

# PHANTOM LOVER

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# CHAPTER 1

"MEN are the scourge of the universe. I say we line them all up along the highway and then mow them down with big trucks." Chrissy paused as her light blue eyes widened with a new thought. "No, wait. Steamrollers! Yeah, let's steamroll them all until they're nothing more than slimy wet spots on the road."

Arching a brow at the rancor, Erin McDaniels looked up from her desk to see her co-worker Chrissy Phelps gripping the edge of Erin's tan cubicle wall. The large brunette's eyes were flashing mad and Chrissy had the look of a woman one step away from the edge.

"Having trouble with the boyfriend again, eh, Chrissy?"

"Actually, it's my younger brother who has me ticked, but since you brought up the boyfriend thing, take my advice: Be the black widow. Find a guy, have fun with him, then eviscerate him in the morning before he can brag about it to his friends."

"Okay," Erin said stretching the word out. "I think someone needs a time-out."

"Someone needs a two-month vacation in the Bahamas without her boyfriend along." Chrissy's eyes brightened. "Oooh, hey, sex camp. Yeah. That's the ticket. We need to start a sex camp where women can tell their hubbies they're going to a fat farm and instead of the boot camp diet with Nazi dieticians, they go to the beach and have hot men treat them like goddesses!"

Erin laughed.

"No, I'm serious. We'd be rich."

Erin laughed even harder. "You'd better get back to work before Lord King Bad Mood catches you over here again."

"Yeah, I know. See, proves my point. All men should be shot."

Erin was still laughing as Chrissy returned to her desk. Two seconds later, Chrissy was back, peeking over the cube wall again. "Hey, are you still having those nightmares?"

Erin's humor fled as she remembered the horrendous nightmare she'd had last night where she'd been cornered in a dark cave by an unseen force that seemed to want to feed off her terror. For the last three weeks she'd barely slept a wink. Her exhaustion was getting so bad that she was even having dizzy spells.

"Yes," Erin said.

"Did that medicine the doctor gave you help?"

"No. If anything, I think it made the dreams worse."

"Oh, man, I'm sorry."

Erin was, too. She'd hoped for at least one good night's sleep. But that no longer seemed possible.

Their boss's door opened.

Chrissy dodged off as their rotund, militant boss left his office in a huff and headed toward the coffeepot with his extra large coffee mug in hand. Oh, yeah, like that man needed any more caffeine to add to his jittery crankiness.

Erin sighed as John filled his mug to the brim and her thoughts turned back to her nightmares.

Honestly, she no longer knew what to do about them. They were just so bizarre, and every night the dreams seemed to worsen. At the rate she was going, she figured she'd be a raving lunatic by the end of the month.

Rubbing her eyes, she focused on her computer screen. She had to get her marketing report in by Friday, but all she really wanted to do was sleep.

In the back of her mind she kept seeing that huge, snarling monster that came for her. Hearing him call her

name as he reached his taloned hand out, trying to claim her. Like some bad horror movie, the scenes kept haunting her, whispering through her thoughts during any unguarded moment.

Shaking her head, she dispelled the images and focused on her computer screen. But as she read, Erin felt her eyelids getting heavy again. She blinked fast and widened her eyes in an effort to stay awake.

*Marketing report, marketing report...*

Oh, yeah, like that was a good way to stay awake! Why not down a couple of sleeping pills and drink a glass of warm milk while she was at it?

What she needed was more caffeine, and since she couldn't stand coffee, she'd have to go to the Coke machine. Maybe the walk down the hall would help revive her, too.

She slid her chair back and opened her desk drawer to get her change, then rose to her feet.

As soon as she was upright, a strange buzzing began in her head. The world tilted.

And in one heartbeat everything went black and her body froze....

Erin felt herself falling down a deep, dark hole. All around her, winds rushed and howled in her ears, sounding like huge, frightening beasts trying to shred her.

They were hungry. They were desperate, and they wanted *her*.

They whispered her name on breaths of fire. Told her they waited only for her.

Not again! She couldn't take any more of this horrible nightmare.

*Wake up, wake up!*

But she couldn't.

Erin reached out to grab anything in the darkness to stop herself from falling. There was nothing to hold on to. Nothing to save her.

"Help!" she screamed, knowing it was futile but needing to try.

Still, she fell.

She didn't stop falling until she reached the cavern she knew all too well. Dark and dank, it smelled of rotting decay. She heard the hissing and screams, the absolute agony of souls in torment.

*Run away!*

Her heart pounded as she stumbled in the dark, over the rough floor that seemed to grab on to her feet with rocky fingers as she tried to find an exit. She struggled to see, but the oppressive darkness wouldn't let her. All it did was stab at her eyes like tiny needles.

She reached out with her hands and touched a slimy wall that slithered and moved under her fingers. Disgusting though it was, at least it gave her some support, something tangible that might lead her home.

And she had to find a way home. The frightened voice in her head told her that if she didn't get out of this now, she'd never be able to escape it.

Panicked, she saw a dim light flickering up ahead. She ran toward it as fast as her legs would carry her.

The light. It would save her. She was sure of it.

She ran into a large cave where the light was shining over the veined and broken walls that oozed some kind of gelatinous muck. The smell of sulphur burned her nose and the screams grew louder.

Erin skidded to a halt. If she had been terrified before, it was nothing compared to what she felt now.

The dragonlike monster, with shimmery blood red scales and jet-black wings, rose up in front of her, snarling. His long teeth snapped as he eyed her hungrily.

He moved closer to her, lulling her with his eerie silver-blue eyes. Eyes that seemed to see more than just her physical self. It was as if they saw all the way into her mind, her soul.

And she knew the beast wanted her. That he longed to possess her with a fevered madness.

Oh God, this was it. The beast was here to take her. To consume her.

There was no escape.

Erin stumbled back, toward the entrance. She wouldn't just lie down and die. It wasn't in her. She was a fighter. And she would fight until the last breath left her body.

Turning around, she ran to the opening, but before she could escape, it closed up, sealing her in.

"You're not going to leave me so soon, Erin," the scaly dragon lisped, his talons scraping the floor as he drew closer. "I need the light inside you. Your thoughts. Your feelings. Your goodness. Come to me, and let me feel the warmth of you wash over me."

He lunged for her.

Erin closed her eyes and imagined a sword in her hands to fight him.

She got a tree limb. Not her weapon of choice, but it was better than nothing. She swung it at him, catching him hard across the face.

Laughing, he shook his scaly head as if he didn't feel the blow at all. "Such spirit. Such intelligence and ingenuity. And you wonder why I want you so. Show me more, Erin. Show me what else you can come up with."

She forced him to step back while she wielded her tree limb. It was a stupid weapon, but it was all she had for the moment.

As if growing bored, the dragon jerked the limb from her hands. "I want your mind, Erin. I want to feel your fear of me."

He moved even closer.

Before the beast could reach her, a bright light flashed between them, stinging her eyes even more. It grew in intensity until it appeared brighter than the sun. When it finally faded, it revealed another monster.

Erin swallowed in terror. Why couldn't she control this dream? Ever since she'd been a child, she'd been able to wish herself out of bad dreams. But for some reason, she had no control in these nightmares.

It was as if something other than her was directing them. As if she were nothing more than a marionette whose strings were being pulled by the monster.

The newest monster appeared in the form of a giant snake. Only in place of a head, she had a woman's upper body. Her scaly green complexion looked craggy, and her bluish eyes glowed.

The she-snake slithered toward her, smiling a fanged smile as she raked her eerie gaze over Erin's body. "What a tasty little morsel she is."

"She is mine!" the dragon roared. "I will not share her."

The she-snake licked her lips as her long tail slithered across the floor. "She is strong enough for us both." Then she turned toward the dragon, her hideous face a mask of rage. "Besides, I saw her first and well you know it. You found her through me and I won't let you have her."

The dragon attacked the snake.

Terrified beyond belief, Erin took advantage of their combat to pick up a rock and pound at the cave's opening. "Let me out," she demanded between clenched teeth.

She closed her eyes and tried to imagine the wall opening and her running through it.

It got her nowhere. Not until the tail of the dragon whipped around trying to sting the snake. The snake ducked, as did Erin, and in one resounding crash, the tail splintered the wall.

Trembling, Erin ran out into the darkness again. The screaming howls intensified.

"Please," she begged out loud, "please wake up! C'mon, Erin, you can do it." She\* pinched herself and slapped her own face as she ran, and did everything she could think of to make herself come out of this nightmare.

Nothing worked. It was as if the monsters wouldn't let her go.

She rounded a corner and found herself sliding down a small slope. At the bottom was a boiling pit where the snake-woman waited. The heat of the pit burned Erin as golden-red lava percolated.

The snake rose up before her, smiling. Those demonic eyes with their diamond-shaped pupils watched her eerily. "That's it, little prize. Come to me. It's my turn to feed off you."

Erin turned to run again, but her feet were locked to the ground. They wouldn't move at all.

The snake drew closer.

Closer.

So close Erin could feel the flick of the snake's tongue. Smell the greasy slime of her body and hear the rasping of her scales moving against the rock floor.

Defenseless, Erin closed her eyes and called out with her mind for help. She tried to summon a protector. Tried to imagine a champion who could come and defeat her monsters.

Just as the snake reached her, the cavern shook.

The snake pulled back an instant before a man appeared between Erin and the beast.

And he wasn't just any man. Clad in a suit of black armor, he had incredibly broad shoulders and long jet hair. Erin couldn't see his face, but she could feel the power of his presence. Feel the warrior essence of him as he prepared to fight the demon.

The snake shrieked in outrage, "Stand down, V'Aidan. Or perish from your stupidity!"

Erin's summoned champion laughed out loud at the she-snake's anger. "I'd perish from your breath long before my stupidity killed me, Krysti'Ana."

Screaming in outrage, the she-snake increased to ten times her size. Her massive jowls snapped and she hissed as the cavern walls around them shook even harder than before. Loud crashes sounded as pieces of stone broke free of the cavern and formed into stone men.

Erin's savior turned to her, and her breath caught at the sight of his face. More handsome than anything imaginable, he held eyes that were so clear and blue, they seemed to glow. A shock of jet-black hair fell over his forehead and contrasted sharply with his tawny skin.

Before she could move, he wrapped his lean, muscular body around hers in a protective cloak, shielding her as the monsters attacked en masse.

Erin could feel the blows he took as they vibrated from



his body into hers. She didn't know how he stood the pain of it. How he maintained his hold on her.

All she knew was, she was grateful for it. Grateful for the power and strength of his presence. Grateful that he cradled her so gently and that she was no longer alone to face her nightmare.

The warm, spicy scent of his skin soothed her. Instinctively she wrapped her arms around his lean armored waist and held on to him, afraid of letting him go. "Thank you," she breathed, shaking. "Thank you for coming."

She saw the confusion in his gaze as he frowned down at her. Then his face hardened, his eyes turned icy.

"I have you, *akribos*," he whispered quietly, and yet his deep, accented voice rolled over her senses like a powerful tidal wave. Soothing, warming. "I won't let the snake Skotos take you."

She believed that, until one of the new monsters seized her about the waist with a stone tentacle. She screamed as it tore her from her savior's grasp.

The dark knight created a sword out of air and pursued them through the dark cavern. She watched as he dodged the other stone monsters, as he literally ran down the walls themselves to get to her. He jumped over the thing carrying her, to land before them and cut off the monster's escape.

The creature caught him about the waist with a hard kick and sent him slamming high into the wall.

V'Aidan didn't seem to feel the pain at all as he slid down the wall to the floor. More monsters swarmed over him, but he fought them down. His face was a mask of determination until he stood strong and victorious over their broken bodies.

He narrowed his eyes on the thing holding her, then held his hand out, and a red glow blasted the monster, splintering it.

The knight grabbed Erin then, scooped her up in his arms, and ran with her through the darkness.

Erin wrapped her arms around his neck and held on for dear life. She could still hear the snake calling out.

"I will have her, V'Aidan. I will have both of you!"

"Don't listen," V'Aidan said. "Close your eyes. Think of something soothing. Think of a happy memory."

She did and, oddly enough, the most comforting thing she could imagine was the sound of his heart pounding under her cheek. The deep accent of his voice.

"V'Aidan!" the she-snake's voice echoed in the cavern. "Return her to me or I will make you wish you had never been born."

He laughed bitterly. "When have I ever wished otherwise?" he mumbled under his breath.

Suddenly the wall before them burst open, spilling more monsters into their path.

"Hand her over to us, V'Aidan," a large gray lizard-man demanded. "Or we will see you pay with the flesh off your back."

Still holding her close, V'Aidan spun around to flee **but** couldn't.

They were surrounded.

"Give her to us," an old dragon croaked, reaching out its claws. "She can feed us all."

Erin held her breath as she saw the indecision in **her** dark knight's eyes.

Dear Lord, he was going to hand her over.

Her heart pounding, she touched his face, her fingers brushing against his hard, sculpted jaw. Erin didn't want the monsters to have her, but inside she understood his reluctance to help her any further. He didn't know her at all. There was no reason for him to endanger himself.

*He's not real.*

*It's a dream.*

The words whispered through her mind. But like so many dreams, this one felt so real. *He* felt real.

And she had an unnatural desire to protect him.

"It's okay," she breathed. "I don't want you hurt. I can fight them on my own."

Her words seemed to confuse and surprise him.

The monsters moved in.

"Release her or die, V'Aidan," the lizard-man hissed.

Erin felt the knight's tender touch as his fingers brushed the side of her neck, sending chills all over her.

The look in his eyes was needful and tormented.

"They will not have you," he whispered. "I will take you some place where they can't reach you." He bent his head and captured her lips.

The heated passion of his kiss stole her breath.

The dream monsters faded away into vaporous clouds until nothing was left.

Not the cave, not the screams.

Nothing.

Nothing except the two of them and the sudden need she had inside her to taste more of him.

Closing her eyes, Erin inhaled the warm, manly scent of V'Aidan's skin. He ravished her mouth with passion as his tongue swept against hers and his teeth gently nipped her lips.

Now this was a dream.

*He* was a dream.

A perfect, blissful moment worth savoring.

She heard him growling like a wild beast as he trailed his lips down her jaw and buried them against her throat. Licking. Teasing. Inciting her desire.

Every nerve ending in her body fired at his touch. She burned for him. Her breasts swelled, wanting to feel the strokes of his tongue across the taut peaks while his hands held her. Her core throbbed with an aching, demanding need.

He lifted his head to gaze down at her and it was then that the rest of the scene filled itself in. The two of them stood outside on a bright, moonlit knoll.

The peace of the moment comforted her. She smelled the damp pine around them, heard the bubbling of a nearby waterfall.

Their clothes melted from their bodies as he laid her down on the ground, which, oddly, wasn't hard. The moss under her was softer than a cloud, and it contrasted sharply with his hard muscles pressing down on her.

She liked this dream much, much better.

"You are gorgeous," she whispered, staring at his sleek long dark hair falling around his face. His body was lean, meticulously defined, and flawless. Never had she seen a better-looking man.

She reached up and traced the sharp arch of his dark brows over those silvery-blue eyes. The color of them was so intense, it took her breath.

Then she trailed her fingers down the stubble of his cheeks to his hard, sculpted jaw. She was so grateful to him. So happy to have him hold her after the terror the monsters had put her through.

For the first time in weeks, she felt safe. Protected.

And she owed it all to him.

V'Aidan captured her hand in his and studied her fingers as if he'd never seen anything like them. There was such a tender light in his gaze that she couldn't understand what caused it.

Moaning so deep in his throat that it vibrated through her, he led her hand to his mouth and ran his tongue over the lines on her palm. His tongue stroked her flesh with featherlike caresses while his teeth gently nipped her fingers and palm. His eyes shuttered, he seemed to savor the very essence of her skin, her touch. Her taste.

Erin shivered at the hot look on his face as he kissed her again. His hands roamed her body, stroking and delving, seeking out every part of her, and stoking her inner fire until she worried it might completely consume her.

He slid his mouth from her lips, down her body to her breast. Erin hissed in pleasure. His hand gently cupped her breast, holding the peak up so that he could take his time tasting it, rolling it over his tongue as he growled again. She'd never seen a man take such pleasure from simply tasting a woman before.

V'Aidan was heaven. Pure and simple heaven. The perfect, attentive lover. It was as if he could read her mind and know exactly where and how she wanted to be touched.

His erection pressed against her hip as his hand sought

out the fire between her legs. Spreading her legs wider for him, Erin trailed her hands over the muscles of his back, muscles that rippled and flexed with every exquisite sensual move he made.

She buried her lips against his throat, tasting the salt of his skin. Chills spread over his body, making her smile that she was giving him pleasure in turn.

Never before in her dreams had she been this at ease with a man. It was the first time she'd made love without worrying if her lover would find fault with her body. If somehow she wasn't good enough for him.

Her dream lover made her feel special. Made her feel womanly and sexy. Hot. Desirable.

She held her breath as he slid his fingers through her moist curls at the juncture of her thighs, separating the tender folds of her body until he could slide his long, tapered fingers deep inside her. Hot fire stabbed her middle.

Groaning at the exquisiteness of his touch, she ran her hands through his silken hair and held him close.

He stroked and teased her body with his fingers as his mouth worked magic on her breasts. The power of his touch, the feel of those hard, defined muscles pressing down on her...

It was more than she could stand.

Leaning her head back, she cried out as ribbons of ecstasy tore through her. Still he kept giving her pleasure. He didn't slow down until the last deep shudder had been wrung from her.

Breathless and weak, she wanted to please him the way he had pleased her. She wanted to look into his eyes and watch him climax, too.

Rolling him over onto his back, Erin ran her hand down the perfect tawny muscles of his shoulders, his chest, his abdomen and hips and raked her fingers slowly through the dark curls between his legs. V'Aidan sucked his breath in sharply between his teeth as she trailed her lips over the hard muscles of his chest to his rock-hard abdomen.

**And** as she laved his tawny flesh, she cupped his hard

shaft in her hand. V'Aidan shuddered in her arms. The look of pleasure on his face thrilled her as he slowly rocked himself against her palm.

She sheathed him with her hands, delighting in the velvety feel of him throbbing between her palms. He ran his fingers through her hair. The muscles in his jaw flexed as he gazed into her eyes while she tenderly milked his body.

"I love your hands on me," he breathed, his voice deep and ragged. "I love the way you smell. The way you feel."

He took her chin into his hand and stared at her with a look that told her he wanted her even more than the dragon had. It was primitive and hot, and it stole her breath.

In that moment, she knew he was going to take her. Take her in a way she'd never been taken before.

Burying her hands in his hair, she couldn't wait for it. She wanted him to possess her.

His eyes flashing and wild, he growled before seizing her lips with his. He kissed her so passionately that she came again as he rolled over with her in his arms and pressed her back once more against the cloudlike moss.

He brought his knee up, between her thighs, and spread her legs wide as he placed his body over hers. She shivered in anticipation.

"Yes, V'Aidan," she breathed, arching her hips in invitation. "Please fill me."

His eyes feral and possessive, he drove himself into her.

Erin moaned at his hardness inside her. She'd never felt anything better than all his strength and power surrounding her, filling her totally. As he moved against her, she feared she would pass out from the bliss of it.

He touched her in ways no man had ever touched her before. As if he truly treasured her. As if she was the only woman who existed for him.

His moves were untamed as he thrust into her. Slow. Deep. Hard.

She wrapped her legs around his, sliding them up and down to feel his leg hairs caress her.

He dipped his head and captured her breast in his mouth,

teasing it mercilessly as he stroked her with his body. She moaned deep in her throat, cupping his head to her.

Then, he leaned back on his legs so that he could stare down at her. Erin swallowed at the sight of him above her as she looked into his eerie silvery-blue eyes. He held her legs in his hands as he continued to drive himself even deeper into her.

His sublime strokes were primitive and hot and tantalizing. And they tore through her, spiking pleasure so intense it went all the way up her back and down to her toes.

V'Aidan licked his lips as he watched her watching him. Erin couldn't move. His eyes held her paralyzed. All she could do was stare at him. Feel him, deep and hard inside her.

She saw his pleasure mirrored in his eyes, saw him savoring her. And when he looked down to where they were joined, she shivered.

"You are mine, Erin," he said between clenched teeth, thrusting himself even harder and deeper into her to emphasize the words.

He took her into his arms and cradled her to his chest as if she was unspeakably precious.

Erin clung to him while she felt her pleasure building even higher. In white-hot sparks she came again in his arms. He buried his face into the crook of her neck and cried out as he joined her.

She lay perfectly still while he shuddered around and in her. His breathing heavy, he didn't move for several minutes.

Pulling back, he looked down at her. "I am with you, *akribos*," he whispered. "I will always be with you."

A strange wave of heaviness came over her. She closed her eyes. Even so, she could still feel and understand what was going on.

V'Aidan draped her over his chest as he lay on his back. She could feel his hands gliding over her while she inhaled the warm, manly scent of his skin.

Even asleep, she felt him near and knew he watched over her, protecting her from the others. And for the first

time in weeks, she rested in total peace and comfort.

"Sleep, Erin," he said quietly. "The Skoti can't reach you here. I won't let them."

Erin smiled in her sleep. But as the darkness came for her again, an odd voice rang out in her head.

*Now who poses the greater threat to you, Erin? Krysti'Ana or V'Aidan?*



## CHAPTER 2

ERIN came awake slowly to find herself flat on her back, outside her cube. For a second she couldn't move at all; then her body slowly began to function again.

The first thing she saw was Chrissy's worried frown.

The second was the two EMTs sitting next to her. Her boss, along with several other co-workers, stood off to one side frowning down at her. John's face told her the only thought in his mind was how much paperwork he'd have to fill out over this.

"What happened?" Erin asked.

"You passed out," Chrissy said. "It was like you were frozen or something."

Erin covered her face with her hands as embarrassment filled her. Just her luck to have the most erotic dream of her life witnessed by half her office.

Oh God, shoot her now!

"How do you feel?" the paramedic on her right asked as he helped her sit up.

"I feel..." Her voice trailed off. She felt incredible, actually. Better than she had ever felt before.

"Ma'am?" the paramedic insisted. "Axe you okay?"

Erin nodded, trying desperately to hold on to the image of V'Aidan, but it faded and left her feeling oddly lonely. "I'm fine, really."

"I don't know," Chrissy said. "She's been acting weird a

lot lately. Hasn't been sleeping. Maybe a short hospital stay where she can sleep—"

"Chrissy!" Erin snapped. "What are you trying to do?"

"Get you some help. Maybe they have something that can make you sleep through the night."

"I don't need to sleep," she said, amazed at the truth of those words. "I feel completely rested."

The paramedic looked at Chrissy. "Her vitals are normal. If she says she's fine, she's fine." He handed Erin a release form. "Sign that and you're on your own, but if I were you, I would go to my doctor just to be safe."

Chrissy gave her a doubtful look.

"I'm fine, Chrissy," Erin insisted, signing the release.

Even so, John told her to go home and take the rest of the week off.

Completely embarrassed, Erin didn't argue as the EMTs left. She merely gathered her things, then headed out of the building, to the parking lot.

Chrissy followed her to the car. "Listen, what I was going to say before John went for coffee and you hit the floor is that my boyfriend is a psychologist who specializes in sleep disorders."

Erin paused at her green Escort. Strange that Chrissy hadn't mentioned that before, but it explained why she had been so interested in Erin's dreams since all this started. "Really?"

"Yeah. His name is Rick Sword and I was telling him about you. He says he thinks he can help." Chrissy handed her a crisp dark gray business card. "I really think you should give him a call."

Erin studied the card. At the moment, she'd never felt better in her life, but maybe she should give him a call just in case the nightmares returned.

"Thanks," Erin said, getting into her car. "I just might do that."

Chrissy stared at her from outside the car and mouthed the words, *Call him*.

Erin waved to her, then headed home, but as she drove

through downtown traffic she really didn't feel like going back to her apartment alone.

In all honesty, she felt rather strange. She could almost sense V'Aidan's presence. She swore she could still smell the masculine scent of sandalwood that had clung to his skin, sense him in her thoughts.

"It was just a dream," she said out loud.

Still, it had been an incredible dream. So real. So vivid and erotic.

So incredibly satisfying.

She stopped at a red light and glanced down at the card on her passenger seat. Before she could talk herself out of it, she grabbed her cell phone and called Dr. Sword.

His receptionist immediately put her through to him as she headed her car toward the expressway.

"Ms. McDaniels," he said eagerly. "Chrissy has told me so much about you. I would really like to speak to you if you have time."

Something compelled her to accept. "Okay, sure. When?"

"What are you doing for lunch?"

Erin gave a nervous laugh. "I guess 'meeting you' would be the correct answer."

His own laughter answered her. "Tell you what. Why don't we meet out in public for the first time? I find it puts people more at ease. Do you like Thompson's Restaurant at Five Points?"

"Okay. What time?"

"How about right now? It should be just opening up for the day."

"Sounds like a plan. I'll be there in about half an hour."

"Good. I'll be waiting."

Erin pulled onto the expressway and headed toward their rendezvous.

Once she reached the mall, she parked her car outside the quaint restaurant that specialized in jazz music and Bohemian food, then headed inside.

There were only a handful of people in the dark interior,

all of whom were seated at tables. It was only then she realized she'd forgotten to ask the doctor what he looked like.

"Erin?"

She turned to see a tall, distinguished-looking man in his early forties entering through the door behind her.

"Yes?"

"Rick Sword," he said, extending his hand out to her.

She shook it. "Nice to meet you."

"Yes," he said with a cool smile. "Yes, it is."

He got them a table in the back of the restaurant, and once they were seated and had placed their orders, he listened as she explained her nightmares to him.

Erin felt a little nervous at first, but as she explained it to him and he didn't appear to judge her, she went into more details.

"And then this guy, V'Aidan, was there and he called the snake monster a Skotos." She paused as she trailed her straw around her Coke. "You probably think I'm nuts by now."

"Hardly," he said, his blue eyes sincere. "In truth, I find you fascinating. Tell me, have you ever heard of the Skoti before?"

"No, never."

"Hmmm, interesting."

She frowned as he made a few notes on the pad he'd carried inside with him. "Why?"

"Well, they're part of history. Tell me, did you ever take an ancient Greek civilization or mythology course in college?"

"No, not really. I mean, we covered the basic Greek pantheon in high school and I had to read the *Odyssey* and *Oedipus Rex* in college, but that was it."

"Hmmm," he said as if he found that interesting, too.

"Why do you ask?"

"I was just wondering how the idea of the Skoti got implanted into your subconscious."

There was a peculiar note in his voice that made her

extremely apprehensive. "What are you saying, they're real?"

He laughed. "That depends on whether or not you believe in the ancient Greek gods. But they were part of that culture. They were, for lack of a better term, nightmare demons. They were said to infiltrate the dreams of humans so they could suck emotions and creativity. It made them high, if you will."

"Like energy vampires?"

"Something like that. Anyway, the legend goes that they would visit a soul a few times during its lifetime and move on. It's how the ancients explained away their nightmares. Supposedly, every so often a Skotos would latch on to a particular victim and go back over and over until the person became insane from the visits."

"Insane how?"

He took a sip of his drink. "The scientific theory behind the legend would be that the visitations, whatever they really were, disrupted normal sleep patterns, causing the victim to never really rest or rejuvenate during the night, thereby causing mental duress. If it continued long enough, it would lead to mental instability."

A shiver went down her spine. This sounded just a little too much like what had been happening to her. "So, how does someone get rid of a Skotos?"

"According to legend, you can't."

"Can I fight them?"

He shook his head. "No, but the ancient Greeks believed in perfect balance. As you have the evil Skotos, likewise you have the benevolent Oneroi who fight them for you."

"Oneroi?"

"They were believed to be the children of the dream god Morpheus. They were champions of humans and gods alike. Incapable of feeling emotions, they spend eternity protecting humans in their sleep. Whenever the Skoti latch on to a human and begin to drain too much from that person, the Oneroi come in and save the human from their clutches."

"Like V'Aidan did me."

"So it would seem."

"And the Skoti, where do they come from?"

"They were the children of Phobotor, the god of animal shapes. His name means 'frightening,' hence their dominion over nightmares."

"So the Skoti and Oneroi are related?"

He nodded.

"Fascinating," she said, mulling over her new knowledge while thinking about her dreams.

Vaguely she recalled the threats the Skoti had made against V'Aidan. Was it possible that somehow these demons had really infiltrated her sleep? Could V'Aidan and the others possibly be real?

It was ludicrous and yet...

Her face flamed. If they were real, then she'd just had a one-night stand with a perfect stranger.

"Dr. Sword," she asked seriously, "do you believe they exist?"

His light blue gaze bored into her. "Young lady, I have seen things in my life that would make anyone prematurely gray. I learned a long time ago not to discount any possibility. But personally, I find the idea of Greek gods infiltrating my dreams highly disturbing."

Her face burned even more. "I assure you, you don't find them half as disturbing as I do."

He smiled. "I suppose not." He reached to the small leather case on his belt and pulled out a Palm Pilot. "Tell you what. Why don't you and I schedule an appointment next week to have your dreams monitored? We can hook you up to our machines, put you under a long sleep, and watch your brain waves. Maybe that will give us a scientific clue about what's going on."

She nodded gratefully. "Now that sounds a whole lot better than Greek gods and demons running loose in my dreams."

V'AIDAN sat high above the ocean, perched on a small ledge that barely accommodated his long frame. He'd come

to this place as far back as he could remember. Ever since he'd been a young child back at the dawn of time.

It was here he'd come after his ritual beatings that had been designed to strip his feelings and compassion away. Here he'd rested, waiting for the pain of his existence to lessen until he could again find the numbness he was sworn to live by.

Here on his perch he could hear the roar of the waves and stare out at the vastness of the water and feel oddly at peace.

Only now that peace was gone. Shattered.

Something strange had happened to him when he had made love to Erin. It was as if he'd left a piece of himself with her.

Even now, he could sense her. If he closed his eyes, he could even tell what she was feeling.

Worse, he craved her in a way that was all-consuming. He wanted to be with her again, to feel her soothing touch on his skin. He'd never once known such gentleness existed, and now that he did . . .

"You broke a rule, didn't you?"

He clenched his teeth at Wink's voice above him. Looking up, he met two large inquisitive silver eyes that were fastened on him with interest.

Wink was the last god he wanted to see at the moment. The son of Nyx, the night goddess, and Erebus, the embodiment of primordial darkness, Wink was technically V'Aidan's great-uncle and one of the oldest of the gods; however, he acted more like some prepubescent human. His youthful face was always beaming and bright and he wore his long brown hair braided down his back.

The most annoying thing about Wink was that he loved practical jokes and was forever making fun of the children of Myst.

"I did nothing."

"Oh, come on, 'fess up, V. I heard your siblings talking about you. They said you took a human from them and vanished. Now, give me the dirt."

"Go away."

Wink smiled at that. "Then you did do something. Oooh, and it must be good, for you to be so secretive."

V'Aidan stared at the swirling ocean below. "Don't you have something better to do? Like torment gods who can actually get irritated at you?"

Wink grinned even wider. "Sarcasm. Hmm, someone's been around humans a long time."

V'Aidan didn't respond.

He didn't have to. Wink moved toward his shoulder and sniffed like a puppy with a pair of dirty socks. Wink's eyes widened as he pulled back. "You *are* irritated at me, aren't you?"

"I can't feel irritation and well you know it."

It didn't work. Wink came around to float by V'Aidan's side, his eyes larger than saucers. He took V'Aidan's chin in his hand and studied his eyes. "I can see *emotions* in there, swirling, mixing. You're scared."

V'Aidan jerked his chin out of Wink's grasp and pushed him away. "I most certainly am not. I fear nothing. I never have and I never will."

Wink arched a brow. "Such vehement denial. Your kind never feels such passion when they speak, and yet you do."

V'Aidan looked away, his heart pounding. He felt the strangeness of panic in his chest. And he remembered a time once, aeons ago, when he'd been a child and he had dared ask the wrong question.

*"Aphrodite, why can't I have love?"*

*The goddess had laughed at him. "You are the child of Myst, V'Aidan. She is formless, shapeless. Vacuous. The best you can hope for is to feel fleeting, muted emotions, but love... love is solid, eternal, and beyond your understanding or abilities."*

*"Then why can I feel such pain?"*

*"Because it, like you, is a fleeting phantom. Like the great ocean it ebbs and flows, swelling to titanic proportions, then sweeping down into nothingness. It never lasts for long."*



Over the centuries, he had learned the goddess was wrong about pain. It, too, was eternal. It never went away.

Not until he had held Erin.

Closing his eyes, he didn't understand it. What had she done to him?

Wink poked him on the shoulder. "Come on, V, tell me why you are in such a state."

He looked up at his great-uncle. Trust of any kind was as alien to Aidan as love. Still, he needed Wink's experience. Wink had been around longer and knew more than he did. Perhaps Wink could give him an insight. "If I tell you what happened, you must swear by the River Styx to tell no one. No one."

Wink nodded. "May Hades chain me in Tartarus, I swear by Styx to never utter a single word of what you tell me."

V'Aidan took a deep breath and braced himself for betrayal. "I had sex with a mortal."

Wink arched a proud brow and smiled. "Nice, isn't it?"

"Wink!"

"Well, it is. I highly recommend it." Wink paused speculatively. "Was it a man or woman?"

"A woman, of course. What kind of question is that?"

"A very nosy one and in keeping with my charming personality."

V'Aidan rolled his eyes. Now he understood what the other gods meant when they said Wink could be a major pain in the ass.

"So," Wink continued, "was she any good?"

A wave of desire tore through V'Aidan, piercing his groin with heat at the very mention of her. Still, he refused to answer that question. It was personal and none of Wink's business.

"Judging by the look on your face, I'll take that as a yes."

V'Aidan growled at his great-uncle and sought to change the subject. "Anyway, something happened."

"Something?"

"It changed me somehow."

Wink snorted. "That's just stupid. If sleeping with a mortal changed a god, there's no telling what I'd be now. As for Zeus . . . perish the thought."

V'Aidan ignored his words. The worst part of all was this incessant need he felt to see Erin again. To feel her hands on him.

He craved her tenderness.

Craved her warmth.

He had to have her.

"V'Aidan!"

Wink paled at the sound of Hypnos's voice. Hypnos was the one god who held dominion over all the gods of sleep. Sooner or later, all of them answered to him.

"Uh-oh," Wink whispered. "He looks mad." Wink vanished, leaving V'Aidan alone to face the old god's wrath.

V'Aidan looked up over his head to see the old man's angry scowl. But since he'd never seen any other look on Hypnos's face, he couldn't judge it. "He looks the same to me."

"V'Aidan," Hypnos growled. "Don't make me come down there to get you."

V'Aidan snorted in response. If Hypnos thought to scare him, he'd have to try something new. V'Aidan had learned a long time ago not to care.

Rising up to the cliffs above, he went to meet the god who made Skoti and Oneroi alike quiver in fear. He alone could give them real emotion.

V'Aidan felt nothing as he approached the old man.

"You seduced a mortal in her sleep."

The accusation hung between them as V'Aidan stared at him.

"What have you to say for yourself?"

V'Aidan said nothing. What could he say? He had committed a forbidden act. Other gods could take humans as they wanted, but not his kind.

He wasn't the first one of his kindred to violate that mandate. However, he wasn't foolish enough to think for one minute Hypnos would be merciful toward him.

He wasn't a favored son.

"You know our code," Hypnos said. "Why did you break it?"

*Because I wanted to be held. Just once.*

*For one moment in eternity, I wanted to pretend someone cared.*

The truth tore through him. Regardless of what Hypnos did to him as punishment, it had been worth it.

He would never forget that one precious moment when he'd held Erin in his arms and she had slept peacefully on top of him. Her breath tickling his chest, she had done something no one had ever done before. She had trusted him.

Her warmth had seeped into him, and for the first time since he'd been born, if not love, he had known tenderness. And it had been enough.

Hypnos looked at him as if he were disgusting. Vile. But then, V'Aidan was used to that, too.

"Take him," the old god said, shoving him into the hands of his punishers. "Strip the human taint from his flesh and make sure that he will never forget the pain of it."

## CHAPTER 3

IT was after midnight before Erin finally found the courage to go to sleep. She was terrified of what her dreams might bring and yet she wanted to see V'Aidan again.

How stupid was that?

He wasn't real and there was no guarantee she'd ever have another dream with him in it.

Still, she wanted a small miracle.

Surrendering herself to the domain of Morpheus, she let her exhaustion take her.

Instead of the falling sensation she'd learned to expect from her dreams, she felt as if she were flying high above the world. For the first time in weeks, she had normal, happy dreams.

No one chased her. No one scared her.

It was heaven, except for the absence of one particular phantom lover.

Sighing in her sleep, Erin saw herself dressed in jeans and a tank top, sitting outside on the porch swing that used to hang on the patio at her Aunt Mae's house. The day was perfect, bright and pleasantly warm with fragrant air laced with honeysuckle and pine. She'd spent so many youthful summers here on this farm in the California mountains.

How she had missed it.

"What is this place?"

She started at the deep, accented voice behind her.

Turning around, she saw V'Aidan leaning against the white porch railing, his hands braced on each side of him, watching her. His long black hair was tied back into a ponytail and those clear silver eyes were guarded. His black button-down shirt only emphasized the perfect muscles of his body, and his jeans had holes in the knees.

For some reason she couldn't fathom, he looked a bit pale and tired, his features pinched. Even so, she was glad he was here.

She smiled at him. "It's one of my favorite places from childhood."

"What did you do here?"

She stood up and approached him, but he quickly moved away. "Is something wrong?"

V'Aidan shook his head. He shouldn't be here. He should have stayed far away from her, and yet...

He couldn't.

As soon as she'd fallen asleep, he had felt her soothing presence calling out to him.

Determined, he had fought it as long as he could.

But in the end, it had been futile.

He'd come here against his will. Against his common sense. His body, even though it healed a hundred times faster than a human's, was still sore and aching from his punishment. It reminded him of the high cost he would have to pay again should anyone learn where he was.

She placed her hand on his arm. V'Aidan closed his eyes as pain swept through him. His arms were so incredibly sore, but not even the agony of his wounds could conceal the hot, intense shiver he felt at her touch.

"Come." She slid her hand down his arm to capture his hand in hers. He stared in amazement at their fingers laced together. And he tried not to feel just how soothing her touch was against his skin. How much he wanted to strip her clothes from her and make love to her for the rest of eternity.

"Let me show you," she said.

He allowed her to lead him down the porch steps and across the yard to an old barn. As they walked hand in

hand, her imagination stunned him. Her dream was so vivid and vibrant. He'd never visited anyone who had created something so wonderfully detailed.

She released his hand to open the well-oiled doors of the barn and show him where three horses rested inside stalls.

Aidan watched her toss a horse blanket over the back of a pinto, then lead it to him. It amazed him that the horse didn't shriek at his scent. Never before had an animal tolerated his presence in a dream. But the brown-and-white pinto seemed completely at ease with him. That spoke volumes about how much power her mind held.

"Have you ever ridden?" she asked.

"No."

She showed him how to mount the horse; then she climbed up to ride in front of him. Aidan held on to her waist as she kicked the horse into a gallop and they rode through the fields.

The feel of the animal under him, with her in his arms as they rode, washed over him. He felt so strangely free and almost human.

She rode him out to a lake where they dismounted and the horse vanished into a brown cloud of smoke.

Erin sat on the grass and started picking wildflowers to weave into a crown. Enchanted, he watched her hands blend the stems together into an intricate piece that bore little resemblance to a simple headdress.

While she worked, he drew her back against his chest so that he could hold her.

Just for a little while.

"You are so incredibly creative," he said. "This place is so . . . you," he finished. And it was. Bright, friendly, welcoming. It was everything good.

Everything Erin.

She laughed happily and the sound of it brought a foreign comfort to his chest. "Not really."

"Yes, you are." It was what had made him seek her out originally. "Why do you suppress your creativity?"

She shrugged.

V'Aidan leaned his cheek against her brown hair and traced circles on her stomach with his hand. "Tell me."

Erin had never been the kind of person to confide in others, and yet she found herself telling V'Aidan things she'd never told another soul. "I always wanted to be creative, but I was never any good at it."

"You are."

"No. I tried to play the flute as a girl, and I remember when they were holding auditions for junior high school I went to play my scales and couldn't hit any of the lower notes."

"You were nervous."

"I was untalented."

She felt Aidan's breath on her neck as he nuzzled her gently. Heat coursed through her, tightening her breasts.

What was it about his touch that set her on fire? And the more she felt of his touch, the more she wanted him.

"I'll bet you would make a great artist."

Erin smiled at him and the confidence he had in her abilities. It was a nice change of pace. "I can't draw a straight line with a ruler."

He kissed her then. Deep and passionately. His tongue brushed against her lips, sending waves of desire spiraling through her. She moaned against his mouth, cupping his head as needful desire coursed through her.

He nipped her lips. "Maybe you should be a writer."

"That I most certainly can't do."

"Why?"

"I get sick at the thought of it."

He frowned. "Why?"

Erin glanced away as she remembered that horrible day. "I was in college and I wanted to be a writer so badly that I could taste it. In order to major in creative writing, we had to submit our best piece of fiction. So I came up with a short story idea that I thought was great and really different. I worked and reworked it until I was sure it was perfect. I submitted the whole packet to the head of the department and then waited to hear back."

She swallowed as she remembered how she'd learned of the professor's decision. "The *Literary Journal* came out a few weeks later, and in it were all the short stories from the students who were being admitted."

"You weren't in it?"

Her stomach tightened. "I was in it, all right. She had chosen my story to highlight what not to do if you ever wanted to be taken seriously as a writer. She ridiculed every aspect of my story."

His arms tightened around her.

"You can't imagine how humiliated I was. I swore I would never again do anything creative. That I would never put that much of myself into anything to be mocked for it."

Tears stung her eyes and she would have cried had V'Aidan not leaned her head back and run his tongue under her chin to her throat. His body soothed the pain away and she moaned at how good he felt. How safe he made her dreams.

"Why is this so important to you, that I be creative?" she asked.

He pulled back and gave her a hard stare. "Because it's your repressed creativity that is drawing out the Skoti. If you will release it, they will have no fodder for your nightmares."

That sounded wonderful until she thought about it. "And what about you?"

"What *about* me?"

"If the Skoti are gone, will you be gone, too?"

He looked away and she saw the truth of it. Her heart ached at the thought of him never coming to her again. Even though they had just met, she needed him. Liked the way he protected her. Touched her.

As a shy only child she'd lived her life with only a few friends and even fewer boyfriends. She'd never really been close to anyone. Yet she felt bonded somehow to Aidan. Felt a connection, a need to be with him.

"I don't want you to leave me."

V'Aidan's heart lurched at the words no one had ever



uttered to him before. He was only used to people trying to drive him away.

She leaned back against his shoulder so that she could look up at him and touch his face.

She was so beautiful there. "Why do you desire my company?" he asked.

"Because you're a champion."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. You saved me from the Skoti."

He swallowed at that. "If you ever saw the real me, you would hate me."

"How could I?"

He closed his eyes as memories surged through him. This dream with her, it was an illusion. There was no truth to it. What he heard, what they felt... all formless delusions.

And yet he wanted it to be real. For the first time in his life, he wanted something true.

He wanted Erin.

"You don't even know what I am," he whispered.

"Yes, I do. You're an Oneroi. You defend people from their nightmares."

V'Aidan frowned. It had been a long time since anyone knew of that term. "How do you know about the Oneroi?"

"Someone told me about them earlier today and I did some research after I got home. I know lots of things about you now."

"Such as?"

"That you can't feel any emotions whatsoever. But I don't believe that one."

"You don't?"

"No. You're too gentle."

V'Aidan was stunned by her words. Gentleness was something he had never thought to hear applied to him. Hypnos would laugh himself into a hernia at the thought.

"Hey," she said suddenly. "Let's do something I have always wanted to do but never had the guts."

"What?"

She looked over at the lake in front of them. "Let's skinny-dip." Before he could answer, she shot to her feet and pulled her top off.

His breath caught in his throat as he stared at her bared breasts. Her nipples were hard and he swore he could already taste them. His body on fire, he took a step toward her and halted only as he felt the pain of his wounds lance up his back. If he undressed, she would see the wounds. See what they had done to him. And he never wanted her to know of it.

"You go," he said. "I want to watch you."

Erin didn't know where she found the courage to undress while he watched. She'd never been so bold in real life. Yet in her dream she didn't mind. In truth she liked the hot, lustful look on his face as she stripped her jeans and panties off and headed for the water.

V'Aidan watched her swim. Watched the water lapping against her bare skin. Her breasts glistened in the light as she floated on her back, and he could see the moist tangle of curls between her legs.

He ached to go to her and spread her legs until he could...

He turned away then.

"V'Aidan?"

The concern in her voice tore through him. He had to leave her.

Unable to stand it, he ran through the forest, ignoring the agony of his body. It was nothing compared to what lay in his heart.

Suddenly he felt himself changing. He saw his hands losing their human form. Felt the burning sensation of his skin as his flesh transformed ...

"V'Aidan?"

His heart pounding, he knew he couldn't stay. Not without her finding out the truth.

Closing his eyes, he teleported out of her dream.

## CHAPTER 4

ERIN woke up to the sound of her phone ringing. Groaning out loud, she rolled over to answer it.

It was Chrissy. "Hiyas, chick. How are you enjoying your morning off?"

She would be enjoying it a whole lot more if someone hadn't interrupted her dream while she was trying to find V'Aidan so that she could strip him naked and drag him into the water with her.

"It's okay," Erin said, stifling her agitation.

"Did I wake you?"

"Yes, you did."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Were you having another nightmare?"

Erin smiled at the memory. "No, not a nightmare."

"Really?" Chrissy asked in disbelief. "Not a single second of one?"

"Nope. Now if you'll excuse me, I'd really like to go back to sleep."

"Yeah, sure," Chrissy said with an odd note in her voice. "Why don't you do that?"

Erin lay in bed for a solid hour, trying to go back to sleep to find V'Aidan, but it didn't work.

She felt so good from their time together that she had no choice but to get up.

Aggravated at herself for not having more control over

her ability to go back to sleep, she piddled around the house.

By late morning, she found herself at her computer, staring at her marketing report.

As she worked, V'Aidan's kind, encouraging words drifted through her mind. And before she knew what she was doing, she closed out her spreadsheet and was opening up her word processor.

Erin sat there for hours, typing furiously. It wasn't until late afternoon that she stopped.

Completely happy for the first time in years, Erin stared at what she'd done. Proud of her accomplishment, she wanted to share it with someone.

*No*, she corrected herself. She wanted to share it with V'Aidan.

She printed off her pages, then took them to the couch. Lying down, she clutched the papers to her chest and willed herself to sleep in hopes of seeing him again.

She found him standing in a meadow. He was dressed all in black right down to his leather biker boots. His jeans hugged his hard thighs, and his black T-shirt looked yummy as it stretched over a chest so lean and toned that it could only be real in her dreams.

The cool breeze tugged at his loose hair, and his silvery eyes shimmered in the daylight.

"I came looking for you," she said happily.

He appeared puzzled by her words. "Really?"

"Yes."

She sat down in the middle of her summer meadow with beautiful jewel-toned butterflies all around her. After their discussion last night, Erin had been trying to let her inner artist out. She wore a light peasant blouse and a loose skirt that rode up on her thighs when she sat.

Best of all, she conjured up a box of Nutter Butter Bites.

V'Aidan moved closer. "What are you eating?"

"Nutter Butters. Want some?"

He dropped to his knees by her side. "What are they?"

She ran her hand through the red box and scooped out

a handful to show him the tan-colored circles. "Peanut butter cookies. They're really good, and the best part of all—in dreams, they have no calories."

He laughed at that. "Would you feed me one?"

More nervous than she could fathom, she held a cookie up for him. He licked her finger as he took the cookie into his mouth. "It's delicious. Your finger, I mean."

She smiled at him and kissed his cheek.

He looked so stunned that it was almost laughable.

"Hey," she said, putting the box aside and grabbing up the papers she'd brought with her. "You'll be proud of me."

He arched a brow.

"I wrote today. For the first time since college."

"Really?"

She nodded. "I actually finished ten pages. Want to see?"

"Of course I do." He took the pages from her hands and sat down in front of her to read them.

Erin watched his gaze sweeping over the page. She ached to reach out and run her hands over his glorious body. He was as toned as an athlete. Better still, his taste was more addictive than chocolate.

When he finished, he looked up at her and the proud, encouraging look on his face stole her breath. He was so devastatingly handsome, so warm, that it made her weak.

"Vampires?" he asked.

She grinned. "I know it's a weird topic, but I just sort of channeled them. What I like is that they're so different from other vampire stories."

"They remind me of some people I know."

Erin gaped in disbelief. "Get out! You know vampires?"

"I know lots of them."

"Are you teasing me?" she asked suspiciously, still not sure if he was serious or not. "There really is such a thing?"

He didn't answer. Instead he flipped back through the pages. "You're very talented, Erin. You shouldn't let this go to waste."

Hearing it from him, she could almost believe it. "You think so?"

"Yes, I do."

He set the pages aside and stared at her.

Erin's blouse began unlacing itself. She shivered at the dark, hungry look on V'Aidan's face as he watched it. Slowly, bit by bit, the laces came out of the holes. Her nipples hardened in expectation. Then, the opening widened, baring a single breast.

"Hey!" she teased.

He smiled unrepentantly. "My favorite part of dreams. Clothing is optional."

Erin hissed as he cupped her breast in his hand; then she gave him a whammy of her own.

He looked down at his new clothes with a frown. "What is this?"

She bit her lip at his costume. "You look *good* as a pirate."

He laughed. "Ahoy, matey," he said, laying her back against the grass. "Me cap'n's ship needs a port."

She moaned as he kissed her. "Me cap'n's port needs a ship."

They made love for an eternity. Erin had V'Aidan every way a woman could have a man. She took him under her, over her, and from behind her.

She spent hours running her hands and mouth over all that glorious tawny skin until she knew his body even better than she knew her own. In the end they soared into the sky, where they made love while the stars twinkled all around them.

Erin lay quietly in his arms, just listening to his heart beating under her cheek.

"V'Aidan?" she asked, sitting up to watch him. "Where do you go when you're not in my dreams? Do you visit other women?"

His hot look scorched her. "No. I don't want any other woman."

"Really?"

"I swear it."

She picked his hand up and kissed his palm. "Then what do you do?"

His eyes glowed. "I think up ways to make love to you."

She laughed out loud at the thought. "You know what I want to do?"

"After the night we've had, I honestly can't imagine."

"I want to show you a carnival. Have you ever been to one?"

"No."

Closing her eyes, Erin wished them to a state fair.

V'Aidan was aghast at her world. The bright lights and music...

Used to only visiting people in their nightmares, he'd never heard music before. The sound was wonderful and warm.

There were only a handful of people around and he let her take his hand and feed him cotton candy, candy apples, funnel cake, and corn dogs.

In between the food, they rode all kinds of rides that made his head spin. But not nearly as much as the woman herself did.

"Hey!" she said as they approached another booth. "Let's get our picture made. I've always wanted to have an old-timey photo done. What do you say?"

"Whatever makes you happy."

V'Aidan allowed her to dress him up in an Old West outfit while she dressed as a saloon girl, but his favorite part was when she sat in his lap where he could hold her. Better still, the dress she wore fell over them so that her bare thighs rested against his loins. It amazed him how fast his body leaped to life.

How could he want to make love to her when he'd already spent hours lost in her body? Yet there was no denying the fire he felt. The urge he had to free himself from his pants and press her hot, wet body down on him.

"You okay?" she asked, looking at him over her shoulder.

He nodded, even though his groin burned like an inferno.

In the first picture, they were cheek to cheek. The second was with her cradled in his arms, and for the last one she leaned over and kissed his cheek at the very last minute.

Erin took the pictures from the photographer and frowned. "Oh, good Lord," she breathed. "I look like the boobie prize."

"Excuse me?"

Her eyes sad, she handed him the pictures. "You're so incredibly handsome and I'm just a plump, round, average-looking nothing."

V'Aidan felt as though she'd slapped him. "Erin," he said, his voice thick. "You are not nothing. You are the most beautiful person I have ever known."

She smiled weakly. "You're sweet."

V'Aidan stopped her and turned her to face him. "No, I'm not. Do you want to know what I see when I look at you?"

Erin swallowed, her gaze searching his face. "Sure."

V'Aidan handed her the pictures again.

Looking at them, Erin gasped at what she saw. Her mouse-brown hair glowed with golden highlights. Her face had a perfect peachy complexion and her dark brown eyes were bright and shiny. She looked breathtaking.

And it was so *not* her.

"This is what you see?" she asked V'Aidan.

He nodded, his face grim. "That is what you are to me."

Erin reached to hug him, but before she could, a weird buzzing sounded.

V'Aidan vanished instantly.

"No!" she groaned as she woke up to the sound of someone ringing her doorbell.

Disappointed to the point of violence, she got up and answered the door.

She blinked in disbelief. Chrissy stood on the other side.

"Hey," Chrissy said brightly. "Sorry to disturb you, but John wanted me to drop off more data for the report."

Trying really hard not to be snappish, Erin opened the door and took the disks from Chrissy's hand. "Thanks.



Sorry you had to come all the way out here."

"No prob." Chrissy frowned at her. "Were you asleep again?"

Erin blushed. "Yes, I was."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Positive."

"Nightmares?"

"Completely gone."

"Oh," Chrissy said, her voice strangely flat. "Glad to hear it. So then, normal dreams?"

Erin frowned at how choppy and odd their conversation was. "Wonderful dreams, anyway."

Chrissy nodded. "Ah, well, that's good. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Thanks again," Erin said as she closed the door.

She leaned her head against the door and cursed. Who or what did she have to kill to have an uninterrupted day with V'Aidan?

OVER the next few days, Erin began to fear even more for her sanity. Not because of her nightmares anymore but because she no longer wanted to be awake.

Every night V'Aidan would come to her. She took him dancing and showed him all kinds of places and things he'd never seen before.

Worse, she learned that he had some degree of control over when she fell asleep. He'd told her he could borrow mist from his Uncle Wink and, much like the Sandman, Wink's mist could induce sleep.

On Friday afternoon when she felt a severe wave of tiredness come over her, she knew what V'Aidan had done.

He was becoming more and more impatient with waiting for her to fall asleep, and in the back of her mind she wondered if one day he would pull her into his realm and not let her go.

When she opened her eyes, she found him lying beside her, his eyes burning her with their intensity.

"Are you angry with me?" he asked, tracing her cheek with his hand.

"I should be. I really wanted to watch that movie."

"I'm sorry," he said, but his face told her he didn't have a smidgen of remorse.

"No, you're not."

He smiled down at her. "No, I'm not, but I don't want you to be angry with me for it."

She laughed at him. "You're evil."

His playfulness died instantly. "Why do you say that?"

She frowned at the hurt look she didn't understand. "I was joking, V'Aidan."

His jaw ticed angrily under her hand. "I never want you to think I'm truly evil."

"How could I?"

V'Aidan dipped his lips to hers, tasting her, wanting to devour her. He needed her and the more he was with her, the worse it became. He'd never known anything sweeter than those lips. Nothing more precious than her small, heart-shaped face.

Erin was overwhelmed by the passion in his kisses. Each one seemed to be even more possessive than the last.

Then he moved his lips lower, over her breasts, where he paused to take his time savoring each mound. As he teased her, white rose petals fell from the sky, covering her.

Erin laughed. "What is this?"

"My gift to you," V'Aidan said. "I want to bathe you in roses."

"Why white?"

"Because, like you, they are pure and beautiful."

Then he kissed her lower, across her stomach, her hip, down her leg, and then up her inner thigh until he kissed her where she ached.

Erin moaned at the feel of his mouth against her, his tongue sweeping across her nub, then down to where she throbbled. He growled, the sound vibrating through her.

He seemed to delight in giving her pleasure first. He

never took his own until she'd climaxed at least twice before him.

She shook in the throes of her first release. When she was finished, V'Aidan pulled back with a devilish grin that made him appear boyish. "I love the way you taste. The way you smell."

She smiled warmly at him. "I love being with you. I don't even want to wake up anymore. I just live moment to moment, wishing I were asleep and waiting until I can see you again."

A dark look crossed his features.

Had those words hurt him? She couldn't imagine how or why they would, and yet... "V'Aidan?"

He moved away from her and his black clothes immediately returned to cover his body.

"V'Aidan, what is it?"

V'Aidan didn't answer.

What he was doing was wrong, and not just because it was forbidden. He didn't care about rules.

What he cared about was Erin.

And every time he pulled her into his realm he was robbing her of the pleasures of her own world. Of her life.

This was wrong, and for the first time he understood exactly how wrong it was.

"V'Aidan!" the howling shout echoed through the trees surrounding them.

He knew that angry bellow. "You must leave," he said, sweeping a quick kiss across her lips.

"But—"

He gave her no time to argue before he sent her back to her world and rolled over onto his back to appear nonchalant.

She had barely vanished before M'Ordant appeared to stand over him. Dressed in the same black clothes, M'Ordant looked very similar to V'Aidan. Same black hair, same silvery-blue eyes. The only thing they differed in was height. V'Aidan stood a good four inches taller and he wore the look of a deadly predator.

M'Ordant looked like a person the humans called a Boy Scout.

"What are you doing?" M'Ordant asked.

"I am lying in the sun," V'Aidan said, placing his hands behind his head. "You?"

"Is that an attempt at humor?"

V'Aidan shrugged as he looked up at his brother. M'Ordant was one of the oldest of the Oneroi and was one of Morpheus's most favored sons. "If it were an attempt, it would be wasted on you, now wouldn't it?"

"More humor?"

V'Aidan sighed. "Why are you here?"

"I have heard distressing news about you."

"And to think I thought all news about me was distressing."

That was lost on his brother as well as M'Ordant stared down at him. "Did you learn nothing from your punishment?"

Yes, he'd learned to be more careful seeking out Erin. To tell no one of the precious time they spent together.

"You're boring me, M'Ordant. Go away."

"You can't be bored."

"And a good thing, too, since I'd no doubt perish from it while in your company."

M'Ordant stared at him blankly. "I am merely here as a courtesy. As of this moment, the woman is tagged. Summon her again, and you will deal with me."

"Well, it certainly wouldn't be the first time you and I have crossed."

"True, but I have permission from Hypnos to make it the last time if you interfere with her again."

ERIN went to sleep that night and waited for V'Aidan to show himself.

He didn't.

When she woke up in the morning, she trembled with loss and worry. Had something happened to him?

He'd acted so strangely yesterday. And that shout...

What could have happened? Could the Skoti have found him? Hurt him because he protected her?

"V'Aidan," she whispered. "Where are you?"

V'AIDAN ached as he heard the plea in Erin's voice. He stood at her side, so close all he had to do was shift slightly and he would touch her. "I'm here, Erin," he whispered. "I've been here all night."

She didn't hear him.

He'd stayed by her bed the entire time she slept, watching her. Making sure none of the Skoti found her. He was sure Krysti'Ana was behind M'Ordant's appearance.

V'Aidan was all that stood between Erin and Krysti'Ana. So long as he visited her dreams and they were together, his sister would never be able to claim Erin.

Erin's mind was ripe with happiness and creativity. Her dreams were vivid and warm and bubbling over with emotions. Any Skotos would be attracted to her.

And now he could neither protect her nor...

His thoughts scattered as she wept.

Pain lacerated his chest at the sight of her grief. She sobbed as if her heart were broken.

Why?

But worse was the helplessness he felt. He hurt for her. "Please don't cry, *akribos*," he whispered, trying to gather her into his arms.

It didn't work.

He wasn't of her world. He could never be part of her world. Grinding his teeth, he cursed his formless existence.

Erin wept until her eyes grew heavy. Until she was spent and so tired, she couldn't move.

And as she slipped back into sleep, she thought for an instant that she caught a glimpse of V'Aidan in her room.

The next thing she knew, she found herself high on a mountaintop, looking out on the ocean.

The grass caressed her bare feet as the waves crashed on the surf far below. Wind whipped through her hair, plastering her white sundress to her body.

She breathed in the crisp, clean air and listened to the gulls cawing. How peaceful.

Just when she thought her dream couldn't improve, she felt two strong arms wrap around her. "Do you like it here?"

She shivered at the deep accent of V'Aidan's voice in her ear. "Yes, I do."

She turned in his arms to see his hot gaze staring down at her. She trembled at his concerned look, at the handsome lines of his face.

"Tell me why you were crying," he demanded.

"I was afraid something had happened to you."

"And it made you sad?"

She nodded.

V'Aidan shook with the knowledge. He leaned down and rested his chin against her shoulder and inhaled the sweet scent of her skin. She felt so incredible in his arms.

She had worried over him. It was unbelievable.

"Where were you?"

"I was with you," he breathed. "I just thought you'd want a night off."

She laughed at that. "You say that as if being around you is a trial."

"Isn't it?"

She looked aghast at the very idea. "No. Never."

"Why do you like being around me?"

"You make me happy."

He frowned. "I made you cry."

"Only a little."

"And still you want to be with me?"

"Of course I do."

The woman was the greatest fool in history.

He knew he didn't have long before M'Ordant would find them. He'd brought her to his land to help mask what he'd done, but it wouldn't shield the tag permanently.

But before he returned her, he wanted to share one last piece of himself with her before he said good-bye to her forever.

V'Aidan moved away and pointed out to the horizon

that his special perch looked out onto. "Did you know you can see the edge of the world from here?"

"Excuse me?"

He smiled. "It's true. See that gold glinting in the sunlight? That's where the human world begins."

"Where are we?"

"This is the Vanishing Isle. Greek sailors used to believe they would come here when they died so that they could always be near the ocean."

"And why do they call it the Vanishing Isle?" she asked.

"Because you can only see it for a few minutes at sunup and sundown. Much like the pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, you can try to reach it, but you never will."

She looked up at him. "Are you really a Greek god?"

"Would it scare you if I were?"

"Do you want me to fear you?"

V'Aidan hesitated at her question. It was the answer that truly surprised him. "No, I don't."

She smiled a smile that shook him all the way to his heart. "Is this where you live?"

"Sometimes."

"Why only sometimes?"

"There are certain times of the year when I am banned from here."

Her brows drew together into a concerned frown. "Why?"

"The other gods don't like my kind. I am a pariah to all."

"Why would they feel that way? You are a champion."

"Not really. I'm a dream master and not what you see. I'm nothing more than the image you have made for me, but in reality I have no substance. No feelings."

"I don't believe **that**. A man without feelings would never have helped me the way you have."

He fingered her cheek. "You are so naive. Are all women like you?"

"No," she said with a devilish gleam in her eyes. "I've been told many times that I am highly unusual."

V'Aidan dipped his head down and took possession of her mouth. Erin sighed as she fisted her hands in the folds of his black shirt. "You taste like heaven," she breathed.

He needed to let her go. It was time.

But...

He couldn't do it.

Zeus have mercy on him, he couldn't send her back. Not when all he really wanted to do was hold on to her for the rest of eternity.

The air around them sizzled with electricity as the sky above turned dark. Erin trembled in his arms.

"What is that?" she whispered.

It was his death.

"Don't worry, *akribos*," he said, "I will protect you." The emotion behind the words stunned him most of all. He meant them, and for the first time ever he understood them.

Suddenly one of Zeus's lightning bolts hit the ground, driving them apart.

Erin fell several yards from V'Aidan.

V'Aidan tried to reach her, but before he could, ten demon Skoti appeared and surrounded her.

In her snake form, Krysti'Ana laughed, the sound cackling louder than thunder. "Tell me, human," she lisped. "What do you fear more? Dying yourself or seeing him die in your place?"

"Let her go," V'Aidan said, rising to his feet. He summoned his black armor to shield him and he pulled his sword from the air around them.

"Never," Krysti'Ana said with a laugh. "I need her ideas. I need her mind. Look at you. Look at me. See what she has done to us? You didn't make her weaker by releasing her creativity. You made her stronger. I have never been so powerful."

It was true. Erin's mind, her depth of spirit, was a treasure. One he had sworn to himself that he would protect at any cost. "Release her, or I will kill you." He pierced each of the Skoti with a murderous glance. "All of you."

Krysti'Ana laughed even harder at that. "You are forbidden to take my life."



"Forbidden or not, I will kill you before I see her harmed."

Erin watched in terror as the Skoti attacked V'Aidan. He fought them with his sword and arms, but he was outnumbered. It was futile. They flew at him, tearing his skin with their claws, shredding his armor.

The she-snake caught him with her tail and slammed him into a tree.

V'Aidan's entire body throbbed as he tried to push himself to his feet. In his human form, he didn't stand a chance against so many of them. He couldn't teleport out and leave Erin behind, and without touching her he couldn't teleport out with her.

"What's the matter, little brother?" Krysti'Ana taunted. "Why do you not change to fight me?"

V'Aidan glanced to Erin and he knew why. He didn't want to frighten her. He only wanted ...

He only wanted her love.

The thought tore through him. He was to never know such. Was beyond it. But still the need was there. Aching. Yearning.

V'Aidan struggled to breathe. He could live and lose the possibility of her love forever or he could be what she thought he was and die in this human form.

If he died, she would have no one to protect her....

Lost and unsure, he did what he'd never done before.

He called for help. "Hypnos!"

The god's reply came in the form of M'Ordant.

The Skoti backed down, circling back to Erin and Krysti'Ana in a protective circle.

M'Ordant approached him slowly, his face completely void of any emotion. "What would you have Hypnos do, V'Aidan? Would you have him offer you mercy for your crimes? Tell me, is there any rule made which you have not broken?"

"I..." He looked to Erin as she struggled against the Skotos holding her. Deep in his heart he had known what

Hypnos's answer would be. He was nothing to the gods. Nothing to anyone.

But at least this way, Erin would be returned to her world and she would be free of the Skoti forever. "Protect her for me."

M'Ordant arched a brow at that. "For you? My job is to protect *her from* you." M'Ordant turned to face the Skoti. "He is yours to do with as you please. The woman, however, belongs to me."

V'Aidan felt the foreign sensation of tears in his eyes as he looked at Erin.

She was safe.

As for him ...

He didn't want to live without her anyway.

Sinking to his knees, he dropped his sword and waited for the Skoti to carry out his sentence.

Erin screamed as she realized the monsters intended to kill V'Aidan. They circled around him like hungry lions stalking prey.

"Come," the unknown man said, taking her by the arm.

"They're going to kill him."

"If they don't kill him, I will."

"Why?"

He didn't answer. Erin felt the familiar pull of the Oneroi trying to send her home.

But she wouldn't go. She wouldn't leave V'Aidan alone to face the monsters.

Twisting out of M'Ordant's hold, she ran toward the Skoti and shoved her way through them.

She found V'Aidan on the ground, covered in blood. His armor in pieces around him, he lay helpless.

V'AIDAN felt someone tugging at him. The desperate, grasping hands hurt him even more as they rolled him to his back. He looked up, expecting to see Krysti'Ana poised to end his life, but instead he met the dark brown eyes of heaven.

Erin wrapped herself around him, shielded him with her body as she willed herself to wake up. He heard her loud thoughts screaming in his head.

He wanted to tell her to go but couldn't.

His strength gone, V'Aidan could do nothing more than wrap his arms around her and cradle her gently. Her tears stung his wounds and he wanted to tell her not to cry for him. He wasn't worth it.

He'd never been worth anything until she had taught him kindness.

He heard M'Ordant trying to get through the Skoti to pull Erin back, but the Skoti refused.

"I'll have them both," Krysti'Ana snarled. "His life and her mind."

Closing his eyes, V'Aidan summoned the last of his powers. He kissed Erin on the lips, then sent her home.

As she shimmered out of his world, V'Aidan felt himself slipping, sliding down a deep hole. The world shifted and spun. Too weak to fight it, he allowed himself to go wherever it took him, and he was sure that place would be Tartarus.

Not that it mattered. Any day without Erin in his life was hell.

ERIN woke up from her nightmare with a jerk and a scream lodged in her throat. She couldn't be back, not without V'Aidan. She had reached down deep inside her and had fastened on to him with all she possessed.

Her eyes were clenched shut. She didn't want to open them yet.

Didn't want to know that she had left him behind to die.

There had to be some way back to him. Some way to save him.

Her heart pounding, she felt something shift beneath her.

Opening her eyes, she realized she was back in her bed... and lying draped over a naked and bleeding V'Aidan.

## CHAPTER 5

"Ow," V'Aidan said as he lay in stunned disbelief. His entire being ached from his wounds, but then, he'd suffered a lot worse beatings than this.

Still, in this "real" physical body it hurt so much that he could do nothing more than shake from the weight of the pain.

The only thing that made it bearable was Erin's presence. The softness of her body on his.

And quick on the heels of that thought came the one that if she had managed to bring him here, the others would follow to reclaim him.

V'Aidan had no fear for himself, only that they would come while he was too weak to protect her.

"Oh my gosh, it's you. It's *really* you!"

Erin reached up and touched his swollen jaw where one of the creatures had struck him hard. She brushed his hair back from his forehead and caught the panicked look in his eyes before he shielded it.

Even though bruises and cuts marred his face, she'd never seen anything more spectacular than V'Aidan alive and in her bed.

He was human.

She didn't know how she had managed it. Maybe it was her determination combined with his powers that had been forcing her away from him. Maybe it was a lot of things.

But all that mattered right now was that he was here with her. He wasn't a dream.

V'Aidan was a real-life man.

"I have to get out of here," he said, trying to get up. "I don't belong here."

No, he belonged to her dreams, and yet...

He was actually here. With her.

"I'm bleeding?" he asked, looking at his arm in disbelief. "Is this blood? This is blood. I'm bleeding."

She nodded, torn between the desire to cry for his wounds and to laugh out loud that she had somehow managed to bring him back with her.

"I need to get you to a doctor."

"No!" He winced. "I'm not supposed to be here. I'm not..."

V'Aidan paused. "I'm not human." He closed his eyes to teleport himself home. It didn't work.

Over and over he tried, and over and over he failed.

His heart pounded. It had been untold millennia since he had walked the mortal realm.

He'd forgotten the vividness of this world. The brightness of the colors and sharpness of sounds and smells.

Erin slid off the bed and disappeared while he tried to sort through it. How could he be here where she could see him?

How could he bleed real blood?

It had to be the fact that his demigod essence had been drained out of him during his beating.

The only way to kill a god was to remove all powers from him, which was what the Skoti had been doing. Erin's mind must have found some way to bring him over the threshold in that last moment before he died.

He should be in Tartarus by now, paying for his crimes for the rest of eternity. But somehow she had saved him. Somehow she had brought him here. There was no other explanation.

The power of her mind and spirit was phenomenal.

Erin returned with a damp washcloth. Carefully she wiped the blood from his face and body.

V'Aidan trembled at the softness of her hand and the way the cloth felt gliding over his flesh. She was always so kind. Until her, he had never understood that concept. Never known what it was to help someone else.

Before he realized what he was doing, he captured her lips, then winced as pain swept along his swollen jaw.

"Ow," he said again, pulling back.

Erin slid her hands over his chest as she inspected his wounds. In dreams, her touch had been muted; now it possessed a tender heat unimaginable. It left him breathless and raw.

V'Aidan reached out and cupped her face so that he could study her beautiful features. "Why are you helping me?"

"Because you need it."

He couldn't fathom such an unselfish reason. Such things didn't exist in his realm.

"You need to rest."

"I need clothes," he said.

"I will have to buy you some."

"Buy?"

"Purchase. You don't just walk into a store and have them give you what you need."

V'Aidan listened to the patience in her voice. Patience he wasn't used to. He knew so little about her human world. He'd been relegated to viewing it through the distortions of dreams and nightmares.

The pain inside him, he did know. It was the only emotion left to his kind. It was why they invaded human sleep. There they could feel other things. Even muted emotions were better than none at all.

"Would you . . . please," he forced the foreign word out, "get me some clothes?"

"Yes."

Incredible. She was so willing to help him. He was baffled by it. Slowly, carefully, he left the bed and walked around her room.

Erin's entire body shook as she left him to fetch a tape measure. How could this be real?

Was she still dreaming? There was a surrealness to this that made it seem like fantasy, and yet...

She cursed as she stubbed her toe against the plant stand in her living room.

No, that pain was real.

This wasn't a dream. V'Aidan was really in her world, and if she had pulled him here, maybe, just maybe, she could keep him here.

*Erin! What are you thinking? A man like V'Aidan doesn't belong here. He's not even human.*

And yet he was more human, more man, than anyone else she'd ever known.

She didn't want him to leave. And that thought frightened her most of all.

V'AIDAN looked up as Erin returned a few minutes later with a strange cloth coil. "What is that?" he asked as she approached him while unwinding it.

"It's a tape measure. I need to know your size to buy your pants."

She wrapped a portion of it around his waist, her hands raising chills on his body, her touch raising another part of him as well.

"Thirty-three waist," she said, her breath falling on his chest.

She sank to her knees before him.

V'Aidan shivered at the sight of her brown hair between his knees as she bent to place one edge of the tape on the floor by his foot. She ran it up the inside of his leg.

Erin swallowed at the strength of his body. And when she reached his groin, her heart pounded. He was rigid and hard, and when her hand lightly brushed his sac, he hissed sharply.

"Thirty-six," she said absently, her gaze catching his.

The heat there was intense, and for the first time, she was actually afraid of him. He was a living man now, one who could possess who knew what strengths and powers in this world.

And they were alone in her house.

V'Aidan took her hand in his and led it to his erection. "I need you to touch me, Erin," he whispered, trailing her hand down the length of his shaft. He shivered from her softness. "I need to know that this is real and not... not a dream."

Because deep in his heart he was afraid this was nothing more than Hades tormenting him already. Perhaps he was dead and this was the way they intended to torture him.

Erin quivered at the sensation of his hard, hot manhood in her palm, and his strong, tapered hand leading her strokes. In her dreams, she'd always been uninhibited with him. Her phantom lover had never been real, only a figment of her imagination.

But it was a living, warm body she touched now. One of flesh and blood. A beautiful, masculine body that made her quiver and burn with something more than lust.

The look in his eyes scorched her. And she knew what he wanted. He wanted comfort. He needed to know that she still cared for him. Even in this world that was alien to him.

Was he as afraid of all this as she was?

How long could they be together before their respective worlds tore them apart?

V'Aidan knew he should release her, yet he couldn't bring himself to do it. He needed her. Needed her touch in a way that defied explanation.

She rose up on her knees and, to his utter shock, placed her mouth on him. He moaned at the feeling of her lips against the tip of his shaft, of her hot tongue stroking him. She cupped him gently with one hand, stroking his sac in time with the flicks of her tongue against him.

Never had anyone touched him like this. He felt weak before her. Powerless against her.

And in that moment, he knew he would never again be able to let her go.

Dear Zeus, what was he to do?

She was mortal and he ...

He was cursed.



Erin stroked and soothed him, and when he released himself she didn't pull away.

Only when he was drained and weak did she pull back and look up at him. Then slowly, meticulously, she kissed her way up his body until she stood before him.

"It'll all be okay, V'Aidan," she whispered. "I promise."

No, it wouldn't. He knew better. There was no way to hide from the others. Sooner or later, they would come.

But he didn't want to scare her. Someway, he would protect her. No matter the cost to him.

He gathered her into his arms and held her close. If he could, he would fly her away from here. Take her back to the Vanishing Isle and keep her forever.

And then he felt it. Felt the evil presence of his sister. The hairs on the back of his neck rose. In this condition he would never be able to stop Krysti'Ana.

The phone rang.

"I'll be right back."

He released her; all the while he looked around trying to find Krysti'Ana. Her malevolence washed over him. Somehow she knew he was here.

He reached out with his thoughts, but in his weakened, wounded state he couldn't contact her.

It didn't matter.

He knew his sister's unspoken promise. She would be coming soon and he would have to find some way to protect Erin from her clutches.

Erin returned. "Sorry about that. It was a friend from work." She headed toward her bathroom. "I'm going to take a quick shower, then buy your clothes, okay?"

He nodded but didn't speak. He couldn't. Not when thoughts of his siblings occupied his mind.

He walked around Erin's small apartment, trying to find where his sister could be hiding. He found nothing, and as the minutes went by, his sense of her grew weaker, though whether from her leaving or from his own diminishing powers, he wasn't sure.

Erin left the bathroom, her face bright and rosy. "I can't

believe I have you here." She threw herself into his arms and held him tight. "Oh, V'Aidan, tell me they can't get you here."

He opened his mouth to answer her honestly, then stopped himself. He didn't want to steal the happiness from her bright brown eyes.

"We're safe," he said, the word sticking in his throat.

She kissed him then, hot and passionately, then left him alone while she went for his clothing.

V'Aidan returned to lie on the bed and rest himself. If he could sleep, he could replenish his strength a lot faster, but he didn't dare close his eyes. Didn't dare fall asleep where he could reenter his world.

They would be waiting for him. With Erin's help, he had escaped them before. But he was sure there wouldn't be a second escape.

Sooner or later, they would take him; then Erin would be alone.

A little while later, V'Aidan heard Erin enter the apartment. Her shoes made the lightest of noises on the carpet; even so, he knew her distinctive walk. Knew her scent, her sound. Knew things about her he'd never known about anyone else.

He turned over in the bed as she entered the room with a bag in her hands.

"I didn't mean to wake you," she said.

"I wasn't sleeping."

She moved forward and set the bag on the foot of the bed, then came to rest beside him. She placed her hand against his brow, then frowned.

"How do you feel?" she asked gently.

"Like I've been beaten."

She rolled her eyes at his blasé tone. "You have a pretty bad fever there. Maybe I should—"

"You can't call a doctor, Erin. Just because I appear human, it doesn't make me one of you."

"I know." She sat by his side and brushed his hair back from his damp brow. "So what are we going to do?"

He took her hand in his and ran the backs of her knuckles along his jaw, which had already begun to heal. Her touch was sublime. He'd never known such a thing existed. "I don't know."

"I was thinking while I was out that maybe we could find a ceremony or something to make you human. Some kind of ritual."

He smiled at the idea. "It's a good thought, love, but there's no such thing."

V'Aidan watched her then, and it was on the tip of his tongue to explain to her exactly what he was. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. Not after they had been through so much.

All he wanted was to enjoy what little time they had, and with that thought, he forced himself to get up.

Erin protested his movements as he dressed. "You're still hurt."

"I'll be fine," he said dismissively. "My kind heals fast."

Erin growled low in her throat as she watched him dress. The man wouldn't listen.

Insufferably male, he refused to relax for the rest of the day. He wouldn't even stay behind and rest while she went to the grocery store.

But she had to admit she really did like having him along. She'd lived alone for so long that she hadn't realized just how much fun someone could have in the produce department.

"So," V'Aidan said as she thumped a cantaloupe, "what are you listening for?"

She held it up to his ear and thumped. "This one is too ripe." Then she held up another one and let him hear the difference. "This one isn't."

She put the good cantaloupe in the cart, then turned around to catch him thumping bananas. Erin quickly grabbed them away from him. "We don't thump those."

"Why?"

"It'll bruise them."

"Oh." He looked around, then paused. "What about those?"

She turned to see the grapes. "Only thump if you want to turn them into wine."

He pulled her into his arms. "What about if I thump you?"

She smiled. "I'd probably make all kinds of interesting noises if you did."

He grinned at that and gave her a quick, scorching kiss that sent heat throughout her entire body.

As they walked through the store, Erin couldn't help noticing the stares V'Aidan collected. She became aware again of just how different the two of them were. He was tall, sexy, and gorgeous and she was plain and simple.

She'd only had a few boyfriends and most of them had been as average-looking as she was. But V'Aidan ...

He deserved a beautiful woman.

"Hey?" he asked as they reached the dairy section. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"You look sad."

"Just tired."

She saw the concern in his celestial eyes. "How tired?"

It was then she caught his meaning. "They'll be after us again when we sleep, won't they?"

He looked away and she had her answer.

*"If they don't kill him, I will."* M'Ordant's words echoed in her head.

"I won't let them have you," she said, taking V'Aidan's arm. "There has to be some way we can fight them."

He draped his arm over her shoulders and held her close. "You would fight for me?"

"Yes."

"Then I am the luckiest being in the universe."

V'Aidan gave her a tight squeeze as he inhaled the scent of her hair. And he wondered morbidly if she would feel that way if she knew the truth of his past.

If she ever knew the truth of him ...

He wanted to tell her. But he didn't dare.

V'Aidan clenched his teeth. She would never know, any

more than he would let her be harmed because of him. He would fight this battle, all right. Fight until either he won or they killed him. But he would do it the way he had lived since the dawn of time.

Alone.

He and Erin finished shopping and were putting their items in the car when V'Aidan heard a woman shrieking in the dark parking lot.

He saw a man running away.

"Oh, no," Erin breathed. "He stole her purse."

Without thinking, V'Aidan took off after the man. He caught up to him at the alley beside the grocery store.

The man turned on him with a gun and aimed it straight at his heart. "Don't mess with me, man. I'm your worst friggin' nightmare."

V'Aidan couldn't help laughing at his words. "You have no idea."

The man fired the gun. V'Aidan ignored the bullet that entered his chest without pain or blood. He took the purse from the man, then caught the thief by his throat and held him back against the wall.

It was then V'Aidan felt himself slipping. He felt his true form welling up. His hand went from that of a human to—

"V'Aidan?"

Erin's voice brought him back. He recovered himself and stared at the thief, who was now ghostly pale from having witnessed the changes on V'Aidan's face.

"The next time you want to steal from someone, think of me waiting for you every time you close your eyes."

The thief quietly wet himself.

Erin ran up behind him with a security officer in tow. V'Aidan released the thief into the officer's custody, then handed him the woman's purse.

"Are you all right?" Erin asked, her eyes falling to the hole in V'Aidan's shirt where the bullet had entered his flesh. Mortal weapons couldn't harm an immortal being.

V'Aidan nodded. His powers were returning.

"Take me home, Erin," he said, his heart tugging at the word. He'd never had a home before. Never really understood the meaning of the word and what it entailed.

Until now.

He followed her to her car and they drove back to her apartment in silence.

In fact, they spoke very little as Erin made their dinner and they ate it.

Afterward, he helped her clean up and watched her closely. What would it be like to stay here, like this? To have this woman by his side every night? If he had such, he would never make her hurt. Never let her want. He would do anything in his power to shelter and comfort her.

But all the wishing in the world couldn't make it real.

It was only a dream....

Once they were finished cleaning up their dinner, they lay entwined on the couch while she watched television.

V'Aidan watched her. He held her cradled to his chest, feeling her breath fall on his skin.

*Love me, Erin.*

The words hung in his heart, unspoken as he ran his hand through her hair. He had no right to ask for her love. Had no right to ask anything of her.

*"You are a scourge, boy. Despicable. Unsightly and cold. No one will ever welcome something like you. It's why you have to creep into their dreams. It's the only way anyone will ever have anything to do with you."*

All too well he knew the truth of Hypnos's words.

Over the centuries, he had hardened his heart to the world. To everything. He'd shut himself off completely until the night when a pair of fear-filled brown eyes had looked up at him with kindness and hope.

Now, he just wanted a way to live out his life staring into those eyes. Feeling her tiny hands on his skin.

Erin listened to V'Aidan's heart beating under her cheek. He smelled of warm sandalwood and spice. She ran

her hand over where the thief had shot him, still amazed that no scar or wound remained. It was an awful reminder of the fact that her entire day with V'Aidan had been an illusion.

He wasn't born of her world. And no doubt tonight they would be parted for eternity.

The thought broke her heart. She couldn't stand the thought of not seeing him again.

If this was her last night with him, then she wanted it to last.

Crawling up his body, she met his gaze and saw the hunger in the crystal silver gaze. She cupped his cheek in her hand and kissed him.

V'Aidan growled at the taste of her as his body roared to life. He tore the shirt from her as he rolled to press her down into the couch.

Erin heard the cotton fabric tear but didn't care. She wanted him with the same desperation. She pulled his shirt over his head and feasted on the sight of his bare chest. Only scars remained of the wounds he'd suffered, and he'd told her that, by tomorrow, if he survived tonight, even those would be gone.

He removed their clothes so fast that she could barely follow his moves. He leaned her up against the back of the sofa arm and drove himself deep into her.

They moaned in unison.

She wished she could keep him inside her forever. She never wanted another day without him in it.

V'Aidan made love to her feverishly, savoring every deep stroke. He caressed her breasts as he kissed her, felt her from the top of his head all the way to his toes.

Her warm body surrounded his, fit him to perfection. And the feel of her hands on his back . . .

It was bliss. Pure bliss. He closed his eyes and delighted in the feel of her breasts on his chest, her tongue on his throat. Oh, yes, he wanted to stay here with her.

Forever.

Erin ran her hand through his long hair, her fingers

clenched as pleasure ripped through her, each thrust deeper and harder than the last. She wrapped her legs around his waist, bucking her hips in time to him. Drawing him into her body even deeper. She clung to him as she came, crying out his name.

He kissed her lips and quickened his pace until he released himself inside her.

Erin lay still, feeling his essence fill her. She didn't want to move, didn't want to feel him leave her.

"I love you, V'Aidan," she said before she could stop herself.

V'Aidan froze at the words. Pulling back, he stared at her in disbelief. "What?"

Her cheeks turned pink as her brown gaze shredded what was left of his heart. "I love you."

"You can't. It's not possible."

"Possible or not, I do."

V'Aidan gathered her into his arms and held on to her desperately. He shook from the force of what he felt for her. So powerful, so overwhelming.

Sated to a depth he'd never known before, he pulled her on top of him and listened to her even breaths as her sleep took her.

He wanted to wake her up but knew better. Unlike him, she had to have her sleep.

"Erin," he whispered softly as he stroked her hair. "I promise you, I'll always be what you think I am."

Resigned to the inevitable, he closed his eyes and waited for M'Ordant and Krysti'Ana to come for them.



## CHAPTER 6

V'AIDAN woke up to a piercing screech that felt as if it would shatter his eardrums.

He groaned at the awful sound as Erin stirred on top of him.

"What is that?" he asked.

"My alarm clock," she said, rising from him to rush to her bedroom.

It wasn't until her return that they both realized what had happened.

Nothing.

"Did you have any dreams?" he asked.

She shook her head. "You?"

"No," he said, smiling.

"Do you think..."

His smile faded. "No. They can find us. Sooner or later, they will."

Erin closed her eyes and cursed the thought of it. "Maybe they won't bother." She saw the doubt in V'Aidan's eyes.

Wanting to cheer his dour mood, she pulled him up by his arm. "C'mon. Let's take a shower and then I'll call in sick to work."

"You can't. What if you get fired?"

She shrugged. "I'll find another job."

He shook his head at her. "You are amazing."

She smiled at him.

Erin called into work only to be reminded of the marketing report that had been due on Friday, which she had forgotten to drop off.

"The meeting is at noon," John told her.

"Okay, I'm on my way up there with it."

"Is something wrong?" V'Aidan asked as she hung up the phone.

She shook her head. "I just have to take something to the office. Want to come with me?"

"Sure."

They didn't speak much as she drove across town. V'Aidan held her hand the entire time and Erin had to admit she liked the strength of his hand wrapped around hers.

Once they reached her building, Erin led V'Aidan into the maze where her cubicle was. He watched the hustle and bustle of corporate life with a dispassionate stare.

Erin went to John's office, only to find it empty.

With V'Aidan directly behind her, she dropped the report in John's in-box, then turned to leave.

Chrissy stood in the doorway with Rick Sword behind her. The two of them stepped into the office and closed the door.

Erin heard V'Aidan curse.

What the devil was going on?

"What are you doing here?" V'Aidan asked, his voice laced with anger.

"Waiting for you." Chrissy stepped around them and pulled the blinds closed. "You won't dare fight us in her workplace, will you, V'Aidan? All we have to do is make ourselves invisible to the humans and they won't see or hear anything but her. And *her* they'll lock up in an asylum as soon as we're gone."

Erin still didn't understand what was going on. But she had a sick feeling that she had been duped from the very beginning by all of this.

If V'Aidan could be real, then so could they.

"What is this?" Erin demanded.

Chrissy's eyes flashed to yellow and it was then Erin knew the truth.

Chrissy was the she-snake from her nightmares.

"Stay out of it, human," Rick said. "We will deal with you after we finish with him."

V'Aidan pulled Erin behind him.

"How very sweet." Chrissy's tone was mocking. "One would think you were Oneroi they way you coddle her."

"He *is* Oneroi," Erin shot back, her entire body shaking from panic. How could she and V'Aidan fight them here? Like this?

Rick laughed at her words. "Is that the lie you told her?"

V'Aidan held his breath. He didn't want her to find out like this. "Erin, I..." His words faltered as he turned to see the confused look on her face.

He didn't want to tell her the truth. He didn't want to be what he was anymore. She had shown him something better and he didn't want to go back to the way he'd been.

"What does she mean?" Erin asked.

"He's your dragon," Krysti'Ana said mercilessly. "The thing I fought the first night we met in your dreams."

"No." Erin shook her head. "It's a lie. V'Aidan, tell me it's a lie."

He wanted to, but he couldn't. He'd lied so many times that it shouldn't have mattered to him. Yet it did.

"I'm a Skotos, Erin."

Her eyes filled with tears. "It was you! You who made me so terrified I couldn't sleep? You who chased me and... and..." She couldn't even begin to recount the torture he had put her through during those first few weeks. She had thought she was losing her mind. "Why did you trick me into thinking you were Oneroi? Was it just so you could feed from me?"

"At first, I only wanted to get you away from Krysti'Ana. I knew you wouldn't go with the dragon, so I appeared to you as a man. And then later..." His voice trailed off as his eyes went dead.

"You lied to me."

"I know."

She backed away from him. The agony in her eyes sliced him.

V'Aidan clenched his teeth as grief washed over him. "I needed you, Erin. And I didn't know how else to keep you with me." He reached for her.

She cringed and the gesture tore through him. She no longer wanted his touch.

Like all the others, she, too, rejected him.

The hurt betrayal on her face made him feel lower than any of the insults the others had ever dealt him.

"I should have known," she whispered, "someone like you pretended to be could never really want someone like me."

V'Aidan winced at the pain in her voice. "Erin, don't say that. You are the most wonderful person who has ever been born."

"Is that another of your lies?"

V'Aidan closed his eyes. There was nothing he could say to make this right. He'd been wrong from the very beginning.

All he could do now was make sure no other of his kind hurt her.

"M'Ordant!" he called, summoning his brother to him.

The Oneroi appeared between Krysti'Ana and Rec'Sord.

V'Aidan took a deep breath. "I will go with them peacefully if you will keep them from her."

"It is my job, is it not?"

V'Aidan nodded. It was the job of the Oneroi to help. It was the job of the Skotos to use and destroy.

He turned to look at Erin, but she refused to meet his gaze. Judging by the tears she fought, he would say he'd done his job very well this time.

His last view of her was when M'Ordant wrapped his arm around her the way he yearned to.

Krysti'Ana and Rec'Sord grabbed him to take him home.

"I'm sorry, Erin," V'Aidan whispered as they shimmered from her realm into his. "I'm so very sorry."

Erin didn't move. She knew V'Aidan was gone. She'd heard the sincerity of his apology as he vanished. But inside she was all raw emotions. Raw betrayal. She kept seeing the horrible dragon in the cave. Feeling the scaly talons on her.

How could that be the same man who had made love to her? The same man who had made her love *him*?

The betrayal of it lacerated her heart. Why? Why had he made her believe in him?

"I don't understand any of this," she said to M'Ordant.

"Sh," he said, brushing her hair back from her face. "Krysti'Ana and Rec'Sord wanted you for their own, but V'Aidan got to you first. When she found out he'd beat her to you, she was livid."

"But how did he find me?"

"Something in your subconscious called out to him. He was only supposed to give you a single nightmare and move on, but he didn't."

"And Chrissy?"

"When she couldn't take you from him, she called in her mate, Rec'Sord. I was alerted shortly thereafter to protect you. I told V'Aidan to leave you. He refused."

Her head swam from M'Ordant's information and from the pain and hurt inside her. "Why did he refuse to leave me?"

"I don't know. I guess it's just what he is. The Skoti suck the hopes and dreams out of others. I suppose he got a kick out of playing the hero with you. Building you up so he could hurt you more."

Erin felt so foolish. So betrayed. How could she have been so blind?

*The eyes*, she thought with a start. She should have realized the eyes were the same color.

Was she really that desperate for a hero that she would accept a demon in disguise?

Suddenly, she felt ill.

Heartbroken, she headed home, wanting to forget she had ever heard of V'Aidan.

ERIN sat alone for the rest of the day, thinking, remembering.

*"You should be a writer."* V'Aidan's kind voice echoed through her head.

It wasn't the demon she remembered as she sat on her couch, clutching a pillow to her middle; it was the man. And as she sat alone in her apartment, she realized she would never again see him.

Never be able to share her day or her thoughts.

Most of all, she couldn't tell him her dreams. V'Aidan might have started off by feeding from her, but in the end he had given her so much more.

He had been her friend as much as he had been her lover. The loss tore through her.

But what could she do? He was back in his world and she was in hers. It was over.

There was nothing left.

In the end, the Skotos had won after all. V'Aidan had drained all her happiness, all her hopes, all her dreams. What was left was an aching, empty shell that wanted nothing more of this world or the other.

As the days went by, the pain of betrayal began to lessen and Erin remembered more of her dreams.

The more she remembered, the more she wanted to see V'Aidan one last time. Could she have been so stupid as to let him completely fool her?

She didn't think so.

V'Aidan wasn't that cruel. She'd seen things in him that defied what she knew him to be. His words came back to her. Words of protection. He had taught her to release her creativity to keep the Skoti away.

And there at the end . . .

*"I will go with them peacefully if you will keep them from her."*

No, those weren't the words of a monster. Those were the words of a man who cared more for her safety than for his own. Such a man, regardless of what M'Ordant had told her, was not all evil.

Desperate, Erin went to sleep, trying to find V'Aidan again. It didn't work.

Erin woke up in the middle of the night, terrified. Where was V'Aidan and why wouldn't he come to her?

For more than a week she tried everything she could think of to reach V'Aidan. Nothing worked. And as every day passed, she hurt more.

There had to be some way to contact him.

DISCOURAGED and heartbroken, Erin sat at her desk, dazed. She'd barely slept in days and she was so weary.

"V'Aidan," she whispered. "Why won't you talk to me?"

"Erin," John said from his doorway. "In my office. Now."

By the tone of his voice she figured she was in serious trouble. No doubt he was going to fire her for missing so much work.

What did she care anyway? At this point, she was only going through the motions of life. Nothing was important to her now. She'd lost the only thing that gave her life meaning. The only one who had ever believed in her.

Soul-sick, she got up and walked the short distance to John's office.

"Close the door. Sit down."

She did as he commanded.

He sat there for several minutes, sipping his coffee, reading his E-mail.

She wondered if he had forgotten her. Then he turned, pulled his glasses down the bridge of his nose, and stared at her. "It's awful, isn't it?"

"What?"

"Loving an immortal."

Erin had a sudden urge to clean out her ear. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, come on, don't play innocent with me. Why do you think Chrissy was working here?" He pointed to the dolphin tattoo on his left forearm. "I'm an oracle for the Greek gods. Which is why I'm so damned tired and cranky all the time. They have the most annoying habit of bursting in when you least expect it." He sighed disgustedly. "The least they could do is pay me, but oh no, I was lucky enough to be born into this. And benefits ..." He snorted. "No sleep, no pay, no peace. Got to love it."

She disregarded his tirade. "So, you're like the Oracle of Delphi? I thought they were all women."

"Those particular oracles are, but not all of us are female. Obviously. We are merely human channels to the various gods."

Totally baffled, she stared at him, wondering if maybe this was a dream, too, or if the Big Guy had lost *his* mind. Something wasn't right, at any rate.

"Okay, so you're an oracle. Want to tell me why you hired Chrissy if you knew she was a dream-sucking monster?"

He shrugged. "She is a god and I have no choice except to serve her. She wanted a chance to scope out human targets. I merely provided her a safe cover."

"You sold me out?"

"No," he said, his stern look turning gentle. "They weren't supposed to drain you the way V'Aidan did. Trust me. What he did was wrong. And you can rest assured he is being adequately punished for it."

Her heart stopped at the forbidding note in his voice. "Punished how?"

"What do you care?" he asked, pushing the glasses back up on his nose. "You're rid of him. Right? No more Skoti in your dreams. You have your life back to yourself."

"I want to know." No, she *needed* to know what had happened to him.

John took a drink of coffee. "Why, they sent him to Tartarus, of course."

Erin didn't understand the term, and at the moment she wished she'd paid more attention in school. "Is that like jail?"



"Oh, no, hon. It's hell. They killed him the minute they took him back to his realm."

Erin couldn't breathe as tears welled up in her eyes. The weight in her chest was excruciating. It wasn't true. It couldn't be true. "They killed him?"

"Didn't you know?" he asked simply. "Didn't he tell you what they were going to do to him? V'Aidan was never one who played by the rules. He'd already been banned centuries ago from taking human form and banished from this realm."

"Why?"

"Because he would pretend to be human. Skoti are not supposed to have any creativity of their own. They're not supposed to want love. Not supposed to want anything except a single night of dream surfing, hopping from one person to the next. He'd behaved for centuries, until he found you. Even after they stripped all his skin from his immortal body, he couldn't stay away from you."

John sighed. "Hypnos had already banned his transformation powers, so he decided there was nothing more to be done with him. Since V'Aidan wouldn't obey him, they sent him to Tartarus for the rest of eternity."

"But he didn't hurt me. Not really."

"Didn't he? You look awful from here. Like you've been crying for months. And I swear you've lost at least ten pounds since all this started."

"That's not his fault."

"No?"

"No. I don't want him to suffer because of me."

His gaze searching hers, John pulled an envelope out of his desk drawer and handed it to her.

"What's this?"

"Open it."

Frowning, Erin did as he said and saw the three pictures of her and V'Aidan at the carnival. Her hand shook as grief and agony swirled in her heart. "Where did you get these?"

"M'Ordant sent them to you. He thought you might like them as a souvenir."

She stared at V'Aidan's handsome face. At the love in his eyes.

"I have to see him," she insisted.

John shook his head and sighed again. "Well, I'm afraid it's too late now."

"It can't be. Please. I need to see him again. Please, tell me there's some way I can reach him.

John narrowed an intense gaze on her. "That depends on whether or not you really love him."

ERIN still couldn't believe what she was doing. She'd allowed John to teleport her into the Underworld, where he'd told her M'Ordant would be waiting to guide her to V'Aidan.

Not that she really believed in the Underworld, but at this point...

M'Ordant materialized in front of her. "Are you sure about this?"

"Yes."

Nodding, he led her through a deep, dark cavern that reminded her much of the one V'Aidan had used to torment her. They walked for what seemed like miles before they came to a small cave.

A light was shining inside and she could hear a man's voice speaking. "You're thinking of her again, aren't you?"

She looked inside and saw the once-proud dragon lying weakly on the floor with his back to her. Someone had chained his neck to a large boulder. His shoulders were slumped, his wings lying broken and useless on the earthen floor. His reddish skin had an ashen, dehydrated look and every inch of his body was covered with bleeding welts.

Erin swallowed at the sight. Could that monster really be the man she loved?

"What's her name?" the man asked. "Elise? Erika?"

"Erin," the dragon rasped, his voice both familiar and yet foreign to her. "Her name is Erin."

"Ah, yes, Erin." The man shook his head. "Tell me what kind of worthless fool gives up immortality for a woman?"

Especially a woman who threw him so quickly to his death?"

"She was worth it."

"Was she? M'Ordant told me she was dreaming of a man last night. Some golden-haired type. Got to figure that if she's dreaming of someone so soon, she's probably already got him picked out and is ready to sleep with him. Bet she's giving him the high hard one even as we speak."

The dragon let out an anguished cry that tore through her.

The man didn't seem to care. He dumped food and water into two containers and moved them away from the dragon. "You'd better hurry. I don't think you've made it yet before your food evaporated." Then he vanished.

Erin watched as the dragon struggled to reach the food and water. His wounds bled anew as he limped, straining against the boulder that would only barely budge. He held one to his heart, and when she saw what it clutched, her own heart splintered apart in pain.

It was that stupid wreath of wildflowers she'd made.

V'Aidan collapsed just before the water, his claw reaching out desperately for it.

Tears streaming down her face, Erin ran to where he lay. She grabbed the water, noting half of it was already gone, and as she touched the container, she knew why. It was red-hot. It burned her hands, but she didn't care.

V'Aidan needed the water.

Kneeling down, she helped him sit up enough so he could drink.

V'Aidan gasped at the liquid as it soothed his parched throat. His eyes were so swollen from his beatings that he couldn't see who helped him. All he knew was that at last he had a moment of peace from his burning thirst.

"Thank you," he breathed, laying his head back down.

"You're welcome."

He froze at the voice that had stayed with him all these weeks. The voice that both soothed and tortured him.

It was then he felt her gentle touch against his scaly flesh.

Erin cried over what they'd done to him. She ran her hand along his rocky flesh, unable to believe they had reduced him to such a state.

He tried to push himself away from her. "Go. I don't want you to see me in this hideous form."

She laid her cheek against his and held him close. She now understood what he'd meant that night at the carnival. "I don't care what you look like, V'Aidan. I love you as you are."

Those words tore through him. "You're not real," he said, his voice ragged. "My precious Erin can't love a monster. No one can. She is goodness and light, and I... I am nothing."

He looked up and roared at the ceiling, "Damn you, Hades! How dare you mock me like this, you bastard! Isn't it enough for you that I ache every minute of every hour for her? Just leave me to suffer in peace."

Erin refused to let go of him. "It's not an illusion, V'Aidan. I want us to go home. Together."

Tears welled in his swollen eyes, stinging them unmercifully. It was a cruel lie. He'd never had a home. Never had love.

He pulled against the chain that choked him, wishing for one moment that he could be with Erin again in her dreams. It had been the only time in eternity he had ever known happiness. "I am damned here, Erin. I have no powers. Nothing to offer you at all. You must go. If you stay here too long, they won't let you leave."

Erin looked around his cold, dark prison that smelled and slithered. She'd never seen a more inhospitable place. Her worst fear had been being stuck in this cave with the dragon.

But if that was what it took to have V'Aidan, then she was willing to do it. "I'm not going to leave you again."

He lifted his head and she could tell he was trying to see her. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that if you can't go home with me, then I will stay here with you. Forever."

V'Aidan gaped at her. "You don't know what you're doing." He pushed at her with his talon. "Go!"

She didn't move. "I will not leave you."

He gathered her into his arms and held her close. "If you really love me, Erin, you won't stay. I could never stand the thought of knowing you were here because of me. Please, love, please go and never look back."

Erin sat in indecision, holding his talon in her hand. How could she leave him here, like this, knowing no one else would help him? Comfort him?

M'Ordant moved forward and pulled her away from V'Aidan, then walked her to the opening, where he kept her still.

For several minutes, V'Aidan didn't move at all. Then he lifted his head and tried to look around.

"Erin?" he asked quietly. "Are you still here?"

M'Ordant motioned for her silence. "She's gone now."

V'Aidan's lip quivered with sadness. "You sent her home?"

"Yes."

"Thank you." He lay down as if all his strength had been stripped from him.

"Tell me," M'Ordant said. "Why didn't you want her to stay with you?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Understand what?"

"Love."

M'Ordant snorted. "What does a Skotos know of love?"

"Absolutely nothing ..." He took a deep breath. "And everything. I couldn't ask her to stay here when I know how much this place scares her."

"But you wanted her to stay?"

V'Aidan nodded weakly. "More than I want my freedom. Now, leave me, brother."

Erin wiped the tears from her face as she stared at M'Ordant. She gave him a hopeful look.

"Can I stay?" she whispered so that V'Aidan wouldn't hear her.

His face impassive, M'Ordant shook his head and led her from the room. "It's not up to me."

"Then who?"

He refused to answer. "You have to leave."

"I won't leave him," she said, her voice firm. "And no one is going to make me."

Erin found out those were famous last words as she came awake back in her office. When dealing with Greek gods, human will didn't amount to much.

Heartbroken, she wept, thinking about V'Aidan in his hell and the fact that she was the cause of it.

Worst of all, there was absolutely nothing she could do to help him. Nothing.

"V'AIDAN."

V'Aidan clenched his teeth at Hypnos's voice. He tucked Erin's wreath under a nearby rock to keep the god from seeing it and taking it from him as he had done the pictures.

It was all V'Aidan had of her and he couldn't bear the thought of losing it.

He forced himself upright and cleared his throat of the grief that choked him. "I didn't realize it was time for more punishment."

Hypnos snorted. "I can't break you, can I?"

He sensed the god moving around him.

"You know," Hypnos said irritably, "I have tried since the dawn of time to make you fear me. And you never have. Why is that?"

"I can't feel emotion, remember?"

"No. What you are is disrespectful, irreverent, and sarcastic. You have never fit in with us. And the thing that has always made me maddest with you is that you never even tried to."

V'Aidan gave a weak laugh. "A Skotos who is evil to the bone, imagine that."

"Well, therein is your problem. Unlike the others, you never were. I never could kill that last tiny bit of goodness

in you. That last bit that was capable of honor. Capable of sacrifice."

V'Aidan frowned.

"M'Ordant told me what you did with Erin. Both on earth and here. As a result, Hades has informed me that he can't keep you in Tartarus. Only souls who are completely incapable of love can stay here."

A burning sensation started in V'Aidan's body, and with every heartbeat that passed, he felt himself growing stronger.

"It seems to me, boy, you have a decision to make."

ERIN opened the door to her apartment. The familiar hole in her heart burned as she imagined what it would be like to come home, just once, and have V'Aidan here.

She'd been doing that a lot lately. Daydreaming. She'd never really daydreamed before. And she'd been writing. But there was no one to share it with.

That hurt most of all.

Toeing her shoes off, she set her keys down on the mantel and happened to see a white rose petal on the carpet. She frowned as she noticed several more.

They seemed to form a trail leading to her bedroom. She followed them.

When she got to the doorway, her heart stopped.

V'Aidan was asleep in her bed. His sleek black hair was spread out over the pillows, the covers tangled in his long, tawny limbs.

He was the most gorgeous thing she'd ever seen in her life.

Erin laughed as tears welled in her eyes. How? How could he be here?

Rushing to her bed, she dropped to her knees and tried to wake him.

He didn't budge.

No matter what she tried, he wouldn't wake.

"V'Aidan?" she said, swallowing in fear. "Please, look at me."

Nothing.

Terrified, she saw a small note card on the nightstand. Picking it up, she read it:

*It is through true love that all miracles are performed. If you really love me, Erin, kiss my lips and I will be born into your world as a mortal man. Otherwise, I shall be waiting for you only in your dreams.*

*You have until midnight to decide.*

V

She didn't need until midnight to decide. Cupping his face in her hands, she kissed him with all the love in her heart.

His chest rose sharply as his arms wrapped around her and held her tight.

Erin laughed happily as V'Aidan deepened their kiss. Her head swam from his warmth, his passion, and she never wanted to let him go.

Nipping her lips, he pulled back to smile at her. The love in his silvery-blue eyes scorched her. "I take it you want to keep me?"

"Buddy, you try and leave me and I'll follow you to the ends of the earth and beyond to find you and bring you home."

V'Aidan laughed. She'd already proven that to him.

Erin shivered as he unbuttoned her shirt. "I think I know what you want to do first as a mortal man."

He ran his tongue over her throat, up to her ear, where his breath sent chills through her. "Believe me, love, you won't be sleeping tonight."



## EPILOGUE

*Two years later*

V'AIDAN lay on the sofa with his infant daughter asleep on his chest. He stared at her mop of chestnut curls, curious about what she was dreaming.

He felt his wife standing over them.

Looking up, he caught Erin's gorgeous smile. "Hi," he said, wondering what she was up to. There was a gleam in her eye much like the one she'd had the day she'd told him she was pregnant.

"Guess what?" she asked, her voice rife with excitement.

"You're pregnant again?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "It's only been three months since we had Emma."

"It happens."

She blew him a raspberry, then brought her arm from around her back and shoved a book into his hands.

V'Aidan stared at it blankly until the name on the cover registered. "Oh my God," he breathed, "it's your novel."

"I know," she said, jumping up and down. "My editor sent me the first copy of it! They'll be shipped to the stores next week."

Careful not to wake the baby, V'Aidan shot off the couch to grab Erin into his arms.

Erin sighed at the feel of his lips on hers. Even now, those lips could incinerate her. And his smell... Goodness, how she loved the scent of his skin.

"Thank you, V'Aidan," she said, pulling back to stare into those hauntingly silver eyes. "I would never have written it without you."

"And I would never have lived without you."

Erin held him close, delighting in the feel of him and her daughter. The two of them were the greatest gift Erin had ever known.

And it was then she realized that even out of the darkest nightmare, something good could come. It had taken strength and courage, but in the end, it had been worth the battle.

"I love you, Erin," he whispered against her hair.

"I love you, V'Aidan, and I always will."