

PIXIES in the PARK



The Nexus Chronicles
Book 3

Viola
Grace

Back at home, Abby is inundated by gifts and cards from the Magical community at large. When one gift is more of a surprise than anticipated, the occupants of Oak Point are going to have their hands full finding the first kidnapped Nexus in history. Abby fights for freedom in her own small way, while Xander goes out of his mind to find her. Join the new creatures, new characters and new villains as they try to help, commiserate and destroy Abby in turn.

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Pixies in the Park

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Pixies in the Park

Book 3 of the Nexus Chronicles

By

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Dedication

To Janet and Jay, editors extraordinaire.

Chapter One

It was insane. Abby didn't know how much of it she could stand, but the agony was for a good cause. The torment had been going on for weeks and if she didn't bring it to a halt, any further agony would be her own fault.

"Laura, I love you dearly, but I can't see a difference in those two colour swatches." Seesee's honesty saved Abby from being the unsupportive friend.

Baby Gaia was on her mommy's lap being entertained by her moving hair tendrils. The gorgon had a built-in entertainment centre for little ones and her adopted daughter was reaping the benefits.

"I am very glad to hear that. It is the same colour." Laura grinned, her elegant face showing pure enjoyment.

"What?"

"I just wanted to make sure you were paying attention. You two glazed over about an hour ago." The mermaid took a cookie off the table and munched cheerfully.

"What happened to the psychotic bridezilla that we have been dealing with over the last few weeks?" Abby asked the question, her eyes intent on her friend. She had almost lost her life to a friend who seemed to shift personalities suddenly and any changes had to be studied. Closely and with cookies on hand.

Montrose's Munchies was catering as usual. The shop had been relieved when Seesee had returned from her adoptive leave. It had taken some time for the gorgon to get used to the new and unexpected addition to her life. Little Gaia had erupted into her life and joined a family delighted to have her. They were hoping to raise her as a less homicidal and bitter person than she had been the first time. Nurture over nature was the goal of the Oak Point Guard.

"I have come to realize that I am only ruining my wedding day for myself and for Verne. We hired a mer wedding planner who is consulting with Verne's pack's tradition keeper. They are handling everything but my dress and that is being created by the very talented Mistress Galfor."

Abby inclined her head in lieu of *you're welcome*.

"So, as you can see, with each side catering its own food and the Council taking care of themselves, it is a rather easy event to organize. Surprisingly." Laura shrugged. "I almost wish it was more complicated...it should be, shouldn't it?"

Abby snorted while Seesee kept Gaia from eating her braids. “Your courtship was plenty complicated. Don’t be surprised if pushing a rock uphill while dating leads to a downhill wedding.”

“That seems to be the case. I just got so used to fighting that I was kinda surprised when I was able to stop. Plus, your faces when I made you try on those god-awful bridesmaids gowns were just priceless.”

Abby and Seesee shuddered in remembrance. “Glad we could amuse you.” Abby was only slightly bitter about that, but she had borne up under the strain until this moment. Now that the all clear had been sounded, relief flowed through her like a drug.

As occasionally happened when she felt something too strongly, a pulse of magic exploded from her to ripple through the neighbourhood and spread across the globe.

Laura gave her a look of wide-eyed surprise. “That relieved?”

“You have no idea.”

The three women shared a look and then burst into laughter. Gaia squealed and clapped her hands as she joined in.

* * * *

Out in the yard, the gnomes looked back toward the patio door where the three women were clearly visible, plus the dark one. Oh sure, the Nexus was willing to forgive and forget where that child was concerned, but they would remain on their guard. She was not getting near enough to Abby to hurt her again, no matter how cute and pudgy she was.

Harby stopped and surveyed the yard. The magic that the Nexus had been putting out recently, thanks to the Warlock Desmith, had come to rest in the plants and flowers of her yard. With spring knocking on their door, it would only be a matter of days before the first of the new year’s blooms flared to the surface. There was plenty for the gnomes to do in the mean time.

Bitsy was reading up on books about feng shui for the garden and he had a plan to create a harmonious space for the Nexus to meditate. It would be a lot of work for them, but after all, the Nexus was a boon to all magical creatures and if she hadn’t been spurred into action, they wouldn’t be alive.

It still seemed odd to Harby that they had come into being by another’s hand. They felt so *in tune* with nature and all around them that it came as a bit of a shock to realize that they were created by accident.

Well, they had been created on purpose so that Abby could create a book that would eventually sell enough copies to get her a down payment on a mortgage, but they had been animated by accident, a slight overspill of the Nexus's uncontrolled power. She had lit them up one by one and they had come awake with the personalities she had designed them with.

Now, if she had just stopped with them and not animated those blasted little tattletales, Harby would have been much happier.

The gargoyles weren't bad, but the elves that they had each gotten for Xmas served one purpose and one purpose only—to tell on them when they were doing something a little iffy. There were ways to distract the little beasts, but nothing could confine them for long. The gnomes had a variety of plans in place for their *spring shopping*, but since the elves only fell for the distraction once, they would have to use their plans sparingly.

Harby stretched and flexed his hands. The grass had already been cleared of all traces of winter and autumn leaves. The plans for the gazebo, pond and small windmill were in place with shopping lists assembled.

As he watched his clan work, he smiled at how well their personal nests were coming along. Just a few feet under the ground were tiny bunkers lined with the goodies that they had assembled at the Magic Summit. Each of them had a set of rooms decorated to their personal tastes and since their rooms were not invasive or illegal, the elves kept their mouths shut about their little town underground. With the gargoyles nesting in the great oak in the backyard, the elves took the gnomes digging underground as a matter of course.

It had been a very productive winter.

* * * *

With the camaraderie having run its course, the ladies left Abby alone with her thoughts as she closed her door. Well, she tried to close it, but a frantic flapping of wings stalled her. Buffy struck her squarely in the chest, squeaking in distress.

“What is it honey?” Abby tried to calm the clinging gargoyle, but it was difficult with her wings still flapping and her claws digging into Abby's skin.

“Calm down, are you hurt?” Abby carefully used her inner eye to assess Buffy's condition. Her basic energy was stable, her body was not damaged and nothing was off.

“Holy heck.” Nothing except for the small, bright spot of life blooming in the gargoyle's belly.

“Where are the boys?” Carrying the little creature, she held her tightly to her chest as she went to look for the other two gargoyles in the backyard. They were up in the trees, hanging baseball caps that they had stolen from unsuspecting men the previous autumn.

“Okay, Buffy. Who is the father?” She pried her creature off her and lured her onto the kitchen counter with a cookie. “Is it Angel?” No response in the aura.

“Not Firefly?” No reaction and the little gargoyle looked away.

What did that leave? “Is it a gnome?” The flare brightened into a hot, red pulse in Buffy’s aura.

“Thank goodness. I was afraid it would have been an elf. That was a close one.” She held her breath for her next round of questions. “Harby? No. Good. That would have been one ugly little bugger. Skint? No. Splint? No, good that would have been tricky. Oh, lord. That leaves Bitsy.”

The flaring of her aura was telling the tale. It was Bitsy.

Abby sighed. It did make a certain amount of sense. Those two had always been drawn together. But a gnome-gargoyle baby? That was a little much to take in.

“Sweetie. When did it happen?” She held onto Buffy’s little hand and smiled as the fingers gripped her.

Buffy waved her hand and squeaked again. This time it sounded more like a word. “Today.”

“Wow. The little one seems to draw your magic a little.”

“No fly.”

“Oh. That was why you crashed into me. I think I can give you some supplements to help with that. But this will be your private stash. Don’t let the boys into them or they will eat them all.” Abby took a cookie and poured the power of the surprise she had felt when she realized she was about to be a grandmother to a flying gnome.

“One cookie a day until the baby gets bigger and then up to three. I will put them in a special spot and get the elves to guard it for you.”

Buffy’s cute little face with its wild mane of fluffy hair looked happy and hopeful as the cookie replaced some of the magic she had been missing.

“There. Better?” When her little one smiled and nodded, she said, “Good. Now you can tell Bitsy if you wish to, but if you want to keep the secret from your other companions, that is your choice. Come to me once a day for a check-up and I will try to compensate for any changes in the baby’s growth cycle with extra boosts. At this point, it is all I can do. I think I may give the cookies to Laura. The gnomes won’t dare break in to her yard...again.”

That had been a funny afternoon. The gnomes wanted to know if they could swim and had jumped into Laura's pool, promptly sinking to the bottom and making mermaid retrieval imperative. Fortunately, what they did learn was that while they could not swim, they could not drown. It was a bright side.

However, after that escapade, Laura banned them from her yard unless Abby was there to babysit. It was a nice, safe place for power cookies.

She made the call and pressed one of her five cookie jars into service. She would leave it in the backyard in one of the small alcoves that was built into the reed hut that acted as a cabana.

Seesee had left her plenty of cookies, so she charged up a dozen and put them in the jar. Now, the only problem was sneaking over to Laura's without the gnomes seeing her.

A thought broke over her and she smiled at the simplicity. Laura was currently alone, so Abby had a few minutes until Verne came over for their date.

She knocked on the door, cookie jar in hand and simply gave it to Laura with instructions on where to put it. Buffy was sitting comfortably on Abby's shoulder and smiled brilliantly at the mermaid as she greeted her.

"Do you have the goods?" The dark and spooky voice Laura was using belied her bright grin.

In her own version of spy talk she whispered, "I've got the jar. Stash the goodies and all will be well."

A canny look came to the mermaid's eyes. "What will I get in return?"

Abby drew herself up straight. "I will order the gnomes to stop putting fish food in your tea and your juice and your salad." She had gotten enough amusement out of it anyway. Having minions had its good points.

"Deal." Laura extended her hands and took the cookie jar, not commenting on the teddy bear holding an *Eat Me* sign. "I look forward to doing business with you again, Nexus. Buffy, congratulations."

The little gargoyle extended her wings, stood up on Abby's shoulder and bowed. She squeaked her thanks and then settled back into her perching position.

The two bipedals shook hands and with a jaunty wave, Abby left her friend's yard just as Verne was making his way to his lady's sidewalk.

"Good evening, Verne."

"Evening, Nexus. Taking the gargoyle out for a walk?"

His question was just silly. “Of course I am. *I can’t ride her, now can I?*” That quieted the grumpy werewolf into stunned silence as she walked back to her house. She looked to Buffy and held up her hand, receiving a high five from the diminutive flyer.

It looked like Buffy was her guardian for the night, so Abby went about her evening routine. She headed to her sketchbook and drew designs for her next creatures. Fairies. Little itty bitty pixies.

The first Nexus had made the first pixies, but they had all been of the same sex and had obviously died out over the centuries. Abby wanted to send Terranor a box of pixies of both sexes to start her new race.

Abby had gotten a pattern for the bodies for Xmas, but she wanted fantastically coloured wings and glitter. Lots of glitter. These pixies would be able to defend themselves against predators as well as camouflage their bodies in the wild.

After her wing designs were completed, she moved into her studio and set up the sewing machine. Minutes of sewing later, she had the first body ready for turning and stuffing. Her small haemostats came into play and soon she was turning the body under Buffy’s watchful gaze. Pipe cleaners filled the arms and legs while the body was stuffed until features started to take shape. She used a deep sequin black for the eyes, giving the fairy no pupil, but second sight. The lips were tiny and red, painted with a brush that was only a few camelhairs wide.

“So, Buffy. Do you think she needs eyebrows?” It was second nature to speak to her creatures, even if they could only sporadically answer her.

At the enthusiastic nod, the brush was cleaned and two lovely golden brows swept across the chocolate-coloured fabric. Using a new technique, she needle felted long black hair onto the doll’s body and then took stock of the combination of arms, legs and the head-torso combo.

“She’s gonna be pretty. Now, let’s work on those wings.” Crisp organza was her fabric of choice for the prototype. She blended gold, greens and black into a swirling pattern that was mimicked on both upper and lower wings. Eyes in the design would let the pixie see what was coming up behind her.

“Now, the glitter. This is one of the most important parts.” A superfine glitter designated as diamond dust was sprinkled onto the wet paint and the excess gently blown off. Beautiful, sparkly wings were in front of her now, they needed only wire reinforcements to make them flutter worthy and Abby would have a new creature.

She yawned and stretched, looking over at the digital clock that Xander had insisted she install in the studio. He was going to be away on council business for another few days and she missed him at this time of the day more than any other time. When she was getting ready for bed, she missed him horribly.

He would have dragged her off to rest hours ago, not left her to work on her creature until two in the morning. Blinking back tears of fatigue and concentration, she wandered down her hall to

scrub her hands clean of paint and glitter. She knew from experience that if she rubbed her eyes now, the irritation would far outweigh the fleeting relief.

Buffy flapped behind her and glided up and down the hallway as Abby got ready for bed. Abby checked on Buffy's power levels and topped her up before climbing between the sheets with her little creature standing guard.

The necessity of letting the paint dry was the only thing keeping her in bed. She wanted to be in there, creating, animating and bringing life to an extinct species, but that would have to wait until morning. Now, it was time to rest and let the morning bring new possibilities of magic.

* * * *

Across the continent, a creature of pure malevolence adulterated with greed, plotted. *With Desmith out of the way, I will easily be able to reach the Nexus. In less than four days, her power would be mine.*

Chapter Two

Finishing the pixie was priority the next morning, but her creatures were having none of it. She was forced to sit and eat breakfast, then bullied into a shower. Abby felt sheepish at being pushed around by her own creatures, but by her own lack of foresight, they outnumbered her fifteen to one. *Stupid strength in numbers.*

It was near ten by the time they let her have her studio time, but she had only fastened the wings to wire struts that would give them support when there was a knock on her door. It was the postal carrier, Stephen Murdoch, half demon extraordinaire.

“Morning, Nexus. I have some more parcels for you.”

“Thanks, Steven. Would you care to come in?”

“I would love to.” He was always so polite, as if he really did not expect her to let him in.

She was under orders to let Stephen vet all of her presents. “Nothing weird?”

“That depends on your definition of weird. Nothing harmful in this batch, I double checked it.”

She was struck by something in that statement. “You mean people have been sending me hate mail?”

“Nothing toxic, just a few live creatures that might help factions to subvert your moods a little.” He shrugged.

“Oh.” Oh, just a little light poisoning, nothing to concern herself with. She shook her head and steeled herself to open the parcels. Two books of magical history, some chocolate that the gnomes taste tested for her and a tunic of silk so fine that the envelope was almost flat. That last was from Galfor. Another commission gift for steering work her way. Now that she was known as the designer for the Nexus, there was a certain mystique about her. She was so busy that she almost didn’t have time to breathe, let alone sew.

After a glass of lemonade, Stephen was on his way, his postal truck stopping occasionally along the street as he did his paranormal rounds. She didn’t know where he went, but his truck disappeared as it left Oak Point Way.

She sighed and closed the door. Pixie time! Walking calmly to her studio, she finished the prep work on the five-inch doll and began assembly. She was done. The little pixie was done and all that she needed to do was to infuse her with magic.

Cradling the little one in her hands, she took a deep breath and centred herself. The gnomes were gathered in the doorway with their elves close behind. The gargoyles were clinging to the storage units that held her materials and all small eyes were watching her.

She took another calming breath and...

The doorbell rang. She stood, placed her pixie carefully down and walked to answer it, but when Abby went to get it, Stephen had already gone. That was peculiar, he had watched her open every box with those demonic eyes blazing and now she was left with this lonely parcel on her stoop. Men changed their minds so quickly it wasn't funny.

"Hey, anyone want to see what I got?" She whispered the words, making her way into the dining room on stocking feet.

There was no return address, which was a little peculiar. There was also no postage. A sense of peace and trust swamped her, drowning her in curiosity. Her mind sounded warnings that her body ignored as her fingers worked the fastenings loose, opening the tape and revealing the box inside.

"Wow. Pretty." The box was a shiny black with silver symbols on every edge. Her mind was screaming for her not to open the box and her creatures were struggling against an invisible barrier. Despite these warnings, she lifted the lid.

An imp darted out, blinking at her with huge blue eyes. "Aren't you just the cutest thing?"

As she leaned down to examine him, two handfuls of sparkles hit her right between the eyes, covering her from head to toe. A startled gasp emanated from her as the world twisted, spun and then got much, much larger.

The bubble that kept out the gnomes stayed in place, as Abby found herself in the strange situation of looking up at her creatures. Her mind was now clear of the compulsion to cooperate with the box, so she extended her hand to pull in the magic. Nothing happened. She could see it, feel it, almost *smell* it, but it would not come to her.

The imp jumped down from the table and with one hand around her waist and one over her mouth, he bounced up to the mirror in her hallway and without warning, leapt through the glass with her in his arms.

A silver tunnel of roaring magic closed in on her and she passed out.

* * * *

“Are you sure?” Bitsy held Buffy’s hand and looked her over from head to toe. Her soft, silvery skin was unblemished and no visible sign of their offspring was evident.

“The Nexus confirmed it. She can see the little one growing and that is why I have been so tired. I only have enough energy for myself at this time.”

“Did she help you?”

“She gave me cookies and hid them at the mermaid’s house. I will be fine.”

“Why did she hide them?”

“Because Angel and Firefly like cookies. It was safer to put them in the hands of a third party and this way, she could concentrate on her new creature creation. She looks to be very cute and the boys and I are glad to have another flyer.” She blinked at him, her large eyes focussing on his face. “How do you feel about the baby?”

“I am surprised, but I believe that anything that comes from you will be extraordinary.” Bitsy pressed his lips to her clawed hand and laid his hand over her belly. The spark of life was stirring inside her and it was a wonder.

Speaking of stirring, the Nexus was moving around. It was time for breakfast.

Since the Nexus had enjoyed bacon the day before, today was oatmeal and fruit salad. As one, the gnomes kept her from entering her workroom until she had showered and changed. When she was ready to face the day, they let her in.

It was amazing to watch Abby bring a creature into animation. The Nexus was intent on workmanship and the gnomes and gargoyles were living proof. Her attention to detail was obvious when he considered that he was going to be a father.

He wondered if the baby was going to have wings while he watched the final assembly of the new creature. The Nexus was just gathering her power when there was a knock at the door.

The demon was at the door with the daily dose of gifts from the magical community. Despite her cool exterior, the Nexus’s pleased excitement leaked through her calm demeanour. She could hide it from the tall ones but not from her creatures. They thrived on her excitement, the magic that emanated from her in subtle waves.

The gnomes no longer needed daily booster shots of magic, but the gargoyles and the accursed little elves still had to hover nearby for extra power. It made them stick close to her and as such, Bitsy kept close to her. He was beginning to feel for Buffy what the warlock felt for the Nexus, something that made him ache when she was away from him.

It kept him closer to home than he would normally want to stay. The urge to wander had become unbearable of late, but his relationship with the gargoyle had quashed it under a wave of contentment.

With the postman finished and gone, the creatures were free to watch the Nexus animate her new pixie. Bitsy was holding his breath and watching the others as Abby drew in her power to give it to the new creature. The doorbell rang and they followed a frustrated woman to the front room.

Something was wrong. The object in her hands vibrated with dark power. She was talking to it as she unwrapped it, murmuring to it as she held it in her hands.

“Get that away from her!” Bitsy and the others surged forward, but they were trapped against a field of power. The Nexus looked at them with glazed eyes and opened the box despite their shrieks of protest.

Something was inside the box. More dark magic filled the air as they pounded their fists against the barrier and they all froze in horror when something popped out of the box. It looked like a cross between an elf and a razor blade. The creature threw something at the Nexus and to Bitsy’s horrified gaze, she shrank to the same height as the new creature she was working on.

The beast looked at the group of them, leered evilly, shot them the finger and then jumped to grab the Nexus, leaping through the mirror in the hallway with another laughing glance at the frustrated creatures.

The Nexus was gone.

Bitsy sprang into action. “Harby, take Skint and Mitsy and get the gorgon. Since she can’t understand us, use a note. Ruffles, Splint, go with Angel and Firefly and get the mermaid and wolf over here. They will need to call Xander because we still aren’t up to using the phones.”

Harby looked upset, “Why are you giving the orders?”

“Because I started talking first. Now go!” The moment he barked the order, everyone ran.

“Elves, guard the scene. If they can trace the kidnapper, then we don’t want to interfere with the possibilities. Go!” The small, grumpy, little creatures carefully walked around the glittering powder on the floor. It was deadly and dangerous—anyone could see that. It was perversely noticeable for creatures made of magic.

Bitsy and Buffy waited, holding hands, for someone to return. It was a lonely wait, but when they started arriving, the worry that they felt spread through the community like a wildfire.

* * * *

Seesee was bemused by the gnomes at her door, but when she was handed the note that simply said *NXS*, she grabbed Gaia and headed for Abby's house with no delay.

"Abby? Abby, are you all right?" Seesee moved into the house and was almost to the hallway leading to the dining room when a small barricade of elves stopped her. A box lay on the hall table covered with glyphs and exuding a powerful magic. Glitter coated the table and floor, Seesee had a nasty suspicion of what that substance was.

Laura and Verne came in through the back door and were stopped on the other side of the scene by the other three elves.

Laura was looking a little wild, "What is it?"

"Abby's not answering and there is a powerful dark magic here. We may have a situation." Seesee held up her hand. "Just a moment and I will meet you on the other side of the house."

She held her little one and moved back out the way she had come, going through the side yard and in through the patio door. She sat at the kitchen table and used her hair to reach for her phone in her bra. The tendrils dialled Xander's number.

"Hello?"

"Xander, you need to come home."

"What? I am in a council meeting." He sounded frazzled. She could sympathise, dealing with any council was frustrating at the best of times.

She took a deep breath and was direct. "Abby's missing."

The line went dead.

A sharp retort rang through the front street.

Laura quickly shouted, "Gargoyles, lead him around the back!"

The grey flyers whipped out the back door and swarmed around Xander's head, drawing him to the growing group of full-sized humans.

"Where is she?"

Seesee bounced Gaia on her lap, more for her own benefit than the toddler's. "We don't know. The gnomes came to get us and there is a box in the front room covered with what seems to be pixie dust."

“Don’t be absurd. No one has seen a pixie in almost a hundred years.” Verne was looking a little peaked, like he had a peculiar type of heartburn.

“No one has seen a female Nexus either, but here we are.” Laura was looking at her fiancé with a strange expression. She looked over to Buffy and bit her lip. “We need to find Abby, fast.”

Xander got out his phone and started dialling. “Yes, Celia, please. This is Xander.”

He waited, his foot tapping.

“Celia, I need you to bring an investigative team to Oak Point Way immediately. The Nexus appears to be missing. Don’t bother being quiet and bring whomever you need. Time is of the essence.”

Seesee sighed, as those few sentences seemed to be enough. Xander closed his phone and went to look at the scene.

* * * *

There were a few spots on the floor of the sparkling substance, like tiny footprints. Xander’s heart clenched as he tried to find Abby with his paranormal senses. There was no Nexus signature anywhere within the scope of his talent...he was almost sick.

“Can you feel her?” Seesee laid her hand on his arm.

He could feel himself vibrating with tension and he knew she could feel it. “No. She is gone.”

Waves of power came through an instant before Celia and the *Charm and Spell Investigators* were on the scene. They appeared in the backyard and came right into the house.

“Where is the scene?” A small goblin with goggles over its large yellow eyes came forward with gloves and a toolbox.

The gnomes waved him in, Celia, a troll and a shapeshifter bringing up the rear.

“Xander? Do you know what happened?” Celia was all business.

“No, I was called in after the creatures alerted the rest of the Guard. The gnomes, elves and gargoyles are the witnesses and they can’t speak.” He was diffident to his cousin. She was here in her official capacity after all. It was rare for a seer to be allowed out on her own recognizance, but Abby had lobbied hard for Celia to do her own thing and the councils had granted her special dispensation.

“Then I will ask them what they saw.” She moved past him with a conciliatory pat on his arm. She rarely made contact with others, so it was quite the moment for them both.

He watched as she knelt near Harby. She spoke to him softly and touched her fingers to his temple. Nodding, she repeated the procedure with all of the gnomes, then the gargoyles and finally the elves.

The troll was sniffing the air while the goblin took samples from the door, the parcel wrapper and the sparkly dust. The goblin examined the vial with the dust inside carefully. “I will need to run some tests, but I do believe we have pixie dust here.”

He couldn’t help it, Xander looked over at Seesee and she shrugged. “I researched Terranor and her first creatures when I was younger. It matched the description.”

The troll grimaced at whatever he was scenting. “Did anyone touch the box or wrapper after the incident?”

Celia answered. “No, the creatures blocked off the area and waited for help.”

The shifter looked over at her, “Are you ready?”

“I am.” Celia took a deep breath and sat on the couch. The shifter took a position behind her and prepared to touch her temples.

“What are you two doing?”

“Nester, here, is about to help me show you what happened by helping to assemble the images given to me by the witnesses.” Celia took up a meditative pose. “Now sit down, shut up and let me show you what happened.”

Bemused and with no other option, Xander sat. A tear welled in his eye as he realized that if Abby were there, she would be demanding popcorn.

Chapter Three

Annabeth Hanover didn't know how long they had been travelling, but she came to as they exited the mirror on the other side of that spell.

“What the hell?” She shoved at the imp but was held firmly in place as it marched across an expensive wool carpet to dump her on her ass and then run like hell. It was halfway across the carpet when a flash of light struck it and it exploded in a swirl of fire and stench.

So, she was a tiny woman in a strange place and what the hell was that blinking light she could see out of the corner of her eye?

The light was blinking on something that looked huge to her tiny self. As she approached the strange object, she reconciled what she was seeing with an answering machine on the floor. Given its position, the message was for her. Seething with what seemed to be a good head of anger, she slapped the play button with her hand.

“Welcome, Nexus. It is my pleasure to welcome you to your new home. Food and drink have been provided under the desk for your stay here. A chamber pot is also available for you under the sofa.

“I am sorry to be a rude host, but I am off at the meeting of the councillors so that I may set up my alibi. Rest assured that you are not the first Nexus I have captured and drained, although the last one that I laid hands on was during war time and he had not had time to concentrate his powers.”

Abby stood in shock as the mystery of the missing Nexus from World War II was solved.

“Don't be distressed by your inability to use your powers. It has taken the last of the pixie dust I have collected, but you are sealed for the next three days. You will be neither able to absorb nor project any of your energies. I am sorry for the inconvenience, but it was necessary. As was the change to your size. The imp could not have carried you otherwise.

“I look forward to meeting you in three days and hope that we can have a polite conversation before you must follow your destiny and come to an end. You have done great things in your tenure and your power will carry me through the next century.”

The recording stopped. Abby's fury knew no bounds and she screamed. It was a nice release vocally, but her power was now seething inside her.

“Damn it, damn it, damn it, damn it!” Her creatures must be going nuts at home and the Guard would be mobilized to find her. With her magic sealed, she didn't know if they could do it, so it was time to take her life into her own hands.

If she could get away and hide for even part of the time she had left, she could wait out the pixie dust and suck the power right out of that bastard. Then she would spit that power into a dung heap at the circus and let him spread his energies over some azaleas.

She shook her head and took stock of her surroundings. The furniture was huge and the promised food was honey and crackers with a hamster's water bottle strapped to the desk leg. Fabulous.

The chamber pot was a small bucket and she grimaced at the thought of using it.

The rest of the room was filled with skeletons of a variety of magical creatures, books, tapestries on the wall and two more couches in the corner. A large doorway opened into a hall, but a gentle prod at the invisible wall confirmed that she was blocked from that exit.

"Damn. Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn, damn." Fighting the urge to wail like a little kid again, she wandered back and grabbed one of the crackers. Munching at the dry starch suited her mood.

If only there was a way to make a list, she always did better with lists. Lists and raw materials. If she could lay her hands on one or the other, it would be fantastic.

As she muttered to herself, the glint of the noon sun struck a small piece of metal wedged in the carpet. Not daring to hope, she held her breath and went to investigate.

It was a paperclip embedded in the woven wool. She tugged and yanked, pulling and rocking the paperclip until it was free. Apparently, her strength was proportional to her size. She had the clip, but the wire was thick enough to be a crowbar but not strong enough. It would even be a good needle for coarse fabric if she could find some.

That was it! Coarse fabric and the skeletons. She almost danced with her excitement. The small dinosaur-type skeleton combined with the large bat creature would give her the shape she needed. Now she just needed the time. Time was in short supply, so she had better start with the skeletons and worry about the fabric later. She was pretty sure she knew where to get what she needed, but without a frame to put it on, it would be useless.

Now, how to get up to that skeleton?

The frayed corner of the carpet gave her the clue she needed. This was not going to be fun, but she now had a use for the paperclip. Tugging and pulling at the loose thread, she worked a strand three feet long loose of its moorings. It took almost an hour to put enough knots in it for her to climb, but eventually she had her grappling hook. Now for the hard part, getting the paperclip hooked on the bat skeleton so she could climb it. The small tyrannosaur skeleton would be easier, it was on the floor, but she needed those wings.

Her arms ached, she was covered with sweat and finally, she was able to make the slow and very painful journey up the wool rope. Knot by knot, she climbed until she was dizzyingly high but really only three feet up. A fall from this height might not kill her, but she would be in no shape to escape, even if she did survive without breaking everything.

The bat thing was on a shelf, so she was able to get stable footing while she examined it.

The wings were tied on with wire and the whole thing used wire for connections. She glanced out the window and judged it to be around three or four o'clock. She had three to four hours of daylight left depending if she was right or wrong.

Hopefully it was enough time to do what she needed.

The wires fought her fingers until she got the hang of untwisting the wires using her whole hand. While she worked, she sang, she muttered and she ignored the smears of blood on her project. She could be a pain wuss when she was safely at home with her friends there to kick some magician ass.

It was the thought of her friends and her creatures going out of their minds with worry that kept her working. If she could get home under her own steam, they would be a little more relaxed when she had to go through life six inches tall. Abby knew that there was probably a magus around somewhere who could reverse this spell, but she was really not too fond of magic that wasn't her own right now.

The right wing came free with a hard twist and it fell to the ground with a light bounce. Abby breathed a sigh of relief—it hadn't broken on the way down. Whew. She quickly moved to the other wing, using the technique she had learned with the first. When the left wing came free, it lodged against the shelf she was on, so she got behind it and pushed until it, too, fell free.

She tugged against the remaining skeleton bits and hoped that it would still hold her weight as she lowered herself. Without the weight of the wings, it might not be stable enough for her to climb down. She hoped that the thought was unfounded.

“Okay, Abby. Deep breath. Queen of the jungle!” With that resounding in her ears, she moved as quickly as she could down the wool. Her blood made the journey slippery and a lot faster than she had planned. The speedy descent was fortuitous. The skeleton followed her down when she was only ten inches from the floor.

She rolled frantically under the shelf to keep herself out of the crash zone. A small bone shattered and cut her cheek, but that was the only major damage that she suffered. A sob broke out of her, but she ruthlessly swallowed its siblings. Now was not the time to lose it.

Abby was fairly confident that the mastermind had not set his auto timer for her convenience, so she was going to be out of time and light as soon as the sun set. The light in the room was turning orange, so she whimpered and stood up to her full six inches. One at a time, she dragged the skeletal wings over to the larger bones of the small dinosaur-type creature. She had no idea what it was, but she knew what it was about to become.

She was building herself a dragon.

Chapter Four

The Oak Point Guard watched the flickering image take shape. It was Abby, she was moving in a dreamlike state toward the door. She opened it, leaned down and picked up the parcel.

Xander held his breath. He wanted nothing more than to shout at her to put the box down, but he didn't. Instead, he watched her open the box, examine the contents and then, to his horror, shrink to six inches tall covered with the glittering powder.

The creature inside the box jumped out. "An imp," he announced to the room, but softly so as not to disturb Celia's trance.

The creature grabbed Abby, an act that made Xander's fists clench, and leapt through the glass of the hallway mirror. Suddenly, the image got closer to the mirror and Xander realized that the creatures had been restrained by the same enchantment that had drawn Abby in.

The image faded, focussed on the mirror.

Celia slumped. Nester released her. "That is everything. Take the mirror. It may have trace in it."

The troll went and sniffed around the edge of the mirror. "A standard transport tunnel spell—we may be able to track the imp."

"Excellent." Xander wanted nothing more than to tear his own hair out, but at least she was alive. If it was pixie dust, it explained his inability to sense her. Her magic would be trapped under what amounted to magical plastic wrap. Nothing would get in or out.

"We will have to report this to the council. They need to know." Celia was next to Xander, whispering in low tones.

"I know. I will go with you. They need to hear what has happened from me. The Guard has lost the Nexus which is exactly what they were afraid would happen." He hung his head.

"Don't worry, cousin. I am sure this will all turn out all right." She took his hand again.

"Are you speaking as a Seer?"

"I am speaking as someone who knows Abby. No way is a little thing like being little going to keep her from coming back to you."

The rest of the investigators completed their gathering. Photos were taken and evidence bags filled using tongs. No trace of the box, dust or prints were left behind. The mirror was lifted from the wall with gloves.

“All right. Back to Hotel Spectre. The majority of the council is still there.” Xander led the way out into the backyard. The bright possibilities of the spring flowers eluding him.

He raised his hands, chanted the spell and with a thunderclap, he and the team were transported to the drive in front of the hotel.

In silence, they walked into the hotel and piled into the elevator. As one, they moved into the ballroom being used for council business and stopped in front of the elders from all races and specialities.

“Warlock Desmith, you are disturbing these proceedings.” A wizened old dwarf groused in a haughty tone.

“I have urgent news for the council.”

“Yes, don’t just stand there, spit it out.” Vokal, the minotaur, drummed his fingers.

“The Nexus has been abducted using dark magic.”

The uproar in the chamber took several minutes to calm. As the main council grew quiet, representatives from a variety of Guard-related races came into the room. Max, the Vampire Apprentice, Avenilia of the merfolk, Pack Master Kevin of the werewolves and the dryad Councillor, Rackonell. They stood and waited for Xander to speak.

Celia and the other investigators had taken the evidence for analysis after he made his announcement.

“How could she have been taken? Where was her Guard?”

“The Guard were not alerted. The attack came in the form of a parcel delivered to her doorstep. She opened it and an imp covered her with pixie dust, then carried her through a transport tunnel.” Xander straightened. “The whole thing was over in less than two minutes.”

“Where is she now?” Vokal didn’t seem to grasp the meaning of the pixie dust.

“We don’t know. The Charm and Spell Investigation team is trying to track the transport tunnel.”

“Can’t you track her? I thought you were mates.” The monster delegate still did not understand the meaning of the dust.

“The pixie dust coats the target and renders magic completely null. It lasts three days and until it wears off, the Nexus will be powerless. And six inches tall.”

That stunned the group of elder councillors. “What?”

Celia returned from dropping off the evidence and answered. “An imp emanated from the box, threw the dust and cast a spell before it landed. She is now six inches high. Completely indistinguishable from a squirrel as far as a magical tracker is concerned.”

One of the elderly human councillors spoke, “How did you come to be there, Seer?” Councillor Janes had been on the council for what seemed like centuries.

“Warlock Desmith called for me the instant that he was notified of the kidnapping.”

Warlock Councillor Johnson spoke. “You say it was a kidnapping. How do we know this?”

“I was able to scan the witnesses’ minds and they gave me a moment-by-moment view that I can share with you if you wish.” Nester came through the door at that instant and took up his position behind her.

“Please. I don’t trust the testimony of one who was to have guarded her life with his own.” Janes nodded for them to proceed.

Xander felt his skin flush an unbecoming red, but he stood his ground. The human councillors, Janes, Johnson and Benz, watched carefully. His heart clenched as he watched her shrink and then be encased in magic-proof dust.

When the image faded, the room was silent.

Vokal straightened. “What can we do?”

Xander took a breath. “We can look for the Nexus and look for the one that took her. It takes three days for the dust to wear off according to legend. If the one who took her is after power, he or she will have to wait until that third day. She has been missing for two hours, we have seventy in which to find her and keep her safe.”

The conversation that followed was a blur in his mind, all he could think about was getting Abby back and spanking her ass for opening a box that Stephen hadn’t checked. He asked for a demon representative to meet him for a private conversation and left the room.

Borya was direct the moment that he entered the small hall. “You don’t think it was Stephen, do you? He is perversely loyal to that woman.”

The fire demon was a red so dark he was almost purple. Since the demonic population had joined the council, he had been one of the chosen councillors. His even temper, for a demon, had earned him a position of trust.

“I know it isn’t Stephen. I would like the demon population on earth to keep an eye out for the Nexus. You have access to levels of emotion and magic that the rest of us don’t. Anything you can do to give us a heads up on her location would be welcome.”

Borya’s eyes went translucent gold for an instant. “Done. I have to be honest and tell you that my people are very fond of the mischief that ensues from this kind of chaos.”

“I know, but it is an act of desperation that has me asking to start with. She is the best thing that has ever happened to me, us and our whole community. We need her alive and well.” He had to hold his emotions in check, but his voice cracked while he spoke.

Xander was exhausted, the hard transports that he had engaged in today were enough to drain him of all energies, but there was much to do if they were going to find Abby before anything happened to her. Well, before anything else happened to her.

In his heart, he knew she was alive and well, but there was no way to track his intuition. He needed to ask the Seers what they saw. Time to discuss his need with Celia.

Back in the ballroom, groups were together with maps, phones and scrying bowls. He waved his cousin over and she parted herself from a conversation with councillors and came over.

“Cousin, they are really unhappy that you lost the Nexus.”

“I know, but what I need to know now is whether the Seers know anything.”

“No.”

“No, what? No you won’t tell me?”

“No, the Seers haven’t been able to see beyond today. Whatever is happening, there is a tremendous amount of power involved.”

He cursed under his breath. “Any luck tracking the mirror?”

“No. The imp exploded. We can’t track it any further than that.”

“He what?”

“Exploded. We were able to trace his magic for half an hour and then it shattered into a thousand pieces that blew away on the wind.” Celia was keeping her tone low and serene, but the news that their only lead had blown up was not a good thing.

“Do you think that I can go back to Oak Point and try to get things under control?”

“They know where to find you if they need you. I will call you if anything comes up from here.” Celia grabbed his hand. “We will find her. I have trust in her talents for improvisation. She has never let me down yet.”

Xander hugged his cousin tightly and then braced himself to return to Abby’s friends and his fellow Guards to give them an update on the big fat zero that was their current status.

They needed to get to their respective races and direct the search from there with Seesee and Miklos waiting in case Abby managed to make it home. Dear great elementals, he wanted her to make her way home.

Chapter Five

Abby cursed as she wrestled the wing into position.

The smell of her blood was sharp in the air. Her hands had been sliced up nicely on the wires that held the bones together. The cuts were shallow and she thanked her doctor silently for the tetanus shots that were kept up to date. With all the needles she used, it was better safe than stupid.

She fastened the wires around the spine and hauled up with her feet while twisting them tightly together. The wings would hang limply when she was done, but she had confidence that if she managed to animate it...when, when she managed to animate it, they would fold neatly along his back.

The light was now more red than orange, so she dismounted with one more twist and a pat to her creature in progress. She washed her hands and sacrificed the lower part of her t-shirt to wrap the scrapes and slices. Honey and crackers made up her dinner and then it was time for the tricky part, searching for a safe place to sleep.

The aged smell of the sofa repulsed her, but with light dying, she needed to get an answer to her next phase of construction. She had to go down on her hands and knees to get under the furniture, but she had plenty of clearance. There was nothing under the couch of the lint or candy variety. This house was well appointed but not lived in. Crossing her fingers and praying for luck, she lay down, rolled on her back and reached up. Joy rippled through her and swirled under her skin. She felt a small trickle of power leave through her palms and stopped short.

“Holy smokes.” It was the first release of power that she had felt all day. Her abductor may have covered her with a magic-confining substance, but he hadn’t counted on her frantic efforts to work out a means of escape. She wouldn’t know until morning whether it was the blood or her cuts that was opening the hole in her skin-tight trap.

The touch of the dust cover under the couch was now a single reason for hope on the new day. If she could sweat, cut or rub off the pixie dust, she could get the dragon into the sky and on the way home ahead of schedule.

She ran her hands along the dusty fabric, smiling as she found a tear. Moving like a child, scooting back on her butt, she pulled against the tear and freed a large strip of fabric.

That one piece of fabric gave her two things, an entrance into the underside of the couch and a blanket for some bedding. She was able to hoist herself into the frame of the couch and shoved the fabric between the wood and the wall. It took some doing, going by feel, but eventually, she was comfortable enough to press her back against the outer wall of fabric with her head tucked on one arm. It felt weird to be sleeping when there was so much to do, but without her gnomes, gargoyles, elves or Xander, she had to wait until morning.

Abby used the luxury of darkness to let her tears fall.

* * * *

Darkness covered everything, but dawn was not far away. Neither was the agony of muscles spasms. She groaned and grabbed her bedding, dragging it into the dimness of the main room. Her one-winged transport was visible in the slowly growing light.

Washing her face and cleaning up as best as she could with some rinsed fabric, Abby then grabbed breakfast and prepared for her day. She used the hated bucket and scrubbed up as thoroughly as she could manage afterward. She hadn't needed it the previous day—she was sweating out all her water.

Now. Time to get that second wing in place.

It went on far more easily than the first one had, by the time the light had brightened enough for her to tighten the wires, it was almost complete.

With relief at this phase of the project completed, she took a water-and-washing break. Back under the couch, she ignored the scent of age and pulled, tugged and wrenched at the fabric until all that remained of the under coating was tatters.

The fabric had torn easily. Too easily. She separated the wing sections and grabbed her trusty paperclip. Straightening the twisted wire was so much easier when she was her regular size. For leverage, she used the edge of the desk to help her. It was fairly close to straight when she finished and now, she had to bend in an eye for her needle.

Her whole body weight went into it, as she grunted, swore and slipped a dozen times until she had the last half inch folded on itself. It was half her body length, but it was a needle.

Lunchtime. *Oh goody, more honey and crackers.* She stuffed her face as much as she could. The energy she was going to be burning would need to have a base for support. That was the biggest lesson that she had taken away from the care the gnomes lavished on her. Keep her body charged up and the Nexus energy would flow. Deprive the one and the other would stutter.

No wonder the WWII Nexus had been an easy target. The lack of nutrition during war was a notorious drain on the populations. She could only imagine what had gone through his mind when he was trapped in the pixie dust. The kidnapper had said he was new to his powers. She was new, too, but she had far more reason to exercise her talent than most.

If it hadn't been for Miranda trying to kill her, she never would have gained the proficiency that she currently had. The bomb, the hit and run, it all wove into a tangle of power and emotion that

had made Abby's talent spike far too early. So, it was that little bit of skill that was giving her the chance to get out of this alive. Hooray.

The light was letting her know it was close to noon. Her captor was going to return and he hadn't said when. Time was of the essence and it was running out. She finished stuffing her face and washed the honey off her fingers. She was tempted to lick, but between the cuts and the pixie dust, it was not a good idea.

She had been right the night before. Her blood had indeed washed the glitter off her hands for the most part and the constant washing had taken care of more of it. She didn't have enough time, blood or water to wash herself from head to toe, but she did use her blood to rub the dust off her feet.

If she held onto the neck of the new creature with her feet on his collarbone, her power should keep him constantly fed. Should. She wouldn't know until she actually got him wrapped and ready if it really could work. No time like the present.

The cambric was sturdy as heck if you hit it dead on, but it tore easily from the sides and she used its characteristics to her advantage. Narrow strips of fabric were her main source of covering. She used them to wrap the head, mouth and neck. She worked the fibres between the teeth and smiled as her dragon began to look like a mummy.

As she worked a knot onto the base of the neck, she tried to come up with a plan of attack for the wings. She had set aside the large pieces of fabric but wrangling them onto the bones would be the challenge. That was the reason for the *needle* she had fashioned. It was easy to wrap the fabric onto the bones, but the wings needed to be large and relatively hole-free.

In the end, she had to string the fabric onto a strand of wool and hoist it into position. She braced herself on the ribs while she sewed the primary joints of fabric with that long strand of wool. She was careful only to use half of it, leaving the tail for the other side of the body.

She had to climb down to wrap the tip of the wing and knot the wool strand. It looked good. The sun still moved, far too quickly for her peace of mind, so she strung up the other swath of fabric and tugged it into place. The effort of pushing her needle through the fabric had her arms shaking, but adrenaline was making her talent spike. As her hands touched the fabric, it smoothed, became more like skin. Abby ruthlessly throttled back so that she wouldn't animate a half-finished dragon. It would eventually grow skin, but it might not have enough muscle mass to fly. These concerns haunted her as she finished the left wing and returned to wrapping the legs with strips.

It was time to put what she wanted into the dragon, its personality and its eating habits. She wanted it to love her other creatures, not eat pixies, to eat insects and to be friendly to any and all creatures with a good heart. She hoped it would echo all of her feelings, but as her gnomes' proclivities for petty larceny proved, it could take its own path once it was animated.

The hardest part of the wrapping was the claws. She had to tear the strips so thin that her wrapping took forever. The sun was almost down, the colours washing the wrapped dragon in brilliant orange and red.

Abby was exhausted. She worked faster, finishing the tail with a jaunty knot and a flip of her fingers. Blood dotted the dragon from head to toe.

She stepped back to quickly rinse her hands, leaving them open to bleed sluggishly. A trip to the chamber pot and a slurp of honey and she was as ready as she was going to be.

Shaking from head to toe, she climbed onto the dragon, pressing her palms to his neck and her feet to his collarbone. All of her worries, her frenzy and her fear poured into the creature under her hands.

Nothing happened for a moment that stretched into eternity. Abby felt the power flow out of her and pool in her arms, trickling out of her hands until suddenly it broke through the barrier of magic and shot into the body of the dragon. She cut back the flow and controlled the speed of the transformation. The dragon swayed and knelt on forearms that elongated to suit the image in Abby's mind. The body thinned, neck stretched and she heard her creature clicking its jaws.

Mama?

Oh, crap. It was speaking in her mind. All those early fantasy novels must have sublimated into her creative process.

Hello, dragon.

Just kidding, Nexus. The dragon's head turned and she was soon looking into one glittering eye. Would you like to go home?

She sighed in relief. *More than you could ever know.*

Then hang on. This is going to be a bumpy ride. The dragon looked away and then returned its gaze to her. Nice job on me, by the way. I will be stunning when I am complete.

I am working on it. A laugh filled her mind and Abby sighed in relief. She had a creature again and it seemed willing to protect her.

The dragon shifted and she hung on for dear life. A warm mane of hair washed over her hands and she gripped it tightly as her steed bunched muscles for takeoff.

Abby chanted to herself as the dragon shoved off with almost neck-snapping force. It wobbled as it got its wings under control and then circled the room twice.

Hang on. This is going to be tight. The dragon charged the window and when they were only a few meters away, it took a deep breath and blasted a column of blue flame out of its mouth. The

glass and wood burst into flame and melted. A second swirling circuit of the room and they were firing through the hole that was open, melted and just a little bit cool. They bounced against an invisible shield and had to turn back. They flapped and banked again and again, shifting into a better position on the window.

I can't make it through. Not with this power.

Then I will just have to turn you up. Magic flowed as the power ran into the dragon. Power to dissolve magic with its fire. Abby was shaking but determined to hang on. *Blast through it.*

Cool.

The dragon blasted forward again and this time, Abby could feel the shimmering pop as the bubble snapped at the impact.

Now to take you home, Nexus. Northeast it is.

The dragon seemed to know where it was headed, so with a relieved sigh, she let it steer. Abby was almost incoherent with exhaustion and the concentration it was taking to hold onto her new creature. She managed one thought as the steady wing beats carried her skyward though. *Cool.*

Chapter Six

Nexus. Nexus, wake up. We are almost there. Put on your shoes, we are at Grandma's house.

The calm, amused voice of the dragon shook her out of her stupor. Instead of stopping to rest and recharge, Abby had ordered the dragon to take several roller coaster swoops to get her charge up. Fear was a very powerful emotion and she dumped that power into the dragon's speed.

You will have to name me, Nexus. I feel funny without a name.

Bleary eyed, Abby looked down at the snaking Red River. They were on the right track and if she concentrated, she could almost feel her creatures.

Fine. You are Echo Steed.

Cool, I like it.

Abby was relieved. The closer they got to Oak Point Way, the better she felt. She was exhausted, they had flown all night, but invigorated at the obvious pull of her little neighbourhood.

You followed my power signature?

No, I followed the map in your mind.

How did you know which way to go? I had no idea where I was being held.

You knew—you just didn't know that you knew. As soon as your power broke free, it aligned itself with the ley lines in the earth and voila, I knew how to get you home.

Echo, you are very advanced for a new creature.

I know. I am what you designed. Not to be arrogant, but I am everything you wanted.

You also have some spots where my hands have been pressed against you.

Of course, it is your blood that drives me.

Oh. That explained it. He was made from *her*. Nexus blood was all over him if she was honest about the construction project. He was also a lot larger and more streamlined than he had been when they started their journey through the night. But, under her hands, he had evolved, reshaped and transformed into a very elegant creature. An elegant dragon with pearl and scarlet skin and dark golden eyes.

Those eyes turned toward her now and then to check on her. She always made an effort to nod her consciousness. Flares of hope shot through her now that they were on the home stretch. With every flap of Echo's wings, she was closer to home. Tempted beyond reason, she sent out a small burst of magic. On the skyline, two figures appeared and moved toward them at a rapid pace.

Her throat was raw, but she greeted them when they met at the halfway point. "Angel, Firefly, so glad to see you again. I need a juice box and some cake the moment that I touch down. How is Buffy?"

The worried expressions were enough. For some reason, Buffy had been unable to reach the cookies and was suffering. That wouldn't do. The instant that Abby had one bit of expendable energy, she was putting it into the pregnant gargoyle.

"Angel, find any and all charged beads that haven't gone to the council and put them in the kitchen. Firefly, get my juice box ready." She had one more thought. "Get every gnome, elf and critter in the area that can handle the task of sewing. We have an army to build."

They looked at her, bemused.

"I may be short but I am still in charge. Go!"

Their lashing tails suddenly faced her as they darted for the target that they were approaching. Home. Number 13 Oak Point Way had never looked so welcome.

I saw it in your mind, but it looks even better in person. Echo banked in slow circles, landing in the centre of the backyard with the lightest of touches.

With hands that would not unclench, she worked her way off the dragon's back. *Thank you, Echo. You did a phenomenal job for one so young.*

Well, I am destined to be one of a kind, so executing my responsibilities is all that I live for.

I might be able to work on that.

Echo winked. *Keep me posted.*

Aside from me, you will be the first to know.

Thanks for that. Now, what can I do?

I will brief you when I brief the others. This is going to be a group effort, because I can't even put it into play without help.

You need your rest. Let us get it underway.

As they conversed, they were approaching the stampede of gnomes. Giant gnomes that were six times her size. Without commenting, Bitsy lifted her to his shoulder and walked into the kitchen. Buffy was there on the counter, looking pale, grey and listless.

“Aww geez. What happened?”

“Wolf ate cookies.” Bitsy took his mate’s hand and held it.

He lifted Abby up to the counter and she was sucking on the juice box when Angel flew in with the beads. In a change of her normal behaviour, Abby plunged her hands into the beads and drew the magic back to her. The pixie dust effect was fading, but her hands were still her best bet for power control.

With a sense of determination, she turned to Buffy and topped her up. The small flare of life inside her was fading, but when Abby started to pump magic in, it flickered and strengthened. Buffy sat straighter and caught Abby when she fell.

“Buffy, I need pixies and I need some rest. You are in charge of manufacturing while I sleep.” Her head was spinning, so she relaxed into the embrace of her creatures. She was home now and Xander would be notified as soon as she woke up. For now, she was safe.

Waking in the embrace of Seesee’s tendrils was not what Abby had expected, but the concerned face inside the halo of hair was a relief. “Morning, Seesee.”

“Abby, oh stars, we were so worried about you.”

“I was pretty worried myself. Why are you holding me, I thought the gnomes would have me under guard?”

“They did, until they called me and I came running. Splint and Mitsy are babysitting Gaia, so they must have been desperate.” The strands of braided hair rocked Abby gently.

“The rest of them?”

“Working in your studio. Your dragon filled me in on the plans. It is really quite advanced.”

“Well, it was born with about a pint of my blood on it, so it stands to reason that it would have more of me than any of the others. How can you hear me so clearly?”

She smiled, a genuine look of amusement. “The vibrations of your speech are carried through my hair. So, while you sound like a mouse on helium, I can hear you just fine.”

“Could you call Xander?”

“I was waiting to see if there was any information on your captor.”

“Excellent. Tell him to act as if I am still missing. No one needs to know that I am back home aside from the Guard and I need them to all act as if I am still kidnapped.”

That took her aback. “Why?”

“Because the jackass who kidnapped me will return home tomorrow and get ready to suck me dry. If he knows I am already home, he won’t go and we will not have an obvious suspect.”

“Oh, so you want them to keep an eye out for anyone who is suddenly announcing that they are leaving the search?”

“Any man over the age of eighty. This guy drained the last Nexus in WWII. He is still around. So, I am guessing he is relatively human looking, very old and in a position of power.”

Seesee whipped out her cell phone and dialed. Abby wanted nothing more than to hear Xander’s voice and it was probably obvious in her face. Seesee put it on speaker.

“Hello, Seesee?” Abby teared up at just the sound of his voice. He sounded exhausted, worried and depressed.

“Hello, Xander.”

“Any updates?”

“Yes. It has been discovered that the kidnapper has done this before...to the last Nexus.”

“How do you know that?”

“Just listen and don’t react. A small dragon arrived this morning. Small enough to carry a six-inch rider. Dragon and cargo are doing fine, but the kidnapper was never seen. He had council business. That business will conclude tomorrow and he will go home. Keep an eye out for this one.”

There was silence on the other end of the line. “Are you sure cargo was fine?”

Abby spoke, “Cargo is still tiny, but fine.” A thousand words crowded her throat, but she kept it to those few.

A deep and shuddering breath on the other end of the line spoke to Xander keeping control of his visible emotions. “Glad to hear it. I will keep an ear to the ground for that occurrence. Thanks for the update.”

The connection went dead and Abby did what she had been afraid to do the entire time she was away from home. She let her grief, fear and loneliness run free and she wailed like an infant.

“There, there. You have been through a lot. Come on, let’s get you a bath.” Seesee walked into the kitchen and rocked Abby in her tendrils. She was a good mother and a better friend.

A few words to one of the elves had it scampering off to the bathroom. It returned with two face clothes and a hand towel as well as some bubble bath.

“This is going to take some innovation, but trust me, it will be worth it.” Seesee simply carried her around as she went about the tasks of creating a tub filled with warm water. A few drops of bubble bath went into the large soup bowl and then came the innovation. The milk frother for Abby’s cappuccino was pressed into service and soon there was a warm, steaming bowl of bubble bath and water.

“Your bath awaits.” Seesee gently slid her onto the counter. “If you can get your clothing off by yourself that would be best. If you need help, this elf has been assigned by Bitsy to attend you.”

The elf in question was actually Mitsy’s. Her idea at Xmas had been to give girls to the girls and boys to the boys. She had not gotten around to naming them though.

“I will give it a whirl, but my hands are really sore.” She stood on wobbly legs and moved behind the wall of bubbles for a teeny bit of privacy. Her t-shirt came off, but she had to call for help for her bra clasp. Her raw, swollen fingers couldn’t manage the fine motor skills. As soon as she asked for help, the elf stripped her to the skin in seconds. Efficient little bugger.

The rioting scent of blueberries engulfed her as she climbed over the edge of the soup bowl and slid onto her butt in the warm water. “This is heaven.”

Seesee smiled. “Frankly, Abby, I hope that heaven is more than bubble bath in a soup bowl. For me, it is when Gaia crawls onto my chest and snuggles in while Miklos and I are watching a movie.”

Her face showed a wealth of happiness that she had never felt she would achieve. She had it all, a new baby, a vampire boyfriend and a successful business. Add to that, her current status as one of three living gorgons and she was a true renaissance woman of the modern age. Abby wanted to be Seesee when she grew up.

The slick ceramic surface of the bowl was surprisingly comfortable, the base just large enough for her to extend her legs to keep herself upright.

While she was soaking, Seesee opened a fresh kitchen sponge and snipped a corner. “Here you go. Try to get some of that sparkle off. You look like a candy-coated Barbie.”

“You know what it is?” Abby had to repeat it with one of Seesee’s tendrils touching her head.

“No. We only know it has strong magic-blocking properties.”

Abby started to scrub and then froze. “If I get rid of this, will the guy who grabbed me be able to track me again?”

Seesee looked startled. “He might. I don’t know.”

“Ask the house to block me. Go to the fireplace, put your hand on the stone and ask the house to shield my signature. There should be enough power left in the house to do it.” There was more than enough if the house would cooperate with Seesee, but Abby didn’t want the Guard to make a big deal out of her using her home as a safe dumpsite when she didn’t want to leave the house. She *should* have been using the rock out back, but it had been a little cold this winter and pouring her emotional overflow into the cold wet of her backyard seemed a long way to go.

Seesee removed the tendril and Abby stayed in the tub, playing with bubbles. When she heard the roar of the fire, she smiled. Number 13 had agreed. It was nice to know that the house was as attached to her as she was to it.

Seesee looked a little shaken—her skin went from caramel to an mocha ash. “Your house is conscious.” Another tendril of hair made contact for communication.

“Yup. I didn’t want to let anyone know in case Xander made me drain the power before the house could absorb it all. It takes a lot of time for an inanimate object to become animated, you know.” Confident that the house would keep her under wraps, she lifted her leg out of the bubbles and started to scrub. It was amazing, at the touch of the soap, water and sponge, the glitter simply slid away.

“I am going to need a rinse.”

“Way ahead of you.” Seesee was prepping another bubble bath and a measuring cup full of warm water. With the rinse and second bath prepared, she held out her hand.

“You are serious?”

“Yes. Grab my fingers and I will lift you into the rinse and then out of the clean water and into the nice bubbly soak. Come along then.” She held out her fingers for Abby to take and with a little bit of trepidation, the slippery Nexus grabbed on.

The feeling of being dangled naked over a measuring cup was surreal. Being lowered into an object that was standing in front of a microwave gave her the shivers. She went into the water, ducked her head, rinsed as best she could and then jumped up to grab at Seesee’s hand.

“That’s a relief. I know you work with measuring cups all the time, but I am a little leering of cooking equipment at this time.” The bubbles were as reassuring as they were the first time, only a tad warmer. She moaned as she let her aching muscles relax under the wet heat. She wished she was back to normal size, back with Xander and in charge of her creatures again. Not at the mercy of everyone and everything. She sank behind her bubbles and wept again. Abby let her aura flex and spread out now that the dust was no longer binding her.

Echo flew in and perched nearby, as did Buffy, they basked in the wash of her power as she let her relief, sorrow and frustration take on magical form. Days, it had been two days since she had been able to use her power freely and in those days, she had learned what she now faced. She was the Nexus, nothing more, nothing less. The power had to flow through her and she had to share it with any and all.

The greed of her kidnapper made her angry, furious. She had enough energy to start new species, bring new magic into the world and he wanted to keep it all to himself. When he came for her—and he would—she would be ready.

And so would her army.

Chapter Seven

Nothing like a nice hot bath in a straight-sided stoneware bowl to set you right. Abby was muttering to herself when she finally climbed out, her muscles limp and loose from the heat.

The gnomes made you a bed. Echo nudged a three-sided box toward Abby. Lined with bits of silk, a tiny pillow and a warm blanket of the softest wool. Abby looked forward to having a restful nap. Or a deep coma, whichever came first.

Thank them for me. Keep Buffy company as well, she is a little insecure right now. Wake me if she needs more power. Abby used the hand towel to dry herself and the facecloth as a terry toga. She nodded to her newest creature and smiled when Echo nodded back.

Will do. Sleep well, Nexus. There will be much for you to do when you wake. I am looking forward to seeing you in action.

A large brown hand stopped her from crawling into the nest that the gnomes had prepped. “Hold it, short stuff. You are not going to bed without eating. Here is a shredded apple and minced cheese. Eat.”

She was too tired to eat much, but munching on the shredded apple made her feel a bit better. The cheese was tart with a creamy tang. Cheddar had never tasted so good. Another juice box appeared and she slurped down enough to float her eyeballs.

“Uh, Seesee?”

“Abby?”

“I have to use the bathroom. To its fullest extent.”

“Oh.”

“Yup.”

What followed was a moment that both women would pretend had never happened. It involved being held under the arms over the toilet and hovering. When Abby was done, tidy and rewrapped in a facecloth, Seesee tucked her into her nest and drew a piece of fabric over her box to give her privacy.

Abby listened to the bustle of her friend and creatures around her and knowing that she was not alone, she slept.

* * * *

Seesee texted Laura. *What's lost is found and still has a little problem, but do not stop looking or the taker will know. Come home tomorrow. Notify your fella.*

The return came five minutes later. *Hooray and okay. Will do.*

There. Miklos would be over to her house at dusk and he would be informed when he read her little note on the fridge, which was a simple *13* in large numbers. A moron would be able to figure it out and her honey was no moron. He could take over watching Abby while she put Gaia down for the night.

Speaking of which...Seesee looked in the bedroom, the kitchen and the living room. The baby was in the studio playing with handfuls of fabric, many of which were showing the stains from her teething. "Hey, baby, you want some lunch?"

The gnomes whipped their heads around and looked at her in surprise. Worry quickly flew in behind it.

"The dragon and Buffy are watching over Abby. They will sound an alarm if anything happens." Her little one was crawling to her with speed. When Gaia made contact, Seesee's knee almost buckled. She was a strong one.

"Hello, sweet. Let's get you some applesauce. Aunty Abby always keeps your snacks on hand." She scooped her baby into her arms and sighed. She was growing so fast.

Applesauce, Cheerios and toddler spoons came out of the cupboards and Gaia was getting a meal fit for a tiny empress. Her chubby fists were getting more on her face than in her mouth, but it was still fun to watch. Even after the months that she had this little one in her care, she was still amazed by the effervescent cheer that the baby exuded and created in those around her. Well, except for the gnomes and the elves. They were just lucky that they were faster on their feet than Gaia was on her hands and knees. She would make gnome chasing a sport if she could.

Seesee didn't know what the baby's reaction to a mini-Abby would be, so she had the idea that it would be best if she kept the chubbier of the two occupied at all times. The Nexus had had enough running for a lifetime.

A few quick glances at the box to make sure that they weren't disturbing Abby and Seesee cleaned up her recalcitrant child who despised having her face cleaned. The shrieks that rang out should have woken the dead, but there was no movement from the box. Worried, she pried up a corner of the dark silk covering the box. Abby was curled in a ball, her tiny chest lifting and falling rhythmically. Her hands were torn to hell, but she simply seemed exhausted.

There was a myth about vampire blood speeding the healing of wounds that Seesee wasn't clear on. It had never come up in her circles. It was only when she became one of the Oak Point Guard that it had even been likely that she would be in need of frequent medical attention.

She wandered the house with the baby cradled against her, Gaia was nodding off as the sun set. Seesee checked on Abby three times before Miklos softly knocked on the door.

"Come in, be quiet." She waved him in and leaned into his greeting kiss until Gaia squirmed against her.

"How is Abby?"

"Short, exhausted and her hands are shredded, but otherwise fine. She's asleep on the counter in the kitchen." She rocked the settled baby. "I need to get Gaia to bed. Will you take the night shift?"

"Of course. Does Xander know?" He was looking curiously toward the kitchen. It was obvious that he wanted to peek.

"He knows, but he has to stay at Hotel Spectre. The kidnapper is an elder of the council, but we don't know which one." She leaned against him for a moment, relieved that he was with her and whole. If someone could get to Abby, none of them were safe.

"Is he a human or another race?"

"Abby thinks he's human."

He nodded. Abby had fairly good instincts and her Guard was used to trusting them. If she said he was a human, he was human.

"You take the princess and have a good night, sweet. I will keep an eye on Abby." Miklos gently steered her out the door as if he could sense her reluctance to leave. Hell, he probably could.

She walked slowly down the path to the cheerful front of her home. Her hair was on the defensive, nothing and no one was getting near her baby and with a kidnapper on the loose, it wasn't too far a stretch to believe that someone might try for the Guards as well.

Gaia's crib was a comfortable collection of bright colours and soft fabrics. She snuffled and twisted a little as Seesee laid her down for a change of diaper and clothing. Cute as a button in her little onesie, her wee darling opened her eyes for a moment and then went back to sleep.

It was one of those motherly moments that Seesee held in her heart. Something to cling to in case Gaia ever turned into the psycho she was the last time she was an adult. The hardest thing about being her mother was knowing what had been under that skin. This was a new start for all of them and the rest of the guard had nothing but the highest hopes for Gaia, but the shadow that Miranda had cast was a long and dangerous one.

Seesee flicked on the nightlight and closed the door so that she could go about the managerial tasks of her business while winding down from the excitement of the day. The moment that Harby had showed up at her door with that one word written on a piece of paper, Seesee's heart had started pounding. She had scooped up Gaia and made a beeline for Number 13. The gnomes had been kind enough to go back to get her diaper bag and some baby food.

It seemed odd to go back to inventory after the excitement of the day, but life went on no matter what you experienced. The cleansing thoughts involved in stock levels consumed her until she was drowsy. With her house locked up and a final check on her baby, she went to bed. Tomorrow was going to be one helluva day.

* * * *

Miklos sat perfectly still in the kitchen. The dragon had eyed him speculatively when he entered, but it had settled to sleep curled around itself while he watched. He was in a guarded meditative state.

He had checked in on the gnomes, but whatever they had been assigned was keeping them busy and out of his hair. The one time he had gotten the nerve up to check on them, the wild fluttering of fabric and rude squirts of paint had driven him off.

A light fluttering of the silk and the strangest sight he ever thought to see came across the counter. It was the Nexus, six inches tall. "Good evening, Abby. You are looking...small."

* * * *

The deep masculine voice was not the one that had floated through her dreams. "Evening, Miklos. I'd make you some coffee, but I might kill myself in the process."

"I can take care of myself. We are waiting to debrief you until we are all here. You may have something in your mind that we can turn into a clearer picture of your captor." He smiled showing a hint of fang.

"Lovely. So what should we talk about? How have things been over the last few days?" Abby was wearing a swath of blue silk from the shreds that the gnomes had lined her nest with. It was warm, comfortable and soft. She knelt a few inches from the edge of the counter and rested her hands on her thighs.

“A little tense.” He chuckled and moved his chair closer to the edge of the counter where she was seated. “How has your time been?”

“A little painful. Do they make itty bitty Band-Aids?” She turned her palms up and winced as the air hit the open skin.

“Perhaps I can assist with that. Do you have an objection to having blood on your hands?” The twist of his lips lent a double entendre to the phrase.

“If it will help, I don’t object too much.”

He smiled, exposed a fang, lifted his finger to his mouth and he bit down. It was a pinprick, but it was enough to bring a drop of blood to the surface.

“Extend your hands.”

“Okey dokey.” She did as he asked and he placed the drop into her palm.

“Rub your hands together.” He watched carefully and grabbed a washcloth from the sink. “Let it soak in.”

She sat there with the warm, coppery blood sitting in her hands and then she felt the tingling, followed by burning. “Is it supposed to hurt?”

“It can if there was infection setting in.”

She hissed between her teeth but held her hands still, blood-covered palms up. Fire blazed in the open wounds for what seemed like an eternity, but as she breathed deeply, it faded to a warm hum. She watched in amazement as her flesh pull back together. It took a while and Miklos hovered anxiously, but it healed.

Her body also absorbed the blood. It was gone from her hands as the last cut closed. “That is so cool.”

“Yeah. It is a party trick that I would rather not use, but I am glad I could today.” His voice was sincere.

“Well, Miklos, since the night is stretching before us, why don’t you go to the gnomes and ask for beads. A lot of beads. They will know what you mean. Bring them back here and then I will tell you the pattern that I want laid out.”

“You are tiny and yet still pushy. It’s an interesting combination.” The vampire chuckled to himself as he went off to do her bidding.

Abby smiled. What she had in mind would test his patience, but it would be worth it the next day if the pixie armada was ready.

He returned with two buckets in his pale hands. “What do you want me to do with these?”

“I will spare any rude suggestions and ask you to move the dining room table out of the way. We are going to need all the floor space we can get.”

Miklos moved her dining table, waking Echo and Buffy. She wandered over to them and topped Buffy up. The gargoyle was already beginning to show. Abby had no idea how long her creature’s pregnancy was going to be, but she would bet it was under a month.

“What now?”

“In a spiral pattern from the centre of the room, place the decorator beads down end to end making sure that they touch. I would do it, but I need help getting off the counter first. Well, that and I can’t even reach into the bucket, let alone lift a few hundred beads. Think of it as a form of dominoes.”

The dark look he gave her was answer enough. He would do it, but he didn’t have to like it.

Chapter Eight

It was three AM when the mermaid burst through the door. “Where is she? Is she really okay?”

Abby thanked Miklos’s quick thinking. He scooped her up and onto his shoulder so that the frantic Laura would not accidentally squash her. His supernatural hearing was a boon as well. She hadn’t even realized that he was listening intently to her until Bitsy came to check on Buffy and he couldn’t seem to hear her.

“She’s here. She’s safe, but the gnomes were right. She’s short.” He was soothing the frantic female onto the couch and Abby gave him a sharp tug on his hair for the short comment.

“Abby, I am so glad you are safe, but if you were trying to get out of wearing the bridesmaid’s gown I picked out, you are sorely mistaken. Galfor can do miracles and I am positive that she can fit one to your itty bitty body.”

Abby laughed and curtsied. “I am glad that I got back in time for the wedding. It was my primary concern.”

Miklos translated her little squeaks and Laura laughed.

Verne arrived next, sitting next to his fiancé and sniffing at Abby suspiciously. He seemed convinced when she walked along the edge of the couch, climbed his shoulder and bit his ear, hard.

Dawn arrived bringing the return of Seesee, Gaia and the one face the Abby had been longing for, Xander.

He walked to where she was sitting on the couch and held out his hand. She confidently walked into his palm and let him raise her to his face. He held her to his cheek and she embraced his jaw and cheekbone as well as she could. “Hi, Xander.”

“Abby, if you ever open an unlabeled parcel again, I will be more than a little irritated.”

“Xander, remember how I said that six inches was enough? I lied.” Those that could hear her burst into laughter and explained their mirth to the others.

“Funny. You aren’t leaving my side again. Seriously, I am taking you everywhere I go.”

“Fine. You are welcome to try.” She crossed her arms and scowled at him.

He carried her to the centre of the room and placed her on the coffee table. Her creatures joined the group and ranged around the edges of the room. Even Echo was perched where it could see what was going on.

“Abby, I have one question and I want you to explain it in complete detail. I am casting a spell so that your voice and the memory of your captivity will be visible and audible to all of us.” Xander chanted, muttered and flicked his fingers.

So, Abby stood on the table and retold the tale of the fascinating parcel, the lovely box and the mean little imp whose life was cut short.

“Was anyone there? Did anyone speak to you?” Seesee leaned forward and asked it eagerly. Gaia clung to her mother’s hair tenaciously.

“There was a message on the answering machine. He, it was definitely a he, spoke of draining the WWII Nexus using this method. He was going to return to his home and suck the life out of me, literally.”

“How did you get here?” Laura was genuinely confused. It showed in every line of her body.

“I used some skeletons in the study, some fabric from under the sofa and part of his wool carpet to make a dragon. Echo flew me home.”

“No, I mean if you were covered with pixie dust, how did you animate anything at all?”

“Oh. Apparently, my blood washed a lot of it off. It was painful but effective.”

That got everyone’s attention. Well, everyone except for Seesee and Miklos. They knew all about her blood.

“What? What blood?”

“I gashed my hands open on the wire that I was working with. They opened more as I kept working. It’s most of what makes Echo so smart. She had more of my blood for a while than I did.” Her thoughts ran to the look of the fabric as she smoothed it with her hands. She stopped her imagination cold when she noted the looks of horror on their faces. It was the image in her mind hovering in the centre of her coffee table that was causing it. She could see her hands and the blood running from her palms to her elbows.

“Sorry about that. Echo, come here sweetie.” She gestured and the dragon came to sit next to her on the table.

You rang?

They want to see you. She knew that they were looking at the bloody spots on her pearlescent hide. It was easier for them to see it then for her to remember.

Echo played to the crowd, preening and extending her wings so that everyone could see the extent of her markings.

Abby didn't know when the dragon became a she in her mind, but it was probably on the long flight home when the energy was flowing between them.

"Echo is adorable and she flew me home. She guarded me after we landed and is a valuable resource of both energy and intelligence." The dragon batted her lashes as Abby watched. "She is also a tremendous ham and has a perverse sense of humour."

"We will discuss this further. Now, does anyone have any ideas about getting Abby back to actual size?" Xander was staring at her as if trying to unravel a particularly tangled problem.

"Maybe Siro? He has a fascination for miniatures." Seesee offered.

"No, he only shrinks things. He has never brought one back to regular size. Plus, draining a Nexus isn't his style and he isn't old enough to have been the same user that attacked a Nexus in the forties."

"Right. I was just thinking about the size thing."

"You two can debate that all you want. I have some things to attend to and I need a bottomless box."

All eyes turned to Abby once again. "Seriously. Xander, you need a nap really bad. Seesee, Gaia needs to be changed. Laura and Verne, your phones are flashing, let folks know that I am back in the world. We don't need them wasting their time looking for me."

Miklos was wearing sunglasses, enjoying the comfort of his woman and her daughter. When those reflective lenses pointed to her, she grimaced. "Don't you be looking at me like that. I am not changing that kid until I am way taller than she is. It could be deadly."

"I was looking at you because it seems you are back to your bossy self. Stephen should be able to help with the box. Demons are good at that sort of thing."

"Excellent. I need another nap, I am rather tired." She climbed onto Echo and was flown onto the kitchen counter again. Completely unselfconscious, she crawled into her nest and curled up for sleep.

Xander followed her, watched her with suspicious eyes and tucked her in. "Sleep well, Abby. We will be near if you need us."

"I have a vampire and a gorgon with a fussy baby watching out for me. Go sleep." She waved him off.

Guilt ran through her. She wanted him sleeping and the others gone so she could finish giving orders to her creatures.

I can pass the orders along.

Really? That's kinda cool. All right. Here goes. Gnomes, I want you to go into town and hit Gales Wholesale. I want every bag of superfine glitter that they have in stock. It is the aisle straight from the door or the one immediately to the right. Get in, get the glitter and get out.

Silence from her creatures was deafening, but eventually Echo asked. *No paint? No glue?*

Nope. Just the glitter. Magic will paint them.

Excellent. Now? In daylight?

Yes. Tell them to take the car. Bluebell will know where to go if they tell her. I want this to be a fast job. Gales doesn't have cameras, but that doesn't mean that no one has a phone.

They are eager and will be back in an hour or less.

Thank them. This is hard enough, but having good friends like them make it a little easier.

Echo snorted as the gnomes slipped out the back door. *They were blushing.*

Tell the elves to stay here. I need them.

They will stay.

Abby crept out of her box and looked down. *Take each and every pixie that has been made and lay them, head to toe, all touching, on top of that pattern on my dining room floor. The beads must remain in contact and the pixies have to lie head to toe, all touching. If they don't, this won't work.*

Echo looked down at Abby and asked, *What exactly are you doing?*

I will tell you if it works. Now, we need to watch the elves and wait for the gnomes. Gargoyles, go entertain Gaia.

The two males flew into the living room, but Buffy stayed behind. Abby checked her energy level and topped her up. The bulge was quite a bit larger now. Abby patted it fondly and Buffy jumped as something inside her kicked.

“Buffy, can you carry me to Xander? I want to be near him for a while.” The gargoyle clutched Abby to her chest and lifted off with a few strong beats of her wings. The others marked the route to her bedroom, but when she passed them and flying toward her love, she felt a sense of calm.

He was on his back, his blond hair spilling across the pillow and his delicately pointed ears sticking out. He watched Buffy bring her in and put her on the pillow next to his. “No reason I can't be in my own bed, right?”

He didn't say anything, merely went to her drawer, picked something up and returned. It was a small cotton handkerchief with his initials on it in flowing script. He tucked it around her and then returned to his supine position. It was as if he was waiting for her to be with him before he could sleep.

He was out in an instant. Abby took a few strands of his hair and cuddled them to her face. With his scent near her, she slept as well.

The deep, restful nap was restoring and when she heard the squealing tires and the thump of doors in her driveway, she was ready for action. Walking over to the top of Xander's head, she laid a kiss between his eyes. She was preparing to slide down a section of dangling sheets when Buffy returned to fetch her.

This was the moment of triumph or failure.

"Put the blue there, the red there and the black there. The iridescent, mix in with all of them." She was giving the instructions to the elves. They were close enough to her height that they could hear her just fine.

When the bins of glitter were ready, Abby thought about pain, grief, loss, rage, bringing all of the strongest emotions to her. She was standing next to the keystone, the glass bead that would connect to them all. With a deep breath, she laid her hands on the stone, pushing the power into it with a lot of force. It needed to flow through the whole setup and for that, she needed velocity.

One by one, the pixies shuddered and sat up. Their multicoloured bodies changing from fabric and wire to flesh and blood. Beautifully ornamented flesh and blood but real creatures all the same.

"Ladies and gentlemen, as you can, select the colour you are meant to be and jump into the tub with that coloured glitter. I have charged it to bond to you." They could hear her just fine. Within ten minutes, 185 pixies that were now up and running, flying in her house, perching on things and spilling glitter on whatever they touched.

Seesee came in wild eyed, "The dust, it's dangerous."

"Not this stuff. It becomes what is needed. Whether sedative or containment. Right now it is just messy."

She didn't look convinced, but she picked up Abby and carried her into the chaotic and colourful living room.

"Take me to the fireplace." Abby had another idea and she decided to roll with it. She pressed her hands to the flagstone and made her request. "House, can you please make a nice, pleasant room for the creatures within your confines? We need to keep them off the radar."

She needed to keep them away from Xander. He wouldn't be pleased to see the little flyers when Abby still hadn't finished reclaiming her power levels. The others may not have noticed, but he had. She could see the worry in his eyes when he looked at her.

On what should have been an exterior wall, a stone door appeared. "Open it, Seesee."

When she pulled it open, the pester of pixies squealed happily and darted through the door. Abby got a good look inside and the bright light and open meadows were attractive to her eyes as well.

They flew in one after the other. Seesee waited until the rooms were clear and closed the door with a sigh. "Was that all of them?"

Bitsy approached them. "First wave. The second is being laid out for you, Nexus."

As was normal when there was magic flying around, the gnomes were increasing their linguistic skills.

"How many more waves, Bits?"

"Three." The look on Seesee's face was a kind of amused horror.

"Can you bring me back to Xander for another nap? I want to be near him for a while." Bitsy didn't say anything but picked her up carefully and cradled her as they walked down the hall.

He walked her around the bed and boosted her to the pillow. A cheerful wave and he was on his way, presumably to stay at Buffy's side. She really seemed to be progressing rapidly in her pregnancy and with it being the only gnome-gargoyle breeding on record, not to mention the only gnome or gargoyle pregnancy ever. None of the others had formed permanent pair bonds yet.

Not like she had. She crawled back under the handkerchief and tugged at the handful of blond hair.

When Xander spoke, she almost gave him a bald spot. "Have fun with your fairies?"

"Not as much fun as with you, but I need them."

"Why?" He reached up and she hugged two of his fingers. Xander brought her down and rested her on his chest.

"Because whoever chose to kidnap me had the last of the pixie dust, ergo, we need self-defending pixies."

"You made that logical leap, did you?"

“Well, it is the only safe leap for me at the moment. Please tell me that there is a way for me to regain my regular size. I don’t want sitting on your chest and hugging your fingers to be the extent of our contact.” She lay on her stomach and faced his chin.

“The council will get you back to yourself, but if we can find either a specialist or the one who enchanted you, it would be a lot easier.” He carefully stroked her hair with one finger.

“What are the chances?”

“That the kidnapper will come forward? Not likely. We will look into finding a cure for the dark magic spell when we rejoin the councillors.”

“Okay, what do you mean ‘dark magic?’ I have heard that phrase before. What does it refer to stuff done in the dark?”

His chuckle almost knocked her off his chest. “The magic you bring to us is natural magic, energy and power that appear in every item in nature. It is external to the user. Dark magic is magic drained from the soul. In theory, it should be traceable, but the investigators are working on finding the spell caster.”

“Investigators?”

“Charm and Spell Investigators. They are in charge of getting to the bottom of strange events. Celia works with them now, as both Seer and Viewer. I think she is sweet on her Projector, Nester.”

“That’s nice. I am glad that she finally got the go ahead to run around outside the Seer suites. She needed a little more life in her life.” Abby yawned, Xander’s even breathing putting her to sleep.

She nodded off for just a moment. When Xander’s breathing changed, she sat up and looked at the reason.

“Batch two is ready for Abby to animate. The creatures didn’t want to come and get you.” Miklos was lounging in the doorway, his sunglasses looked horribly appropriate in the morning sun.

“Ah. Thank you. Now, you see why I had you lay out all those beads?”

He eyed her tiny form and grinned, his fangs showing. “Yes. I see. Lovely design for your gown by the way.”

Xander cupped his hands so she fell into them when he sat up. “I will bring her.”

Miklos raised his hands in surrender and backed away, still grinning.

Abby concentrated on bringing enough power together to raise the pixies. “Open the door by the fireplace, Seesee. They will head for it on instinct.”

With Xander kneeling next to her while she worked, it was easier than the last time to bring the magic together. Her heart was pounding, she could still smell his skin on hers and his general nearness did what it always did. Her magic came running.

This round of fliers leaped into the air in seconds and dove into the glitter before heading to the doorway. As soon as they cleared the pattern of beads, the gnomes and gargoyles sprang into action, reloading for the third wave.

“How many did you make?” Xander was amazed at the pile of pixies that was stacking up.

“I have no idea. The gnomes started them when I got back.” She smiled up at him. “They are really industrious after they have finished their yard work.”

“That they are. Did I hear your car earlier?” His suspicious look was back.

“You may have. They needed to run out for coffee and other sundries. And glitter.” Abby looked at her fingernails.

He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You sent your creatures out in broad daylight? To steal? At a craft shop?”

“A wholesaler, but really, it wasn’t too bad. They don’t even have surveillance, but they do have all the supplies and they are almost at the perimeter, minimal danger.”

“Abby. Do you know what that kind of blatant exposure will do?”

“No, but I will deal with it later.” She waved her hands in the air dismissing the negativity.

The third batch was almost ready. The instant that Harby gave her the thumbs up, she pushed the magic into the linkage of beads and watched her next round of creatures pop up.

The pattern that Miklos had laid out was a twisting spiral surrounded by two rings leading to a path that Abby used as the trigger. When she charged that one bead, the connection lit all of the others up pushing the magic into the pixies.

She was tired by the time this batch had finished bathing in glitter.

The final reset was done in three minutes and with heavy arms, she knelt to put the last bit of magic in her through the dolls. As if sensing her fatigue, Xander stroked one fingertip down her spine, causing a surge that had the little ones giggling through the air in under a minute. They trailed into the new door, chattering to themselves.

When her fella scooped her up and cradled her in his palm, she sighed up at him, “Xander. Why do people keep trying to kill me?”

The stricken look on his face was enough to push her over the edge and with him holding her safe, she wailed like a little kid.

Dignity be damned, she just wanted to spend time with her friends, occasional time with her family and every waking moment with Xander. Why couldn't she just get everything she wanted?

Chapter Nine

Abby woke from her impromptu nap in Xander's hand to find herself facing a demon.

"Stephen! How have you been?"

The basically human face of the postal carrier was very close to her. "A little concerned. It seems you have been shrunk, Nexus."

"It's true. What was your first clue?"

"The warlock having you in the palm of his hand. You asked for me?"

What was it that they had said he could do? Oh yeah, the bottomless box. "I need a bottomless box."

"Fine. How big?"

"Xander, can you call Harby? He knows the box I need."

Xander called out for the gnome and when he appeared, Xander extended his hand so Abby could speak and be heard.

"Harby, can you get me the box that is on the second shelf of my studio? Black and white paisley." He nodded and sprinted off.

"So, Nexus. How have you been keeping? I hear that you escaped your captor on the back of a dragon. The community will be so pleased."

"She isn't very big."

"A new dragon hasn't been seen in centuries. Any progress will be welcomed, I am sure."

Harby pattered up with the box.

She gestured for him to open it and there was her prototype pixie. "Oh. Put her in the dining room please. I will work on her later. Give the box to Stephen and off you go."

He nodded and gave a wink at her light toga. He was still her little pervert, no matter how big she was.

"I can work with this. How much do you need to store in it?"

"Over seven hundred flying pixies. My size."

That surprised him, his eyes flared gold, the slit pupils widened and you could almost see horns popping out of his forehead. "I can do that. I need some supplies though."

"Xander, call Harby." She smiled as Xander brought the gnome back with his voice. She hated that for those too far away she was just an annoying squeak.

"Harby, get whatever Stephen needs."

For a demon, his needs were simple. Five candles, a flat table made of wood, some charcoal and a glass of red wine.

He took the box and Abby was glad that Xander followed. She was curious to see another type of magic in action. She had experienced null magic, holiday magic and dark magic. Now demon magic loomed in front of her.

When Harby brought the candles and charcoal, Stephen first drew a symbol on the table's surface before he lit the candles with a touch of his finger. Abby looked through her inner eye and watched the magic come from inside Stephen but not out of him. It was like battery power that he carried in him all the time.

"Demon blood. It carries its own magical charge." Stephen answered the question she hadn't even asked.

He raised his hands and chanted, pulling the power from the flames on the table and propelling the power to the bottom of the box.

The colours of his magic were black, red, gold and silver. He was concentrating the colours and when he finished, the magic now swirled at the bottom of the box. When the magic stopped its dance, he extinguished the candles one by one, using his fingers.

"All ready. Any time you want, just remove the lid and point it at the item or creatures you want inside the box. If they fit in the mouth of the box, it will hold them." Sweat was running down his face until a gargoyle tossed some paper towels at him.

"Excellent. Thank you, Stephen." Abby was almost chortling with glee. Her power flared and she saw Xander's fingers flex in response. She was going to have to get back to normal soon or there could be an accident.

She was having a hard time keeping herself under control and she knew that when she did regain her size without outside assistance, it would cause a sensation, so she wanted to do it in front of the council. Causing worry amongst her friends was not fun, but Abby figured out what might possibly spur the transformation when Xander touched her.

The moment that his finger caressed her spine, a jolt of lust followed by a coursing stream of magic had ripped through her. If she had kept that magic inside and used it to push out and up, it might just undo the spell that was still sticking to her.

It was like a film of dirt that had been trapped under the pixie dust. A light, oily residue that would not be able to contain her if she pushed outward from within. That was Abby's working theory anyway.

She needed to get everyone back to test that theory. "Xander, get everyone in the living room, but the only creature I need is Echo and the unliving pixie. She has a purpose that I will explain later. I want the gnomes and gargoyles on full patrol and wards on this place that will let no one in who is not one of the Guard. Even the councillors should not have full reign here. I want this place sealed off."

When Harby got close enough, she leaned down. "Harby, I want you to plant each and every glass bead as close to the oak as you can. Same design as the one on the floor. And a wick so I can light it."

He nodded and gathered the other creatures. Buffy flew in and Abby topped her up as she hovered in front of Xander.

"Echo, take a perch on Xander's shoulder. We are getting ready to leave." She looked around her at the mermaid and wolf still on their phones. She gestured for them to hang up. They did. "Laura, grab the box and open it. Seesee, use your hair to hold the door open."

Abby screamed the next part. "House, expel the pixies and close the door after they are all out."

What followed was a screaming collection of colours, glitter and tiny bodies flying out of the door and into the box. When the last fairy crossed the line and disappeared into the paisley box, Laura shut the lid.

"House, resume full alert and security until we return." The lights dimmed and flared. It would be on guard and if Abby guessed right, the neighbourhood squirrels were in for a bad time if they tried to get into the attic again.

"So, ladies, gentlemen, bodyguards, who is up for a trip to Hotel Spectre?"

Xander laughed as the others looked a little uncomfortable. "I think I have enough power to transport us all."

"Is everyone ready? Seesee, that means you and Gaia, too." Her little pipsqueak voice carried as much as she could make it. She was lucky that she was a hand talker, her point got across even from across the room.

A few minutes of preparation and a great deal of huddling with Xander, careful to keep her in an uncrushable grip, they were ripping through worlds and ending up in the front drive of Hotel Spectre.

Xander staggered. He was exhausted and now that Abby was paying attention, his aura was very feeble. He had been draining his magic to the fine edge with every move.

The box of pixies rattled alarmingly in Laura's hands but stilled after a few seconds. As one, the Guards of Oak Point Way entered the hotel, waved at Stu, the troll bellboy, and headed for the elevators.

When they entered the ballroom, everyone in the room froze. "Xander, what are you doing here? Why aren't you guarding the Nexus?"

He extended the hand where she was sitting with her legs crossed and the councillors gasped in shock. "It appears that the creatures saw correctly. Abby is indeed quite small, but we are here guarding her."

"Xander, are all the councillors here? The same ones that were here when I disappeared?"

"They are. A few left for some hours, but they are all back now."

"Good. I want them to greet me and wish me well. One at a time. Also, have someone find me a regular sized piece of clothing. Or several actually. I may be back to my normally obnoxious self soon." He was looking at her in confusion, "Just pop me on the table and let me go."

Xander cleared his throat, "The Nexus wants you to greet her and wish her well. One at a time."

With a slow and steady step, he walked to the table and placed Abby on the cotton tablecloth. She stood, walked off his hand and started her little promenade.

Each councillor spoke quietly and reverently about how happy they were that she was alive and well. She watched them and looked *into* them as she moved from person to person.

Rackonell's greeting was warm and she even extended her woody finger to Abby. She knew that the kidnapper wasn't Rackonell but appreciated the gesture. Finally, she was standing in front of the one whose voice echoed in her mind and filled her with fury. The magic that he had stolen from her soul to shrink her was also there, glowing with bright frustration.

"I have not met you before, who are you?"

Rackonell leaned in to assist. "He is Councillor Nathan Benz. He helped design the safety protocols for Oak Point Way."

"I am pleased to meet you, Nexus." He extended his hand and she took the tip of his finger between her hands.

"I believe you have something of mine." She didn't know what he had intended, but her surge of power through his finger was not what he expected. She pulled her energy back into her body and immediately felt the moment that the spell reversed itself. His energy was back with him and hers was with her.

In seconds, she was standing on the table glaring down at him. “Guards, you may want to take him into custody.”

She walked over to the stunned Laura and took the box from her hands. “These little beasts may be familiar to you, Nathan. But I wouldn’t try to absorb their energies. These are the next generation, a lot less palatable than the ones you destroyed.”

With a flourish, she opened the box. Pixies shrieked their release and immediately swarmed the stunned councillor. He batted at them, fired spells, but nothing worked. They covered him in the new and improved pixie dust and soon, he was sitting, stunned and powerless.

Demon guards arrived.

The councillors were too stunned to do anything, so Xander took charge. “Arrest Councillor Benz on the charge of kidnapping and attempted destruction of a Nexus.”

The demons were staring at Abby with leering grins. She looked down and unlike her first transformation, this one didn’t include clothing. Butt naked in front of a crowd, she was standing there like an avenging queen and they were looking.

“Great. Can I get some clothing?”

Xander shrugged out of his shirt and wrapped it around her. Seeing him half naked did all sorts of nasty things to her libido and now she was big enough to do something about it. In front of the entire room and those leering demons, she grabbed Xander and kissed him until she could taste him. Cinnamon, chocolate and exhaustion were his flavours. Her libido gave her more than enough power to share and the longer she kissed him, the more the magic flared.

A shockwave ran through the room, the building and the slightly askew plane that the hotel was on. It had only been a few days since she was in his arms, but what a few days.

His hands were inside his shirt, on her bare skin and hers were on every inch of hard muscle that she could get her hands on. Eventually their heated exchanged cooled down but not until they both hummed with energy, as well as lust.

Xander halted their reunion by pushing her away from him and buttoning up the shirt. It hung to just above her knees, so was relatively decent if a little less than opaque.

“Can you take him into custody please?” His voice was a little hoarse and meeting his gaze, Abby saw how close he was to bawling.

“Now please. We need our rest.” Abby curled her arm around Xander’s waist and yawned. “We’ll get some rooms at the front desk, catch some shuteye and see you in a few hours. This has been a stressful time for all.”

She waved to the councillors who were getting to their feet and fired off a, “Later,” as she shoved Xander into the elevator with the rest of the Guard accompanying them.

Laura was clutching an empty box, “What do I do with this?”

“Hang onto it. We may need it later.”

Later was a word that Abby was starting to despise, but everything had to be done at its own pace. Even if she was bloodthirsty for revenge.

Chapter Ten

The front desk was far less busy than the first time Abby had been there. On her last visit, the concierge had been a shade of rude that had almost sent her over the edge. That dryad was no longer visible behind the counter.

A lovely half goblin greeted them. “How may I help you, Nexus?”

Well that was easier. The first time, the staff hadn’t believed her until she dumped magic into the countertop and pens. “I need some rooms for myself and the Oak Point Guard.”

“Your regular suite will be ready in thirty minutes. Would you care to wait here or in the restaurant?”

Abby blinked. “The restaurant, please.”

“Here are your keys. Wait thirty minutes and go on in. Thank you for staying at Hotel Spectre. The management appreciates your presence.” The other half of the concierge had to be elfish. It was the only way that the large buggy eyes would combine favourably with the pointed ears and green hair.

“Thank you...” she squinted to read the nametag, “Vahsh. It has been a pleasure dealing with you.”

The woman nodded with a smile as they headed back to the elevators and up to the restaurant. Verne was watching the time, but Abby was just happy to be in Xander’s embrace and able to really touch him again.

She got her standard chicken strips and fries served to her within two minutes of sitting down. The front desk must have called to warn the restaurant staff. How thoughtful.

The regular food is just what she needed. Eating tiny mushed-up food for days had been wearing on her patience. The crackers had just been ridiculous. Abby ripped into the meat with far too much enthusiasm for someone on two feet with no fangs. It was a matter of enjoyment for her. She hadn’t known if she would survive the transformation and now that life was once again on the horizon, she was going to live it.

Laura and Seesee had salads, the guys had burgers and Abby went for ice cream the moment her plate was clear. It was a little tricky as Xander and Miklos were hemming her in, but she managed simply by pushing Miklos off the bench and ran for the ice cream bar.

No one came after her and she was able to get herself a chocolate sundae complete with cherries, strawberry jam and sprinkles. Her towering creation came back to the table with her and to her disgust, the other ladies had located spoons.

“Hey, that is my victory snack!” She duelled with Seesee but was out gunned when multiple hair tendrils picked up spoons and dug in. Laura was able to sneak in on the far side, away from the battle.

“Mmm. A wonderful victory snack.” Laura scooped some up and offered it to Verne. He opened his mouth like a child and closed his eyes in happiness.

“That is good.”

Abby asked Xander, “Would you care for some before everyone destroys my handiwork?”

“Please.”

She carefully selected a strawberry out of the jam and scooped up the ice cream and chocolate. Balancing it, she steered it to him and it just barely fit in his mouth. “I thought your mouth was bigger than that.”

Seesee snorted and kept her relay up, feeding herself in tiny bites. “No, that’s you. Stop looking in mirrors when you eat.”

“Very funny.” She turned her focus back to the sundae. Happily, she slurped and sucked at her spoon, stopping to give some to Xander when he tapped her shoulder, but she was groaning with satisfaction before all the ice cream was gone.

“That was fantastic. Verne, over half an hour?”

“Forty-five minutes, Abby.”

“Excellent.” She fanned out the keys on the table and let them each pair off to take one, as they willed. Three keys disappeared leaving the one to the master suite. “I am wiped out. Let’s go.”

They were all quiet, replete and enjoying the thought of privacy for the first time in days. When Xander opened Abby’s suite, there was a large box on the dining room table. The logo stated it was from *Mistress Galfor - Tailor to the Nexus*.

“Ah. Clothes. Wonderful, fitting clothing.” Abby turned to Xander with a smile and she almost froze at the look in his eyes.

“Xander, what is it?”

“Come here, Abby.” He held out his hand to her, backing away into the bedroom until his knees hit the back of the bed. She followed him in a sort of hypnotic trance. The gleam in his eyes was matched by the flexing of the muscles on his torso and she was lost. The barrier of his trousers was nothing to her imagination. She knew what was under his clothing, as well as he knew what was under hers and she delighted in rediscovering every inch of him.

His hands were warm and shook ever so slightly as he unbuttoned his shirt she was wearing. As it opened to expose her skin, he knelt in front of her to kiss each plane of exposed flesh as he worked. Her shoulders were worshiped in turn, her collarbone felt the trail of his tongue and by the time he was working up to her neck with his mouth and spanning her waist with his hands, she was lost.

She was shivering violently, needing, wanting him to join himself to her body, mind and magic. Her hands stroked his shoulders feverishly, tangling in his hair and directing his talented mouth to those parts of her that were aching from desperation for the contact. She gasped when he flipped her onto the bed, writhing against his body slowly as he moved to cover her.

Finally, she rocked with him until her body glowed with suppressed magic. Their gazes met, locked and tears came to her eyes as she realised that she had been only a few hours from never feeling this again. Feeling right, loved, safe and desired. It had almost been beyond her reach.

As if he felt her pain, he slowed, lowering his head so that they could kiss. She tasted the salt of tears and her eyes widened as she realized that they weren't hers. Her tears were running to her temples, not dripping on her cheeks from above.

Xander raised his head and she saw the same revelation that she had been through—he had almost lost her. This one moment of loving stretched on and on until Abby's body had had enough and shook and shuddered in a release that left Abby gasping.

The expansion of magic was not violent but rather a soft wave of wistful emotion that flowed out to cross the world.

"I am here, I am safe and I am with you. Nothing else matters." It seemed she had made that speech before.

"I am with you, I am holding you and I will not let them take you, love." Xander curled her against him, his chest against her back as they spooned. He slipped inside her again but did not move. It was enough just to have him around her and part of her.

Warm, safe and content, she nodded off knowing that today was not done by half.

The knock on the door was anticlimactic and roused her from a light nap. Xander was still wrapped tightly around her and the combined effect of their bodies still being twined made her smile.

When the door opened, Abby groaned and buried her face in the pillow. She mumbled and Xander pulled her out of the warm suffocating muffler she had been using.

"What was that, Abby?"

“Stupid master keys. I saw you slip it to Miklos when we finished dinner.” She grumped and pushed away from him. It was at that point that she realized two things. One, her clothing was in the main room in a box and two, Xander hadn’t used protection when they came together.

She sighed, “Did we forget a condom?” Xander never forgot.

“Yes, we did. I am hoping that everything will be fine, but if not, I am willing to pledge my entire life span making things up to you.” He looked remarkably calm.

“I love you, even if you are a thoughtless twit. I am heading into the shower. You can join me as soon as you put our visitors on hold.” Abby got out of bed and sashayed into the shower with enough swing in her hips to invite him a little more physically than vocally.

When he strode naked from their room and into the main area, she didn’t stifle her giggle and when he joined her in the shower, pressing her up against the tile wall, her laughter flowed over them both until they were in danger of drowning.

Their shower may not have been as thorough as it should have been, but it was more fun than they had had together in weeks. Laughing, Abby once again confronted her lack of clothing. She took a few steps toward the door before Xander caught her and stopped her with a scowl. He slipped from the room and returned in an instant with the box from Galfor.

“Looks like I am going commando. Good thing there are extra layers here. It could get nipplie out there.” She tugged, laced and slithered into her clothes. She was barefoot but otherwise decently attired in bright silk and soft wool.

He stopped her again, handing her a hairbrush and gesturing for her to tame her damp and wild locks.

“It was fine until you ran your fingers through it for the ninth time.”

“Well, ninth time’s the charm.” His grin was unrepentant and as she looked up into his bright eyes, he took her breath away.

Shaking her head, she straightened her hair, again, and then twirled so that he could give his seal of approval.

“Excellent. You hardly look like you were less than a foot tall just seven hours ago.”

“Thank you. Both you and the shower felt wonderful. I had had images of bathing in a bowl for the rest of my life. Not cool.”

Together, they entered the living room of the suite and Abby was surprised to see Councillors Rackonell and Vokal. “Hello.”

Miklos was standing nearby, his sunglasses firmly in position. He could stay awake through his sleep cycle if he had to, but it meant his eyes turned a disturbing shade of scarlet. The glasses made things more socially acceptable.

“Nexus, glad to see you up and well. You seemed to be a little under the weather when last we spoke.” Rackonell was very polite, bowing deeply.

“Why are you here?” She knew but formality required that they say it.

“We need you to bear witness against Benz.” Vokal cut right to the chase, as was his bull-headed nature.

“When?”

“Now.”

Echo, can you get me a bottle of water out of the fridge?

Of course. Do you want fries with that?

No. Just the water.

The flap of wings was welcome as the dragon hovered so that she could get the bottle. “All right, Councillors. Let’s go. I want to go home.”

The dryad and minotaur stood, Miklos got the other Guards and together, they headed to the upper floor. It was a much quieter trial than the one for Miranda had been and Abby could see the fury in every inch of Benz’s body.

He wasn’t going down without a fight.

“Nexus, can you tell us why you believe that Councillor Benz is the one who kidnapped you?” His defence attorney was questioning her. He had already gone through the evidence with the Charm and Spell Investigation team. This was his last chance to prove his client innocent.

“First off, when I was taken to the study where I was confined, there was an answering machine.”

“And it had a voice on it, correct?”

“Yes.”

“How did you know it was my client’s voice?”

“I knew that it was the voice of someone on an active council and that he was occupied here for the days that I was incarcerated. When I heard him speak, I knew instantly that he had left the message. I recognise people by sound most of the time.”

“So, if magic had been used to duplicate the sound, you would have been able to confirm that it was my client?”

“Probably.”

The goblin attorney turned to the jury, “Then I conclude that magic could have been used to alter the voice and mimic that of my client. The Nexus can not confirm that he was the one who kidnapped her.”

Abby chipped in, “I never said that. I can indeed confirm that it was him.”

The attorney rounded on her in confusion. “How?”

“He had the power that was taken from me to shrink me. How could I be standing before you if I did not get all of my pieces back together again?”

The jury murmured to itself.

The goblin spluttered. Benz groaned and covered his face before he gestured to his lawyer. They murmured furiously together for a moment before turning to Rackonell, the prosecution. More heated muttering and a surprised look coming to the dryad’s eyes.

She walked over to Abby, “Nexus, did you say that there was a distinct mark in the study of the one who stole you?”

“Yes. There is my blood, which could have been cleaned, but the underside of the entire couch should be shredded beyond repair. Why?”

“Benz claims that he was in it for the power hit to extend his life, but he was not the mastermind behind your abduction. There is another. We will have his couch brought here and then we will know.”

The goblin came back to stand in front of her and held out his hand. A bubble formed. “Nexus, is this the place where you were held?”

The bubble contained a room that was similar in design to the one she had been in, but it lacked the filled bookshelves and the animal skeletons. “It is close but not exact.”

“My client concedes he was involved in abducting you but puts before the court the fact that he was not the one who killed the previous Nexus or the one before. He only assisted in arranging *your* demise. His partner was to do the actual killing. He does not know who his partner is. He

has never seen them face to face. He knows only that it is old and it needs the power of the Nexus to survive. The destruction of the pixies was incidental.”

As he spoke, a ripple of disbelief ran through the jury, becoming a roar of fury. The room exploded in uproar and Abby rubbed at her forehead. “Aw, geez. Not again.”

Chapter Eleven

“Who, aside from a few hundred snobs who want to keep pure bloods and mixed apart, would want to kill me?” Abby knew that it was a rhetorical question, more of a statement really, and there wouldn’t be any easy answers.

She was pacing in one of the business rooms on the fifth floor, Echo kept pace with her over her head. Brainstorming was something that came easily to her most of the time, but with a roomful of expectant faces staring at her raptly, it was giving her performance anxiety.

“It has to be someone whose voice I would recognize. Someone outside my regular circle, someone old, someone that I probably met at the first Magic Summit.” She kept pacing as Celia and her crew made frantic notes on their laptops.

“Is there anyone who kept a record of everyone I met?” It was too much to hope for, but she had to ask.

“Of course. The archive.”

That stopped her in her tracks. “Seriously? There’s a listing of everyone I have met?”

“Everyone in the magical community that has crossed your path, yes. It is standard in case you ever...go missing.” Celia was pale as she realized what she was saying.

“So, I am guessing that no one has checked the archive yet?”

A sudden flush came to the young elf’s face. “We forgot. It was a rather tense moment for all concerned.”

“Where is the archive?” Abby was eager to get to the bottom of this well of deceit. It was dramatic, but she was getting damned tired of this. She just wanted to live her life with Xander and the Guard around her. Happily ever after.

“I will take you.” Xander had her in his arms and they were popping through dimensions until Abby was nauseous.

She staggered a little when they finally stilled. “Where are we?”

“Welcome to the archive!” A lean and elegant woman with a smile of welcome on her face approached them. She was Asian in feature with long black hair and deep brown eyes, her height defied her biological history—she was close to six feet tall.

“Hailey, thanks for the warm welcome.” Xander was still standing with one arm around Abby, supporting her as she swayed. “Annabeth Hanover, the current Nexus, this is Hailey Farquad, the eternal archivist.”

“Eternal?” Abby looked at the woman. She was human but couldn’t have been more than twenty-five.

“She has been on duty for over three thousand years. She is descended from one of the great dragons and was found in a cave, surrounded by books after her parent died. She doesn’t seem to age.”

Hailey blushed. “Hailey wasn’t my original name, but I change it to reflect the era I am in. I am so happy to meet an actual, living Nexus, you have no idea.”

Xander smiled, “She also studies modern vernacular and languages. Research is her primary focus.”

Abby reached out her hand and blinked at the power that flared between them as she and Hailey made contact. “Whoa. You have everything you could ever need.”

Her smile was brilliant. “That is what I keep telling them, but no one believes me.”

“I do. I need your help.”

Hailey led them back to a large table and waved for them to take seats with her. A pot of coffee floated in with all the accessories and rested gently on the table.

“Nice trick. Xander has tried it, but he always rattles the silverware.” Abby lunged for the pot and fixed herself a cup as the two supernaturals watched her with amusement.

“Now, Nexus. I am loving the visit, but what do you need?”

Abby sipped at what had to be one of the best cups of coffee in her life and sighed happily, “I have heard that you have a record of every magical person that I have ever met.”

“Of course.”

“I also need any record for the WWII Nexus and the one previous to him. I am looking for a correlation in people they met with people who might have killed them and tried to kill me.”

“I understand. Just a moment please.” Hailey sat and her dark brown eyes glowed a brilliant blue, obscuring her pupil and iris. She kept this pose of focus as three books began to float out of the surrounding bookshelves.

Shelves stuffed with scrolls, books, loose documents and even the occasional laptop ran as far as they eye could see. There was no ceiling, just an amorphous grey sky that stretched out from horizon to horizon.

Two slim volumes settled down in front of Abby and she opened the first. James McCrief was the name of the WWII Nexus. There were nine entries on his first page and the rest of the book was blank. “Was this it for him?”

“Yes. He disappeared soon after these recordings.” Hailey had moved her chair so she was sitting close on Abby’s right, Xander close on her left.

“Can I get a pen and a piece of paper to record these names?”

More flying objects came into her field of vision with incredible precision. “Thanks.”

She jotted down the names and dates, then reached out for the other slim volume. “And now my book.”

“No, that one isn’t yours, it’s Sargo Nexus’.” She gestured to the fat book. “That one is yours.”

“Whoa.” Shaking her head, she opened the visitor log for Sargo Nexus, a man taken from the steppes of Mongolia during the nineteenth century. There were around sixty names in the ledger, mostly female. Apparently, this Nexus liked company.

Abby flipped through the dates. He had only lived twenty years in the custody of the councils. His death was recorded as natural. He had drained his power away in the service of the magic community.

“Wait.” She re-read it. *Drained his power away.* “That’s it! It’s a woman.”

Xander was shocked, “What?”

“The two previous Nexuses were male. She could drain them of power either a little at a time, or if she was desperate, all in one shot via sex.”

Xander thought about it and then said, “Then why didn’t she—”

“I don’t like girls.”

“Oh. *Oh*...gotcha.” His hand came around her waist.

“Exactly. So she had to come up with another way to get me into her clutches. She used Benz’s enthusiasm for the idea to put him into the spotlight. He was just greedy enough to want a huge shot of my power and leave the rest for her. But who is she? Everyone take a book and start writing female names down. Is there a way to tell on all of them who is male or female?” She turned to Hailey.

“Sure. I will get the styluses, but don’t spill the ink on the originals. It would be unpleasant to have to explain the stains.”

Pots of dark ink and pens came to them, each had a book in front of them and dipping the pens in the ink, they started writing.

Abby laughed out loud. It was red for women and blue for men.

Hailey had thoughtfully taken Abby’s book. Her hands blurred as she wrote. The spell that changed the colour had trouble keeping pace.

Abby looked into Hailey’s face and once again, her eyes were pure, unrelieved blue.

“Nice talent.”

“It is, isn’t it? You should see how fast I can do taxes.” Her laugh didn’t slow her hands and by the time Abby had finished the single page of James and Xander had worked through Sargo, Hailey was almost done.

“Okay, cross off all the men.”

They worked silently.

When Hailey finished, she tapped her pages and the female names assembled on the front page.

“Start with Sargo and look for women who were with him, with James and who met me.”

Name by name, they went through the lists. Only three women had met them all.

Autone Theya, Esolar Rackonell and Salleth Cavil. Abby knew two of them on sight, but the third was a bit of a mystery. “Three names. Not bad.”

“It is definitely a better start than the whole magical community. But how are you going to determine who was your kidnapper? You didn’t see her, didn’t hear her and have no idea who she truly is.” Xander made his point.

“Ah, you have so little faith in my creatures. I have a plan.” Her grin held some sadness with her triumph. She knew the price for an attempt on her life and it was the life of the attacker. This was not a good thing that she was about to do, but she wanted to live a long and healthy life. Having a woman who wanted to drain her dry was not conducive to survival.

“Hailey, it has been wonderful to meet you.” She took her short list and stood. “I would love to stay longer, but...”

“There is a killer out there. I understand. I would ask you to return, but you managed to get here under the council’s radar this one time. They won’t be so lax again.”

Xander's face showed his surprise. "You knew?"

"That you weren't authorized to be here? Of course. I know everything on this plane. It's what I do." Her smile was kind. "You needed to be here and you would not abuse the power of this place, so I had no problem with assisting you."

"Wow. So I have to fill out a form if I want to come here or something?" Abby was confused.

"Something like that. Access to the archive is usually only given on a singular-need basis. But you have to go through a tribunal to even get access to this plane."

"Then how did we get here?"

Xander blushed. "I know where the back door is. I helped map the plane a few decades ago."

"Sneaky. I like it." She pressed her body to his and smiled as Hailey laughed.

"I do hope that you can return one day, Nexus. It is not often I get to greet another woman of power." Hailey extended her hand and Abby took it gladly. Power to power, they were matched. Abby could pull what she needed and Hailey had all she needed, a never-ending source of power and strength. A true meeting of equals.

"I thank you for your hospitality and am glad to count you in my acquaintances. Don't forget to put your name in the book." Abby stepped back against Xander and felt him power up for the jump back to Hotel Spectre.

The last thing she heard from Hailey was, "What happens in the archive, stays in the archive."

Chapter Twelve

“Do you still have the list?” Xander was holding Abby tightly, her knees were insisting on not holding her upright.

With a flourish, Abby held the page up between her fingers. “Ta-da. I don’t think I will ever get used to that. How many planes are there?”

“No one has mapped them all.”

“Yikes. Now, how do we get these women to the hotel so that I can interrogate them?” Abby was mentally rubbing her hands together with determined anticipation.

“I will handle that. The last two are easy and Rackonell will probably be a little offended but will be questioned. I have no memory of the first woman, Autone. She will be harder to find.”

“Great. I am going to our room. Give me a heads up when the first interview has been set up.” Abby yawned heavily. “I am still not quite up to snuff.”

“Come with me until another Guard can go with you. You are not going to be alone again if I can help it.”

He held her pinned to his side as they returned to the meeting room. Verne and Laura were seated at the table, talking quietly, their hands twined on the tabletop. They looked up, relieved as Abby and Xander entered.

“We were worried. The CSI team is working on a trace from Benz’s home as well as the box that the imp came in.”

“Abby needs a nap and a bodyguard. I have to run around getting suspects to attend a meeting.” He nodded grimly.

Verne caught on immediately and whistled low. “Aye, aye. We will tuck her in and everything. Seesee is off with Gaia, giving her a little lie down as well.”

“Miklos is with them?”

“Yes.”

“Good, then you are with Abby. I should have the suspects rounded up in less than two hours.” He made sure she was standing stable on her feet and gave her a quick kiss before he left the room.

Abby knew that Rackonell would be the last one he rounded up, she was already here. With Laura and Verne flanking her, she returned to the elevator and to her rooms. She needed a nap in the worst way.

“How do you guys pop around like that?”

Laura snickered. “Frankly, I try not to, but the underwater portals are a lot easier on my system than a dry-air transport.”

“I think I may have to institute a one-transport-per-week rule. I will walk home if I have to.” Shuddering at the thought of returning home the same way, she allowed Verne to open the door and check inside her rooms. When he pronounced them clear, she darted into the bedroom and crawled between the sheets. Between one breath and the next, she was out.

“Oh come on, I just fell asleep.”

“Three hours ago, sweet. The suspects are all waiting for you. Are you sure that you can tell who was responsible?”

“Me? No, but I have a secret weapon that will be able to do the job.” Rubbing at her eyes, she sat up and winced at the wrinkles that now marked her clothing. “Dang.”

“Don’t worry about it. You look fabulous, as always.”

Xander extended his hands and pulled her to her feet, holding her tightly against him while he smoothed her hair. “Nothing will happen to you on my watch.”

“Good. When does your watch end? I want to be prepared.” Her laugh was not appreciated, as the smack on her ass indicated.

“It ends when we are both pushing up daisies and not even then if I can help it.” He separated them and led her into the main room. When her stomach growled, she had a strange realization, without the gnomes, she had forgotten to eat. She was hungry and it was probably the reason for her fatigue.

“Before we go, I need some fruit or something. My power levels are running a little low.” Before she activated as a Nexus, she would have freaked to be consuming the kind of food quantities that she now took in. Now, it rarely felt like enough. It was a whacky, magical eating disorder.

The fridge yielded some bananas and an apple. When Seesee arrived to see what the hold up was, she sent Miklos back to their room for some applesauce. Abby sat with the baby on her lap and gave one spoon to Gaia and kept the other for herself.

Two bottles of water later, she felt much better. “Why don’t I ever think of food *before* I pass out?”

“It is a weird instinct. Normally, folks feel hungry before they are tired. You seem to be wired the other way.” Seese was laughing at her, but it didn’t sting. For a woman with animated hair, she got her kicks where she could.

Abby cuddled Gaia and let the munchkin yank on her hair. “Let’s go. Time to find out who is trying to kill me. Won’t that be fun?” She finished her comments in baby talk, drawing disgusted and uncomfortable glances from the men, smiles from the ladies and a drooling laugh from Gaia.

They trooped out of the room. Abby sent a call out the moment that they left her suite. So by the time they arrived back at the ballroom, Echo was waiting.

Do you know how hard it is to push elevator buttons with a tail? I tried with my nose and ended up stopping on every floor.

Abby still had Gaia on one hip, so Echo took the opposite shoulder. *I thank you for attending.*

No problem. I just got my nails done in the salon. Aren’t they pretty?

Lovely. Harlot scarlet is a wonderful colour on you. Do you know what I need?

Yes. I am sorry it has come to this though.

So am I. But at least two out of three aren’t guilty.

Abby sat across from Salleth and smiled brightly. “Hello, Salleth, how have you been keeping?”

Echo lifted her head and sniffed the air. *It wasn’t her.*

You are positive?

The house we were in did not smell like snake. I would have noticed something like that.

“I have been well, Nexus. What is this all about?” Her gesture took in the privacy chamber, the magic barriers and the demon guards ready to spring into action around the rooms.

“There has been a little problem. Someone has drained the last two Nexuses and wanted to make it three.”

The naga’s shock was not feigned. “Sargo and James? They were killed?”

“Sargo was drained over a long period of time. James was more of a sudden shot.”

“I knew them both.” Salleth was looking surprisingly depressed.

“I know.” Abby reached out and took Salleth’s hand. The naga returned the embrace and for a long moment, they simply sat in commiserating silence.

Salleth’s eyes widened. “That is it, isn’t it? I knew them both and that is the reason I was brought in for questioning.”

“You know me, too. That was the bigger problem. It was someone I would recognize, so we had to check.” Abby didn’t let go of her hand until Salleth pulled back gently.

“What did you learn by the contact?”

“That you are simply what you seem to be, an emotionally stressed naga who is a little confused by being dragged in here. I am sorry that you were involved in this, but I am glad that you are not the one.” Abby stood and bowed to Salleth, startling her again.

She left the privacy room and as soon as she left, it disappeared. Salleth was free to go.

One innocent, sobbing naga down, two more women to go.

“You know, I didn’t know your first name was Esolar.”

“There was no reason for you to have known it. Rackonell is my use-name.” The dryad was looking as intense as ever, her lawyer-like suit fitted and expensive.

“I also didn’t realize how old you were.”

“Dryads live for up to a thousand years if our tree is healthy.”

“You never mentioned the other two Nexuses you knew.”

Her green eyes grew wide in surprise. “Why would I speak of that? They are both dead. Nothing more for me to say.”

She smells close, but she is not the one. The other smells like a tree that has dry rot.

Why didn’t you mention the tree connection before?

You didn’t ask and I had never met one like her before. The other will be similar, but dead. Not green.

Curiouser and curiouser. “But you knew them both.” Abby was trying to get Rackonell to say anything spontaneously, but she was playing things close to the vest. Time to go on the attack.

“I did.”

“And you knew Sargo intimately.”

“As did many women in my social circle. He was even rumoured to have fathered a few children. But that was never conclusively proven.” She leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. “Why am I here?”

“You are here because someone who knew Sargo and James is trying to kill me, too. I am thinking that Sargo was an accident, but James was a hard and heavy strike. He was killed before he could become even a fifth of the Nexus he was meant to be.”

“I met James. I was there when he was discovered. Literally. His first burst of energy took place near my tree. I helped the councillors find him, but before he could be brought in, he was dead.”

“Who else knew about him? I accept that you were not the one to try and kill me, but did you tell any of your kind?”

“Of course. It was big news—another Nexus in the world—the trees and leaves whispered it around the globe in days.”

“That explains it. Now, I need to ask you a few pointed questions about dryads.” Abby leaned forward and settled in for a long session. This was going to be a bumpy ride.

She is the one. It was her home we were in.

I know, but thank you for the confirmation.

Echo started preening on Abby’s shoulder. It felt weird.

“I never did get your name the first time we met, did I Autone?”

Sitting across from Abby was the woman that had been her first exposure to the magical world at large.

“No, Nexus. You didn’t. You did get me fired though.” The woman had not fared well in the last six months. The green cast to her skin was tinged with grey.

“I am sure that you helped that process along. You were the first magical person outside of the Guard that I ever met. You made quite an impression on little old me.”

“As did you. Why am I here?”

“Well, as you pointed out, you have no place of work, perhaps I am just trying to find out if I need to help you get your job back.”

“Unlikely.” The woman gave an indelicate snort, her ash brown hair floating around her in a brittle cloud.

“You are right. It is unlikely. What I am really here to talk about is Sargo.”

Whoa. Her aura just flared a weak blue.

“What about him?”

“He was a Nexus and he lived under the grip of the council for twenty years. What kind of relationship did you have?”

“Private.”

“So you were one of those who was rumoured to have borne him a child.” Abby leaned forward and looked down at the pad of paper with random doodles on it as if checking her notes.

The weary eyes widened in shock, “How do you know that?”

“Each Nexus has access to a diary of all those who have come before it. It was started by Terranor and has continued into my day. I know everything.”

Tears welled in Autone’s eyes. “I didn’t know what to do after my tree was burned, so I went to the Nexus and he gave me enough power to support me for over a hundred years...and his son.”

Abby had to fight to not join the woman in her tears.

“I had no choice. I needed that power to keep living. But when my son grew up and joined our community, I didn’t want to leave him behind. My sisters still spoke to me, so they told me when a new Nexus activated.”

“So you went to James...”

“He rejected my advances and I lost my mind. I took it all from him after the councillor left him alone. He was waiting for his sweetheart in the shadows and I simply stepped out and drained him with roots through his chest. No one could know what I had done, so I dragged him onto a landmine and just waited for someone to move him. When he blew, so did the man who found him and there was no one to tell the pieces apart.”

Abby just blinked. “You have been waiting to tell someone for a long time, haven’t you?”

“Almost a hundred years. I know that you have figured it out, but I need to do one thing before I am sentenced.”

“I don’t think that you will have that opportunity. There is a horde of demon guards of the council waiting for you to make a move.” Abby was on guard.

“I only need a few minutes to say farewell to my son, but I don’t want everyone knowing who he is and judging him for it.”

To be the son of a Nexus killer would be a little awkward for anyone.

Chapter Thirteen

When Abby let the privacy screen down, the demons moved in to take Autone Theya into custody. She fought them, struggling to carry out her dying wish.

The demons subdued her with ridiculous ease. Autone was shackled with chains that pulsed with energy—dark, fiery energy. Not the sort of thing that would be easily absorbed by a woman made of wood.

Abby fought the tears for a while and then, after Autone had been taken into custody, she let a slow trickle of sorrow run through her eyes. As the tears hit the floor, they shattered into jagged pulses of magic that caused shivers of reaction in all the beings in the room.

“Xander, I need to talk with management. Will you come with me?” She hoped that he caught on to what she was really asking. Abby put her plea into her eyes and begged as hard as she could.

“Only for a few minutes. With her confession on record, she has only one destiny. As a dryad, she will be burned to ash, her soul captured and stored in a penal facility.”

“Oh god.” Abby was queasy. “Fine, a few minutes is fine.”

He spoke to the other Guards and escorted Abby to the elevator. A light pass of her hand on the panel, hitting the subbasement button and off they went.

The doors to the elevator opened and the green and gorgeous span soothed and filled a part of Abby’s soul that was aching for what was about to come. As they reached the village at the far edge of the field, the first Nexus was waiting.

“Abby, what’s wrong?”

With a cry and a sob, Abby ran to Terranor and threw herself into the other Nexus’s arms. The older woman held her as she sobbed out the story. The deaths of the Nexuses, the dryad losing her tree and doing anything to survive, Abby being at risk and the original pixies being used to smother her power.

“Original pixies?” Terranor interrupted her babbling with that gentle question.

“All of your originals are gone, but I made more.” She sent out a call for fifty of the new fairies to come to Terranor. “I give the replacements to you.”

“I can’t take all of your new pixies.”

“You aren’t. There are close to seven hundred of the buggers now and they will need a purpose.” Abby smiled through teary eyes. “I think you can give them that purpose.”

Xander was leaning against the cottage wall talking with his multiple-great grandfather, Strykr. The two were so much alike, it was almost scary. Strong genetics at work.

“I think I can as well. Are you keeping any for yourself?”

“Only one.” Abby gave Terranor the grin of a dawning idea. “I think I am going to keep just one.”

“Well, I am glad to see you are in better spirits. You have not been used to physical violence or retaliation in your modern age. In my day, she would have already been hacked to pieces and thrown in the fire.”

Abby shuddered at the image but knew in her heart there was a little bit of things to come in that description. “I know, but I am basically a pacifist at heart. I just want everyone to get along.”

“It is a laudable goal.” Terranor gave her another hug. “Feel better?”

“Yes. I am sorry to dump on you, but you are the only one that understands exactly what is going on in my head most of the time.”

The elder laughed, “I think that it would take an extraordinary person to understand your mind. All I can claim to do is to sympathize and empathize.”

She blushed but said honestly, “Then I am lucky you steered Xander my way. He seems to understand more than he should at times.”

“I look forward to you having little ones of your own, then you will have the joy of never being understood and loving it every minute.”

Abby laughed and thought about their absent birth control the night before. “Don’t you have enough great grandkids?”

“I get the feeling that a child who came from you would be something wonderful and truly powerful. A handful and a half.”

Abby thought about a little one of her own. She thought about the joy of holding Gaia, knowing that joy or darkness could be the outcome of her adulthood. It didn’t make a difference.

“Are you calmer now?” Xander came away from his grandparent and stood next to Abby.

“I am. We can go back. I think I need to have a proper dinner before any more festivities.” Her sarcastic tone merely got her a hug.

“Thanks, Terranor. Nice seeing you again, Strykr.” She waved at them and they waved back as Abby and Xander crossed the barrier of magic and time, walking back to the elevator that would take them into the world of tech and magic.

When they pressed the call button and the doors opened, Abby laughed. Fifty pissed-off pixies bolted out of the open box and straight for the bubble of time and magic that held the oldest Nexus alive.

Abby was still laughing when they went to the restaurant on the twelfth floor. The remainder of the pester of pixies came to check in. Abby suddenly had a thought. "Buffy!"

"What?"

"Buffy is pregnant and she needs more magic. I don't know how I could have forgotten about that."

"I will go get her." Xander used his phone to call Laura and Verne. "So, just Buffy?"

"No, get Bitsy, too."

"Why?"

"He's the father." Abby kept a straight face as she ordered a Caesar salad with chicken. Xander's shock was funny to watch.

Laura and Verne babysat her as she ate her salad, an impressive ordeal for Verne as he didn't like the scent of feta or parmesan.

"So, the mystery is solved. It was the dryad." Verne was making polite chitchat. He must have been sensing her stress.

Abby forced herself to keep eating. "It was, is."

"She will have her final statement and then be executed?" Laura seemed politely curious.

"I guess so." She finished picking the bits of chicken and croutons out of the salad and pushed the rest aside. A soda finished her meal off. "Is there any way I can speak to her?"

"To whom?"

"Autone Theya?"

"Why would you want to speak to her? She was going to kill you." Laura's outrage was almost palpable.

"Because she once was part of a logical and peaceful race, she had a lover and raised a son. She knew more Nexuses than I ever have and there may be something I could learn from her."

"But why?" Laura wouldn't give it up.

“I hate to do this, but because I am the Nexus and I want to meet my abductor. Alone. In private.” She didn’t pound her hand on the table, but she sat up straight and shoved some steel into her voice.

Verne and Laura blinked and finally, Verne smiled. “Finally. I knew there was an alpha under there somewhere.”

“I don’t like to use it.”

“You don’t like to use it on your friends. I have seen you use it several times on others. It’s good though. We won’t break if you insist on something. Always feel free to tell us what is on your mind. We may not do as you wish, but we need to keep things out in the open. It is a dangerous world that we live in, secrets can get you, or us, killed.”

“Wow.” That put a whole new spin on Verne’s attitude. He needed her to be in charge because she *was* in charge. In his world, alphas were everything.

Just as she was standing, Xander came out of the elevator toward them. Buffy was in his arms and Bitsy was at his heels.

Abby felt a surge of panic, “Buffy, I am so sorry. I didn’t...things have been hectic.” She took the gargoyle and ran magic through the small body in gentle waves. The small bump was now a softball under the soft grey skin. She crooned and rocked the gargoyle until the bright eyes opened and a smile formed.

“Hey, sugar. How are you doing, mommy-to-be?”

Buffy slowly sat up and flapped her wings. “No fly.”

“I guess you are a little middle heavy right now. You want me to carry you?”

Bitsy and Buffy both nodded, so she scooped him up as well. He reached out and took Buffy’s hand. They were together as one happy family, Xander watching with relief on his face.

“I wasn’t sure that I got to her in time. I am sorry. I should have kept a better eye on things, including your creatures.”

“How about everyone else? Were they all right?”

“They were trying to find a way to toilet paper your house from the inside, but otherwise, situation normal.”

Abby wanted to rub at her eyes, but with her arms full of creatures, it wasn’t likely. “Oh boy. Okay. I am on my way to speak with Autone Theya one more time. If she has anything she needs to tell me, this is probably the last chance she has.”

Laura looked a little perturbed, “Really? I can’t believe that you want to give that woman a chance to say anything.”

“Laura, I got my second chance at life when my power surfaced.” She looked down at the critters in her arms, “Everyone deserves a second shot to be heard for who they are, not what they have done.”

She straightened and kept the grip on her beasties. “Which way to the holding cell?”

Xander shook his head and escorted her to the elevator with Verne and Laura following. Xander led her to the guards and waved at her to try to talk her way in.

Abby looked at the two demons and smiled. “Let me pass, boys, and you will have enough power to fire your horns for two decades.”

Xander stood in shock as the demons grinned, nodded and stepped inside. They closed the door behind her and she was left in the presence of a dying dryad.

Chapter Fourteen

“Why are you here, Nexus? Come to gloat?” Autone was suspended between two posts, light flames causing a pale stream of smoke to come from her wrists.

“No, I came to ask you for your last wish.” Buffy hissed at the dryad and Bitsy growled. “Quiet. Be nice.”

“They are your creatures?” Curiosity was coating her tone.

“They are. Buffy is pregnant and may not have gotten this far without additional magic. She needs a little more attention than I have been able to give lately and that pains me. It is part of the reason I am here.”

“To drain what magic I have left?”

“To take a message to your son.”

Hope flared in her dulled eyes for a moment. “Are you serious? You will find him and tell him what I want him to know? Even if it is not what you would wish to say?”

“I will grit my teeth and say it anyway. Even if you order him to kill me. I can’t promise I won’t defend myself, but I will tell him what you say.” She took a deep breath. “I swear.”

The ripple of magic that ran through the room did not touch Autone—her restraints did not allow her to absorb anything.

“Then I will tell you what I wish you to tell Acteon.” Autone took a deep breath and began her tale.

Quickly, knowing that Autone was not going to stop and start again, she put Bitsy and Buffy on the floor and scrambled for the suspect list. She also pulled a pen from the pocket on her vest and started writing. Pen kleptomania was her thing and she had never been happier for it.

Acteon, I know I have told you that your father was a man who fell in love with me in the woods, but that is not the truth. During the razing of the village near my tree, a fire was lit. The fire blazed out of control and destroyed the tree that I was bonded to. My survival was given to me by a water sprite who doused my flesh as it tried to burn.

Her name was Ithera and she was my oldest friend.

She kept me alive by feeding me her magic and it was in learning to absorb other magics that I came across the idea of talking to the Nexus Sargo to get enough power to last me for a generation.

When I first saw him, I saw only the wild human that had been caged. He was angry at the world for giving him this gift and then keeping him from the steppe. We talked about loss of the life we had known and gradually, love came into our relationship. I know it seems like I was mercenary at the time, but I really did love him and we spent a wonderful two decades together. I was not his only woman, but I was his only love.

He died, his power gone. I know now what I did not know then, he was giving me power from his own life when we were together and it took too much from him. You were born six months after he died.

I stayed young, healthy and vital for a hundred years. You grew slowly, as does all of our kind. Without you needing a tree to attach to, our lives were wonderful. Full of travel and adventure.

When you left to start your own life, I was sad, at loose ends and my health spiralled downward until I got word that there was another Nexus in the vicinity. Trees love to gossip.

His name was James and he was lovely. He was also very much in love with another woman and I could not seduce him, though I tried. Frustrated, I forced the magic from him and took it for my own, leaving him for dead, as a decoy on a landmine. I am not proud of this, but I was so focussed on the living that I forgot I had lived my life a dozen times over. I wasn't entitled to more, but I took it anyway and for that, I am sorry.

I have seen what a Nexus can do if left to run free and I can only weep for Sargo's loss of his beloved steppes at this point. I want nothing more than for you to run free for the full span of your life, but don't forget that life must end, so live it, as you want to be remembered.

My life ends now, not because it came to a natural end, but because my urge to extend it led me to this point. In trying to kill the Nexus, I have killed myself. I know that now.

I urge you to chase happiness wherever it may lead and if you find someone who gives you joy and who feels the same, stay with them no matter when or where the journey takes you. I love you, my dearest Acteon, and wish you a long, full and natural life.

Abby's tears were flowing freely as she wrote in the tiniest of scripts each and every word.

It was a difficult thing to listen to, but it was her penance for doggedly uncovering the truth. The truth could bring pain and this was the perfect example.

She folded the paper up and put it back in her pocket, the pen with it.

With a sniffle, she scooped up her creatures again, sighing happily as they snuggled against her neck. “I will tell him each and every word, Autone, even if it takes me years to find him.”

She laughed, her own tears flowing. “My son will find you. He is aware of a few aspects of my life, including my fascination with the Nexuses. He will hear of my death and the circumstances and he will seek you out.”

“Great. Is he the violent sort?”

“No. My son is the gentlest and most gracious of men. You need not fear him.” The pride in her voice practically vibrated in the confines of the room.

“Then I will not. I will be there at your execution. Please know that I take no pleasure in it.”

“And know that your visit has made my end much more satisfying. I will be remembered fondly and not only by my son. I think that you and I have more in common than most would think.”

“I am glad we met, but I abhor the circumstance.” Abby bowed formally. “Farewell, Autone Theya.”

“Farewell, Nexus Annabeth Hanover. I also regret the circumstance.”

The inclined head and soft smile made her leaving a little bittersweet, but Abby left anyway.

She absently gave each of the demon guards enough energy to rev their power levels up past all standards. Additional spikes jutted from them as they absorbed the energy. She gave one look to Xander and he put his arm around her for comfort.

Abby kept her composure as they passed others in the elevator, she held it together when they got to their floor and she breathed deeply until she was inside her room. It was at that point that the waterworks flowed in earnest. No sobs, no screaming, just an endless fall of fat, hot tears down her cheeks.

She sat down on the couch, curled up against Xander when he sat next to her and just cried. When the storm abated, she sighed and took the cold washcloth that Bitsy brought to her. It felt wonderful on her hot, swollen eyes.

“You don’t have to be there. She admitted everything and her sentencing and execution will be short.”

“I promised her I would be there. She needs at least one friend.”

“You can’t consider her a friend.”

“Well, I consider her a woman who was fixated on her own survival to the point where the rest of the world ceased to exist. She found love when she went looking for power and got a child after her lover was dead.”

Xander tucked her head under his chin and squeezed her. “How do you know all this?”

“Call it a death-row confession. I now know what motivated her and it makes her a lot less frightening.”

“You still don’t have to be there.”

“But I have said I will.”

“Then get ready, it starts in five minutes.”

Abby charged Buffy and Bitsy up, even though he didn’t need it. She placed them on the couch and went off to the bathroom to fix the wreck of her tear storm. She brushed her hair and smoothed water over her face and hands a few times to cool them.

Presentable, if wrinkled, she went back out into the living room and picked up her little ones. “Let’s go.”

Xander reluctantly stood. Verne and Laura looked at each other.

“If any of you don’t want to watch the sentencing and execution, you don’t have to stay. You can wait outside. The threat to my immediate person is obviously over.” She walked toward the door and was relieved when Xander stood beside her.

In the hall, Seesee and Miklos fell into step with Laura and Verne in the rear. As a group, they went to the sentencing and took seats in the viewing gallery.

Autone was on those posts and hanging from shackles on her wrists at the front of the room.

Councillor Vokal was in charge of the sentencing. “Ladies and gentlemen, we are here today to sentence to death the woman who masterminded the attempt on the Nexus’s life. She has also admitted to killing the last Nexus who died before he could come into his powers.

“For these crimes, she has been declared a danger to our kind, our magic and our way of life. The sentence for attack on a Nexus is death.”

The room roared in agreement. Several pounded their feet on the floor.

“Dryad Autone Theya will be burned alive, her soul removed and stored in a crystal for all eternity. This sentence is to be a lesson to any and all who would take the life of one who provides magic for all.”

He stepped back and with a flourish, he pointed to the guilty party. “With the power vested in me, I hereby carry out the sentence set forth by the magic councils one thousand years ago. The sentence of death.”

Abby met Autone’s gaze as the fire started. The dryad was calm as the blaze came from the cuffs and roared through a body that was made essentially of dried wood. Abby watched her burn from a body, to broken, to crumbling coal and ash. When they stepped forward to take her soul and put it in the crystal, Abby lashed out and attached her magic to the soul in the crystal.

“I want that crystal. I will keep it and keep Autone’s soul in my possession in perpetuity. Can you make that happen?” She murmured it to Xander and he looked a little surprised.

“It is not unheard of. Wait until after the celebration for the execution and I will see what I can do. Is there a rush?”

“No. But I want it.”

“You have a devious plot?”

“Don’t I always?”

He laughed.

“Can we go home now?” She was plaintive, but she wanted to be back at Oak Point Way.

“Councillor Janes has requested that we stop in on our way out. It will only take a few minutes.”

Abby’s nerves were raw. The shaking inside her mind was starting to come out as a fine trembling. If one more thing went wrong, she was going to snap.

In the elevator once more, all together, they approached the room where the council members were waiting.

As soon as they were all lined up, Janes spoke. “Oak Point Guard, you are relieved of duty for gross inability to protect the Nexus.”

It was the final straw. Abby started screaming. Buffy and Bitsy were handed to Laura and Abby shrieked her fury.

“Nexus, we only mean to set you up with a more suitable team.”

“What team could have protected me from a dryad who used the oaks in my yard to gain access? Who could have protected me from a councillor that was responsible for the wards around my home? You selected those who put up the wards. It is your failure that did not protect me.”

She began to pace. “The Guard has done nothing except put up with my tantrums, my creatures and walk me through the early stages of my training. If not for that training, I would not be here today.”

Janes cleared his throat and Abby held up her hand. “I am taking offence at this constant effort to remove me from living my life. I want as normal a life as I can—coming and going as I please. This makes me happy and being happy makes me productive.

“This is the modern age. I am a woman who has friends and family that will not simply forget I ever existed. I am grounded in the living world. I have to be able to remain in it. One hundred years ago, I could have been made to disappear, but this is the twenty-first century and I am here and the first free-range Nexus. Powerful and proud.”

The councillors were looking taken aback and horribly confused by her outburst.

“And if anyone, *anyone*, tries to lock me up. This will be my response.” Abby stood between the u-shaped tables and drew all available magic into her. They flinched as she touched them and panic ran through their faces as they realized what was happening.

She pulled hard, wadding their power up into a ball and holding it in her hand. “Before me, I have enough power to run a dryad who has lost her home for three hundred years. If anyone had offered this to Autone, she would still be here today, living and happy. But the Nexus at the time didn’t know that the possibility existed and so he could not do more than what he did. Give her a piece of him, a little at a time.

“Unless you kill a Nexus, you cannot take our power. A trained Nexus could have helped her at any time, but you don’t share the power. You keep it hidden and confined, hoarded. This magic is life, as some of you are discovering now, life is to be shared.” With a lazy flick of her palms, she returned the magic to the councillors.

“I hope we understand each other, because I want to go home. I want to be surrounded by people I can trust, who trust me in return. This is the last time I will hear of alterations to my Guards. If they choose to retire, so be it, but no councillor will have the power to withdraw them from my service.”

She was crackling with energy, her anger and outrage spilling into her skin, “Are we clear on this? Let me hear it from you.”

Janes stood, shaking, he looked to the others and they all nodded. “We are clear. Have a good trip home. Thank you for your explanation, Nexus. You made things very clear.”

Abby’s lips twitched, but she inclined her head. Echo landed on her shoulder and Bitsy and Buffy were back in her arms in an instant.

“You heard the man. Let’s go home.”

Chapter Fifteen

Their exit from the hotel and into the front area where they could transport comfortably was anticlimactic. Laura and Seesee were in pleasantly stunned shock as they gathered in the yard and Xander transported them home.

The grass of Oak Point Way had never been so welcome. Abby's bare feet wiggled in delight as she walked back to Number 13. She stroked the doorframe lovingly and whispered, "I am home."

The door sprang open in an instant and she finished her greeting. Squeals and shouts rang through her home as tiny feet and flapping wings came straight at her. A pile of little ones greeted her and she knelt to embrace them all while still holding onto Buffy.

"I am back to my normal size! Isn't it wonderful?" She chuckled as they all took their turn hugging her and then came back for seconds. Even the taciturn little elves came in for a group hug.

With Buffy still in her arms and Echo on her shoulder, she wobbled a little as she stood up but making her way to the couch was a familiar trip.

Her crew sat around her in shock and surprise.

Miklos broke the silence. "I am amazed that you don't clang when you walk with those huge brass balls of yours."

The laughter broke the tension.

Verne smiled. "I have never seen the council so flattened. It was amazing."

"The idea was not amazement. The idea was to get them off my back. These aren't the dark ages. They can't just lock me up."

Seesee giggled and Gaia echoed her. "I think they got that inkling."

"I am pretty sure a few *inkled* down their legs." Miklos was still smiling. His yawn exposed all of his considerable teeth. "With one disaster over, I think I would like to get some rest. Any objections?"

"Go nuts. We will see you after you have had one good night's sleep. Or good day's sleep. Good lord, what time is it?" Abby was yawning as well. "To hell with that, what day is it?"

“Saturday, I think. The calls that I have been getting on my phone have all revolved around the last-minute details of wedding cakes. That is a Saturday thing.” Seesee checked her Blackberry and started to answer calls.

Abby smiled. “And so I prove that the real world rolls in.”

Laura grinned, “You don’t have to prove it to me. I have two consultations next week with some new commercial clients and the wedding planner.”

“I have a new shift at customs to rack up time for my honeymoon. It starts tomorrow afternoon.”

“Have you two decided on a location for your vacation?” The gnomes were confining Abby’s feet and the gargoyles were sitting behind her on the couch. The elves were snuggled against the side that was not plastered against Xander. She was surrounded by love and it felt fantastic.

“Nunavut. It will give Verne plenty of places to hunt and the sparse population makes my coming and going from the icy sea relatively easy.” Laura smiled, Verne lifted her hand to his lips and he grinned back. They were going to be spending more time in their magical states than they could in a year living amongst humans. It would be a relaxing and bonding time for them both. Just the thing to start their new life together.

“It sounds great. Wonderful in fact.” Seesee was curled against Miklos and the baby was asleep on her chest, sucking her fist.

Abby thought about it. Her idea of a relaxing and comfortable vacation was right here, all around her. Her friends and creatures around her, her mother nearby but far enough away and the council off her back until the next disaster. She was at peace with the world.

Basking in her serenity, she sent a wave of magic out. Her creatures lifted their heads to stare at her and smiles broke over their faces. The slow grin that she gave them in return was enough to get them chattering to themselves, with an occasional understandable word mixed in.

* * * *

“She’s good now. We can leave.” Splint grinned and patted Skint on the shoulder.

“I don’t want to leave.” Bitsy was holding onto Buffy’s tail.

Angel and Firefly weren’t excited about him being the father of Buffy’s baby but being uncles was taking root in their minds.

“We know *you* won’t leave. You are starting a family. The rest of us have the opportunity to see the wide world.” Ruffles was a little less than impressed.

Harbinger thought long and hard before he spoke. “The world will still be out there, waiting for us. I, for one, wish to stay here and watch the Nexus develop. She has the warlock, but she is happiest when we are all around her together. We are part of her and she only feels complete when we are here or haven’t you noticed her calm is linked to knowing where we are?”

That one sentence threw them into confusion. One by one, they sat and ran through their memories of the Nexus. Every calm and serene moment that she had exhibited in the last year, they had been there for her. It shook the wanderers to their core.

The Nexus has a plan for you if you would like to hear it. The dragon on the Nexus’s shoulder looked down at them with sparkling eyes.

She knows that you do not wish to keep close to her at all times, so she is working on getting means for you to check in. Give her some time.

Ruffles was suspicious. “How do you know all of this?”

I was born bathed in her blood. I can never leave her, but she cannot leave me either. Her mind and mine are linked and her thoughts, hopes and dreams are mine.

As a group, the gnomes blinked at her.

Finally, Harbinger asked her, “So what is the plan?”

You are going to learn how to use magic. You will be able to create portals to go where you wish, but you will return home. Once a week, an automatic spell will bring you home, no matter where you are or what you are doing. That way the Nexus will have peace of mind. She has an idea, but it will take a few weeks to enact it. You might have to wait until after the mermaid and the wolf wed.

“I am willing to wait. It sounds like fun.” Harby rubbed his hands together and thought of all the places he wanted to see. As soon as the Nexus was asleep, he was going online and starting a travel tick of all the places he wanted to go.

He had read about the pyramids, the troll bridges of Ireland and a hundred other locations that burned in his mind. Places of old magic and wonder. He hated to admit it, even to himself, but there was a large nostalgic streak in him that the Nexus had no doubt planted when he was created.

The rest of the gnomes muttered to themselves and came to the same conclusion. They would stay until after the wildness of the upcoming nuptials was over. If the Nexus wasn’t on their side by then, they would leave regardless.

Harby watched the dragon rub her head against Abby's and he felt a pang of jealousy. The new one was closer to the Nexus than any of her other creatures and it filled him with a sense of loss, but looking into the human's face and watching her happiness as she communicated with the dragon, he appreciated what they had together.

He was glad that they had found it—true communication was rare. Now, he wanted to find it for himself.

They were reluctant to leave. Abby could see it. She was going to have to be a bad host. "Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your company, but right now, I want to take a hot bath and have a nice night's sleep in my own bed."

"Regulation size." Miklos's lips twitched in amusement. He rose to his feet and took Gaia from Seese, settling her against his shoulder.

"Well, yeah, that is an issue. I am just glad to be home and looking the way I used to. Being six inches tall sucked."

Laura and Verne stood as one and Laura said, "Have a nice rest then, Abby. You will eventually have to take some time off and just enjoy yourself, you know."

"That can wait until later. For now, I need to make sure that me and mine are taken care of. That is my priority." She sighed as Buffy shifted against her body. The sharp warmth of the little one against her caused a surge of maternal thoughts and feelings that caught her by surprise.

One by one, the Guard left her and Xander alone with her creatures. Abby stood slowly and walked to the kitchen, pressing her hand to one of the interior walls. An alcove opened under her hand, four feet deep with a high lip on the edge. She concentrated on the lower angle of the wall and a serpentine ramp with a railing appeared.

"Are you doing that?" Xander was right behind her.

"No, I am asking the house to make the changes."

"I thought you had to verbalize it."

"No. I can merely request what I need silently. The magic shapes the house. When I got Seese to ask the house for the pixie gate, it was because I was unable to make the necessary communication with the house, my mind and voice weren't right. Not to mention that a huge chunk of *me* was missing." She turned to smile at him. Her Legolas in tight jeans. "Can you get me the box filled with silk?"

"What are you doing?"

“Making Buffy a nest. Though I would love to, I can’t carry her around all the time, plus she needs uninterrupted rest. Bitsy has to be able to get to her, but I don’t want her too close to the ground. With the small ramp, she can get down and wander around if she wants.” Xander handed her the box and she arranged the silks and fabrics into a comfy, little nest for Buffy.

She eased the gargoyle into place and smiled as she snuggled down into the fabric. Bitsy scampered up the ramp and was next to her in seconds. He gave Abby the thumbs up as he snuggled with his mate.

Abby sighed and turned to snuggle with hers. His arms wrapped around her and he rocked her from side to side. She inhaled the scent that was his alone and her soul relaxed with every breath.

She heard him take a shuddering breath and wondered if he was thinking the same thing she was.

His deep whisper in her ear made heat skip down her spine. “Come on, you have an agenda.”

“I do?” Her mind was a complete blank.

“I believe it was a bath and then a nap. You never said you wanted to take them alone.”

She chuckled, “You are truly wise. I believe that we should make every effort to conquer my itinerary.”

“Thank you. Let’s start with that bath.”

He swung her into his arms and carried her into the bathroom. Her laughter spilled out into the hall as water spilled onto the floor during their efforts to settle tightly together. She would have to ask the house to increase the size of the tub, but that was a matter for another day. Today, the tight fit was far too much fun.

The next day, they began a comfortable routine. Abby assisted in keeping Xander powered while he engaged in his day job of uncursing cursed objects. Mirrors, tea sets and a creepy assortment of dolls were analyzed and the spells holding malevolence in them were dissected and destroyed.

They spent the nights at her place—his was far too creepy.

Chapter Sixteen

“Abby, I want you up, dressed and ready for a night out in thirty minutes. Laura and Seesee will be here to pick you up.”

She blinked a little dully at him. “You are very cute, but you are not making sense. What?”

“The ladies are going to introduce you to a fascinating concept, a girls’ night out. I don’t know what exactly it entails and I don’t want to know.” He held up his hands in surrender.

She rolled so that her legs were dangling off the edge of the bed. “Now? Tonight?”

“They gave you one day to recover and now want you to have some non-magical fun.” Xander held out his hands and pulled her upright.

“Fabulous. Do I have time for a shower?”

“You have twenty-nine minutes. Use it as you wish.” His wink was oh-so-tempting, but she wandered into the shower, yawning the whole way.

Hot water was pouring down on her when his words finally clicked in. “Holy heck! I don’t have much time.”

She finished her refreshing scrub in record time. With towels around her body and hair, she scooted along the hardwood floors and into her bedroom. She flicked her closet door open and took stock of her clothes while towelling her hair dry. *Girls’ night out, what the hell am I supposed to wear?*

Abby closed her eyes and selected a set of shoes in her mind. Opening her eyes, she grabbed a dark blue pair of jeans, a sparkly black tank top and a matching open tunic that tied under her breasts. Now for lingerie. A brilliant blueberry lace bra and panty set were the first things she put on. Then a set of cartoon frog socks, the jeans, deodorant, tank top and tunic went on in complimentary layers.

She eyed herself in the mirror over her dresser. She needed some more colour. She dug in her jewellery box for the baroque pearl set that she got at the magic summit and put them on. It was just the proper touch of flirty colour to set off her outfit. The earrings dangled an inch or two down, flickering into and out of her hair with abandon.

Lipstick and a flick of eyeliner completed her ensemble. She was ready for anything, club or restaurant.

She finished the outfit with three-inch-heel granny boots. Abby grabbed her purse just as a knock came at the door.

Seesee and Laura were waiting. "Are you ready?"

"I think so, let me get my jacket." She reached for the front closet door and smiled as it opened and a small hand thrust her jacket at her.

Remembering Buffy, Abby sprinted into the kitchen and reached into the cubby that the house had provided. Buffy was sleeping in Bitsy's arms, so Abby just stroked her forehead a little to deliver another boost of power. It would keep her and the baby topped up for at least eight hours. Abby was intending to be back by then, no matter how much fun she was having.

She skidded back to the front door with her jacket in place. "Ready."

The ladies smiled and waved her out of the house. "Let's go." They chimed in as one and then laughed together.

Seesee fell into step with Abby as she left her house. "We have a designated driver so that all you need to do is to show up and have fun."

"Who would be willing to trail some drunken women around all night?"

Stephen Murdoch came around to open the minivan door for them. "A masochist. That's who. It isn't enough that I have to deliver mail all week, now I am your chauffeur for the evening." He may have been snarling, but there was a smile on his face.

"Lost a bet, did we?" Abby laughed when his eyes widened in surprise.

He tucked them into his dark van, made sure they were buckled up and got behind the wheel. He seemed to know exactly where they were going, which was good because Abby had no clue.

"So, how long did Xander give you to get ready?" Laura was looking at her still-damp roots.

"Half an hour from waking to you knocking. Just enough time to get showered and dressed, not enough time to panic or back out."

Seesee snickered. "He's a smart one."

"That he is. Cute, too. I still can't believe that he stays with me." Abby shook her head.

The other two looked at each other and communicated beyond speech. "Abby, Xander is head over heels in love with you. It shows in everything that he does."

"He has also had a few heart-to-heart talks with Miklos about you. He thinks about you and your safety all the time. And your ass. He really likes your butt." Seesee giggled as Stephen snorted.

“You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, I am. Deadly serious.” Seese’s hair was confined. No stray tendrils tonight. “You have several loveable qualities that even I can see. Why is it so hard to see that you are worthy of his love?”

“I just have never had a man like him interested in me before. It still takes me by surprise when I wake and see him lying next to me.”

“I feel the same about Verne.”

“Me, too, with Miklos. He has his choice of the vampire women and any and all would take him on. Well, except the Abomination. She only has eyes for Gregori.”

The image of the living vampire on the prowl was a scary one. “From what I have seen, the fact that Gregori feels the same is best for all. She could be dangerous if left out on the market.”

The laughter that filled the minivan continued with small anecdotes about the dating habits of the council members. Occasionally, Abby caught the shocked look on Stephen’s face, but he kept his eyes on the road as they entered Winnipeg.

“We are going to dinner first and then a movie.” Laura informed her. “Stephen has agreed to be at our beck and call, so when we are done eating, we simply call him and our chariot will await.”

“He must have lost quite the bet.”

Stephen rolled his eyes in the mirror.

Abby laughed.

Carlos and Murphy’s was their first stop. “Oh, God. It has been forever since I had good Mexican food.”

“Well, it will still be a while for you then, this is Southwestern food.” Laura murmured it to her as they entered the rough-hewn doors and waited to put their names in for a table. It looked as if there were about a half-hour wait, so they settled in to watch people until their name was up.

An unbelievable scenario was taking place. Apparently, a fairly drunk client accidentally made an error on the payment of his bill. He had debited a ten-thousand-dollar tip on top of his bill. The management, the drunk and the hostess were all engaged with the debit-card company to reverse the charge. The client being unable to select the correct card out of his wallet for the reversal did not help matters. The manager rejected his gas card, his grocery card, the drugstore card and possibly his library card before they got to the correct one.

It was a relief for everyone when everything was set properly and the client left the restaurant. Abby almost cheered. It had been tense to watch.

“Wow. What kind of service would you have to give to get a ten-thousand-dollar tip?” Abby couldn’t help it.

“I don’t know about here, but in Nevada, there are a few places where you would have some options.” Seesee was snickering behind her hand. The new folks entering the waiting area did not need to know details.

“Laura? Your table is ready.” The hostess looked harassed but calmer now that the problem was solved.

“Thank you.”

Together, they stood and followed the woman over uneven floorboards and around the corner.

It was a corner table and Abby took the seat with two sides with a yelp of glee. “Mine!”

No one could really hear her. The bar area was blasting music and the level of conversation was shouting versus speaking.

Abby looked at the one-page menu and bit her lip. Nachos. They had six kinds of nachos. She was in the hell of indecision.

When the waiter came by, she didn’t hesitate. “Strawberry margarita.”

It was going to be a night of relaxation if it killed her. She waited until the other two had each taken a sip of their respective beverages and then she asked, “So, Laura, do you and Verne ever get freaky with your other forms?”

The spray of sticky syrup and alcohol travelled about seven feet. Laura’s look of surprised horror while she got her composure back was priceless. Seesee’s laughter was quiet, but it didn’t stop for five minutes.

The waiter brought napkins for the table and a refill for Abby. To her surprise, she had slurped one down and she didn’t even remember it going. That was the trouble with drinks that tasted like candy—they went down far too easily.

Abby decided on nachos Oaxaca. It was a lovely mix of tortilla chips, cheese, meat, jalapenos, onions and tomatoes. She ordered extra sour cream and salsa and then waited for the others. Seesee was having a chimichanga, a monster of a deep-fried burrito, and Laura was having a special order, shrimp ceviche. Abby didn’t know how she got the kitchen to serve it, but it was what she tucked into with a certain amount of enthusiasm.

Relative quiet fell as they ate, broken only when Laura dropped a shrimp into her lap.

“Crotch shrimp—must be a delicacy.” Seesee giggled as the crustacean was retrieved and consumed.

“It beats crabs down there.”

There were five solid heartbeats before they burst into laughter.

Seesee’s sex life with the vampire was the next topic for ridicule. “What exactly does he suck on?”

The more they drank, the looser their tongues, but they kept their chatter to men, sex and how many calories were in their beverages.

Abby smiled as Seesee hit the number for Stephen to come and pick them up. The cheque was settled with no bizarre tips and the ladies toddled into the lane where their chariot awaited.

“Where next, ladies?”

Instead of a movie, they had all agreed on their next stop. “Desserts!”

The wince from the demon was almost palpable, but he drove them to the best pastry shop he knew. Montrose’s Munchies was only a few blocks from their homes, but it was indeed the best dessert shop that any of them could think of.

Giggling and staggering a little, the ladies made their way into the shop. They were not the only customers, but they were by far the loudest. Éclairs, cheesecakes and an assortment of tarts all met their doom under the ravenous attentions of the mermaid, gorgon and Nexus.

The shop closed around them, Seesee having waved the staff off at their regular time. Their laughter finally stilled and sober thought took over.

“Abby, how have you managed to do this and not lose your mind?” Laura was frank.

Seesee joined in, “It is something that we have wondered. I mean, you get goofy, but you always snap back.”

Abby spun slowly on the bar stool at the counter. “I don’t know. I think it comes down to the people and critters surrounding me. I didn’t have many friends around me when I was growing up. I never quite fit in. My mind always took me to weird places.

“When the Nexus thing kicked in, having the gnomes to concentrate on was my distraction. As wild as my life got, I was always able to look at them and remember what I was thinking when they were created. I feel accomplishment with them around. The same thing happens with the gargoyles. Buffy was created deliberately, knowing that she would fly the same day she was finished. From her, I get joy.

“The pixies gave me revenge, so I don’t need them around me. Knowing that they are somewhere in the world doing their thing is enough.” She stopped spinning. “I am gonna hurl.”

She lost her dignity with her dinner. She knelt in front of the trash bin and looked up, miserable. “Why do I always throw up around this place?”

Seesee laughed and loosened her hair, using the tendrils to help Abby clean her face with some wet wipes from behind the counter. “Too much excitement and spinning chairs. You will have to use a little more discretion when you choose your seating apparatus.”

Laura got some water and helped Abby to rinse her mouth.

Sitting on the floor next to the pastries, looking up at her friends, Abby had a thought and started laughing.

“What? What is so funny, oh queasy one?” Seesee mock glared down at her.

“We just had a girlfriend bonding moment. *A true friend will hold your hair when you puke.* It’s funny.” More giggles ran through Abby until she had an all-too-familiar feeling. “Uh-oh.”

Seesee and Laura helped her stand and once again asked her, “What?”

“I am either gonna puke again or there is a magic wave on the way.” Holding onto their hands, she shook as the feeling welled up and crashed out of her in the promised wave.

“Oh good. Just more magic.”

Seesee’s hair was standing on end and Laura was glittering with power. “Sorry, ladies. Do you want me to recall it?”

“No, I think Verne will enjoy it this time. Keeping him in human form when he really wants to shift is part of the fun.” The twinkle of light bondage was in her eyes and Abby started to laugh uncontrollably.

“Seesee, can you get Stephen in here? I might need a little help.” Leaning against the display case seemed a better option than the floor. Her giggles kept going though her and they didn’t feel like they were going to stop any time soon.

She looked to the supercharged mermaid. “Laura, do you remember when I had my little breakdown before the Magic Summit?” Her giggles were still going.

“Yes. Why?” She looked like she was going to hate the answer.

“Because I am now on the flip side. Welcome to the giggles.” Her silly grin was uncontrolled.

Stephen arrived and helped her into the car where she chortled like a monkey. He gave her several guarded looks but drove the few minutes to Oak Point Way.

He helped her to her door while the other ladies looked on in concern. Xander came to the door, tousled and sexy. "I am fine. I just have a case of the drunk, sick sillies. A little sleep and I will be fine. I hope."

"Thanks, Stephen, I have her." He did indeed have her, with an arm around her waist lifting more than holding her. "You have been sleeping a lot, Abby."

"I am in shock, Xander. I am coming to grips with more attacks on my life and people who want me dead or imprisoned. There are folks out there who hate me, Xander. They hate me and can't even manage to kill me, isn't that funny?" Her giggles came on again.

"No, Abby, it isn't funny. It is the stuff of my nightmares. I think we may have to do something a little drastic."

"Oh, like burning a woman to death for trying to suck out my magic?"

"Not that drastic. You and I need to link a little more securely than we are. That way, when you are having a bad day, I can offer you help instead of waiting for the after effects."

"Okey dokey." She blinked up at him. "You are really pretty. I am like mud."

"You are a lovely woman, Abby. I get hard every time you are near me...and no one is trying to kill us."

"Nice qualifier."

"I think so. Honesty, just watching you throw your weight around at the council got me all randy. I am a sick, sick man." He chuckled when she barked a laugh.

He sat her on their bed and sat across from her. He took her hands and stated, "Look into my eyes, love."

She did. Blues, greens, golds, all the colours of magic that she thought of as him were in those eyes. "I love you. Forever and ever."

"And I love you, through this life and beyond." His magic came toward her and she sent hers out to greet his. They met and mingled in the middle, until Abby felt his mind touch hers. He went deeply into her mind, anchoring his magic inside her. She followed suit, found his first memory of her and anchored her magic to that moment in his mind.

As her mind locked to his, she rose up on her knees and met him in a kiss that mimicked their mental joining. She removed his shirt, unbuckled his belt and opened his jeans.

His hands moved on her and as her clothing slithered to the floor.

They joined in body in the same manner as their minds. He was deep inside her and she felt herself surround him. Together, they locked the link that was forged into their psyches. Forever and through this life and beyond.

Chapter Seventeen

Seesee was smiling. “So, what do you think?”

“I think it’s a great idea. How soon can we get it going?” Abby was almost rubbing her hands together. She loved a good party, but she was going to steer clear of the alcohol.

“This Friday? That will give everyone a week to get ready for the wedding.”

It was short notice, but if anyone could pull it off, it would be Seesee. “I think that is excellent timing. What do you need me to do?”

“Show up and don’t tell her. I will be running all the catering, invitations and entertainment for it.”

“Entertainment at a bridal shower?” Images flooded Abby’s mind of a male stripper with extra appendages. Across the room, Xander looked up and frowned. *Oops*. She was still getting used to this mind-link that they had installed.

“Leave it to me. I plan to shock the starch out of that nasty little wedding planner.”

Abby shrugged her agreement. Savoriliana was one of the most supercilious creatures that Abby had ever met. If you weren’t a mer folk, you were scum. It had been almost funny to watch the woman swallow her contempt when she was presented with the current Nexus.

It had almost been worth the sneer that was turned on her whenever she wasn’t directly looking to make the older mermaid treat her with the etiquette due her station. The game got a little stale after about half an hour, so Abby just stuck next to the bride while they were going over the etiquette of the event. The coordinator was forced to treat her as one of the bridal party, the maid of honour.

Technically, Abby should have been the one organizing the bridal shower, but Seesee had the will, the skill and the connections, so Abby volunteered to foot the bill.

“Just don’t shock her too much. I am a bit of a prude as well and it would be a shame if I had to go running for the hills.”

Seesee gave her a quick hug. “You can run all you want. I’ll tip them if they catch you.”

“Fink!”

“Wuss!”

Abby couldn’t fight her grin. “Yes, yes I am.”

Seesee straightened and returned to her list. "So, who do you think we are missing from the list?"

"The management at Hotel Spectre. She will get something stupendous from them. Anyone who was attending at the Magic Summit, oh, and Hailey the archivist."

Seesee raised her eyebrows and wrote down the names. "If you insist."

"I do. I am the Nexus and I must be patronized." She grinned and stuck out her tongue, then sucked it back in as a tendril of hair whipped toward it.

A light whirring interrupted what was about to become a light slap fight.

The gorgon looked down and watched the gargoyle on the standing scooter tooling through the house. "What is that?"

"That's Buffy. Don't be ridiculous." Snickering, she waited for the next question.

"What is she doing on a scooter?"

"Riding around the house. What does it look like?"

Tendrils of hair crept around Abby's throat. "Nexus, why is your gargoyle riding a scooter and where did it come from?"

"Well, Buffy is pregnant and can't fly, she is too pudgy to walk well and she was getting mopey sitting in her nest, so I had the fellas and the elves get me some supplies. So here we are." Buffy was grinning from ear to ear and doing loops on the floor, under the table and from room to room.

"She is really bringing a gnome-gargoyle to term?"

"It looks like it, though if she gets any bigger, I think she might blow."

"It's incredible."

"And rather odd, I will tell you. She has ceased to need my constant attention now and is in a sort-of holding pattern. Bitsy won't let her out of his sight and the gargoyles are looking at her as if she is a whole new species."

"What does the scooter run on?" Seesee was watching it with a sort of twisted fascination.

"Me, so don't give Gaia any ideas about tooling around the playground on one of those. I can't imagine the looks on the other mothers' faces if you call me, I come over and I simply run my hands over the scooter to get it running again. Not just that, but the thing weighs a bloody ton. I wanted it nice and stable for my little one."

Seesee sighed. "It was worth a shot. I hate it when she falls while trying to walk."

"I know, but she will soon be sprinting along and you will need both your legs and your hair to keep up with her. As you know, the older we get, the harder it is to get up from a fall, so let her have her recovery and her triumph."

The crib midget in question was playing on the floor with three of the gnomes. They were sitting together and rolling a sparkly ball between them. The gnomes weren't in distress and Xander was keeping an eye on them all, so Abby went back to her conversation with Seesee.

"Do you think we left the shower until too late?"

"Abby, with our schedules, this was our only chance. The wedding is going on in eleven days. This is the last chance for Laura to see a man naked that isn't Verne. Well, aside from the werewolf games. Clothes tend to fly around a little at those things."

"I didn't notice." Being prim while giggling like an idiot was an acquired skill, but Abby had mastered it. She was getting used to toning down her emotional responses to joking around so as not to alarm Xander.

Just two nights ago, she had snuck into the kitchen to have midnight nachos and when she turned the light on, she saw Harby and Ruffles having sex on the counter. Her mental shriek had brought a naked and battle-ready Xander out of the bedroom in an instant.

Abby had been trapped between the embarrassment of her mental scream, her shock over seeing her gnomes having sex where she was going to make her nachos and the obvious indication that Xander was ready for action, in every sense.

She had struggled to select an emotion to go with and finally decided on calming Xander down in the most direct and pleasurable way possible. When the gnomes scrambled for cover, she knew she had succeeded and with some gentle coaxing, she finished what she started when they returned to the bedroom.

The object of her rumination came out of the living room to wrap his arms around her, laying a kiss on her neck. Shivering while Seesee grinned at them, she blushed to the roots of her hair.

His voice was low in her ear. "You called?"

"Not directly, just thinking about how easily I embarrass."

"I love it when you turn pink all over. It's endearing and kinda hot." Another kiss on her neck and he left her with a stunned Seesee.

"Whew. Your blush is almost setting the table on fire."

"Yeah, I do that. Now. Where were we?"

Seesee looked down at her phone and answered a text. "I was selecting strippers..."

* * * *

Abby's phone had been ringing all day. She and Xander had been running shuttles to and from the highway and into the main yard in the centre of the cul-de-sac that was Oak Point Way. Tables, chairs and a dance floor were all installed with a minimum of fuss.

Lights, bunting and the music man were in process when a voice that Abby was dreading sounded behind her. "What do you think you are doing?"

"Me? Absolutely nothing. Just letting all of these charming people in here for some kind of event." She turned slowly to face the dreaded wedding co-ordinator, Savoriliana. Mer woman extraordinaire.

"You are having some kind of bacchanalia for Lorifinialwen."

"Me? No. Perish the thought. I can't even spell bacchanalia. I am merely a conduit for those who are attending the event." She smiled brightly.

The mer woman was a harsh blue in the light of the bright April afternoon, but she turned purple while she tried to come up with a firm but polite way of putting Abby in her place. It was sort of fun to watch.

Abby sighed and draped her arm over the taller woman's shoulders. "This is a human tradition and Laura lives in the human world. She has a human business and a human persona. I want this for her and so do the other Guards. Seesee has gone to tremendous lengths to arrange transport for the guests who are coming this evening and the caterers are some who frequented the Magic Summit. It will be a meeting of all races and all in honour of Lorifinialwen. That should count for something."

As she spoke, she let a trickle of power leak into the sour woman. At first, Savoriliana stiffened, but she soon relaxed and let the power wash through her. "It isn't dignified."

"Dignity is for the wedding day. Single fun is for the unmarried." She released the woman and let her stand there in the bright rays of the sun.

"I suppose. Will there be people who are not invited to the wedding?" The way she said it, it seemed it was the worst thing that could happen to etiquette.

“Of course. Everyone invited loves a party. Food, drink, dancing and games will take the guests away from their regular lives for a moment and have them enjoy what I hope to become more common. A multi-race social event.”

“I suppose...”

Abby turned away to answer her phone. “I will be there in a moment.”

“I am sorry. I have been called away for a moment.” She sent a signal to Xander and together, they made their way to the catering truck that was seeking the entrance.

“What did the coordinator want?”

“To stop a bacchanalia. Whatever that is.” Abby winked at him as he let the catering truck through.

“Would you like me to show you?” His eyebrows arched and a trickle of heat came through their link.

She groaned. “Tempting, but I believe that I have a shower to attend this evening.”

“After the shower then. When Verne brings Laura home, Miklos and I are taking him out for a night on the town.”

“Fine, but if you watch a cartoon, I don’t want to hear about it.” She was sniggering. A previously unknown fascination for animated movies had caught her by surprise, but many mornings she slept in to find Xander and the critters watching digital ink frolicking on the television.

“What if it is a stripper with a particularly engaging routine, would you like to hear about that?” Xander grinned and it was evil.

“I think if you are engaged in that manner, I will know regardless.” Their link was stronger every day. She even felt his irritation when he couldn’t locate the cookies in the cupboard. If he got horny from some strange woman writhing against a pole, she would just have to deal with it.

If he did anything about it before he got home, she would torch his pointy little ears.

Chapter Eighteen

When the doorbell rang, Abby was just finishing her feminine formal wear. It was one of Mistress Galfor's hand-woven tunics with a skirt made of shifting panels of overlapping silk. Perfectly concealing unless there was a stiff breeze or she sprinted. Xander had left to get dressed at his own house. Not all of his clothing was at Abby's yet, though the house had expanded the closet for him.

Abby opened the door, the two demon guards at the end of her sidewalk attentive and alert. They had obviously vetted the visitor.

"Nexus?" An elf-demon hybrid stood in front of her. His purplish skin contrasted with his blond hair, blue eyes and pointed ears. The horns and slitted pupils didn't help either.

"Yes. How may I help you?"

"I have the soul crystal of Autone Theya. You requested custody of it?" He had a box tucked under one arm.

A sad hope sang inside her. "I did."

"Do you understand that you are responsible for the control and custody of this crystal for the rest of your life?"

"I do."

"Please sign here." He extended a pin and she caught on that she was supposed to sign with a drop of her own blood.

"Fine." She took a deep breath and punched lightly through the pad of the ring finger of her right hand. A single bright drop of blood shone and she pressed it in the box on the paperwork he handed her.

"The crystal, please."

He extended the box and opened it.

Something was wrong. "This isn't the right soul."

He suddenly looked very nervous. Abby lifted her right hand in a pre-arranged signal. The demons started to close in.

“Autone Theya was marked by my magic before she died. I know that the soul in that crystal is not the right one.” She narrowed her eyes and concentrated. “Because the correct crystal is in the right front pocket of your shirt.”

“I beg to differ, Nexus. There is nothing in my pocket.”

“Let us be the judge of that.” Two gravel-voiced demons spoke as one. The left one held him as the right one tore his shirt to pieces. The crystal was in his clawed hand in seconds.

“The contract.” Abby held her hand out and the searching demon placed the folded paperwork into her palm. A light drain of magic and her blood disappeared from the document.

“What? But you have the crystal!”

“This indicates that it was delivered to me. It was not. We were forced to take it from you. That defies the contract. Go back to your day job and explain what happened, I dare you.” Business was business and Xander had thankfully prepped her for this type of occasion. She had practiced withdrawing her signature until her head ached.

He tried to splutter in response, but the demons were dragging him out of Oak Point Way. The courier would have to deal with his attempted theft when he returned to the crystal containment department. Or, he would run for the hills. Not her problem.

She took the crystal and held it in her hand. It sparked and pulsed with the life Autone wanted so desperately. When the increasing noise of arrivals got her attention, she went to the secret cubbyhole that she and the house had.

The crystal went on top of Autone’s letter and the Nexus Chronicle. The things that even Xander shouldn’t be too familiar with.

He knew about the secret storage through their connection, but after they discussed it, he agreed that some Nexus-related details should be hers alone.

Abby smiled as she stroked the wall closed. She must be getting better at not freaking out if Xander didn’t come running when she got angry. Emotional self-control was still her weakness, but she was working on it each and every day.

Buffy rolled by on her scooter and Abby knelt until she rolled around and parked. The little gargoyle was looking pale, but her baby was kicking strongly. “Take care of yourself and send Bitsy to me if you need anything.”

A feather-light touch on Buffy’s face had her tired little face smiling. Buffy nodded and rolled away. Abby heard her rolling up the ramp to her nest and smiled as she walked out the front door to the incredible shower of over two hundred women who had turned out for Laura’s big day.

The gift table was enormous, growing from three tables to a block of nine, piled high with presents.

Abby took a deep breath and plunged into the crowd. Familiar faces smiled, others looked a little confused. As the sun set, Seesee stepped up to the podium and clapped her hands. “Ladies, I just spoke to Verne and he and Laura are almost here. The tradition would be to hide from sight, but as we are too large a group to be jumping behind trees, Xander has agreed to conceal us until they pull into her driveway. When she exits the vehicle, the veil will drop and we shout surprise or clap.”

As Seesee continued, Abby realized how many of the women there had never attended an event of this sort. Or any in the human world for that matter. The mer women were everywhere and looking uncomfortable until they got the rules for the evening.

Seesee explained the speeches, the gifts, the games and the buffet. It was an interesting lecture. A sharp whistle pierced the newly born night and they all went silent. It was eerie, watching the car approach, knowing that the inhabitants could not see them.

When Laura got out of the car, there was a bright flash and they yelled, “Surprise!”

The scream that came out of the mermaid’s throat almost shattered glass.

Abby and Seesee moved forward quickly to cut off any panic. “Laura, welcome to your bridal shower.”

“My what?” She was pale, shaking and looking like she had just suffered an attack.

“Human tradition. All those gifts on the table? They are all for you. Well, you and Verne, but he gets to escape.”

Abby put her hands on Laura’s shoulders and put a light wave of magic into her. She calmed immediately.

“I am having a shower? I have heard of these things but never saw one.”

“Good, it’s a first for a lot of the guests tonight. Now, come and sit in the chair of honour at the table of delivered food.” Seesee guided her along and soon, she was greeting her line of guests, one by one.

Abby was at her side when Hailey came by with a wink and a cheerful grin. “See, Seesee, I told you she would come.”

“Who?”

“The archivist, Hailey. That was her there with the long cape of black hair.” Abby was smug as Seesee almost dislocated her neck trying to see one of the least seen and most famous women in their community.

“Abby, I am so glad that I was invited. I don’t get out nearly enough.” Terranor was suddenly in front of her and Abby squealed and hugged the other Nexus.

“I can’t believe you came! I mean I hoped you would, but this is incredible.” She was almost dancing in place she was so excited. “Laura, this is…” Oh, heck. She didn’t know what name Terranor was using.

“Tara North and this is my daughter, Silvain. We are old friends of Abby’s.” She gripped Laura’s hand gently, but the way the mermaid’s eyes widened, there was some power exchanged. “Congratulations, Verne Fisher is a good man.”

Laura was a little dazed. “Thank you. I think so as well. Enjoy the party.”

“Oh, I will. I haven’t been to a good party in decades.” Terranor waved to another granddaughter in the crowd and left the bride and her attendants alone.

“Was that… I could swear… She gave… The handshake…”

“Relax, Laura. Look. A disapproving organizer. Enjoy.”

Abby ducked back as they spoke in the liquid basso language that was their purview. The mer women were slowly mingling.

She wandered through the crowd until she saw some goblins and then looked closely until she saw Mistress Galfor. They spoke at length about the gowns for the wedding and then enjoyed the companionability of being two women who didn’t quite fit the gathering.

After the greetings were completed, the buffets were opened and several large bins full of beads were rolled next to the dance floor for the first game.

“Ladies. Under each of your chairs is a number. Will all those with number nine come forward?”

When the collection of women was standing in front of the podium, Seesee continued her instructions. “In each of the bins are several prizes. Four ladies enter each bin of beads and search around for the prizes. You have three minutes. If you get the white bride’s gift, you get another three minutes. If you find more than two gifts, you get a special prize later in the evening.”

The women broke into groups of four and males dressed as waiters stood next to each bin with stopwatches.

Abby blinked. They weren't waiters. The waiters were wearing a different uniform. Oh lord, they were the strippers.

A demon, two elves, a mer man, a half goblin, a warlock, three vampires and a few races that Abby couldn't identify made up the group. Good lord, there was a dozen of them.

At Seesee's signal, a sharp whistle broke out and then it was every woman for herself. Beads flew everywhere, but they didn't ruin clothing, which had been Seesee's prime concern. Laughter started as women grabbed and held prizes above their heads, which were removed by the attendants and then dove back in.

A fun time was being had by all and judging by the smile on Laura's face, she was enjoying herself, which made the whole evening worth it.

The whistle stopped the women and only two had found the bridal gift, which meant that they got to keep digging. More cheers as the second round continued until one of the women held up a gift in each hand.

"Excellent. Thank you, ladies. Attendants, please make note of the lady and administer her special prize later."

With grins and nods, the men removed the bead-filled bins back wherever they had come from after giving the prizes to the winners. The losers didn't seem too unhappy as the handsome males gave them plenty of consolation.

"Now, for some dancing. The toasts will commence in an hour. Enjoy, ladies." Seesee cued the music man and the four-armed goblin started up a pounding beat that had the ladies tapping their toes in no time.

But no one danced.

Abby was rubbing her forehead when a strange hand grabbed her and pulled her onto the dance floor.

She was swung into a heavy, gyrating beat by one of the strippers whose origins she had been unable to place. "Excuse me?"

"Sorry, Nexus, but they won't dance unless you do. Some of them are very old fashioned and you are the highest ranking woman here." He spun her and then settled her back against a very hard and warm body, rocking against her.

"So, why the dirty dancing?"

"I didn't think you knew the tango."

He was right. She laughed.

Seesee and Laura were dragged onto the dance floor by two more of the attractive young men and soon, the rest of the women had joined them on the floor.

“That was quick thinking...”

“Teo.” He grinned and she knew his face from somewhere.

“Thank you, Teo, but you can let me go now. Your job is done.”

He danced her to the edge of the dance floor and then drew away from her. “You danced divinely for someone stiff with outrage.”

She curtsied and inclined her head, making him laugh. “I do try.”

“May I speak with you later, Nexus?”

“If you are not swamped with mer women who have just discovered mimosas, sure.” She laughed and went to raid the buffet. It was quite the rocking party after all.

The mer folk were hitting the liquor with enthusiasm of... fish in water. Clothing started to loosen and soon, the women were eyeing the entertainers like pieces of meat. It took far longer than Abby thought to have the first male surprised by some direct groping.

“Wow. Never thought I would see those women loosen up. It’s like a stick is embedded when they swim into the world.” The voice came from directly behind Abby and was very familiar.

She turned and smiled. “Max, so glad you could make it. And Raven! Nothing being born tonight?”

Max, the Abomination, the living vampire, was standing next to an albino with brilliant violet eyes. Abby rushed forward to hug them both. “I didn’t see you when you came in.”

Raven blushed, a truly appalling sight on her pale skin. “We snuck in after everything was underway. I hope Laura likes light bondage, because the present that Max gave her is not for the faint of heart.”

“Hey, there is always a little room for slap and tickle, or in my case, claw and tackle.” The blessedly normal features of the Abomination always made Abby smile. Aside from the woman being built along very lush lines, she was taller than most of the supernaturals attending, making her a caribou amongst gazelles. She was still lovely, but she stood out.

“I don’t want to know.” Raven plugged her fingers in her ears and hummed.

“Fine. Spoilsport.” Max grumped and snuck a snack off one of the passing women’s plates before anyone saw anything. “Good shrimp.”

“Seesee arranged the catering. My job was to keep my mouth shut.”

Raven laughed, “You got the hard part.”

Abby grinned, “I thought so, too.”

They took over a table and talked shop. Max and Abby were involved in policy and Raven in social development of the races she was a mid-wife for. The modern world was a harsh place and it took a bit of getting used to. It was better for the races to become acclimatized as quickly as possible. Raven was able to work that idea into her patients heads while helping them bring the next generation into an ever-advancing world.

Seesee waved at Abby and the next part of the evening’s entertainment was about to begin. Speeches. “Excuse me, ladies, I have to go and make an ass out of myself in public.”

There was no way she was going near the bar tonight, so her steps were steady as she walked to the podium.

“Ladies. Your attention, please.” The microphone boomed her voice through the neighbourhood.

“This is the part of the party when we celebrate Laura in all her incarnations. Laura, Lorifinialwen, Laura Exner, the entrepreneur, the landed mermaid, Verne’s fiancée, and one of my best friends. Thank you for being here and being yourself.”

Abby waited until the applause from the gathering and hoots from Max and Raven stopped.

She looked over to the table where Laura was sitting and made eye contact. “Some of you may know this, some may not, but Laura was the first person from the magical community to greet me and make me welcome.

“There I was, laying on the grass and thinking about taking root on the grass when this wonderful woman blocked the sparkling sunlight that was warming my head. She helped me stand up and move the boxes into my house while calling the rest of the neighbours to come and get the lead out.”

A ripple of laughter ran through the crowd again, Abby figured that the majority of the enthusiasm was spurred on by the punch that was being served.

“She didn’t freak out when my gnomes came to life, she kept her patience when I over charged her system and then ran away. Living next to a Nexus is not an easy task and yet, Laura has managed it with charm, grace and the sense of humour that is so vital to life in the vicinity of animated garden ornaments.

One of the men handed her a glass. “As the maid of honour, it was my duty to host this party, but Seesee is far better at this sort of thing and has a much larger rolodex than I do, so I am left with the duty of the toast to the bride.

“Laura, thank you for being the kind of woman who will stand between a friend and harms way when possible, who will love a werewolf with everything in her, even when their cultures are tearing them apart. Thank you for agreeing to marry the most contrary pile of fur and fangs that was ever born. Thank you for selecting Mistress Galfor for the bridesmaid dresses even though you could have insisted on us going *au natural*.”

“To Laura, my dearest friend and next door neighbour. A more beautiful bride has never stood on Oak Point Way.” Abby raised her glass and the others followed suit.

The chant rose up. “To Laura.”

A wave of magic rose up and crashed on the shore that was Laura. She glowed with beauty and the love and respect of all gathered.

Seesee took the podium next, “Abby said most of it, but I will agree on this one point, Laura was the first mer folk that I ever met and she set the bar for the species. If any mermaids here live up to her example, we are heading into a new generation of understanding and grace.”

She raised her glass. “To Laura.”

Abby sipped from the glass that contained nothing but water. Teo had handed it to her with a wink and a smile. It was a relief to know that she wasn’t going to sink into a nauseated stupor again. Though, she was not quite sure if the spinning on the chair hadn’t been a gross contributor.

Max and Raven welcomed her back with grins and toasts. “You did a wonderful job there, Abby. Remind me to have you do my speech if I ever become Vampire Guild Master.”

“Max, do not tell me you are thinking of bumping Gregori off.” Raven laughed and slapped Max’s arm.

“No, but I might lock him up for a while and have my way with him for a few years. That might keep him out of the ruling seat.”

“Max, stop it, I now have an image of you two together on that ruling seat and it is a scary one.” Abby shuddered.

Something struck Abby’s leg. She looked down in surprise. “Hey, Bitsy, what’s up?”

The image of his worried face burned itself into her brain. “Ohmygod. Raven, go with Bitsy.”

The albino stood and finished stuffing a canapé into her mouth, “Why?”

“It seems that my gargoyle is in labour and you are much more qualified to deal with it than I am.” Abby stood and bolted to Laura’s table.

Chapter Nineteen

“Laura, Seesee, Buffy is in labour and if I don’t get back before the final farewell, know that I am becoming a grandmother.” The words sounded funny but right.

“Go, if the baby arrives before the party is over, come out and tell us what it is.” Seesee waved her off and grinned.

“I hope it’s a girl, now get going!” Laura flapped her hands and dismissed her.

Abby was moving quickly through the crowd that was listening to Laura’s mother give her daughter a public vote of confidence.

A hand stopped Abby and she looked into Terranor’s worried face. “Is there something I can do?”

“There may be. Come with me.” Abby grabbed her hand and pulled her along through the crowd. Together, they sprinted across the green and into Abby’s house. It was unusually quiet.

Abby gestured for Terranor to follow and led her through to the kitchen. Buffy was in her nest and Bitsy was supporting her from behind. Raven was already examining her patient.

“How far along is she?”

Abby was watching the procedure with eager fascination. “What?”

“How pregnant is she?”

“Oh, two, three weeks. The day I got shrunk.” Buffy’s hand flailed out and Abby extended two fingers for her to grip. She drizzled power into the little one as her labour became intense.

“Raven, how is it going, will Buffy be all right?”

“Minutes, Abby. She seems to be doing well, but she wasn’t designed for this, it won’t be pleasant.”

Designed. Abby had put narrow hips on all the gargoyles, liking the tapering look. She concentrated and focused on Buffy, doing what she could to widen the birth canal.

“What are you doing? Don’t get me wrong, it seems to be working, but I have never seen anything like this.”

Abby could see the body relaxing, blooming under the energy she was feeding it. On the other side, a hand reached out and gave Buffy more fingers to grip. Abby could feel the magic flowing into the little gargoyle and knew that Terranor was adding her little touch, just as Abby had with the original pixies.

Time crawled by as they listened to Buffy pant and Bitsy kept shooting worried and intent glances to Abby. She was flat against the wall, reaching into the cubby while holding the gargoyle's hand and Terranor did the same on the other side giving Raven all the room they could.

“Whoa. Is that the head?”

“I certainly hope so.” Raven eased the little thing into the world and turned it over to clear its mouth. The cry that it gave out was the mewl of a kitten, but it was all creature. The first gnomgoyle ever born.

Abby held her breath as the little one cried again, waving its little fists. The small wings on its back showed potential for flight, but the body was that of its father. Well, mostly. It was a girl.

Buffy let go of the Nexuses' fingers and reached out for her child. She cradled the little one to her chest and made a coughing sound. A small bit of food came out and she fed it to her little one.

“Well, that explains what the baby will eat. I have to admit I was wondering.” Raven stepped aside to wash her hands, making the gnomes scatter as they tried to get a closer look at the baby.

Abby leaned in, “Do you have a name for her?”

Buffy and Bitsy looked at each other. She cleared her throat, “Alphaica. The first of her kind.” Buffy could speak perfectly well—she just didn't bother. Abby had asked her about it once and she said there was not much to say.

“It's a good name. Alphaica. You two did a wonderful job.” She reached in and touched them both, stopping to trail a finger down the newborn's arm.

Raven got some fabric from Harby and asked Buffy for the baby. Buffy waved her off and wrapped the infant herself. “You have it under control then. No problem.” Raven kept her hands away from the baby as she cleaned up the mother from the residue of the birth.

Abby finally tore her gaze away from the new baby in their midst. “I am a grandma.”

Her knees buckled and she sank heavily to the floor. She had made some things come to life and those things had made a life of their own. She laid her forehead on her knees.

“Are you all right, Abby?”

Terranor was looking at her kindly. “Come with me. There is still a party going on and there are more than enough creatures here to alert you if something goes awry.”

“Are you sure I should leave?” She didn’t want to, but it seemed as if the gnomes, gargoyles and elves had everything under control.

“This is their moment, their new start. Let them have it.” The older Nexus drew her to her feet. “Now, I believe one of those men offered me a lap dance. I don’t know what it is, but I get the feeling the Strykr won’t like it.”

Laughing, they exited the house, Raven bringing up the rear. “Thanks for your help with the delivery, Raven.”

“I will send you a bill. Frankly, I think my normal escort is more than willing to take some of your beads in exchange, but for me, I am with your friend here. A lap dance will call it even.” She chuckled evilly.

“Fine. I will let Seesee know and she can set the rest in motion.” The words made her laugh. Motion.

Several partygoers cheered when they returned. Terranor blended back into the crowd. Raven and Abby joined Laura’s table and explained the little matter of Abby being a grandmother.

Laura got up, wobbled and headed to the podium. “Ladies. I would like to thank you for coming out tonight and as my friend Seesee has arranged some special entertainment, I will keep this short.”

“First off, I would like to thank all of you for coming out despite ancient feuds and superstitions. Second, would the gentleman who made off with my underwear, please return it.”

Laughter and scandalous gasps followed that one.

“Just kidding. I don’t wear underwear.” She grinned and Abby could tell that the alcohol had been flowing freely in her absence.

Abby chuckled heartily as Laura thanked her prudish aunts for coming out and the mermaids got up to bow one by one. Seesee handed her a list and she started to read names.

Twelve chairs were lined up and ten names were called out. Tara was one of them, Raven another. The women came forward and were each escorted to a chair by the entertainment.

“And now, for my dear friend Abby who became a grandmother this evening. She and I will take the last positions. She needs the recreation with the kind of year she has been having.

“I want to thank both her and Seesee for throwing this shindig this evening. It means more to me than you can possibly imagine having all of you here for this moment in my life.”

Tears were in here eyes and Abby went to the podium and gave Laura a hug. Their escorts arrived and took them to the last two chairs in the semi-circle.

Abby squeezed her eyes closed and peeked occasionally as the men began to dance. The heavy, pounding beat and mock battles that the men enacted grew even more entrancing. As the shirts were torn free and the muscles gleamed in the flaring lights, Abby's eyes stayed open longer and she began to enjoy the spectacle.

Her dancer was the demon. His purplish hue made the light glow as he flexed and twisted to the heavy music. His grin said that he was having fun and so did the gleam in his eyes.

When the black trousers were torn free, Abby snapped her jaw shut and closed her eyes again. The small containment fabric did very little to conceal his attributes. She was treated to a close view as he gyrated closer to her and rested one hand on her shoulder. It took a lot of effort not to stare at his chest and lower as he moved, his scent was intoxicating.

Intoxicating? Oh hells, she was facing an incubus. Her recent studies with Xander had outlined this particular type of demon, they were rare, but they were rampant.

Knowing that his scent was pushing her to the edge of control, he came in closer until she was forced to put her hand on his chest to keep him from getting closer. The contact sent an electric shock through both of them.

“Back up, scooter, or I will burn you where you stand.” Her whisper floated on the wind, but his gaze indicated that he had heard her.

“Contact with the Nexus is quite the way to go.” He may have spoken with bravado, but he leaned back and removed his hand from her as he continued to dance.

She watched him with a more reserved enthusiasm now than she had had earlier. He was pretty, graceful and a potential threat. When the dance was over, the chairs were removed and women and men mingled and met on the dance floor.

Abby sighed and left the noisy collection of supernatural beings on the green. Her family was calling, her house, her creatures. It was a far more soothing beat than the wild party taking place. She nodded to Laura and Seesee as she went, disappearing into the cool confines of Number 13.

It was relaxing, to shut the door and put the party behind her. It would go on for hours, but they didn't need Abby to keep it going. It was Laura's party and she was having a wonderful time.

Abby crept into the kitchen and sat on the floor next to the ramp. There was a line to view the baby and she wanted all of the aunts and uncles to look their fill.

It was enough to be close to them.

An elf brought her two juice boxes, so she pierced one and handed it up to Harby who handed it to Buffy. Abby was sipping contentedly when she was tapped on her shoulder. Buffy was leaning against the railing and had her arms extended with the baby in them. She was offering it to Abby.

Tear in her eyes, she took the tiny creature and cupped it in one hand. She was pink with glossy black hair and when she squinted, navy blue eyes with a spark in the centre. "Hello, Alphaica. I am your grandmother. You can call me Nana Abby."

The little darling snuffled and a tiny fist went into its mouth. "You are quite something, you know. The first of a new species. I didn't even know that your parents could reproduce and yet, here you are. I promise to be the best nana I can and you can tell me if I am doing something wrong."

Abby started rocking gently and the baby opened her eyes. "Pretty eyes, little one. Pretty everything."

Abby laid a gentle kiss on the downy forehead and handed her back to her mother. "You did a wonderful job, Buffy."

"You did too, Nexus. We are very happy to be here."

"Thank you, Buffy, it means a lot to hear it. I was never quite sure if it was the right thing, but it felt right at the time."

"It was right, we are here and we will do great and strange things. We and she," Buffy lifted Alphaica, "will be your legacy."

Tears leaked down Abby's face as she viewed her little kingdom. "Thank you. May the world shake at your arrival."

Buffy gave her a smile, exposing sharp teeth, "It already quivers."

Chapter Twenty

Fireflies called Abby to the backyard. The lights were swirling around the great oak in her yard and she knew something was up.

She opened the patio door and stepped through. The lights got bigger, much bigger until they were the size of her hand. “You followed me home, you sick little buggers.”

Over six hundred pixies were swirling around the oak, desperate. Something inside wanted out and it wanted out now.

She was halfway to the oak when the silhouette of a man caught her attention. Abby turned and watched the figure come closer. “Teo?”

“Nexus. I still need to speak to you.”

“Speak.”

“My mother died recently and I am told you were the last person to speak to her.” He kept approaching and she got ready to throw up a wall of magic.

“Who was your mother?”

“Autone Theya. My full name is Acteon Theya.” He bowed from the waist. “Few people know of our connection though, so please keep it between us.”

“You and your mother did not have a public association?”

“Not for the last half-century. Not since she killed that Nexus.” It was out in the open.

“You knew about that?”

When he was ten feet away, he sat on the grass. “I tried to talk her out of it, to let her end come, but she wanted to see me live, flourish, wed and have babies.”

Abby knelt. “Did you?”

“Well, I lived, I flourished, but I never found a woman who meant enough for me to give up my lifestyle and live with her.” He shrugged and in the light of the fireflies, he looked more like his mother than he did before.

“You look a lot like her.”

He looked relieved. “So, you were the one. I wasn’t sure. You know how the rumour mill goes.”

“Wait here a moment. I have something for you to hear.” Abby stood and darted inside, the noise from the party still going strong. She went to her secret stash and opened the wall, taking out the message and leaving the crystal.

She paused in the kitchen to grab a flashlight and returned to the yard where Teo was now leaning against the oak.

“I have it. She dictated a message to you before she died. Here it is.” Abby shoved it at him.

He looked shocked. He stared at the page, trying to make sense of her scribbling. “I am sorry, I can’t read it. Can you read it to me?”

“I am sorry. I didn’t know how much I could write. Sure. Let me just get the flashlight going.” She had cranked her flashlight three times when the world lit up around her. The pixies were glowing brightly in the dark, turning night into dawn.

“She starts, *Acteon, I know I have told you that your father was a man who fell in love with me...*” Abby kept reading until they were both bawling like children and he leaned forward to hug her.

“Am I interrupting something?”

Abby had never thought that Xander’s voice would be unwelcome, but as she comforted the man who had lived over a century, she winced to hear his call.

“One of the ladies was overly familiar with Teo here and I was just giving him a little shoulder to cry on.” It was as good an excuse as any.

Teo’s eyes widened and he caught on. “Indeed. Those goblin women can be very aggressive, I ran to the Nexus for support.”

Xander came forward and lifted Abby to her feet, one arm around her waist. Well, at least he didn’t mark his territory another way.

“I will return to the party now. It should be safe.” He bowed and left swiftly, his feet made no noise on the grass.

Abby turned to glare at her fella. “That was not subtle.”

“It got the point across. Now, what was all the panic followed by pride?”

“Buffy had her baby.”

His eyes lit up in surprise, “Boy or girl?”

“A little girl, Alphaica.”

“That’s a mouthful.”

“We can call her Alphie.”

“Can I see her?”

“Sure, she is in the cubby hole. I think Buffy wants to keep it, but we may have to install a baby gate.”

She wasn’t given any more opportunity to expound on the delicate nature of the tiny one, Xander’s mouth covered hers in a kiss that melted her resolve and brought back the feelings of the incubus’s touch.

Heat rolled through her as his hands parted her clothing and slid her shirt from her shoulders. Her skin felt hot in the light of the pixies and they circled the couple as Abby finally got him undressed and they started to slide together under the blanket of stars.

He rolled so that she was on top of him and her knees were crushing the first grass of spring. Abby rode him until the stars came and danced behind her eyes as well as above them. The echoing power wave shook the earth around them making the oak shudder in response.

Flowers bloomed wildly as the world spun to a halt behind Abby’s eyes. Her yard was alive and the sound of music hadn’t done it.

“What was that?” Abby muttered it against Xander’s neck.

“If you don’t know by now, I have been doing it wrong or you haven’t been paying attention.” He ran his fingers through her hair in a repeat motion.

She got suspicious. “Did you go to see strippers or something?”

“Succubi strip show, but all I could think of was you.”

She snickered, “I doubt that, I saw an incubus tonight and if the women are anything like the men, I was a distant memory.”

He sighed and buried his face between her breasts. “All right. You have a point.”

“Hey, I don’t mind if you get worked up out in the world, as long as you bring it home to me.” She shifted on him again and he moved inside her again. “Ah, you put the super in supernatural, love.”

He just groaned and let the pixies circle. Abby did the rest.

* * * *

When the second magic wave emanated from Number 13, a cheer went up on the green, started by Laura. Laura was up for a second round of cheering when Verne arrived and hauled her off to her house, over his shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“Celebrating. It is time for mermaids with day jobs to be in bed. With me.” There was a grin in his voice as he waved at the few female relatives and friends he recognized. He moved smoothly through the ladies and dodged the hands that tried to grab him as he proceeded to Number 9.

When they entered her house and he locked the door behind them, he put her on the floor and stripped her in a few efficient moves. Her hands clung to his shoulders as they joined with her back against the wall and him leaning his hands beside her.

There was no magical burst, but for her, the earth moved.

* * * *

Seesee watched Verne haul Laura off and laughed until she felt icy eyes on her. The party was dwindling quickly with the loss of the honoured guest, so all Seesee still needed to do was make sure that the others were transported home with dignity. The mages that she hired to do the job were transporting them *en masse*.

Those that had arranged their own *rides* were calling and popping out of the green. As the guests left, the wards went back to full strength, letting people leave but no one new could come in.

In under twenty minutes, the party had gone from full swing to Seesee alone with the staff handing out cheques and cash to finish their jobs. The pile of presents would be dealt with in the morning. For now, Seesee used one of her best-functioning charms to make the presents safe and keep them from the elements.

With everything taken care of, she released her hair and let it run free. The braids hissed together and flexed in relief. “How long are you going to stand there staring at me?”

“Until you are ready to return home. Once I have you in my clutches, you aren’t going anywhere until dawn.” Miklos was behind her before she could blink, his hands wrapping around her and rocking her against him.

“Went to see the succubi, did we?” She was laughing. This was a standard response. Magical lust was still lust and it needed to fade or be burned out.

He nuzzled her neck. “Yes, yes, we did.”

She turned in his embrace and kissed him, “Then what are you waiting for. My house is that way.”

“I know.” He swung her into his arms and they crossed the green in a blur of pale and mocha skin.

Their joining shook the walls of her house, but a light inspection in the morning indicated that the foundations were still intact.

Chapter Twenty-One

Abby bounced out of bed with energy and anticipation. She was halfway down the hall before she realized that she was butt naked and covered with grass. “Whoa. What the heck?”

Retracing her steps, she followed a trail of mud and grass back to her bed. Xander was face down in the sheets, his chest rising and falling with a deep sleep. Based on the wreck of the bed, it had been quite an evening for them both.

Okay, shower time. She grabbed a robe and carried it with her into the bathroom. The water from the shower hit sensitive spots that were a little unlikely as erogenous zones but started to throb when the heat hit her. Her scrubbing was a lot more ginger than usual, but she was neat and clean when she was finished, her knees only slightly green.

Flashes of what she had been up to the night before started to fill her mind. “Oh.” She had no other comments to herself. Sex outdoors had never been something that sprang to mind, but apparently, it had been on Xander’s and she had been willing.

The elves had swept the hall by the time she finished brushing her teeth and hair, respectively. The robe came in handy while she pattered back to her bedroom. Goldie locks was still asleep, so she kissed him gently on the cheek and got dressed. No fancy meetings today, so it was jeans and a t-shirt over a plain bra and panty set.

In her socks, she slid down the hall and went to check on Buffy and the baby. Both mother and daughter were doing fine.

Abby also found her breakfast underway with Harby manning Bitsy’s regular station. The bacon-frying station was dangerous for a gnome wearing assless chaps and the Nexus could only wince when he jumped at the sting of hot fat.

She was content, all of her beasties accounted for and she was getting bacon for breakfast. All was right with the world.

The shower was running, so Xander was up. She snagged some fruit and went to wait for him in the bedroom.

Elves wearing nothing but a towel should be illegal and the look he gave her should have been censored.

“Morning, love. Sleep well?” He came straight to her and gave her a kiss that warmed her toes and let her know that he was using her toothpaste again.

How did he expect her to answer when he wouldn’t let her breathe? She gasped when he finally let her go, her nerves humming with something that was going to be an energy burst quite soon.

“Yes, yes I did. There seem to be a few missing parts of last evening though and I wasn’t drinking.”

He grew a little pink, “Ah, that. Well, the side effect of certain demons is a visually transmitted lust spell. Because you and I were both voluntarily exposed we...worked off the spell.”

“Hmm.” She pushed out of his embrace and glared at him. “Worked it off?”

“All that is left now is just you and me, no magic.” He shrugged and dropped the towel, informing her oh-so-subtly of his current interest.

She sidled closer to him and looked him in the eyes. “I beg to differ, there is always magic between us. But not this morning. I want to check on the residue of last night.”

Xander’s grin made her want to stay and play, but Oak Point Way had had a party and she had an urge to check on everything in the light of day.

Grabbing her sneakers and sprinting down the hallway, she was kicking herself for not agreeing to his invitation, but there had been plenty of magic thrown around last night and she didn’t want to be thought of as insatiable if they had another go around.

The greens were showing the signs of many feet, but the only overt sign was the mound of presents still in the centre.

Abby began the prearranged transport of the gifts, carrying boxes, parcels, bundles and bags around to Laura’s backyard. If all had gone according to plan, the mermaid would have gone in to her shop to consult with clients before her wedding one week in the future. She didn’t want any exotic aquarium fish deaths on her watch.

Seesee was doing the same thing at Montrose’s Munchies and picking her daughter up from the sitter on her way home. Gaia was not yet ready for giant parties in her front yard.

Abby grinned when Xander joined her for the transport detail with the gnomes in tow. As a group, they had the entire gift pile relocated in less than half an hour. “Alrighty, time for breakfast.”

“I smelled bacon. It was cruel of you to make us do this first.” Xander wrapped an arm around her waist as they walked back to Number 13.

“I wanted the wards at full strength and the pile of gifts was way to distracting. They will be much safer in Laura’s backyard, in the shed designed for them. Besides, if you can’t work up an appetite one way, manual labour will always be a good substitute.”

“Abby, there is no substitute for working up a morning appetite.”

“And yet, I am hungry anyway. Let’s go.” Breaking free of his hold, she raced him to the house.

Breakfast was laid out, covered dishes waiting for the hungry human and elf. Abby checked to make sure that Buffy was eating already and smiled then winced at the sight of her softening a piece of melon for Alphaica. Regurgitation was not Abby's favourite feeding method to watch.

She took her chair at the head of the table and started in on the bacon before Xander could even sit down.

"You know that it isn't healthy for you."

"I know and so do the gnomes. They have switched me to turkey bacon when they do let me have it. Apparently, they thought I burned off some calories." Her smug grin earned her some footsie under the table until she was blushing furiously.

"Okay, enough. I need to eat."

"Oh, what do you have planned today?" His eyebrows rose in query. He was busy consuming his favourites, oatmeal with chocolate chips and a fruit salad.

"I need to have a talk with the oak. She knows something she isn't telling."

"Uh, Abby. Trees don't talk. Unless they are dryads and if the one in your backyard had a dryad, I would know about it."

"Not if she wasn't out yet. The tree may be old for the area, but it is fairly young magic-wise."

"I see. Well, I am glad that I am working from home these days. I want to be there if you need me."

"You can be here, but I want to have a private discussion with the tree before anything else happens."

His frown could have curdled milk. "What are you expecting to happen?"

"Nothing. Not a thing, really. It's just...Benz got that present here somehow and the oak is the only sentient in the area that would be silly enough to let someone in."

He looked at the oak over his shoulder as if a psychopath was standing there with a chainsaw.

"I don't like it."

"I don't think she knew what could happen, but I need to ask her and for that, I need quiet. No creatures, no Xander, no elves and no stray squirrels. Just me and the tree." She finished working on her breakfast and slugged down some coffee.

“You run along and unhex some stuff and I will meditate to confront the mind of a tree. This could take a while, so meet you back here for an early dinner? Four or so?” She stood and came around to give him a kiss. He moved like lightning and she was sitting in his lap.

“Promise me you will be careful.”

The feeling of him holding her was intoxicating. She could stay curled up like this forever. “I promise. I will break the connection if she tries anything.”

“Swear it.” His grip tightened on her and his expression was serious.

“I swear. I will not let her get control and will break the connection if she tries anything.”

They sealed it with a kiss that went a little beyond the levels of public affection.

Abby finally pulled away reluctantly, but her body was giving her twinges from the night before that it had been too stupid to give her earlier. She stood and went through the back door, sliding the panel closed behind her.

The tree loomed ahead of her, pixies flitting on the branches. Abby sat fifteen feet from the trunk, right over one large root. She breathed deeply until she concentrated on the life of the tree.

It was awkward communicating with something that wasn't quite ready. *Hello.*

Nexus. It is good to feel your power home again.

Is it?

The gnomes were worried as well as their little followers.

Not the gargoyles?

They were worried about one of their own.

Ah. Buffy is fine now.

Yes, the others told me. The baby is strong and a wonderful cross.

Abby didn't know how to ask the next question but ploughed forward anyway. *Did we have a visitor around a week ago?*

If a tree could squirm, the oak would have. *We did. A sister of mine.*

Did she come to visit you?

She said she did.

Did she do anything else?

She said she had a gift for you.

Did you let her through the wards?

Tiny new leaves fell from the tree it was shaking so hard. I am so sorry. I never thought one of my kind could do that.

Neither did I but she did.

I am sorry. I regret her actions. The trees told me of her ending.

I am sorry for that. I know that there are not many of your kind in the world.

She was not of my kind. She could have chosen another tree, but she roamed the world and bore a child.

You called her your sister.

She was one of us but not one of us. We are born, we do not bear.

Interesting. Dryads were not to get pregnant. So, I am left with what to do with you.

Whatever you wish, Nexus.

I was preparing to supercharge you, set you free.

I am aware.

What should I do now?

Whatever you wish, Nexus. The oak will remain here as a pillar of the ward until you have long given up the earth as your own.

I know. But I am torn.

Whatever you wish is fine, Nexus. A tinge of amusement ran into her thoughts, the tree was having a silent laugh. Trees can wait a long, long time. It's what we do.

Then wait while I debate what to do.

You should go inside, Nexus. I thrive in this weather, but you do not.

Abby blinked and came out of her trance with a jolt. She looked to her left and saw Xander standing there, an umbrella held over her head. "It's raining."

“It’s raining. I noticed you still sitting here like a rock and came to assist.”

Groaning, she stretched out her legs. They were stiff and dead asleep. “What time is it?”

“Nearly five. I have been out here since three. Why aren’t you getting up?”

“My legs are asleep. They have just gotten to the prickle point.”

He sighed. “Hold this.” The umbrella landed in her hand and she held it above them both as he scooped her up.

“Thank you.”

“You are chilled.”

“It happens when you don’t eat and sit outside in the rain for a few hours. I never thought it would take so long to talk to a tree.”

“I should have warned you. They take forever to get a thought across and you don’t even notice.”

“Well, we had a lovely chat. I have to think about some things before I take any action.” She was chattering away, but it was to keep her teeth moving under her control. She was frozen.

“A hot bath is called for, I believe. You are rapidly turning grey.”

“I am a bit hungry as well. Can I do both?”

“Love, I am sure that you can do anything you set your mind to, but for today, it will be bath, then soup, then bed.” His chin rubbed the top of her head as he walked her to the bathroom. She held onto him for support while he stripped her and placed her in the slowly filling tub.

The chill in her legs made her shake, but he kept the water just warm enough to keep heating her blood degree by degree. Eventually, she was warm and limp, her rounds of shivers having run their course.

“Why are you so set on bringing out the dryad?” He was washing her hair with careful attention.

“I want to bring the dryad out for the same reason that I brought the gnomes out, the gargoyles and the elves.”

“What about the pixies?”

“They were defence and revenge. Benz used them for their magic dampening power and so I brought them back to the world in another incarnation. Their magic is under their control. If they die, the power goes with them.”

“Clever, but then your mind is one of your very attractive features, along with your body and your talent.”

She was almost nodding off under his ministrations. “Body, talent and mind, you admire them all, do you?”

“I do. I always have. Since the day I first knocked on the door and you turned seven shades of scarlet. Skin that sensitive had to belong to a sensually minded woman. I am so glad I was right.” He prodded her to rinse her hair and brought her up from the water with a kiss.

When she was able to breathe again, she gasped, “I thought you were a Tolkien elf in denim. And when I learned you were my next-door neighbour, I almost passed out. No wonder Harby came wandering around the corner that night.”

He stood and lifted her from the bath, swathing her in a thick white towel as the water drained. “And for something that started so innocently, your life took a strange twist that day.”

“My life’s twist happened at my urging. I wanted this house, then the life of making creatures and then you. Now I have them all.”

His hands were rubbing her dry and she took a deep breath to stifle the warmth that woke the magic in her.

“You had me at that first hello.” Using the towel to hold her confined, he brought her into his embrace and simply rested his forehead against hers.

Abby smiled as she scented green grass and moonlight on him. “And you had me with your neighbourly visit.”

“Not yet, but I wanted to.”

She giggled and touched his mind with her own. It was a warm exchange of emotion, sharing her love with him through her thoughts. When his own mind heated, she smiled as her magic sprang to life. *What the hell, dinner can wait.*

Chapter Twenty-Two

It had taken all her self-control, but she had not sent the magic out into the world when she and Xander came together. It was after midnight when she slipped out of Xander's embrace and pulled on a delicate nightgown with a matching shawl. Barefoot, she headed across the yard, moving past the gnomes as they stood aside for her.

She was glowing with magic. Xander had been most thorough in warming her and her body was humming with the power that she had been forced to contain.

I have returned.

You are full of magic.

I am.

You have come to a decision?

I have. But you must swear to one thing.

Name it.

You will be guardian to the pixies. I gave them very independent spirits and I would not have them come to harm. Can you promise me to protect them and to gain the cooperation of as many of your kind as you can in the same purpose?

I can and I will. The gargoyles as well if you wish it, they have been excellent companions.

Thank you, give me your oath and we shall begin.

I give you, Nexus, my oath to guard and protect your flying creatures by any means I am able as long as I shall live. I also hereby swear to pass this onto any saplings that my tree shall seed.

Then, dryad, prepare to meet the world. Abby was up against the tree, holding it tightly as she poured enough power to fuel a medieval village for years. Magic surrounded her hands, pooled and then was absorbed by the rough bark.

It took less time than their previous conversation. The magic flowed, pooled and was absorbed in minutes.

Abby stood back and bundled her arms in her shawl. "Come on out."

I will see you this afternoon. I will have worked out my exit strategy by then.

A startled laugh was forced from her. She had never thought that the dryad would have any problem working her way out of the tree, but they were now two separate, living beings in the same space, it could indeed take a while.

“Well, then I am going back to bed and will call on you this afternoon.” Her bare feet were icy by the time she made it back to bed, Abby slipped under the covers a safe distance from Xander, not wishing to wake him with her frozen feet.

It was for nothing. Abby sighed as he turned toward her and hauled her back against him and winced at his yelp over her icy feet.

“I take it we have a new dryad.”

“If she figures out how to leave her tree, we might have one this afternoon.”

He tucked her feet between his calves and held her still as he used his body warmth to warm her. “You should have waited until summer.”

“I am a tad impatient, in case it had escaped your notice.”

“Nothing about you escapes my notice and I occasionally find your impatience endearing. Especially when we are together like this.” His breath was warm in her ear.

“I am feeling impatient now. Would you help me with that?”

He started to lay tiny kisses down her spine. “Anything to keep you impatient, Nexus.”

* * * *

It was back to her normal routine once again—rising around eight am, eating breakfast with Xander and the gnomes. Making sure that Alphaica and Buffy had everything they needed as she marvelled at the growth of the newborn. The baby was already flapping her wings and getting some altitude, carefully supervised by her mother.

As she had breakfast, she kept a sketchpad next to her and doodled away. She always wanted to try metalworking. This was the perfect opportunity.

“Xander, can you lock a spell onto plastic?”

“It isn’t easy, but it can be done. Metal is the best for holding a spell. Glass is usually the worst, but you use it to great effect. Why?”

“I need to design some medallions that will help the gnomes travel. I want to build in a failsafe so that if someone steals or removes the medallion, the gnome will automatically return home.” She was going to continue, but she felt something land on her head.

Since the pixies were all outside and the gargoyles were having a banana, there was only one possible culprit.

“Alphie? Are you on my head?”

Xander was simply staring in surprise.

A tiny giggle emanated from the top of Abby’s head. “Nana Abby!” The squeal was unmistakable.

She reached up to carefully scoop the tiny creature off her head.

“Hello, Nana Abby! I flied!”

“Houston, we have a talker.” Abby grinned and put a light kiss on Alphie’s head. Buffy was hovering nearby.

“You did indeed flied, sweetie. You flied very good.” The wings she had at birth had expanded to twice her body height. They folded in very nicely as Abby cupped the little one in her hands. “I am very proud of you, as is your mama and papa.”

Bitsy was almost catatonic on the floor.

The tiny gnomgoyle giggled and stood up, twirling and sticking out her wings to show off. “I am getting big.”

“You are, very big. And such a pretty girl. Isn’t she, Papa Xander?” Abby hadn’t run the name by him and he merely gave her a light glare before turning his attention to the tiny princess.

“You are getting very big indeed. And very pretty.”

Alphie preened until her mother scooped her up and flew her back to the nest. She started singing, nonsense words, but a cute little chirp until broken up by a yawn. She was growing so fast, naps were almost constant. Buffy sighed and tucked the little one in before returning for her own breakfast. Feeding was also almost constant.

Buffy looked at Abby with tired eyes, “Sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. She is adorable and her growth is incredible. You and Bitsy are doing a great job.” A light touch to Buffy’s cheek, a surge of magic and a little of the fatigue fell away.

“Thank you. She grows fast. In a week...” She gestured with a clawed hand her own height.

“Wow. I am guessing that you and Bitsy won’t be having another any time soon?”

“One per year. Too tiring otherwise. We talked.” Buffy was making her way through an entire banana, so Abby parted with some of her precious bacon.

“Good. Communication is important. Where is Echo?”

“In tree. Eat bugs.” The face Buffy made was hilarious. She was a gargoyle with standards.

Abby finished eating her breakfasts, gave all her critters and Xander a peck on the cheek, then went into her studio to create a master mould for the medallions.

It was a cute little medallion, shaped like Bitsy. It would be cast from silver precious metal clay and she would be able to make ten and then destroy the mould.

Humming to herself, she sculpted one after another of the little medallions, trying to get it perfect. When he looked just right, she baked the polymer clay that she was using as a master and when it came out and cooled, she had her two-part silicone mould material ready. When the grey and white turned an even lavender, it was time to press the gnome into it.

Muttering to herself about curing times, Abby scrubbed her hands and looked out the kitchen window at the oak. A fine trembling was starting in the leaves. It seemed the time was now.

Echo confirmed it. *Yo, Abby. The tree is doing something.*

“I know, you nosey dragon. I am coming.”

The whole yard was trembling with tension. Grass and rock shivered with the magic in the air.

Abby sat on the big rock and her creatures and Xander surrounded her. Xander took the spot next to her on the rock and together, they watched the tree split open. “Echo, get that silk panel I use as a drape my studio window.”

The dragon sighed, but only Abby could hear it muttering as it flew into the house and disengaged the silk from the window.

It carried its banner back to the group just in time to see a hand emerge from the bark. The arm extended and bent, pushing and pulling the body out of the tree. When the dryad was free, she smiled in relief as the oak closed the wound.

As Abby had realized, she was naked, Echo brought the silk and draped it around the new addition to the neighbourhood. The woman stood five feet tall and had silvery grey hair with white oak skin. Only her eyes were surprising, a brilliant orange in her monochromatic face.

“Hello, I am Abby.”

“Lelurien. I am pleased to meet you.”

She took a few slow steps toward them, so Abby closed the distance.

“And I you.” The hug that she delivered was genuine affection. The tree had been there for her to dump her energy into since the first time she went out of control. It was nice to put a face to the sensation that she got when they made contact. It was like hugging a favourite aunt.

They chatted away and Abby introduced Xander and all of the critters.

The pixies swirled in a slow circle before alighting on her. They chattered and squealed as they introduced themselves, then began to swirl around her.

Abby and the others stood back as power started to flow out of the pixies and *around* the dryad. When they finished, she was wearing a lovely sundress and sandals. “That was odd.”

“They like you and know you for what you are. Their guardian, their protector.” Fatigue rippled through Abby. She had put more of herself into the tree than she should have.

Xander stepped forward. “Would you like to meet another of your kind?”

Lelurien’s eyes sparkled. “Could I? I swear not to let any one in unless they are escorted by one of the members of the Guard.”

“I was thinking more of taking you to them. I can transport you if you wish. Rackonell is waiting for you. She knows that you are out.” He was gently steering her into an open spot in the yard. No mean feat considering the gnome horticulture that was everywhere.

“See you later, Lelurien, Xander. Enjoy your visit.” She waved and bemused, the dryad waved back before magic tore a hole in dimensions that they could move through. It took less than three seconds and they were gone.

Abby had some studying to do.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The Nexus Chronicles was exactly where Abby had left it. In her secret cubbyhole. She preferred not to have Xander around when she read it, because for all of his agreement that she needed something private, he was still intensely curious. It was better he didn't even see it.

Getting comfy in her recliner, she situated the huge tome on her lap and summoned some of her personal magic. "Sargo."

She opened the book and there it was, the life and times of Sargo Nexus. The beginning was horrifying. He manifested as a child and his keepers had found him immediately. They had been kind enough to allow him to mature before starting the charging of blades, weapons and battle charges for warlocks.

He wrote about the women who started to come to him and he was exceptionally detailed. Abby was blushing furiously until she finally reached the pages that held the name she sought.

My beloved Autone.

Abby read back to the moment that they met.

There was a meeting in the citadel today. I was invited to attend, as I would be needed to provide the magic for the battle they were planning. I could see the plains from the window of the meeting room and my heart wept for the sweeping golden freedom I was denied.

A woman came and sat next to me as if sensing my loss. When I looked into her eyes, I knew her for one of the tree folk. She had loss in her eyes as well and we sat in companionable silence for the hours of the meeting. She touched my hand as she left and the sensation was not one I had felt in all of the women who had come to me.

I saw her again that evening. It was hard for me to look away. There was no other woman in the room that I wanted with me.

I informed my keepers and they spoke to her. She looked up, smiled and came and took my hand. We were meant for each other and it was clear for everyone to see. Her name was Autone.

Abby blotted tears away. Knowing how it was destined to end was difficult, but it must have been heart wrenching to experience.

Other women came to me while Autone was gone. I was a trophy for them. A night with me and they wore enough magic to attract a more permanent mate, but they were not the one I wanted with me.

When Autone returned, it was as if she had never left, her scent brought with it the steppes I longed for. I could not give her more power than I gave to the others or my keepers would know, so each time we joined, I gave her part of my soul.

Abby read on, years the two had been lovers until finally he had grown too weak and the keepers did not want to let them be together.

I have never told Autone that I wished for a child with her sparkling eyes, a child who could know the freedom that I have been denied. Bribery brought her to me for the last time and I knew when we parted, I would not see her again. My body was intact, but I had given her my soul and I would not remain long on the earth after that moment.

Sargo wrote of the rumour of the pregnancy and the joy he felt at the hope that it was true. It was his last entry.

Abby was bawling like an infant. He had never known he had a son and the knowledge that his son didn't know much about the great love that his parents had shared.

She closed the book and held the crystal in her hand, tears still staining her face. She knew what she wanted to do.

“Harby, where is that pixie that I had you put aside?” She raised her voice just enough to get the little guys moving. They had been watching her sob and snuffle, enjoying the wave of magic that her emotional overload caused.

He handed it to her and patted her knee.

She laughed through her tears. It was quite the moment.

With the crystal in one hand and the pixie in the other, she walked into the yard and sat on the big rock again.

She had no idea of how to get the soul out of the crystal, but placing the pixie body on top of it had to be a good start.

Her memory of Autone sparked a wave of sensation and she concentrated on her features, of the memories that Sargo had left on the page.

Magic swirled and circled, binding the crystal and the doll so tightly that they became one. She concentrated and they merged. The crystal was still the crystal and the pixie was now around it. The crystal was larger than the pixie, but somehow, they were occupying the same space.

The doll that she had created was now translucent. Lovely crystal hair rippled across Abby's palm.

Hello, Autone. You can wake up now.

The eyelids fluttered and opened. She sat up on Abby's palm, but Abby kept a grip on the base of one wing in case she decided to bolt. *You have a body again.*

I do? Nexus? I remember fire. She shuddered in reaction.

I know, but I have claimed the soul crystal that you were in and now you can fly around the world and see everything without worry of keeping your life fuelled.

Why? Why offer me this when I tried to destroy you?

You wanted what we all want—freedom, love and family. There is nothing wrong with that. You just went about it in the wrong way. I would entreat you to make up for James's loss by any means you can. He had a woman he was in love with, he was going to start a life and you ended it. You need to atone and you cannot do that if you are dead.

So, you are charging me with a geas?

No, I am offering you a chance to make amends and watch over your son as he tries to find love in the world.

The attitude that she had been working up disappeared at the mention of her son. *Acteon, is he all right?*

He is fine. I spoke with him and he understands what you are and why you did what you did.

She looked shy, her eyes downcast. *Does he miss me?*

He does, but he doesn't quite know what he is. There is no other like him, is there?

He is one of a kind. I checked the archives. No other dryad has had a son, let alone one by the Nexus.

Sargo gave you his soul. Every part of him became part of his son. He didn't know, but he hoped.

Tears formed in the tiny eyes. *How can you know that?*

I am a Nexus and we are a breed apart. I know of his love and I know that you were broken when he died. This is your chance to heal. Take it.

Autone took a deep breath and her whole body shook. *I don't know if I can.*

Will you try?

I will.

Abby released her wing and healed the mark that she left behind. "Then fly."

The wings fluttered and after a few hopping tries and the encouragement of the other pixies around her, she lifted off, a tinkling laugh the only thing that she could hear with her full-sized ears.

Exhausted but lighter in spirit than she had been in weeks, Abby went back inside.

She was getting the urge for a snack, but nothing in the house was appealing. Time for a trip to Montrose's Munchies.

She missed the afternoons with Seesee at her shop, but with the new baby, Laura's wedding and Abby being shrunk and kidnapped, there had been very little time for girl talk.

Time to get back on the road. First, a phone call. "Xander, I am heading over to the pastry shop, do you want anything?"

"Can you wait until I get home?"

"No, you suck at girl talk. I need some mindless chatter with Seesee."

"Fine. Call me if you need me."

"I always need you, but I like being independent now and then."

"Love you."

"Love you, too." Abby hung up and smiled, knowing it was a foolish grin.

She grabbed her shoes and a light jacket, remembering her purse and car keys at the last minute. It had been a while since she needed her insurance and drivers license with her.

“Hello, Bluebell, miss me?” Abby didn’t even need the key, the car revved into life the instant her foot pressed the brake. “I am going to drive. Feel free to jump in if I do anything stupid.”

She had forgotten what fun driving was and it was far too short a trip into Sargent for her.

Seesee had installed a playpen for Gaia, so Abby nagged her into a break and they had some tea and éclairs. Girl talk was exchanged and Gaia tried to eat Abby’s hair. The waves of normal were washing over her until Seesee asked her that loaded question, “So, what have you been up to today?”

“Uh. Well, I woke a dryad from her tree, read some history and played with the pixies. That is about it.”

“She’s awake?” Seesee was excited and it communicated to her daughter. Gaia squealed and clapped in reaction.

“Yup. Her name is Lelurien and she is currently visiting with Rackonell. I was wondering if she could have the empty house on the street.”

“I don’t see why not. Her tree is only a few yards over. It shouldn’t be a problem and we have needed a permanent person on duty for security purposes. A dryad is perfect. She’s almost invincible.”

“Almost...oh, right. Fire.”

“Right. But that close to the river should be perfect for her.”

“Yeah, she gets enough water, wonderful light and the tree is covered with pixies so plenty of magic.”

Seesee’s happy grin faded into confusion. “Pixies you say?”

“Yeah. They are all back in my yard. I guess they followed me home somehow.”

“Somehow, huh. Look behind you.”

Expecting to see Xander or one of the others, Abby’s jaw slacked as she watched a series of pixies mooning her from outside the shop. They were hovering over the parking lot and posing for camera phones.

“Uh, Seesee, I think I have to go.”

“Come here, baby.” Seesee grabbed Gaia and sighed, “It was a nice visit. I will shoo any stragglers along.”

“Great. See you later. Wonderful shower by the way.” Abby waved farewell and walked into the pixie cloud. “Oh, come on, guys! Get back home! Shoo!”

She climbed into Bluebell and steered back to Oak Point Way, a cloud of sparkly beings in her wake. Abby screeched into the driveway and geared up to give the little beasts a lecture. Autone landed on her fingers, twirled and giggled in happiness and Abby couldn’t yell.

They were having fun. They were exposing themselves about as much as the gnomes and gargoyles had. They were just doing it all at once instead of in small forays. The others had never just flown into the middle of town. They had remained in the park and raiding hats from passers by.

“Go bug folks in the park. Angel and Firefly can show you the way. Come home when you are tired.” Abby waved them off and the giggling cloud flew into the backyard in search of gargoyles.

The exhausted Nexus stomped into her house and flopped down in front of the television. Her beasties would be on local news, but at least they weren’t in the house.

She was just settling onto the couch when she was struck in the head by a soft, warm, laughing body. Carefully she reached up and disengaged her granddaughter. “Alphie, you are cute as a button, but you have to stop landing on my head.”

“Your hair catches me good.”

That was succinct. “Okay, but yell Nana before you land. It will stop me from jumping.”

“Okay. Can I sleep on you?”

Buffy flapped by and landed on the edge of the couch. “If your mama says it’s okay, you can sleep on me.”

“Okay. Mommy?”

“Yes. Back in nest when done.”

“Yay.” The tiny gnome with wings crawled up onto Abby’s chest and snuggled under her chin. She was asleep in seconds.

Abby reached out to hold Buffy’s hand. “It’s all right. I like that she has an attachment to me. If you don’t object, I can babysit for you once she is on solid food.”

“Already is. This afternoon, she got all her teeth.”

“Then I will give you afternoons to yourself and once I am back from Laura’s wedding, I can spend more time with her.”

“Rest now.”

“Skootch down here and we can all have some rest while I watch television.” With a smile of relief, Buffy slid into the curve of her arm and they started watching court shows on television. It wasn't restful, but it was bonding and it made Abby feel closer to her creature than she had in a long time.

By the time Xander came back with Lelurien, the couch was surrounded and covered by creatures, only Abby's head and remote-control hand were the only parts of her visible.

Xander stopped near the pile of living beings and grinned, “What are you up to, Abby?”

“Echo squealed that I needed some critter contact and they all came running. Well, aside from the pixies, they are terrorizing folks in the park. I think. Angel said something about hitting the windmill in Steinbach.”

He rubbed his eyes and she laughed. “Love me, love my critters.”

“I know, I know.” He waited a moment, “Is there room on there for me?”

She wagged her eyebrows at him. “I look forward to finding out.”

It turned out that her couch folded into a bed. All it needed was a little spell work and they were all snuggled together watching the pixies on the evening news stealing bumper stickers and those little balls folks put on their car antenna.

“What do you think they are going to do when we are gone for the wedding?” Abby was lying with her head on his shoulder, little Alphie still protected near her collarbone.

“One shudders to think. Oh, look. They are mooning the camera.”

The gnomes sniggered and Buffy sighed. It was just another night at the Nexus house.

Chapter Twenty-Four

It was four AM and Abby was trapped in a tulle nightmare. She was grateful that it was only the tent that the ladies were dressing in covered in the hideous stuff. The formal gowns for the bonding ceremony were bulky enough with the stiff embroidery, if she had to wear a petticoat, Abby would have jumped ship.

“Stand still, Nexus, or I will stick you with this pin.” Galfor was on her knees doing a last-minute fitting.

Abby’s final fitting had been cancelled due to dryad intervention. Lelurien needed an instructional day on the ins and outs of modern junk food, which seemed far more appealing than a day of pins and needles. The gnomes were teaching her the ins and outs of the internet. It was scarier than it sounded.

“Ow!” Galfor stuck her with the pin she had been threatening with. It wasn’t an accident—the goblin had taken aim. “What are you going to do, sell the pin with my blood on eBay?”

The goblin grinned, exposing teeth that were sharp and white. “Just making sure that you will be awake for the first ceremony. It is the formal bonding and will start the festivities.”

“I know. And I know it has to start at dawn. The price of merfolk tradition meeting that of the werewolves. The merfolk want it on the shore and the wolves need it at dawn. I still wish that the wedding party didn’t have to be there.”

“I want you there, Abby. I would have only my friends there if I can, but it has to be done in front of my community, so here we are.” Laura glided through the tent as if the floor were water. Her gown was bright white silk covered with embroidery so heavy it turned the gown into a work of waves, seashells and pearls.

Abby’s base was purple, Seesee’s was red and Laura’s sister was in a soft yellow. Silver and gold patterns in silk and beads covered them from bust to ankles. It was a tight bustier that acted as a corset and a long straight skirt slit to each knee with embroidery around the edge. This was only for the morning ceremony. For the afternoon, they had another change and for the evening, yet another.

Though the seamstress had her measurements, she had still been forced to drop Abby’s hem by an inch. Apparently, when she regained her height, she had gotten an extra inch.

Laura carefully sat at one of the dressing tables and checked her makeup. The wedding planner was running around outside trying desperately to keep the arriving dignitaries and family members under control, so all was calm in the bridal tent.

“Laura, you know I would do anything for you and this definitely qualifies.” She pointed down at the goblin and Laura laughed.

Abby sighed happily, that sound was what she had been striving for. Ever since the last week started with the final formalities, Laura had gone as tense as a drum. She had been signing documents, meeting ambassadors and the rehearsal dinner had been the final straw. She was ready to snap.

“Where is Seesee?”

Galfor was muttering under her breath as she straightened the hem for the final time. She was now going to have to work on Abby’s other dresses.

“Tucking Gaia in with the babysitters. Gwendolyn, Georgia and Genny are with her.”

“Excellent. All still sleepy, I presume?”

“If by that, you mean passed out on the floor of the kids’ tent, then yes.”

With the seamstress muttering to herself, Abby dismounted the fitting block and sat next to Laura at the dressing table.

“Remember, no matter what happens, today is about you and Verne. If anyone tries to get in the way of that, have them bounced out of the wedding. Even me.” Wearing makeup did not come naturally, but with a few practice rounds, she had created a look that was reminiscent of early morning dew.

“Thank you. I needed that. Anymore sage advice?”

“Don’t name your firstborn after anyone you know. Always make Verne do the laundry when you can. Lean on your friends but don’t stand on them. He is your base now, so always turn to him first and your friends second.” Abby took her friend’s hand and held it tightly, “And don’t animate gnomes. That is where my problems started.”

Seesee entered as they sat there snickering. “What, what did I miss?” She was truly elegant in the red gown that Galfor had crafted. Her hair was up in a classic twist, earrings and necklaces matching in a wild pear twist. Abby’s set was still sitting on the stand.

“My sage advice on relationships. It isn’t much, but I stand by it.” She yawned but resisted the impulse to pat her mouth. Her lips were a subtle rose and she didn’t want to smudge them.

“You look lovely Seesee. How is Narda?”

“Showing off her gown to anyone who will look. You would never guess that she is over sixty.” Seesee shook her head and looked over at Abby’s hair. “Why doesn’t it ever want to stay put?”

“It has a free spirit. Well, not like yours, but it gets by.” She smiled and let the gorgon fuss over her. She was teased, pulled, poked and finally, her hair was behaving in a somewhat normal fashion.

“There. Lovely. Now, if it stays put in that wind out there, it will be fabulous.”

Laura laughed, “Labrador is lovely, but the wind off the ocean can be something else. My people think of it as good luck.”

“Well, your people also needed their arms twisted to let this wedding take place. I know that they don’t think much of us dry-landers, but do they have to be so obvious about it?” Seesee was taking umbrage, of course, being a monster, she could wed whom she chose. Even a vampire if he ever got around to popping the question.

“They have centuries of snobbery under their belts, when they wear belts. Let it be.” Abby waved off the snobbery as best she could.

“It still peeves me that her sister isn’t in here with us because she feels we are below her.”

“Seesee, you are upsetting Laura. She is turning green.”

The bride was indeed turning green, but not with irritation or upset. “Oh heck, she’s gonna spew.”

Galfor acted quickly, thrusting a bowl under Laura’s nose as she lost the contents of her stomach. “Don’t worry, a lot more brides go to the altar with a passenger than you would think.”

Seesee still didn’t catch on, “A passenger, like a barnacle?”

Abby laughed and helped Laura blot her face gently. “More like a tiny parasite with fingernails and an urge to go to college.”

“You’re pregnant?” Her gasp carried loudly.

“I am not. It must be stress.” She was defending her nausea to the last. It was stirring really to see a mermaid fight reality.

“I thought you were finally relaxed.”

“I was. Am. I am relaxed. Just...”

Abby chortled. “Do the math and work out the possibilities. I don’t know how fast your people show, but my mother says she was sick with me from the moment that she got knocked up.”

“It would ruin the wedding. We couldn’t have one if it’s true.” Her glorious eyes were filling with tears.

“I solemnly swear to do my duty as a bridesmaid and the maid of honour and defend your honour to all and sundry. Seesee, do you swear not to reveal anything?”

“I do.”

“Mistress Galfor?”

“I do.”

“Then let this magic seal it.” She sent out a pulse that billowed the walls of the tent and locked down the word pregnancy.

The power may have gotten someone’s attention, but no one dared to interrupt them. Eventually, Narda and the wedding planner joined them for a final walk through of the event. When the time came, they lined up at the opening of the tent and waited.

The gentle strings of a harp started and Narda took the lead. A mer singer sang an aria fit for an opera while they made their way down the aisle of crushed shells. The dawn was only threatening as Abby paced slowly up the aisle where Narda, Seesee and the men were waiting for her.

Verne looked composed in his embroidered tunic and trousers. He was an ocean of calm for Laura’s nervousness and Abby was glad for it. Xander looked amazing in his black and silver ensemble, Miklos in grey and gold with sunglasses and a merman whose name Abby just could not pronounce, so she called him Bob.

The crunching of her shoes was all that Abby could hear aside from the singing. The strappy pumps were a triumph for the bridesmaids. Mer wedding parties normally went barefoot. For Abby and Seesee, that would have meant blood.

The woman’s song rose to a dizzying pitch and the werewolves to either side of the walkway covered their ears. Laura merely sailed down the aisle as if she had not a care in the world and with Verne waiting for her, she didn’t.

There were no flowers for Abby to hold, so she waited while a knife was held up and a slice was made on Verne and Laura’s palms. The officiator bound their hands with silk so their blood would mingle. As they sat, he went through a long, detailed sermon on marriage and the duties of man and wife.

Abby stifled a few yawns and only perked up when the sun finally made its appearance.

The bride’s and groom’s hands were untied to show that they had healed and the two were now one. There was more ear-piercing singing and the arias continued as formal contracts were signed. The contracts were not just for the bride and groom but also for the grand matriarch of the mer clan and Verne’s pack leader. Abby and Xander were asked to witness but a signature

wasn't required. It was blood that was used to sign. The most basic of all connecting fluids and one that was endemic to all species.

They were almost through the hour-long ceremony when Laura broke protocol. Laughter was forbidden.

Abby groaned silently as a pester of pixies came surging forward. No matter how far she went, the little buggers tracked her down and they had enough magic to make their own portals. They were currently circling Laura and Verne, adding their blessing.

Laura apologized quietly to the official who was scowling at her levity. Abby's back immediately got up. She finished her signature and reached into the air. She grabbed one of the little flyers, a male, and winged him at Xander. "Pixie fight!"

Verne cracked a smile as Abby and Xander drew the fire of the official. His disgusted look was now aimed at the Nexus who had a pixie wedged in her hair and Abby was quite happy about it. Laura needed support, not censure.

Xander was smiling, too, only a few marks of sparkling dust marring his tunic. She had sent her intent to him along their link and he had been willing to participate.

The official cleared his throat and the ceremony concluded with more singing and a slow procession back down the aisle with the newly wedded couple leading the way.

Relief ran through Abby as she took Xander's arm while they followed the couple down to the shoreline while the rest of the party followed them.

Laura and Verne waded into the surf and held hands facing each other while they bent their knees and submerged in the ocean. They stayed under for a count of ten and resurfaced, kissing passionately.

"I now introduce you the mated pair, Lorifinialwen and Verne Fisher. May their union create joy and harmony between our two peoples." The official raised his arms as the couple exited the surf and then dropped them. "You may now celebrate."

Verne smiled and kept one arm around Laura. "Not quite yet, Magistrate. But soon."

They left the beach and walked up the path to the tents. In a strange twist, Verne kissed Laura once more and the two went their separate ways.

"I guess this is our cue. See you later, love." Abby kissed Xander and was about to turn her back when he swung her back into his arms and gave her a kiss that sent magic pulsing through her veins. Her body was humming when he righted her and turned her with a smack on her ass.

"I look forward to it, Abby."

Dazed and a little befuddled, she wandered up the path and headed for the bridal tent where Laura was waiting for her maids. Seesee helped steer her around so that she didn't run into the wall of the tent.

“What is wrong with her?”

“Xander. He got her a little distracted. She'll be fine, eventually.” Seesee sat her on one of the makeup chairs. “Let's just get that pixie out and fix your hair.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Abby's hair was her least-favourite feature. It rose in a halo when the wind teased it. The pixie had become snagged with no trouble at all. Narda was helping Laura out of her stiff morning wear and into her less-formal noon dress. The women would have a light meal for lunch and then prepare for the afternoon rituals, but their morning outfits were far too restricting for eating or even moving comfortably.

"Aha! Gotcha!" The triumph of Seesee freeing the pixie was only matched by her wild laughter as it flew to the makeup table and started prettying up. The little creature pranced in the different colours of facial powders and covered the blues and greens of its body with them.

He was making quite the spectacle of himself and even Narda stopped to look. When their laughter faded, raised voices caught Abby's attention. She waved Seesee off and went to see what was up.

"You have to keep performing." Savoriliana was begging the singer just a few feet from the tent.

"Why should I? I have performed the most important ceremony for our people. The werewolves are disgusting and have no interest in my voice." The diva looked bored and irritated. Abby flashed back to the song and the wolves covering their ears.

"But the wolf ceremony, I did not arrange a substitute." Savoriliana was wringing her hands.

"Not my problem, now go and tell the bride that her wedding is ruined. I am leaving." The woman swept down the hill and into the ocean. Her tail flicked and that was the end of it.

Abby watched the organizer wring her hands. "You may as well just tell Laura, so we can get a plan B started."

Savor jumped. "You heard that? Of course you did, if I can hear you, you can hear everything."

"Whatever, get in here."

The reluctant wedding coordinator followed Abby into the bridal tent and Abby dropped the flap behind her. "Laura, we have a snag and don't get upset. We have time to unravel it."

Laura froze in place. "Spill."

"Apparently the diva is a diva and doesn't like the lack of appreciation given by the wolves during her performance and has decided to return to the sea."

Laura took a deep breath. "My cousin Hellebore can pitch in. She sings with a band and has performed at some paranormal weddings."

Savoriliana turned ashy grey. “She isn’t here.”

“What? I got her RSVP. She was coming.”

“I called and had her uninvited. She is too low born to be in this company. I thought it would be best if you didn’t worry about it.” She was holding her hands together so tightly, Abby could almost hear her bones creaking.

“I wanted her here. She is my family. My blood.” Laura was seething and the other woman tried to lean away. Abby’s hand in her back stopped her.

“You had no right to do that.”

“The matriarch can not be associating with those so far beneath her.”

“Get out.” Laura got her composure back with some effort. “Go and organize something else. I will deal with this and inform you of the result. Return in an hour.”

Abby and Seesee escorted Savoriliana out of the tent. Laura waved her hand through the air, “Get me my cell.”

Abby rummaged around the table and eventually found the cell phone under the pixie. He chattered and swung at her as she held him up by the wings while she handed the phone to Laura. The irritated mermaid punched numbers, but her voice softened as she got an answer on the other end of the line. “Hel, I am so sorry, I had no idea that that psycho had called you. I just found out part of what she said. I know that this is beyond last minute, but I need a favour.”

Laura smiled and relief sparked in her eyes. Her body relaxed and Abby felt a surge of relief.

“I need a singer, some drummers and possibly a band for today.” She cocked her head. “Um. In three hours? As quick as you can would be ideal.”

Laura nodded and looked up at Abby.

Knowing that there was a question in her eyes, Abby nodded. Whatever the bride needed, the bride would get.

“Here is Abby. She can connect you with someone who can do the transport. Just tell her what you need.”

The bride handed her the phone and Abby took it with a bemused grin. “Hello?”

“Hello, Abby.” There was laughter on the other end of the call, the voice was rich and controlled, not like the shrill shriek of the diva. “My name is Hellebore and I will be your singer today.”

Abby’s grin was genuine. “What do you need and when do you need it?”

“Well, I need transport, so if you could put me in touch with someone who can pick me up, that would be great.”

With a wave to the others, she left the tent and started walking to the groom’s tent. “I am taking you for a walk so just bear with me.”

“Thanks. Is Laura freaking out?”

“Well, when she learned that Savoriliana had uninvited you, she almost grew her tail on dry land. I have never seen her so ticked off.”

The rich laugh sounded again. It was obvious from the noises that she was on a computer. “That sounds like her. The first time my family came to a reunion, none of the other mer folk would talk to me. Laura came over and treated me like a member of the family.”

“That sounds like her.” She was getting quite a few funny looks as she walked across the green to the tent where the men were gathered. “So, you’re a singer?”

“On the weekends. I have done a few werewolf weddings and have attended a few dozen mer weddings, so I think I can fill in. Are you ready for the drum walk?”

“The what?”

“The presentation of the bride before the afternoon ceremony. The bride and attendants have to walk the green path but they have to stay off beat to the sound of the drums. They may not have told you this, but if the bride can keep off step with the beat, she will lead the household. It proves she can conquer her instincts.”

“Thanks for the heads up. No one mentioned that.”

Hellebore laughed and Abby wanted that voice around her. “The wolves wouldn’t. They are pulling for Verne.”

“What is it with your voice?”

“You noticed that? You are sensitive. I will explain when I arrive. It’s a little strange to explain on the phone.”

“Fine, but I am really curious. Okay, hang on a second.” Pressing the mute key, she leaned forward and yelled into the tent opening, “Xander!”

All conversation inside the tent stopped. He stuck his head out and then his body followed. “You rang?”

“Okay, short version. The singer backed out, Laura called her cousin who is now on the phone and Hellebore will fill in but she needs transport. Possibly for more than one person.”

Abby was proud of her summary. She turned the mute off and handed the phone over to him.

He spoke quietly for a few minutes and ducked inside the tent while she waited. He came out with a map and a phone number. "Okay, I am handing you back to Abby now. See you when you get here."

She took the phone, gave Xander a quick kiss and walked back to the bridal tent. "Hello?"

"He's quite efficient, isn't he?"

"With me around, he has to be."

"Well, I just wanted to thank you for your help. Laura wouldn't have made it through today without you to twist arms."

"Oh. Uh, thank you. She's a good friend and deserves everything good in her life." She smiled, the pixies were circling the bridal tent. "Sometimes good people get what they deserve and this may just be one of those times."

"See you soon."

"Have a safe trip. Bye." Abby hung up the phone and returned to Laura, feeling ten pounds lighter. "It's set. She is on her way."

Laura's smile lit up the inside of the tent. "Thank you. Xander is helping?"

"How did you guess?"

Seesee was wearing her loose gown. "Because you have a silly smile on your face. You two are so goofy in love, it's embarrassing. Now, get over here so I can tame that hair, you look like a wild woman."

"Ah, that explains a few things."

"Like what?"

"The looks I was getting while I crossed the space between tents."

Abby grumped and crossed the room, handing Laura's phone to her as she passed. She watched the mermaid absently check the battery and slide the cell back on the table. Businesslike habits died hard, even on special days.

The mirror showed her what she had been avoiding, the extraction of the pixie had wrecked her hair beyond human intervention. Fortunately, no one in the room was human.

Seesee wrestled with the brush and the tangles that formed so easily. “You know, this is like hairstyling thick silk. It’s healthy enough, but it doesn’t want to stay put.”

“My burden to bear. What are those?” Combs were laid out on the table, pearls and shells decorating them.

“Laura’s grandmother sent them over. They are to symbolize the aquatic nature of the bride.”

“They are radiating power.”

That made Narda and Laura pick them up with curiosity. “What kind of power?”

“Nothing caustic. I think it’s an attraction spell.” Practice made perfect and she had been practicing identifying magic until the cows came home. Or pixies in her case.

“Like we need anymore attraction floating around here. The air is so thick with pheromones, you could cut it with a knife.” Narda was rather disgusted by the other women and it showed.

“We are all in love—it has an effect on people. You will know it one day, little fry.” Laura chided her little sister while examining a comb. “If you wear this, the moment might come sooner rather than later.”

“You will be wearing them as well, won’t you?”

Abby smiled when Laura didn’t answer, “Of course we will. I am just going to play with the charm a bit first. Make it a little more specific.”

“You can do that?” Narda had no idea what Abby could and could not do, so when neither Seesee nor Laura contradicted her, she sat back with her combs protectively against her chest.

Abby ran her fingers across the combs and pulled the magic away from the metalwork. It was easier than doing what Xander did by unravelling the spell. The spell was still there, it just lacked power. She had simply pulled its batteries.

She handed her combs back to Seesee for insertion into her hair. If anything had a chance of keeping her looking tidy, it was some old-fashioned combs.

“Can someone help me out of this dress? I don’t want to sweat in it.” She grimaced and stood as soon as Seesee had finished cussing at the back of her hair. She felt strong, elegant and hungry as hell. “So, when is brunch?”

“Let’s get you changed and then we can summon the food.”

Mistress Galfor came up behind Abby and started unlacing her bodice. “I don’t want my work ruined by sweat.”

A sharp tug made Abby gasp. “Fine. But be gentle, the last time you were a little free with the claws.”

“What? I would never mar my work.”

“No, just my skin. Are you selling that pin with Nexus blood on eBay yet?”

The goblin came around in front of her, releasing her from the tight silk. “Naw, I don’t have the right App on my phone. Maybe next time.”

“I look forward to it.” Her light gown was the same brilliant purple as the previous one. Waves of colour faded it to white and back again across the span of the gown. Three dark bands of colour delineated the gown. They dropped it carefully over her head and it laced tight under her arms.

“So you all did this while I was gone?”

“Yup. The pixie was fascinated.” Laura took a seat and watched Galfor and Seesee finish the lacing.

“I’ll bet. I am still not sure whether it was a good idea to have the gnomes build both genders. I mean, I wanted a self-preserving population and they only reproduce once per year, but still. They don’t have many natural enemies. This could become a problem in a few decades.”

Galfor gave her a slap on the back to indicate she was done and Abby stumbled a few steps before righting herself.

She took a few steps and twirled in the voluminous gown. It was really lovely. “You have outdone yourself here, Galfor. This is wonderful.”

Mistress Galfor bowed low as the women gave her a round of applause. “It is wonderful to be appreciated by such as you. You are excellent recipients of my wares and you always pay on time. A humble seamstress such as myself appreciates these things in clients as well.”

Laura nodded and clapped her hands seven times. A blaze of light came into the centre of the room and a table appeared covered with snacks.

Peckish and perky, Abby waited for Laura to start and then took a few bites of fruit. “Have I mentioned recently that I enjoy the perks of magic? A mobile buffet is one of the grandest things in the world.”

“It is wired into the tent. Seven for lunch, thirteen for dinner.” Laura laughed at the wonder in Abby’s voice.

Seesee was finishing her hair renovation. The pearls shone brightly against her midnight hair, the crimson of her gown flowed around her, turning her into a dark caramel medieval maiden.

The other ladies took to the food daintily. They still had two more formal events to attend and the gowns fit fairly close to the body. No sense giving Galfor another fitting nightmare.

Abby remembered the phone conversation with Hellebore, “Did you know about the drumming thing at the beginning of the werewolf ceremony?”

“Of course. We walk in to the sound of the drums.”

“Did you know about keeping counterpoint to the drums? Hellebore told me. Apparently, you have to *not* keep step with the beat and ignore it entirely. If you manage to make it down the aisle without stepping to the beat, the tradition is that you will have the upper hand in your relationship.”

“Verne never said that. His organizer just said that I walk in to the drums. No one mentioned the beat.” The mermaid was a little aghast.

“I know if I hear a beat, I want to walk to it. This is going to be tough.” Seesee was gnawing on a shrimp the size of a small hamburger.

Narda was genuinely confused. “Why wouldn’t the organizer have mentioned this?”

“Why did the diva jump in the ocean? There is some long-standing snobbery at work here.” A carrot stick was calling Abby’s name, so she jumped at it.

She was munching so loud that she almost missed the roaring noise filling the air, but there was no missing the sudden glow on the bride’s face.

“Hellebore is here.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

“What is that noise?” Seesee looked up and her hair shifted as if it wanted to go on the offensive.

“Hellebore, I just told you.” Laura gathered up her gown and left the tent.

“We are maids, so we had better attend our bride.” Abby led the charge and they stood with Laura on the green as a large portal opened up.

The hovering disk shivered in the air, liquid silver and a roaring rush coming from the magic itself. The bikes that jumped through the portal were eerily quiet. No odd pulsing motors, no roars of the engines, just wheels turning and five bikes launching through the air and onto the grass.

The bikes circled and when the leader saw the bridal party, they approached slowly. Ten feet away they parked their bikes and dismounted.

Abby was looking carefully, some of them had something across their backs. When the leader in black leather approached, Laura ran forward. The helmet was removed and billowing crimson hair flowed free. Hellebore had bright blue eyes and chalk white skin. She was a tropical fish come to life.

As the women embraced, Laura cried. Seesee let it go on for a minute before she grabbed the ladies and ushered them back into the tent. “Let’s work on fixing that makeup.”

Narda spoke, “I will tell Savoriliana to get the band into a tent to practice. Hellebore can join them at her convenience.”

She left in a flurry of yellow and white silk.

Hellebore laughed, laid a black case down and started to unzip her leathers. “She really doesn’t like me. Pity.” A modest black dress was under the bike leathers and she tugged the dress down until it rested a few inches above her knees. “Ta-da.”

“That is pathetic.” Mistress Galfor was pacing around her as if she scented fresh meat.

“Pardon?”

“Your clothing is woefully inadequate to this gathering, but don’t worry, I have the cure for the little black dress.” The goblin was in the dress rack in an instant, rummaging and muttering to herself.

“Searix, please fix her hair. She has helmet head.” Galfor didn’t even look up to give that edict. She suddenly lunged forward and all four of her arms carefully held up the gown that she removed from the rack. “Here we are. This will do marvellously well.”

“Holy crap. I thought our dresses were striking. That is wonderful.” Seesee marvelled at it and Abby couldn’t blame her. Gold, black and red swirled together into a pattern of a gown that had a tight, cinched waist and flowing skirts made of dark flame. It even had sleeves that were held together with tiny fiery pearls.

Galfor grabbed Hellebore before Seesee could fix her hair and had her stripped and stuffed in the gown in seconds. Those four arms moved so fast, they were almost a blur.

“At what point did I say, hey strange goblin lady, strip me down and cover me with silk? It seems like I would remember doing that.” Hellebore had a sense of humour that Abby liked. She looked at the world through eyes that saw it sideways.

“Don’t worry about Galfor. I am sure I will get the bill. I am Abby Hanover, by the way.” She held out her hand and smiled as Hellebore shook it firmly without any weird grip.

“Hellebore Anders. Siren.”

Siren? That explained the hypnotic voice. Wait, she had given a title. “Oh, Annabeth Hanover, Nexus.”

Those brilliant blue eyes widened and a blush crawled up her face. “Nice to meet you. Sorry I missed the shower. I was stuck with overtime. The life of the supernatural in the mundane world sucks occasionally.”

“That it does.”

Galfor was fussing and simply lifted Hellebore onto the fitting stand. The woman blinked in surprise but turned, lifted her arms and bent on command.

Abby continued her chat while Laura sat back and listened, seemingly content to have her cousin at her wedding. “So, are you first cousins?”

“Second. My grandmother left the pod to chase a sailor and she managed to catch him. He wanted her away from the sea that called, so they moved to Saskatchewan. Nice and landlocked. They had my mom and she married a farmer. Then I came along. When the siren thing surfaced, it was a shock to everyone, especially my great grandmother. She hated what I was, not the siren, the human part. She despises that I am unable to return to the sea and find a nice fin boy to spend my life with, thereby carrying on the siren gene.”

“Wow. Harsh.”

“Yeah, it wouldn’t be so bad, but my great gran is a bit of a totalitarian. She wants it all or nothing. Since I cannot be all, I am nothing.” The shrug she gave said it all. She had given up on changing minds and part of her heart was now barred against family.

“Well, I am having fun with the higher ups in the mer folk. They don’t think much of dry landers, but they have to be polite. Etiquette is a bitch.”

The laugh that the ladies shared was more than bonding, it was understanding. Laura’s choice to wed a werewolf would make her an outcast amongst her own people, no matter what kind of deal Abby struck for her and her husband. Her kids were being set up for the same treatment.

“Well, have you considered joining any of the half-blood events? We have a ton of things going on at any given time in many locales. You might enjoy it. Are you single, there are a few really cute guys out there.”

“Don’t you dare start fixing people up, Abby. You are bad enough when you accidentally get worked up and zap folks.”

Abby sighed and sat down, a cloud of silk billowing around her. “It was just the once and it was the day I discovered my talent. Besides, your tail is so pretty, you should get it out more often.”

Chuckles came from Seesee and a snort came from Galfor.

“Where did you put my band?”

“I think they are rehearsing in a soundproofed tent at the end of the green. It seems the sort of thing that Savoriliana would do.”

“Laura, why did you get a stick-in-the-mud like her to arrange this shindig?”

“Matriarch. Her services were given to me by the matriarch as a wedding gift. I couldn’t really say no, now could I?”

“Not if you ever wanted to see your family again, so I concede your point.”

“Done. Feel free to twirl, the Nexus always does.” Galfor stood back and looked at her handiwork.

Hellebore lifted her arms, clapped, twirled, bent and shifted her hips. “Wonderful. Thank you so much. Laura, I will see you later. I really should get some practice in.”

The vision in black gave her cousin a kiss on the cheek and the admonition to fix her makeup. Humming to herself in that haunting voice, she picked up her instrument case and left the tent. The silence when she left was almost haunting.

“She really fills up a room, doesn’t she?” Abby whistled in surprise. She had a bit of a girl crush on Hellebore’s voice.

“That she does. You can understand why sailors killed themselves trying to get to them now, can’t you?” Laura took her cousin’s order to heart and repaired the damage that her happy tears had done.

“Yup. Does her voice come through on recordings?”

“Nope. Though phones aren’t a problem. The effect isn’t as strong though.”

Seesee laughed, “Damn. I forgot to fix her helmet hair.”

The minutia of the wedding took them over as they put on the heavy corsets that would keep everything where it should be but left the rest of the gown free. Just that addition made it a new dress. The jewels, gold, pearls and embroidery made it the fanciest corset that Abby had ever seen, not that she had worn many. As a good fan-girl, she had worn a few though.

They wanted to play while lacing each other up, but Galfor pushed them out of the way and tightened their laces one by one. When it was almost difficult to breathe, she stopped. The figures that were exposed in the mirror were heightened and exaggerated but still show stopping.

Abby didn’t twirl for this one, she was afraid she would pass out.

“Ladies, are you ready?” Savoriliana poked her head in and gasped at the gowns. “Wonderful. You all look absolutely wonderful. Mistress Galfor, you do wonderful work.”

Abby fought a grin as Galfor flipped the mermaid the bird. The coordinator either didn’t know or didn’t care what it meant.

“Are the drummers in place?”

“You mean your cousin and her lot? Yes. Anytime you are ready, the witnesses are on the green.”

This second ceremony was also for family, clan and pack members. The great party would be for friends and relatives that were further off the family tree. Over four hundred guests were expected. It was going to be one helluva bash.

For this ceremony, they walked in a line with only a few feet between them.

As soon as they exited the bridal tent, the drumming started—a low heavy beat. Abby tried to keep off the beat, but she had no idea how well she was doing until grins broke out from the women on Verne’s side of the path. Two gave them a thumbs up and based on the rustling behind her, Laura was walking with her normal gliding gait, no discernable step evident.

Verne was looking a little rueful as they lined up and he bowed to his lady. The wolves in the crowd cheered as Verne gave up control of the house to his wife.

She put her hand on his shoulder to guide him upright. "Equal in all things."

Her voice was calm, but it carried and applause broke out. She was a classy fish.

The pack wedding was a little different. Kevin sniffed Laura and scent marked her with his cheek, he did the same to Verne and then gestured for them to follow with each other. He asked Lorifinialwen if she would honour Verne and pack tradition. When she said she would, he turned to Verne. "Will you defend her against any and all who would seek to take her affections from you?"

"I will."

"Then start now."

All hell broke loose as wolves flowed in from the surrounding woods.

Abby looked to the other bridesmaids. "Apparently, we missed more than just the drums."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Verne stood ready for the attack. Xander, Miklos and the merman had his back. They engaged in ritual combat, the wolves not actually biting, merely throwing themselves at Verne in an effort to knock him away from Laura.

Two foolish wolves tried for the bride and were given a mer-folk uppercut, courtesy of Laura, that made Abby blink in shock. Xander was content to go through the motions and let Verne handle the bulk of his relatives until two wolves started growling and backing Abby away from the other bridesmaids.

The blast of magic that hit them sent them ass over teakettle into the scrub that they came out of. Leaving Verne, he grabbed her under an arm and shoved her into the centre of the back-to-back men. Verne followed suit with Laura and Seesee freed her hair to defend herself since Miklos was busy trying to roust three wolves at once. Narda was on her own.

The mock battle went on for five minutes until Kevin clapped his hands sharply.

Panting with effort, Verne put an arm around Laura's waist and they waited.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride and then take a shower."

The kiss that she witnessed was hungry, desperate and happy all in one shot. Laura's hands were knotted in Verne's hair and he held her flush to him from chest to knees.

Abby whispered to Xander, "Is it just me or is the kiss taking longer than the battle?"

He good naturedly put his hand across her mouth. "Let them have this moment."

She squinted her eyes at him in a glare he couldn't mistake.

The kiss continued until Kevin cleared his throat. "I wasn't kidding about the shower. Like most typical grooms, you have fear sweat. Go wash it off."

With that order from his pack leader resonating in his head, Verne reluctantly released Laura so that they could go their separate ways for a few more hours.

Xander hadn't released her, so Abby elbowed him in the ribs. It was the less weird of the options, the other was to lick his hand and who knows where that might lead.

"Sorry, love." He let her go and took Verne in hand. The groomsmen went to one side of the green while the bride was looking dazed and aroused.

Kevin stepped forward. “While the bride and groom freshen up after the battle, we will engage in the traditional werewolf games here on the green. It is an opportunity to show off for your own lady, so don’t be shy.”

Apparently, they were dismissed. Her attendants pulled a bemused Laura across the green and into her tent. They had one final change for the evening party and they were gowns they could dance in.

Abby dropped into a chair, her back ridiculously straight because of the corset. “That was something. Did you know about the wolves?”

“No. That was something of a shock, but thinking about it, not much of a surprise.” Laura was immediately in the clutches of Galfor and the laces were flying. She gasped as her ribcage was finally free. She staggered slightly but took her seat as Galfor yanked Narda onto the podium.

One by one, they were freed from the corsets, had a light snack and prepared for the last moments of the evening. The games were in full swing outside, but the bridal party was not allowed to watch.

That sucked.

Abby sat in silence, remembering the moment when Xander had swept her from those wolves and she got all tingly. Xander needed to defend her, but too often, she had already solved the problem by the time he came along.

The defence was symbolic, but it still resonated in Abby’s heart.

“Thinking about Xander?” Laura suddenly fixed her gaze on Abby’s.

“It shows?”

“We have told you before...” Laura took a breath and Seesee joined her. “It shows.”

“How can I even think of us being together when he is going to outlive me? By like, a really long time.”

“You would deny him the time with you, because I tell you, he has the same dopey look when he is around you.” Laura was irritated and it showed.

Today, she was a champion of love. To hell with practicality. Abby winced. Now that Laura had her match, she was going to be one of those nosey matchmaking friends. She could tell.

“It isn’t fair that we can’t watch the games.”

Hellebore walked in, a grin on her face. “There I can help you.”

She muttered a few syllables and a bubble appeared in the centre of the room. "It's the only magic I can really do aside from the voice thing. Kinda like personal pay-per-view."

"You have finished rehearsal?"

"Yup. All tuned. Now, I just need to rest up and the reception can go all night." She smiled and Seesee ambushed her.

"Aha! I can finally get my hands on that hair. I am thinking braids and pearls." Seesee dragged Hellebore to a dressing table and sat her facing the mirror. "How long do we have?"

"Three hours."

"Excellent. Now hold still."

Seesee had far too much fun and often engaged others' hands to help hold the braids while she worked. What emerged from her creative moment was an intricate network of interlocked hair that formed a crown yet had a coursing wave of loose hair down her back. It was stunning with the embedded pearls in the red mass.

It had taken two hours and forty-five minutes, but between watching the relays, wrestling and a variety of other games, it had killed some time.

"I can hardly wait until Gaia has enough hair to play with."

If Abby didn't know better, she would say that Seesee was chortling evilly. "As her godmother, I declare that you are restricted to one hairstyle a week until she asks for more and if she runs away from home because of your mad hairdresser skills, I will take her in."

"Fine, Abby. But I have to wait until she has more than that thin silk on her head and if she gets hair like yours, I may just work out my braiding on your gnomes."

"Deal."

The light outside the tent was dimming. It was almost time.

Mistress Galfor stood and scowled at them all. "Don't just sit there, get into your evening gowns so that I can lace you up and get some dinner."

Abby and the others scrambled out of their silks and into their evening gowns with only a little bit of a fuss. Abby knotted the laces on the side of the silk gown and she had to get Galfor to unravel her.

Laura had to be careful as she bent to pull the final gown up, her hair was a graceful confection and it would have been a shame to wreck it by flipping her head around as she pulled on the gown.

With her own gown halfway up her torso, she paused and looked at the bride. This gown was far more traditionally human than any of the others—a beautiful gown for a beautiful bride. Embroidery, gems, no expense had been spared and the maker of the creation took full credit for the design. It was a fairytale bodice—tightly boned with a flowing skirt that made her look like Cinderella.

“Oh. Wow. Laura, you are beautiful.”

She blushed and looked away. “I thank you formally for the services of Mistress Galfor. I don’t know many or any seamstresses who would have been able to make this many gowns for the same day.”

“You are welcome, but the business that I get as being seamstress to the Nexus is nice as well. I love steady customers.” Having four arms was a definite asset for a seamstress as she tightened and tugged the lacing for the corset with the gown attached and finished with Laura.

“Next.”

Abby stepped up and the purple-and-gem-studded gown that echoed the design on Laura’s tightened into a wonderfully snug but comfortable gown. She held completely still and let the goblin do her job.

This corset didn’t confine, it supported, flattered and boosted everything it touched. Abby twirled before she stepped off the fitting stand and bounced her way back to the chair she had been occupying. Matching shoes were stepped into with a little bit of effort and she was ready.

Seesee was laced up with Narda bringing up the rear in a buttercup confection that was flattering and made her look like a fairytale princess. They all looked like princesses. It was part of Galfor’s magic.

Hellebore watched with fascination as the last of them was laced up. “Wow. I thought this gown was nice. I look like the wicked witch next to the four princesses.”

“No. Not wicked. You simply look like flames next to a set of cake toppers.” Abby put her arm around the siren and gave her a squeeze.

Something occurred to Hellebore and her eyes widened. “I had better get on stage for your presentation and first dance. See you later, cousin!” And with that, she was gone in a flurry of silk chiffon.

Savoriliana poked her head into the tent for the final time. “Are we ready?”

Laura grinned and bounced on the balls of her feet. “I don’t know about you, but we are.”

“The buffet is in place, the wait staff has been briefed on etiquette by both me and Kevin. I believe we are ready for your presentation and your first dance.”

Laura looked over at her crew, “Ladies, it has been an honour to share the field of bridal with you. We go now to dance the night away, listen to toasts for my future and generally waste private time with my new husband who wishes nothing more than to be alone with me. Are we ready?”

The resounding, “Yeah!” from Seese and Abby took the coordinator aback. She blinked and led the way to the area that had been cleared for dancing. When they reached the crowd, Verne and his crew met them from the other side. One by one, they led their ladies to the dance floor.

Abby stood, her hand on Xander’s arm, and waited for the music to start. Verne and Laura were in the centre of the space staring into each other’s eyes. A soft sighing tone started the song and as it built in strength, a harp joined in. Hellebore was standing on the stage and singing the softest song of love and devotion that Abby had ever heard. When Verne and Laura started to sway to the music, everyone applauded and as their steps became more visible, Abby grinned.

As Hellebore’s music grew in tone and topic, Xander took his cue and Abby was in his arms, moving to a slow and deliberate waltz. Miklos and Seese followed suit, with Narda and Bob trailing after.

Xander led her in swaying steps around the married couple and by the end of the song, there were three couples guarding the fourth, swinging and swirling in a pattern Abby couldn’t fathom.

Pixies came to dance between them as the next song started with all couples invited to join in. The bright colours and glowing wings made those who had not seen them before laugh out loud.

Abby merely gave Xander a wry look. “They follow me wherever I go.”

“I know. So do I.”

“You I don’t mind. In fact, I encourage you to be with me wherever I go. I feel better when you are with me, stronger somehow.”

They finished their sweeping turns around the floor and came to a halt as Hellebore spoke. “Ladies and gentlemen and beings of other, I present to you, Laura and Verne Fisher. Celebrate their joy.”

The implicit threat on that last was not lost on Abby, but she cheered on her own. The cry of *woohoo* that broke through the applause and cheers made her smile. Max was here. Her guild master probably was as well. It would be a fun night if the Abomination had rated an invitation.

Xander turned to her. “I don’t know about you, but I am starving and I have it on good authority that the head table gets served first.”

She laughed and took his arm. “I could eat. Have you ever known me when I wasn’t planning my next meal?”

The maids, groomsmen, bride and groom made their way to the head table on an elevated dais. They could see the dancers, the performers, the podium and the buffet. They were really good seats.

For Abby, the best part was sitting next to Xander for the whole event. Being close to him and unable to cuddle all day had been torture.

Hellebore knew her stuff. She kept the music and vocals low key and soothing while the bridal party tucked in. She stopped and stepped aside when relatives came up and wanted to make toasts and smoothly kept anyone who had been too free at the bar from being too free with their comments. The perfect wedding singer.

Her music was infectious enough for there to be constant couples on the dance floor. This part of the wedding was every woman's dream. People were having a good time, the ceremonies had gone off without a hitch and Hellebore's voice was much more crowd friendly than the diva had been.

The brightly coloured pixies dancing in the air added to the festivities as well. They added the true air of magic to the event.

The food was easy, beef or fish. Abby went for the prime rib while Xander took on the lemon-poached flounder. Verne got two servings of the beef while Laura took the fish, Seesee had the fish and Miklos had a glass of what Abby hoped was red wine, but at a supernatural event...one never knew.

While Laura and Verne fed each other from their individual plates, Abby surveyed the guests.

There were mer folk aplenty, werewolves who occasionally waved over to the head table when she caught their eye. A few were teenagers that she had powered through their first shifts. She was just making friends all over the place.

Then, there were the dignitaries. Max and Gregori cuddling together like teenagers, Rackonell and other dryads who toasted her for bringing new blood into their world. The table of monsters made her smile. Seesee's sisters, Vokal the minotaur and Terric the black dragon. Several others were at their table, but Terric was ignoring them all, scanning the crowd.

Abby looked through her inner eye and saw immediately the woman he was looking for, his phoenix. She glowed red with her magic flaring and pulsing around her. It was amazing that Terric couldn't see her.

Xander leaned in close. "What are you looking at?"

"Terric's phoenix. I can't believe he can't see her."

He looked from her to the young woman she was staring at and whipped out his cell phone.

“What are you doing?”

“Telling him where she is.”

“Oh, no you are not.” It was not her proudest moment, but a three-stooges-style fight for his phone took place with several people just stopping in their tracks to watch.

“Yes, I am. He needs to know.”

“He can figure it out for himself.”

“I can figure what out for myself?” The dragon in question was standing in front of their table and looking at them curiously.

Abby clamped her hand over Xander’s mouth and he took the low ground, licking her palm.

“Ew.”

“The phoenix is here. Sitting at that table over there, blue dress.” He buckled a little as Abby’s pointy shoe met his shin. “Be polite, but ask her to dance.”

Terric suddenly looked less imposing and much more nervous. “Are you sure that’s her?”

He was asking Abby.

She twisted her lips and went with honesty. “It is the woman next to the one in blue. The shy one wearing the black and silver gown. Make sure it is a slow dance and keep an appropriate distance. Ask her about herself and be polite. If you scare her, I will have your wings for curtains.”

“Understood. Thank you, Nexus.” In a surprising move, he bowed formally and then turned on his heel to approach his destined mate.

Abby watched quietly, Xander’s hand on her arm holding her down. “I can’t believe you did that.”

“He has been waiting for a very long time. I don’t want him to miss his opportunity to meet the one he is meant for. If my grandmother hadn’t seen you in my future, I would never have been selected for the Oak Point Guard. Sometimes love needs a shove.”

“If he spooks that woman, I am not going to forgive you for a very long time.”

“Understood. Would you care to dance?”

“Fine, but I plan to step on your feet at least three times.”

“Noted.” He took her hand and escorted her to the dance floor.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Hellebore was singing something bright and cheery that immediately hummed into low and sexy.

Xander held her comfortably close, just enough so that their bodies brushed but not enough to frighten the pixies.

Abby sighed and relaxed into the beat, the music and the feeling of being in his arms. It was wonderful. No one was stalking her, there was no death threat imminent and she was feeling a sense of joy and freedom that had been eluding her since that first car bomb.

As they danced, she twirled and spun, enjoying her full skirt and the fun of a partner who actually knew how to dance. Her dance skills were minimal, so she depended on her partner to steer her around the dance floor. Xander had no trouble taking the lead.

When they took a break, they returned to the table and Abby was finally able to watch Terric with his phoenix. He was sitting at her table, chatting with her. She was smiling and laughing, then looking away shyly.

So, he wasn't always a bully. It was good to know.

A glass of wine was next to her plate, but Abby stuck to water. One recent drunken episode was enough in her memory.

With the meal over, the dessert table was revealed and a line formed immediately. Laura and Verne selected their morsels from the tray and Abby was able to snag some éclairs. Xander chose a strawberry tart that he generously shared with her.

Tough. He wasn't getting her éclairs.

More toasts and speeches were given and finally, Xander looked over at Abby, "Should we?"

"What? Give a speech? Make a toast? Sure." Abby stood and took her water glass to the podium.

Xander was behind her and they waited until there was a break in the music before signalling Hellebore.

"Hello, I am Abby and I am here to celebrate the union of Laura and Verne. I have to say, that while Laura and I immediately clicked, Verne and I took some time to come to a truce. Honestly, I think my uncontrolled talent may have had a lot to do with our rocky start, but even after it came under control, there were bumps in the road.

“But, with Laura’s help, everything came right and now, with she and Verne formalizing their union, it is a brighter day for us all.” She raised her glass, “Thank you, Laura, for being my friend and thank you, Verne, for distracting her from my more-colourful exploits.

“To Laura and Verne!”

When the crowd echoed her toast, she stepped aside as she sipped at her water.

Xander stepped forward. “My turn.” He kept Abby at his side with an arm around her waist.

“As some of you may know, I have known Verne for years. As his best man, I am here to congratulate Verne on his choice of a good woman but more than that. For having the patience to stick it through. It was a long journey from the moment that he first set eyes on Laura and fell over his own feet, crashing into a wall, until now. I would like to thank her matriarch and his pack leader for sponsoring this union and the Nexus for assisting in negotiations.”

He was speaking into the microphone but looking down at Abby and she looked up into his sparkling eyes. “Once in a lifetime, if we are lucky, our perfect match crosses paths with us. A smart man makes his move and a smart woman gives him a chance.”

He raised his glass, “To Verne for being smart enough to know what he saw when he first saw Laura and to Laura, for not running away screaming. To Verne and Laura!”

“Verne and Laura.” Smiles and applause followed the toast.

Abby and Xander regained their places at the head table as Verne and Laura took the podium.

They stood together and waved as tipsy cheers followed their stepping up. Laura took up the speaker’s position and Verne stood behind her, his hands on her waist. “Ladies, creatures and gentlemen. Thank you for coming.

“There are many people who made our day here possible. My matriarch eventually came to see that there would be no other in my heart aside from the wolf standing behind to me. My family met him and saw a flicker of what I see when I look at him and pronounced him worthy.

“First off, I wish to thank Hellebore Anders, my cousin and lifesaver for stepping in when she was needed as a singer. You saved my bacon. Now for the rest of you, I wish to thank my friends for standing by even when Verne’s temper threatened to run away with him, excusing it as that time of the month.” Wolves laughed. “It takes a strong will to befriend both sides of a relationship and the Oak Point Guards are everything I could want for friends.

“Now, to the Nexus. When we first met, she needed control and I was the first to feel her power and it hurt. But, she came and made it right and has been a steadfast friend ever since. If not for her, Verne and I would not be here at this place with you people today, so I will raise a toast to the Nexus.

“To the Nexus.”

Abby’s face was on fire. She had not expected that.

Xander lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. “To the Nexus.”

Verne moved to the podium. “When I was asked to join the Nexus’s guard, I was hesitant. What use could an out-of-control magic user be to my people?”

He looked to his bride and smiled, “That was the day I met Laura and suddenly, I knew. If people could be brought together and mixed like the Guard was, we might all have a tiny chance of happiness. Of course, she wanted nothing to do with me and wolves are not known for their patience, but I wore her down and here we are.”

Everyone laughed.

“I raise this toast to my bride, my one, my only, my princess forever more. To you, my love, to Laura.”

Abby grabbed a glass and raised it in toast, “To Laura.” Her emotions got the better of her and a wave of energy rippled across the gathering. The pixies flew wildly and the wolves sat up straighter, scenting the air.

Laura leaned forward to the microphone, “I told you she was dangerous,” and kissed her husband.

The music resumed with a far more cheerful pace. Now was time to dance the night away and the voice called everyone to the dance floor.

Terric was one of the first to convince his phoenix that they should dance. They were on the floor and soon over fifty couples were spinning, dipping and hopping along to the beat.

Laura cut the cake and fed Verne the first piece. No shenanigans here. Verne fed Laura in turn and soon the caterers were slicing the rest of the eight tiers into pieces for the guests.

Abby was asked to dance by Vokal and she went with only a little trepidation. He was light on his feet for a minotaur, not that she had a basis for comparison.

The vampire guild master was the next to claim her for a dance and Gregori moved like oiled silk on the dance floor. He steered Abby out of harms way and made polite chit chat with her. “So, Nexus, how are you enjoying the supernatural world?”

“It has its moments. I prefer to be at home surrounded by my creatures. It’s far more relaxing than public functions.”

“I hear you. It is only Max that keeps me whirling in social circles. If not for her, I would be in my nest only dabbling in politics when I had to.”

“Why is being with her different?”

“If I give up my place as Guild Master, Max dies. For real this time. Her politics rub most of the older vamps raw and I am rather attached to her. I will not see her dead as long as I exist and that means remaining in the only position that can issue a death sentence for her.”

“Oh.”

He grinned down at her, fangs showing. “Yes, oh. But to see her smile, it is worth every second of it.”

Abby smiled for support. She had seen Max smile and while there was energy, there was also a predator just below the surface.

Creepy.

But love had its ways and this was obviously one of them.

Her next partner was one of the councillors—she didn’t get his name. He simply waltzed her around the dance floor until the music ended, then bowed and left.

Bemused, she wandered through some of the tables, greeting friends, talking to those who caught her attention, waving at Laura and Verne who were doing the same thing on the other side of the tables.

Xander was speaking to his mother and there were tears in her eyes. As Abby got closer, Amelia saw her and wiped her eyes quickly. Reginald was nearby but giving mother and son a moment.

“Sweetie, why are you making your mother cry? Did you offer to pay the food bill retroactively to your childhood or something?” Abby looped her arm through Xander’s and nudged him with her hip.

“Abby, you look wonderful. That gown really suits you.”

“I know. I always wanted to be a drag-queen ballerina.” Her laughing gaze let Amelia know she was just joking. “Thank you.”

She stifled a yawn and Amelia’s gaze darted to Xander’s. “You can’t be tired yet?”

“I have been running around since before dawn. I think I need some coffee. It was nice seeing you here. I hope you are enjoying the wedding.”

“Oh, I am. I really, really am.” Reginald came up behind his giddy wife and supported her after she finished jumping Abby for a hug.

“Okay. Coffee for me and you might want to indulge yourself as well.” Abby looked around and laid eyes on the beverage table. “Time for cake.”

A cup of coffee and a slice of wedding cake later and she was feeling quite herself.

When Hellebore announced a midnight dance, Xander materialized at her side and escorted her to the dance floor.

There was an intensity to his manner that she wasn't used to. He was staring at her as if to tell her something with his mind, but if he wanted to do that, he only needed to drop the wards that he had erected between them for propriety's sake.

Too many telepaths at the wedding.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

As Abby twirled in the arms of her beloved half-elf, she thought about the day and smiled. You could wish for a day like today, but it was a lot easier if you paid weather elementals to do the work for you. One to change the weather and another to keep it from affecting the rest of the world.

It made for a memorable wedding day.

When the song wound to a halt, Xander stopped still in the middle of the dance floor. Looking down at her he asked, “Abby, will you come with me?”

“Of course, Xander. You lead, I will follow.”

In a shockingly formal manner, he took her by the hand and led her off the dance floor, off the area cleared for the wedding and into the woods. Navigating the woods in the dark in a ball gown should have been far more difficult than it was. No branches snagged her and no roots rose up to trip her.

In an open glade, Xander led her to the centre.

“Abby, you know that I love you.”

“And I love you.”

“Shh. Let me speak before you say anything.”

Abby’s eyes started to water as he knelt. “Abby, you are a pain in the ass, headstrong and bullish, but there is no one I trust more to do the right thing, even when it hurts.

“I knew the moment that I laid eyes on you that you were not my usual type, but then you bent over and your ass changed my mind.”

She was blushing furiously now. He had mentioned it before, but now he was dead serious.

“When your life was in danger, my heart was in my throat and when you disappeared, it was only knowing that you were alive somewhere that kept me going. The very world would weep if you were lost.”

It was a lovely exaggeration.

He lifted his gaze to hers and their minds flowed together. “Annabeth Hanover, will you marry me?”

Her mouth opened and closed, she blurted out, “Why now?”

“Because yesterday was Laura’s wedding. It is the next day now, a new day, all yours.”

He had put some thought into it and that was the clincher.

“Xander, will you be the father to my creatures, grandfather to Alphie and any of the others that follow?”

He cocked his head, considering. “I will.”

“Then so will I.” Her face hurt, her smile was so wide, “Yes, Xander, I will marry you.”

She shrieked happily as he surged to his feet and lifted her high in the air. Pixies surrounded them, giggling and shrieking happily. When he brought her down for a kiss, a wave of emotion turned to magic and echoed through the woods and into the wedding party.

“I believe an engagement ring is traditional.” He got back on one knee and held his hand out. Autone deposited the ring in his hand. “I bet you didn’t think I knew about the crystal, did you? She is happy now and the crystal can still be proven to exist, so I don’t care.”

He waggled his blond eyebrows at her and took her left hand in his. “With this ring, I pledge my love, honour and hand in marriage as soon as we can arrange how we will get your relatives there.”

As he slid the ring onto her finger, she felt a strong vibration coming from the stone in the platinum setting. “What is that?”

“Tear of the dragon. I traded Terric an invitation to the wedding for it.”

“You knew his phoenix would be here?”

“Yes. I paid attention to every expression on your face at the Magic Summit. I knew what family she was with and made sure that they were here.”

“It is beautiful and there is so much power in it.”

“It is said that a dragon can only shed five tears in his lifetime. This is his first.”

“Is it a diamond?” She brought it to her face to examine it in the light of the pixies.

“Made of solid magic.”

“I can feel that. Solid magic, no containment. It is pressing in on itself.”

He held her hand and caressed the band. "It is said that at the end of magic, Tears of the dragon will open and spill their magic back into the world in an effort to restart it."

"Wow. How many are there?"

"This makes the third on record."

"Even for me, that isn't a lot of magic."

He stood and tilted her chin up to meet his gaze. "Sometimes, a little bit of hope is all people need to keep a touch of magic going. Hopefully, we will never know the truth in our lifetimes."

She grinned. "Not in mine. With you nearby, there is always going to be some kind of magic between us."

"On that matter, I would have to agree. Now, let's rejoin the party. We can celebrate tonight."

She took his hand again and let him lead her back to the wedding. She put her suspicion into her voice, "You told your mother and father, didn't you?"

"I did. They have been watching photos of you for months, looking for a ring."

"Fink. I think I should have been the first one to know."

"That would have ruined the surprise."

The pester of pixies flew ahead and around them, lighting their way. Autone was grinning and flying loops on her way. Apparently, pixie life agreed with her.

Returning to the party was surreal. Abby was still high on her emotions and as soon as they got back onto the dance floor, she went into Xander's arms eagerly.

Folks were getting tired and slowly drifting away from the party. The whole bridal party was on the dance floor and suddenly it was a game of *may I cut in*. Abby found herself in Verne's arms all of a sudden.

"Congratulations, Verne. You got her to the wedding. She's all yours."

"And, dear Nexus, I see that Xander has caught you as well. Congratulations to both of you, I am sure that your wedding will far outstrip ours."

He whirled her in a circle. "Would I be horrible if I wanted to have a small ceremony on Oak Point Way?"

"Yes. This will be the only Nexus wedding in history. It will have to be photographed and studied."

“That reminds me, where are the obnoxious camera men that are always all over these things?”

“When you get home, there will be an album of the high moments and some candid shots that you will not believe. One for each lady in the bridal party.”

“What do the men get?”

“Out of their uniforms as fast as they can.”

Abby was still giggling when Miklos swayed with her in a stately waltz. “Congratulations, Abby. I see you are engaged.”

“Oh, you see it, too, do you?”

“It is hard to miss. Your hand radiates far more power than usual and you are actually glowing.”

“The darned pixies. I am covered with pixie dust.”

He frowned, “Doesn’t that block powers?”

“Nope. Not the pixies 2.0. These ones control their effects on people, places and things. They are probably making their own vortexes through space. It would explain how they can follow me everywhere.”

“It would indeed explain it. But they have added a nice touch to today’s festivities. Like a garden of flying flowers.”

“Which Laura couldn’t have because most of her non-mixed family is allergic.”

“Right. So are you thinking large or small wedding?”

“I want a small one, but Verne just read me the riot act about me being the only Nexus wedding in history. So I am thinking Hotel Spectre will be hosting it.”

“Excellent choice. It is a lovely venue and everyone can come.”

His steps were graceful. Abby was amazed at the dance abilities within the magical community.

She didn’t mention it though. She would be able to ask Xander later, after they were exhausted and the lights were out.

The music stopped and everyone applauded politely. Hellebore cleared her throat away from the mike and then stepped up again. “It is that most wondrous of times, the time when the bride and groom take their leave and we wish them well.”

“Laura and Verne, take care and take our love with you as you scamper away on your honeymoon. Be well, be happy and be back before your fish starve!” Everyone laughed and Laura and Verne hugged their way out of the party.

A transporter was waiting at the edge of the field and they disappeared in a flare of light. Their clothing had gone on ahead earlier in the day.

Xander came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her. “Time for us to be going as well. I don’t want lectures from the gnomes about keeping you up past your bedtime.”

“Let me say my goodbyes and we can go.”

“You have three minutes.”

She quickly scooted to the tables with friends, hugged and squirmed her way around the matter of the engagement ring and it was Xander who had to pry his mother from her when she saw Abby’s left hand.

“It’s all right, Mother, you can come to visit next week. After everything is back to normal.”

“Oh, Xan. You and I both know that normal rarely happens.”

He grinned and wrapped his arms around Abby again. “Fine, foresee a day that is good and give us a call. You can meet Abby’s granddaughter. She’s a cutie.”

Abby had only enough time to see Amelia’s eyes widen before she and Xander were between worlds and heading for the front of Hotel Spectre.

“I got your purse and bag and sent them on ahead.” He held out his hand and flashed a key card.

“I thought we were heading home tonight.”

“No, I explained to Lelurien that we needed a night out, so although she hasn’t gotten the hang of wrangling the pixies, she is watching the others.”

Her suite was ready and there was a bottle of sparkling cider to go with an enormous fruit basket and a cheese plate. Courtesy of *the Management*. Code for Xander’s original grandmother, Terranor. They had built the Hotel Spectre over the village that Terranor shared with her husband, Strykr, and a number of scholars. She was a Nexus and her children and grandchildren were powerful seers.

Of course, no one knew that a Nexus had had a family. They were thought to be mules. If only they knew what Abby did, Xander’s bloodline would get a lot more respect.

“I hope you know how to work laces, because if you pull the wrong one, I am pretty sure that Galfor rigged us to blow.”

“I promise to only yank the blue wire.”

“Wonderful. Now, I have a serious question to ask you.” She walked forward, backing him into the bedroom. When he sat on the bed, she placed her hands on his shoulders. “My dearest, Xander. Did you actually ask me to marry you?”

His lips twitched, “Yes. Yes, I did.”

“I thought so. Now hold still while I look for the head injury that you must have suffered during the chicken dance.” She ran her fingers through his hair and when she got to the back, she tugged his head back.

A kiss that would have burned a lesser being flared between them as Abby tackled him to the bed and covered him with her skirts.

He eventually got her out of her dress and she got him out of his formal wear. Magic flowed through the hotel and outward, making flowers bloom and creating a rash of mobile garden ornaments that has not run its course to this day.

Author's Note

This is the final Xander and Abby book. They may appear in the books of Max, Raven, Hellebore or any of the others that people want to know about.

Xander and Abby got married and started a long and happy life together, eventually having the first child known to belong to a Nexus. Justice Searix Lori Desmith.

They had several adventures but always returned home...Number 13 Oak Point Way.

If you would like Devine Destinies to carry a book about a character in these books, please let me know.

Viola@violagrace.com

Thanks for reading my first full novel series. Gnomes of Suburbia, Gargoyles in the Round and Pixies in the Park.

I have enjoyed writing them and can no longer look at garden gnomes the same way.

Viola Grace

<http://www.violagrace.com>

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<http://www.extasybooks.com>

About the Author

Viola Grace was born in Manitoba, Canada where she still resides today. She really likes it there.

She has no pets and can barely keep sea monkeys alive for a reasonable amount of time. Her line of day job tends to be analytical which leaves her mind hopping to weave stories. No co-worker is safe from her character analysis.

In keeping with busy hands are happy hands, her hobbies have included cross-stitch, needlepoint, quilting, costuming, cake decorating, baking, cooking, metal work, beading, sculpting, painting, doll making, henna tattoos, chain mail, and a few others that have been forgotten. It is quite often that these hobbies make their way into her tales.

Viola's fetishes include boots and corsetry, and her greatest weakness is her uncontrollable blush.

Her writing actively pursues the Happily Ever After that so rarely occurs in nature. It is an admirable thing and something that we should all strive for. To find one that we truly like, as well as love.

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