apart so he could fit in between. His gaze on hers, Lumere fisted his meaty cock and shoved in. Jasmine cried out and bit her lip when he pushed her back until her shoulder blades rested against the headboard. His hands around her waist pulled her spine in a tight curve and added pressure along her clit. Another orgasm threatened to make her scream like a banshee.

Jasmine closed her eyes when another vision filled her mind. *Ohh this would be too...wicked.*

"Are you sure about this?" Lumere stopped his assault on her pussy. He was panting hard. Sweat glistened over his sculpted chest.

Jasmine nodded. "If it's okay with you."

"I am a *diavolo* as they say here, a demon, Jasmine, none of your thoughts will ever be too wicked."

Next moment, she lay on the grand hall table, which was decked in full party mode but deserted, two fistfuls of tablecloth in her hands, her legs stretched wide while Lumere stood in between and resumed his powerful lovemaking.

No one was there, although the thought did occur to her they might be watching anyway.

Lumere looked up from his task. "They are not. Would you enjoy it if they were?"

That meant sharing Lumere with others, even if only the sight of him. She wasn't ready for that yet. "Maybe someday."

He nodded.

The mammoth chandelier high above cast a silver glow to his hair, made it look like blue ink instead of the usual indigo and underlined his classic facial features she so loved. A particularly potent thrust forced her head back.

"Oh god," she breathed repeatedly. *Oh god.*

Another push, slow and gentle but the deepest yet. Lumere's gaze was set on her face. Clearly he was gauging her reaction and adjusting his movements accordingly. Very similar to the horizontal side rod of a steam locomotive, he pumped in deliberate, stretched-out ellipses, forward, down then back, up, forward then again. Every pass brought Jasmine closer to a monstrous squall of ecstasy. She saw stars when she squeezed her eyes shut. Then it hit.

"Lumere...ohh..."

As she cried out his name, a million nerve endings along her body fired impulses her brain couldn't process. She was going to pass out! When the wave crashed and left her reeling and teetering near the edge of total collapse, heat spread through her, caressed her quivering skin, soothed her jerking muscles. She opened her eyes to find Lumere with his hands splayed over her belly. His hands were the source of the heat spreading through her.

As the euphoria of after-sex settled in her deadened limbs, Jasmine crossed her hands behind her head. She watched Lumere pull out and massage her thighs and calves.

She could stay this way forever. Ha. She *would* stay forever. *Not a bad deal at all.* Lumere was patient, skilled and affectionate. What more could a woman want? She'd spent her life it seemed looking for a man like him, someone with whom she could exchange on a level other than bills and mortgage payments, a man she could depend on to let her make her own decisions and not feel belittled by it. A man who could love her and *trust* her. That he was too handsome for words wasn't bad either.

Lumere stopped rubbing her legs. "I am not a man."

A pronounced roll of her eyes made him grin. "Okay, okay, just pretend I thought *demon.*"

After he helped her sit on the edge of the table, he sat on a chair. His fingers laced together on top of her knees, Lumere leaned his chin on them and looked up at her. She felt studied. Gauged.

"What?"

"You are beautiful."

His simple words made her blush. She shrugged.

"You are." A touch of authority emphasized his remark, as though he was daring her to challenge him or deny his claim.

"What now? You retrieved the cards, right?"

He nodded.

"Couldn't we, I don't know, can they be destroyed from this side?"

"No, Raffaello, the man who created them, warned me that while the cards are only keys, not catalysts, they are still connected to the demon it represents. I do not want to kill my brethren, only keep them where they belong."

"Raffaello, that's the alchemist, right?"

Lumere gave a quick nod. "He died because of me. Vespero went behind my back and forced Raffaello's hands around the rope. I recognized the signs too late."

The weight of Lumere's guilt was almost palpable to Jasmine. She reached out and squeezed his shoulder. "Then we have to make sure he didn't die for nothing. When is it going to be safe again? I mean about the carnival?"

Lumere squinted. "We still have about one of your hours left. Would you care to go?"

Jasmine did very much want to see the last bits of the carnival. "But won't it be dangerous to leave the cards unattended? What if some other demon tries to sneak in and take them?" A thought occurred to her. "Vespero's card, what do we do with it now?"

"You will make a fine guardian," Lumere replied with a hint of a smile. He straightened and opened his hand, palm up. The deck of wooden tarot cards appeared, The Fool on top. "He always manages to sneak in and out of wherever he pleases, this one."

"I hope he's all right, he helped me, you know," Jasmine said, stopped then cleared her throat as she remembered the lean man's hands and mouth on her. "He told me about using pain."

"Yes, he showed you many things." Lumere smiled roguishly when he saw her discomfited expression. "Come now, my love, you are no prisoner here. If he pleases you, nothing keeps you from enjoying him. He certainly would enjoy it."

"Do you trust him? Will he turn on us?"

"I can throw The Fool much farther than I can trust him...is this how you say on your world?"

"Close enough," Jasmine replied, patting his hands on her knees. "What about The Devil, is he...gone?"

Dead, destroyed, annihilated, terminated, spread in a thousand little bits, she mentally added with no remorse whatsoever.

"He will not come back."

Lumere showed her The Devil's card. It was completely black except for the gold letters etched at the bottom, *Il Diavolo*. The inky darkness, matte, a rectangular window into an abyss, made Jasmine shiver.

"So when a demon goes...when he or she dies, that leaves one less? How do you *add* a demon? Can you—we—have children?" The image of a miniature Lumere made her shake her head. This was no place for kids.

"This world is barren, Jasmine, just as we are. Nothing here is truly alive and growing, not like the little ones on the material plane."

Anxious to change the subject she kissed Lumere on the forehead. "So, do we go to that carnival or not?"

He stood, in the blink of an eye wearing the most gorgeous dark gray brocade suit she'd ever seen. Boots reached up past his knees, split on the sides so he could walk. After he raised his hand where dangled his ever-present lantern, he bowed, his long indigo hair, which he'd tied behind his head, spilled over a shoulder. Only his silver streak flowed freely from his temple in a silky ribbon.

"You look...*wow*."

Jasmine scooted off the table and closed her eyes. She wanted something nice, not too pouffy. When she felt she wore clothes again, she looked down at herself and cringed. Not quite what she'd envisioned.

"It requires a lot practice to be this precise," Lumere offered as he mentally adjusted her bustier so it'd fit her chest and not her shoulders and lengthened the gown so it'd touch the ground instead of hanging mid thigh.

A quick tweak and she wore a fine, tailored lilac gown. She smoothed down her long, adjusted sleeves and grinned. A velvet mantle she hadn't come up with covered her shoulders and she rubbed it against her face. "I'm *so* going to enjoy this place."

She accepted Lumere's proffered hand in hers and took a few steps. When the next second she walked on a cobbled street of Venice, a gasp escape her.

"Venetians know how to party!" she yelled to be heard.

Music filled the streets. Fireworks blasted high above the lagoon and lit the city in wonderful flashes of all colors, which reflected against the marble architectural wonders built on, it seemed, every corner. A slow-moving procession of cruise ships glided down *Canal Grande*, decked with lights strung across the upper decks. Passengers crowded the railing and waved to people along the promenade, who waved back. A long sigh escaped Jasmine. She felt more alive now that she was...well, *dead*, than ever before.

Lumere wrapped a long arm over her shoulders and pressed her against his side so he could kiss her cheek. They walked up the promenade along *Piazza San Marco*, no one turning an eye for them, no one acknowledging their passage, for which Jasmine was glad. She wanted to enjoy this moment with the man—*okay, okay*, demon—she loved without having to sidestep the throngs of people massed in the streets. Masked and unmasked revelers stood in groups, danced and sang in different languages or crowded the doors of fancy restaurants, looking for a bite to eat. A family with two kids sitting on their parents' shoulders gazed in wonder at the illuminated sky. Jasmine smiled when she recognized the English-speaking family for whom she'd relinquished the hotel room.

Glad they're having a good time too.

After they climbed over some wide steps, Lumere stopped and guided her gaze with his. Up farther into a narrow side canal spanned the Bridge of Sighs.

"*Ponte dei Sospiri*," he murmured against her ear. The heat of his breath tickled her skin.

Jasmine could almost see the prisoners walking across the covered bridge to their court hearing beyond. A gondola glided smoothly out from underneath the bridge on which they stood and floated below the famous one. Jasmine watched an amorous couple sitting and holding hands while the silent but grinning gondolier pushed left to right against his oar. The black-and-white-striped shirt reminded her of the house's upper floor. She watched the majestic gondola until it'd turned a corner.

"Why the checkered pattern?" she asked. "On your card and the upper floor of the house I mean?"

"That is where Raffaello worked when he created the cards. Black and white, good and evil, life and death. The perfect balance. He thought it was fitting that my card would show these two colors as well." Lumere looked back at the canal. His gaze seemed lost in time.

Guarding her thoughts jealously in case he was eavesdropping again, Jasmine imagined a new setting, complete with details, colors and smells, then willed it to happen.

“Whoa,” she yelped when both tumbled pell-mell in a gondola.

Lumere fanned his arms wide to steady himself. “You must warn me before you attempt these things. Mastering one’s thoughts requires time.” He looked around and nodded. “Though you *are* very adept.”

They sat in a gondola, a black—as all gondolas—lacquered beauty with gold trim and midnight blue seats. Cushions and tassels added just the right touch of panache. She grinned like a fox that’d just gobbled up the last egg in the coop.

“What time is it?” she asked, looking down at her wrist but seeing nothing there. *That’s right, the guy broke it off. Not that it would’ve been useful.* Still, she’d sure miss her watch.

“Almost midnight for them. The gate will disappear for another year. But such is not my present concern.”

Lumere sat closer to her so he could lean down and kiss her. He teased her lips with his, let the tip of his tongue caress hers but retreated right back again, leaving her open and hungry for more. Much more!

Liquid pleasure seeped out of her. Jasmine squeezed her sex tightly as she mentally envisioned Lumere’s large member in her, his skillful hands over her entire body. While fireworks thundered overhead, announcing the very last minutes of the carnival, she planted her hands on his shoulders and sat astride his lap, facing him. She exhaled sharply when he wrapped his arms around her waist and squeezed her tight.

“Do you enjoy the human game called chess?” he asked while he pecked a trail down to her cleavage.

“Only if it’s the strip version.”

Lumere arched an eyebrow and looked at her. “Strip chess? I’ve never heard of this one. How do you play it?”

Jasmine laughed. “I’ll teach you. It’s a lot of fun.”

One of his hands traveled down her back before it slid up under the velvet mantle around her shoulders. He unhooked it and let it fall to the bottom of the boat. The heat of his fingers when they reached the nape of her neck triggered a long frisson. One by one, she felt the buttons giving under his skilled touch.

“I have things to teach to you as well.”

“I’m quick, you’ll see.”

Lumere shook his head. “No,” he replied between kisses to her throat and the dawn of her breasts. “I hope it takes a very, very long time for you to learn.”

“Was that a *joke*? An actual joke? My, demons have a sense of humor too. Who would’ve thought?”

It shut her right up when he slipped the sleeves down her arms and denuded her breasts to the faint breeze blowing down the canal. Raising her face heavenward, she watched as gold, red, white and green sparkles—official colors of respectively Venice and Italy—filled the Venetian night sky in dazzling showers or dove with comet-like velocity into the glossy lagoon beyond the canal.

The way she sat on his lap, with fireworks forming an asymmetrical halo alive with bright flashes of colors around her head, awakened a sense of tenderness and vitality Lumere did not know he could feel. His self-appointed duties of guarding the gate between the two worlds had forever consumed much of his life and attention but for the first time in eons, Lumere felt—needed—to understand, to embrace something other than the all-important balance. Vespero had been right—he was no longer neutral. He would no longer be alone to safeguard the gate and show the way to his wayward brethren. Jasmine would be there to support and help him. With her by his side, Lumere knew he could continue his duties without sacrificing his heart. Her love would fill the void. It already *had*.

He forced his hands to be slow and tender when he caressed her breasts, his mouth to tease and draw the nipples out, and not become demanding or possessive. There would be plenty of occasions for this later on. Right then, he wanted to love Jasmine lovingly, softly.

Lumere drew her head down so he could reach her ear. “Have you ever been taken so softly, so slowly, you thought you were dreaming, that your senses must be fooling you until pleasure bloomed and became so intense even your mind reached climax?”

A sharp intake of air rewarded him.

“Has a man ever made love to you with his gaze, his mouth, his hands alone and nothing else? Would you believe I can titillate your senses, stimulate and awaken your body with only these three means?”

Jasmine nodded.

“Would you have me love you this way?”

“Yes.”

“Now?”

“Yes.”

Lumere wrapped her waist with an arm while he stood and lurched forward. She “humphed” when it looked as though they would tumble out of the gondola and into the canal but at the last possible second, he willed them back inside his home, which he immediately adorned for the occasion.

He stopped her momentum so she would sink slowly into a veritable mountain of cushions, each one finer and more luxurious than the next. Where gold tassels, Prussian blue and pale opal embroideries rivaled in intensity and shimmer. Where a gem such as she would feel at home. Tapestries hung from the bare stone walls and provided an

extra layer of warmth and coziness while the ceiling was festooned with red, looping satin drapes. A candelabrum provided just enough light to create exquisite shadows along her body. With an arm behind her shoulders, he lay her down gently. Her dark brown curls settled around her face.

“Oh...my...goodness,” she murmured, looking at the décor he had hastily assembled.

Lumere’s chest puffed with pride that she would enjoy his attentions so much. “You are not to move a single limb, Jasmine, unless you wish for it all to end.”

“What, you think I’m a fool? I’m not moving a single *hair*.” She nuzzled a cushion and sighed. “I’m really, really going to enjoy it here.”

He grew serious. “It will not always be so enjoyable, but for now we can indulge ourselves in these pleasures. Time for vigilance and toil will come soon enough.”

Jasmine must have willed her clothes off for the next instant she lay naked among the plush pillows and cushions, shadows and points of light making her body a work of art, the lush triangle between her thighs a canvas upon which he would create his work of passion.

Lumere followed suit and knelt naked by her side. “Now close your eyes and let me love you.”

She did as he told and sighed.

After he arranged cushions for her to lie flat on her stomach, he caressed her body from head to heel, twisted her hair up so he could admire her back, the curve of her behind, those muscled thighs and calves. His hands became extensions of his eyes as he stroked and cherished every angle, recess and arch, every perspective, each limb one at a time as though to look at her from a distance and take in her sum would make him lose his mind. How a human could so electrify and impress him, he had no idea...nor would he change a thing about it. Ever.

Lumere spent a long while adoring her skin for the simple pleasure of feeling her warmth under his hands. Soon though, his mouth began to salivate at the sight of such a glorious woman. He wanted to taste her as well. Tenderly, he retraced his every step, this time with his mouth a companion to his hands and eyes. To better savor her, Lumere kept his eyes half closed. Goose bumps appeared over her shoulders and compensated for the mental and sensual agony of not taking her right then and there.

“Roll onto your back,” he murmured in her ear after he blew on the nape of her neck.

Jasmine pushed herself over and nestled amid the cushions with a leg slightly bent outward. Her eyes were still closed. Perfect.

With his arousal growing to dangerous proportions at the vision before him, he kissed her face, claimed her mouth and had to fist the cushion to master the passion knifing his gut. Master of himself once again, Lumere tongued her lips slowly—spending time knowing how each parcel of her reacted to his caresses. He had time. He *was* Time.

Down her throat he grazed her, tongue following her jawline, the fine collarbones joining in the middle and creating a tantalizing pool of shadow. By the corner of his eyes, he spotted her nipples hardening, shrinking to half their size and Lumere thought he would lose his self-control. To quench some of the fire, he visited on her breasts his most passionate attention yet. He lipped her nipples before he released his tongue and allowed himself to lick her dark pink areolas, lick them into tight little mounds he then rolled in his fingers. A moan left Jasmine. Her belly quaked.

“Shh,” he whispered between her breasts before he licked a trail around one then the other, the symbol for infinity. “Let it build inside before you release it.”

Another pass around her breasts made her arch. Lumere repeated the movement but slightly higher then he did it again, repeating the process until he had reached the twin summits. He suckled tenderly.

When he knew her body clamored for more, Lumere left her breasts, which rose with each sharp breath and raked his teeth along her abdomen before stroking the thin cleft between her legs. A muscle twitched on her thighs. Lumere smiled. She was his. Entirely. Willingly.

While his hands continued down her thighs then under her knees, his mouth settled over her nether lips. He inhaled deeply. The first time he tasted her Jasmine trembled, the second time she shook and the third time he ran his tongue along her tight sex a long moan left her.

“Let it build, Jasmine,” he urged.

So she would experience the most pleasure, Lumere brought his hands on either side of his chin and used his thumbs to part her but only slightly. He did not want her to feel any pressure other than his mouth on her glistening flesh. Honey had already seeped out of the folds. Spreading it upward with the tip of his tongue, he savored Jasmine unhurriedly. When more of her nectar flowed from her to him, he accentuated the intensity but maintained the slow cadence. From the bottom up, slowly, using his tongue like a brush and spreading her pleasure in a long line. Then again. Her pelvis tilted to follow his movement.

“Do not move.”

Lumere knew his tone had sounded commanding, much more so than he had intended but he also realized Jasmine wanted it this way and more than gladly indulged her.

Wet with her satisfaction and his saliva, her sex shimmered, a rained-on pink orchid. Her pearl was completely denuded and swollen. Lumere looked up to see her staring down at him.

“Close your eyes and let me bring you there.”

She was already “there”. He’d taken her “there” twice already. She’d never come so silently, so quietly. No man had ever invested such time and energy in it either. Jasmine closed her eyes and let her head fall back on the cushions.

Something entered her slowly, something slick and agile. His tongue. While he kept her lips parted with his fingers, Lumere was giving her the gentlest yet most powerful orgasms of her life. Another one reared and kicked-started a series of abdominal spasms that spread to her thighs and butt cheeks. Even her lower back burned with intense pleasure. An urge to crush his face between her legs sent signals to her reeling mind. She fought them. God she wanted him to take her. Now. Tomorrow. Always.

But when she thought she'd already reached the paroxysm of pleasure, that she couldn't possibly come any harder, another wave swelled right behind the last, this one so massive her heart started pumping hard enough to make her feel dizzy. She waited with bated breath. It was almost there.

Lumere slowly pushed his tongue in deep then back out again. Fingers replaced it. The slightly abrasive surface of his skin provided just the right touch to her already fired senses.

"Let it build," he said again while he tongued her clit. "Let it swell."

It was building all right! Jasmine squeezed her eyes tightly and fisted cushions. Oh...*ohhh*.

Lumere sucked on her sex then abruptly released it. "Release your pleasure, Jasmine," he breathed, his voice hoarse and raw. "Unleash it!"

As though every nerve ending in her body had fired at once, a blanket of tingles covered her, reduced her shaking frame to a mass of stimulated flesh. She cried something out. She wasn't sure what it was, only that the last syllable stretched out almost indefinitely. When her lungs were emptied and burning, she gulped several breaths and moaned with the tiny but powerful stabs of aftershock. Arching back with her arms over her head and her feet pointed, she rode another rush then another. Pain soon followed.

Lumere must have understood for he lay down by her side and gathered her against him. As her orgasm trailed off in tingly increments, Jasmine nestled her knees between his, her ankles locked with Lumere's. That peculiar smell, man, musk and mint, stamped a satiated grin on her face. She caught the sparkle of pride in his black eyes.

Jasmine took her time admiring her man—her *demon*. The forward chin just square enough, that mouth, so refined yet decadent, a Grecian nose to make a Renaissance sculptor proud, the forehead high and smooth. He seemed ageless in his patient grace, extraordinary in his quiet strength. *Il Tempo*. The wise guardian of the gate, keeper of Time.

No words were needed. She smiled.

Epilogue

With the tip of his saber, The Fool flicked the hem of a woman's skirt as she walked by. It ruffled slightly even if he couldn't really touch her, not across the once-more sealed barrier between his demonic world and the material plane. Hell, he was already bored.

He was sitting cross-legged on the sidewalk near a gondola gathering point, harassing the oblivious passersby when a pair of women—probably a mother-daughter pair of visitors—climbed inside a gondola and glided away from the dock. Their gondolier smiled a fake, toothy grin as the pair *ooh-ed* and *ahh-ed* at the many sights. Because they were the liveliest and noisiest things around and since he was hopelessly bored, The Fool climbed to his feet and strutted down the canal to follow them. The daughter was particularly enjoyable, with her body a marvel of generous curves. Not a single angle to be seen. She was rosy and plentiful and smiling. Just glorious.

So he followed along the ledge as the gondolier took them around the less mind-numbing architectural details of Venice. It had once been so exhilarating. But the recent century had dulled its luster and cooled its fire. He had come to loathe the city and fervently hoped it would sink faster. But then again, he rarely came here anymore and preferred the much livelier, newer mortal cities. The ones in America proved especially entertaining. Now that the gate would remain closed, he would soon leave and find mortals to pester. He had so many names, but his favorite one was *esprit frappeur*, a “spirit that hits”... How hilarious! Others called his antics the work of a poltergeist. Much more boring. He preferred the former.

While they rounded a corner of the canal, waiting for another gondola herding other mortals to glide past, the daughter exclaimed about something and reached dangerously far over the edge. Despite the gondolier's warning, she remained thus then snatched her hand back. A transparent film holding something rectangular in shape glistened in her hand. She showed her mother, who exclaimed just as profusely.

The Fool wanted to exclaim as well!

Though he could not see it from where he stood, he recognized the object right away. He rushed forward so he could perch on the ledge and take a closer look when the gondola glided past. There it was, with the words *Il Tempo* shimmering temptingly at him. When he looked up into the mortal's face, he gasped and stepped back.

The daughter...she had been staring right *at* him!

A quick check behind him confirmed it. When he looked back at her, she had already traveled farther down the canal but had turned in the seat. Their gazes met.

The Fool could not help himself. He executed a quick jig, spun on himself then bowed low until the feathers of his mask brushed the stone ground.

She gifted him with a shy little grin then resumed conversing with her mother, who'd claimed the card and was examining it.

The Fool smoothed the front of his jade green doublet and smiled to himself. Things had just become astoundingly less boring!

About the Author

I am a mother, spouse, older sister, writer, ex-soldier, high school drop-out, dog owner (or dog owned), half couch potato/half intermittent jogger, wannabe renovator and avid reader who watches too much television, sinks too much money in clothes, likes animals more than humans, recycles, wore braces, never downloads copyrighted stuff, was a nerd without the grades, has a belly laugh that turns heads in theaters, can't stand bullying, is mother hawk more than mother hen, votes even if candidates aren't that great and thinks formal education is highly overrated (probably because she has none).

Nathalie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorasCave.com.

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