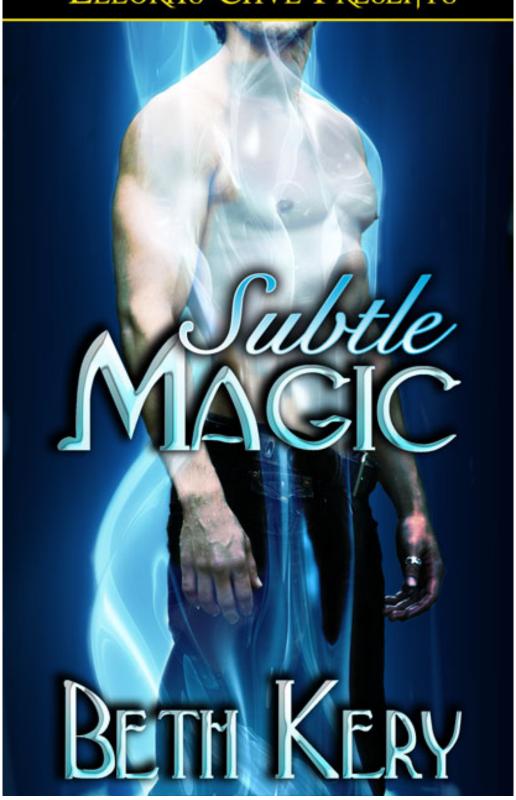
Ellora's Cave Presents



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



Subtle Magic

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SUBTLE MAGIC

Beth Kery

This one is dedicated to E.J.

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Author Note

So there may well be in existence a creature endowed with a rational spirit and a corporeity less gross, more subtle than man's.

For the incubus, by reason of his rational mind and immortal spirit, is equal to man; and by reason of his body, more noble, because more subtle, so he is more perfect and more dignified than man. Consequently, when having intercourse with an incubus, man does not degrade, but rather dignifies, his nature.

They (incubi) practice perfect coition, and sometimes beget.

Incubi, from their nature, may be well be styled Sons of God.

It is clear that (incubi) are neither evil Demons nor Good Angels.

"...the children thus begotten by Incubi are tall, very hardy and bloodily bold... It is generally a fact that men thus begotten (by incubi) excel other men, yet such superiority is not always shown by their vices, but sometimes by their bravery, and even their virtues."

Lodovico Maria Sinistrari, Demoniality

The Watchers were...known in Hebrew as nun resh... 'those who watch'...

- Andrew Collins, From the Ashes of Angels: The Forbidden Legacy of a Fallen Race

"The sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair..."

-Genesis 6:2a

Glossary

Dionytion Ceremony: The Watcher celebration that occurs when a mate in her new incarnation reaches her Second Change, and thus can be re-united with her Watcher lover.

Dionytion Stone: An ancient, columnar stone that is a tool for raising the vibratory rate of subtle energies. Watchers use it to amplify the power of a mate's Rush in the Dionytion Ceremony.

Druaga: The ancient line of priestesses who were identified at birth as being able to wield power in the subtle realms and then trained for that specific purpose. It was only women such as the Druaga that were able to successfully mate with the mysterious Watcher fathers.

First Change: This is the change in a female human's subtle and physical bodies that equates with what human's would call puberty.

Grigori Council: The Watcher ruling body consisting of the King and five other Watchers who have been chosen and tested for their degree of wisdom and strength.

Lema: A human female, not powerful enough to be a true mate but still having the sexual power to feed and empower a Watcher to a greater degree than typical women.

Rush: the burst of rarified, subtle energy provided by a human female's orgasm. A Rush is essentially Watcher food, their sustenance for existence in the physical world.

Second Change: The refinement of a woman's subtle bodies that occurs when she is in her thirties or forties. The Second Change is too subtle for humans to acknowledge it physically but it is this change that signals that a female human is sexually viable to a Watcher and thus able to perpetuate their species.

Sigil: Every Watcher possesses a generally known sigil, or symbol, that connotes him and him alone, in addition to a private one, which he reveals only to those he trusts and loves. This symbol is placed above the right breast of Watcher mates.

Subtle Bodies: Generally speaking, any of several energy bodies, all of which are more rare or subtle than the physical body but which permeate it and act as the template for the flesh.

Truest Image: This is the Watcher's most genuine form, the one he takes when he is on the Astral Plane, but also at various times in the physical world, such as during his own sexual climax, when he takes the Path of Sorrow or during special ceremonies. To see a Watcher in his Truest form can be potentially fatal because of the power and purity of the energy. Only a true mate can witness her lover's Truest Image.

Chapter One

"Duse, Jax says he needs you in his suite."

Duse Ammadon's face looked as stormy as the sky over Lake Michigan when he turned around to face Ainge. Despite the fact that he'd expected it, Ainge had to force himself not to flee Duse's office. An Ammadon's temper was never an easy thing for anyone to encounter, human or Watcher.

"Well, you can tell my little brother to go straight to the Borderlands of the Astral World! What does he need me for? Ron and Force and you must be panting at his door in order to help him out. What in Hades does he think he's doing leaving his suite unshielded? How can his lemans trust him?"

Ainge shrugged casually despite the shiver of caution that ran down his spine from looking into Duse's icy blue eyes. By the Three, Jax was right. Duse was at the end of his energy reserves. They still had no clues as to the whereabouts of his mate's existence, except that he knew she was here, in this region, and Duse claimed that the time of her Second Change was very near. In the meantime, Ainge clearly sensed the life force draining from Duse's subtle bodies.

"You should just go, Duse. You look weak. Devon wouldn't want you to suffer. Jax's newest leman is extremely powerful..."

"You idiots don't know the meaning of a powerful woman."

"She's not a potential mate or anything, but she'll give you the sustenance you need until Devon is found."

Duse just stared at his knight for a long moment.

Devon, please, the wait has been so long this time. I've been without you for four hundred and eighteen years.

Even the anger that kindled in his belly was dying a quick death. He didn't have the energy to be pissed off these days. And he needed energy, not only to run Ammadon Enterprises and carry out his duties for the Grigori Council, but more importantly, to sense Devon's Second Change. He couldn't allow another Watcher to find her first, especially after Helen Ammadon's murder.

He let out a slow breath of defeat. "All right," he said impassively. He stalked out of his office, leaving a stunned-looking Ainge in his wake. Just as he'd imagined, Ron and Force were standing just feet from Jax's private suite. He scowled at both of them as he walked past.

"Haven't you two got anything better to do?" he barked. Both Watchers had faded by the time he reached for the door, but Duse doubted they'd go far.

Not that he could necessarily blame them. The sex energy rolling out of his little brother's room right now was potent stuff. He closed the door firmly behind him and inspected the scene in the bedroom with a clenched jaw. His cock immediately leapt to life. Curse his Watcher nature. And damn it...

"Have you ever bothered to explain to Bale how it is that you're so powerful when you're not even mated," Duse growled out irritably as he approached the bed. The human woman who was currently on top of his little brother riding him like her life depended on it never even took notice of him. The one that straddled his face that he was in the process of pleasuring with his mouth managed to look at him through heavy-lidded eyes, her lips in the O shape of undiluted ecstasy. Despite himself, Duse's eyes ran over her nude body hotly. This must be Jax's newest leman—Cora or Coral something—the one that was supposed to be so powerful. She was beautiful by human standards, and yes, she had power. Most lemans did. How else could the Watchers ever seek them out?

But it wasn't even possible to compare her to Devon.

Jax paused before he answered, waggling his long, powerful tongue over Carol's clit horizontally before he inserted two thick fingers up her wet pussy. He carefully watched his older brother's nostrils dilate at the sight of his woman's shaved, fully exposed, glistening cunt.

What Jax wouldn't give to see his martyr brother succumb. "I'm an Ammadon," Jax murmured eventually, as though his cocky explanation was all that was required. He'd never be able to tell Duse the real reason for his ability to maintain a corporeal body for such extended periods of time. Every Watcher in existence believed that it was possible only with a mate. But Jax knew better. Miracles could happen through suffering as well as through ecstasy. He languidly tongued one of Carol's swollen sex lips while she groaned and tried to push her clit against his tongue. Jax leaned back against the pillows as he continued to fuck Carol with his fingers and Jana, his other leman, with his cock.

"You and Bale never question Che so much about his power. But that's not the point, is it? The point is that you came."

Duse tried not to notice that his brother's mouth, chin, and even his nose shone with his leman's sex juices. He didn't care for the triumphant gleam in Jax's light blue eyes, either. But what could he do about it? He felt so weak that his knees were ready to buckle. And the sight of Jax's two beautiful lemans in the midst of lovemaking was the equivalent of putting a feast fit for the gods in front of a mortal dying from starvation.

Jax saw both the hesitation and the hunger on his brother's rigid features. He urged Carol up over him, allowing Duse to better view her glossy cunt. His pulsations inside her slowed into a teasing, erotic rhythm. Duse's eyes narrowed when he spread two fingers, displaying her soaking channel to him. Jax laughed softly as he used one finger to distribute her abundant cream over her tumescent clit.

"It's your choice, big brother. Both of them are about to blow, but Carol is the more powerful," Jax said quietly as he continued his ministrations to the chorus of the women's escalating cries of arousal. He waited while Duse stared at Carol's lewdly exhibited sex.

"No, not Jana," Carol whispered. Her eyes were open wide now on the hunk of beautiful man standing next to the bed. All of the Watchers were gorgeous, but Jax and his brothers were enough to make any woman forsake everything—a career, a promising relationship, the chance of a family. For every woman out there who would have admonished her, Carol could only say one thing. Don't wave your finger until you've known the sublimity of a Watcher making love to you.

And don't even consider glancing her way with shame until you'd spread your legs for the touch, the mouth or the cock of Jax Ammadon. Just the sight of his darkly handsome older brother had Carol hungering. She watched as a muscle leapt in Duse Ammadon's rigid, cold face. She was new to the ways of the Watchers. She didn't believe what Jana had told her for a second. Watchers consisted of more subtle matter than humans? Carol's eyes swept down greedily to the enormous bulge in Duse Ammadon's pants. Jana was full of shit. These men were so fucking real her pussy sucked in like a vacuum every time she inhaled just the scent of one of them.

"Come here."

Carol couldn't believe she had the willpower to actually move away from Jax, but the sight of Duse Ammadon and hearing his cool command were more than sufficient lures. She reached for his cock as she came off the bed. He stopped her with a steely grasp on her wrist. Her eyes flew to his.

"I'll bring you pleasure. But you must do exactly as I say."

Carol's eyes widened at the barely restrained lust in his deep, gravelly voice. He wanted her! Power and desire surged through her. Hadn't Jana said that Duse never even looked twice at women? He was as aloof and untouchable as the one they strangely called "King"...the oldest, Bale Ammadon.

Duse tried to ignore the sting of tears in his eyes. Fidelity to a mate was more natural to Watchers than it was to human beings. The thought of touching another woman made him dizzy both with physical need and feelings of longing for Devon. Where was she? By the Fathers, he didn't even know what her name was in this incarnation. The subtle essences of the nude woman who faced him were coarse and unrefined. The smell of her sex, while arousing in his lethargic state, also struck him as almost painful in its wrongness.

He felt himself fading. He must have sustenance.

"Bend over the bed. No. Here," he instructed hoarsely. He guided her so that her face wasn't far from Jax and Jana's avid lovemaking. His hand remained on Carol's shoulder. "I belong to another, Carol. But Jana and Jax will not mind if you share his cock while I pleasure you."

Jax clenched his teeth. "Just take her, you stubborn fool. Devon will understand."

"Shut up," Duse said so sharply that for a moment, all three of the others stilled. Carol threw back her head and groaned in excitement when she felt him caress her thigh with his big hand, then insert two fingers into her well-oiled slit. God, it felt good. Watching so closely while Jana resumed sliding up and down furiously on Jax's glistening penis certainly helped to make things more arousing as well. But what turned her on the most was the feeling of the fully clothed Duse Ammadon next to her bare ass. He wasn't pressing to her lewdly. She could just make out the partial outline of his firm, full erection through his pants as he thrust his talented fingers into her with more force. It felt elusive and strangely more erotic than if he were fucking her flagrantly. Her mouth opened wide and her eyes rolled back in her head when he slid his thick forefinger along her clit bull's-eye fashion, as if he'd been pleasuring her for a half a lifetime and knew exactly how she liked it.

These Watchers were such incredible lovers.

"Help Jana pleasure Jax," she heard him order starkly behind her. Carol was only too happy to oblige, tilting her head to greedily tongue Jax's firm, round testicles and the base of his thick root as Jana continued to piston her pussy over him lustily. Carol felt so overwhelmed by the sensation of Duse's fingers and the knowledge of his big body behind her, so cold and aloof but giving her so much hot pleasure, that her tonguing of Jax became inspired. She felt his balls retract toward his body.

"Pull her back," Jax hissed. But Duse had already been separating Carol from the mating couple, stopping the possibility that Carol's subtle bodies would interfere with Jana's Rush.

Duse watched narrowly as Jax pinched with an almost casual precision at Jana's clit. Being alive for over seven thousand years taught a Watcher a thing or two about how to ignite a woman when he was ready, Duse thought with wry amusement. Jana shrieked as orgasm slammed into her.

Jax's face became transformed by ecstasy as her subtle energy poured into his being. His head jerked back on the pillows. He roared when his own climax crashed into him. Duse gently pushed on the back of Carol's head and averted his own eyes from the brief, yet potentially deadly sight of his brother's sacred image.

Carol gasped in vague surprise when Duse Ammadon forced her head down until it came within inches of her thighs. But then she felt him increase the force of his ministrations on her pussy while he pressed a thumb to her ass.

"Do you like it here?" he whispered not unkindly.

"Yes. Oh, yes!" she cried out when he penetrated her. It pushed her over the edge. Her own shout of release joined Jax's aggressive growls and Jana's waning cries.

Only Duse remained silent.

After the last shiver of pleasure coursed through her, Carol became vaguely aware of him gently pushing her arms down to brace on the bed. "Oh God, yes," she whispered as Duse Ammadon's fingers began to pleasure her all over again. This time, though, he finger-fucked both of her openings more insistently. Carol keened as her

vulva sizzled from clit to anus. She practically choked as her second orgasm crashed over her, so shocked was she by the power of it. Her eyes opened into narrowed slits a few moments later when she felt his fingers slip out of her. She smiled wanly at the dark giant standing behind her.

"That felt incredible. Let me return the favor. Please," she added when she saw the wintry cast to his exotic light blue eyes. Despite her post-climactic state, her heart began to beat rapidly when he smiled slightly and two dimples dented his cheeks. The impact of those dimples and the flash of white teeth on that typically cold, dark face left Carol gaping.

"No. I realize you're new to our ways. Suffice it to say that you're generous response has enriched me more than you know, and just when I most needed it. Thank you." He nodded once at Jax, his thanks apparently for his brother as well.

Jax just shook his head in amusement and disgust as he watched his brother head for the door with a markedly energized stride. Before he shut the door, Jax heard him instruct Ainge to call Sherry Morton. Jax frowned. The desperate search continued, then.

His motivations in asking Duse to share his lemans today had been multifaceted. The part of him that deeply loved and respected his brother was gratified to see his rejuvenation.

But the part of him that cursed the fates daily for making the impossible possible, in Devon's case, felt a little triumphant at seeing Duse succumb to his need with another woman, as abbreviated and brief as the contact had been.

He sighed heavily as Jana murmured contently next to his ear. Even that devil Asmoday agreed. How cruel could the gods be to have fashioned one woman so that she could be a viable mate for two Watchers...let alone for two brothers?

* * * * *

Asmoday Tertulious, otherwise known as Day, watched the dark magician's ritual with a mixture of condescension and curiosity. He secretly despised this human being who was fooling with powers that were way beyond his comprehension. But thanks to the damned Ammadons, the Grigori Council and the infernal energy prison in which they'd placed him, Day was forced to resort to these primitive, debasing channels in order to perform his magic.

As the human magician, Rolland Ockley chanted Shax's name as he stared fixedly at the symbol drawn near the base of a large, wooden equilateral triangle. It was Shax's secret symbol. Day inhaled deeply of the smoke that rose from the brass censer that glowed at the center of the ritual triangle. Watchers loved subtle scents and odors. Inhaling a rich aroma fed the refined essences of their beings. Yet, Day still doubted that a being as powerful as a Watcher could be truly bound to a mere human. But the goal that he strove for the most greatly at the moment was just that—the enslavement and finally the death of Duse Ammadon. The stupid human that Day used thought that he

would have sole control over Shax Ammadon, and eventually Duse, when he finally gained him as a familiar.

But Day had other things in mind. He was sick of the Ammadons and their protection of the status quo. Duse Ammadon, in particular, had fought most stringently against Day's attempts to legally make the power that Watcher mates could confer public property. Duse and the rest of the Ammadons were power hungry elitists and Day was personally going to orchestrate their downfall.

Day considered himself to be a revolutionary above all else. Mere laws couldn't hinder his destiny. Even the strictest Watcher taboos about experimenting with the energies of human women before they reached their Second Change weren't too great for Day to disregard. He had to think creatively when it came to the energy prison that bound him. Bale and the Council's spell had manacled him, but only for the more obvious powers. They had made it so that he couldn't gain sustenance from human women directly, only allowing him a weak, artificial version of energy that Paim had created. But since Watchers believed that the energy of First Changers was incompatible with their subtle nature, Bale and the Council hadn't thought to weave any prohibitions about them into Day's restraints.

He had done some...experiments with women in their early- and mid-twenties. He'd discovered valuable information about the nature of First Change women's sexual response that no other Watcher knew. At first, he'd found the quality of the energy abhorrent and nearly impossible for his being to metabolize and use efficiently. But over time, Day began to grasp the laws of unrefined sex magic. In using it, he became more familiar with its essences. As such, he was about to divine the location of a mated First Change female before that of his brethren, even her mate, Duse Ammadon. Through Shax, he would get Skylar and once he had Skylar, Duse would be his to command. He would be able to use the human magician to compel—and destroy—the mighty Duse Ammadon.

Of course, telepathically and psychokinetically seducing women before their Second Change did have the problem of causing the woman to have severe seizures, and for most, death. Day regretted this, not because of the harm to the women he used, but because their deaths could create a pattern that the Grigori Council would trace back to him eventually. But he desperately needed that energy, unrefined as it was. Without it, he could only survive, not thrive.

Soon, very soon, he would be in a position to take Duse's mate himself if he so chose. Her subtle, rarified and pure essence would strengthen him exponentially. Forcing Helen Ammadon to release her sexual energy for his benefit had been the most electrifying experience of his life, and as a Watcher, that was saying a lot.

He'd been in existence for thousands of years. Humans throughout the ages had called his race incubi, demons, shining ones, fallen angels, the Gentry, fauns, jinn and lutins, among other things. Since a Watcher could take any form that he pleased, at least for a short period of time, they were bound to be the source of myth and speculation over the ages. The title of incubi—the spirits that sexually tempt and seduce women in

their sleep—at least captured the Watchers long and complicated genetic history with human women. Every Watcher had a human mother; and every Watcher craved human women, especially the rare type that could possibly conceive his child.

There were unique, powerful human women who could be mated to Watchers, but that involved a lot of luck in finding her, in addition to a long, and arduous waiting process that Day didn't have time for. It was much easier, and possibly more rewarding, just to steal another Watcher's mate. There was the prickly little problem that when the human woman and the Watcher deliberately mated, their subtle bodies became like a two templates of a whole, fitting together like puzzle pieces. That didn't stop another Watcher from forcing a sexual response on the human mate that wasn't his; Day had found that out firsthand.

Too bad his rape of King Ammadon's wife had killed her because of her previous mating to Bale. Perhaps he'd been hasty in his actions. He didn't care about Helen's death, but his small group of Watcher followers, the ones who had backed his failed Rush Initiative, hadn't cared for what he'd done. In fact, they'd condemned him almost as forcefully as the Grigori Council. They were cowards, one and all, but still, Day needed their puny support. If he was going to take Skylar Halifax, then he'd better make the event more appealing to his alienated contingent this time around.

He'd use the Dionytion Stone when he forced Skylar Halifax to succumb to him. Surely such a display of sheer power, beneficent though it must be for political purposes, would finally put a stop to the Ammadons' vicious maligning of his character. All of the Watchers would come to see that these human women's lives, precious though they were, were less important than the strength and power of their small and fading race.

Helen had made him gloriously powerful. But merely increasing his strength wasn't enough. He needed a plan for breaking the energy bonds of his prison. In order to weaken his bonds, at least four of the six-member group consisting of the Grigori Council and King Bale Ammadon were going to have to die.

Which all led to why he was clandestinely watching this idiot human as he completed the ceremony that would allow him to control a fellow Watcher. All good planning took time, Day knew. What he needed most now was an ally among the close circle of the Ammadons. His attention sharpened on the magician's proceedings.

"I do invocate and conjure thee, O Spirit Shax. I do strongly command thee by Boreas, Settiano, Bellaria and Favonius; the most Powerful Princes, Jinns, Liachidae and Ministers of the Tartarean Abode..." the black magician shouted.

Day rolled his eyes mentally. He regretted having to align himself with Ockley, but if the myth was true that a Watcher could be subjugated by a human under certain unique circumstances, then this was a powerful piece of magical knowledge—wisdom of which he was sure King Bale Ammadon wasn't aware. Supposedly the conjuring spell had been passed down through the centuries, originating in Sumeria. But the knowledge inherent in the spell had faded from the Watchers' awareness, and Day wasn't even sure who most of the spirits and deities were that the human invoked.

Would a Watcher really be bound by a spell created by and invoked by a human being? Even the most powerful of Watchers were unable to compel another of their own kind. It went against some inherent law of their substance.

His eyes widened in amazement. There, in the middle of the magician's ritual circle, a figure began to appear, congeal and solidify. For a moment, the body remained incomplete, like an unfinished wax model with no features or characteristics, just a putty-colored blob that approximated a human form. Day thought that the conjuration had failed. The Watcher was fighting his subjugation at the last moment, despite his pledge to the magician. No Watcher would enter these bonds happily. In spite of his plans, a part of Day respected, even encouraged, the Watcher's last-minute fight not to be leashed by a human.

"I do invocate, conjure and command thee, O thou Spirit Shax, to appear and to show thyself visibly unto me before this Circle in fair and comely shape, without any deformity..." the magician continued.

Day's subtle body shimmered with excitement when the impressive nude form of Shax finally revealed itself fully to the black magician's awestruck eyes. Shax's eyes glowed with eerie, dark blue flames. Part of Day hated seeing a Watcher demean himself in such a way.

But Shax—more commonly known as Jax—was an Ammadon, and his betrayal of his brothers was just the sweet, vengeful beginning of the end of all of them.

Chapter Two

Skylar Halifax self-consciously rubbed her dirty hands across the smock that she was wearing. Great, the first decent-looking man that she'd met since she'd broke up with Andrew Parks three years ago and she was covered in mud. Dan McMahon had said that Rolland Ockley was a medical researcher at the University of Chicago, so he must be smart in addition to being handsome.

"I'm sorry I can't shake hands," she said with a self-conscious smile when Dan made introductions. "As you can see, you'd get a little bit more than you bargained for, Dr. Ockley."

Rolland Ockley was thinking the same thing, but not about the inconsequence of the dirt on Skylar Halifax's hands. She was more than he bargained for...a lot more. He suddenly felt as tongue-tied as a teenager. The presence of his powerful familiar within him didn't help. He sensed that Shax was as temporarily stunned into muteness as he was. Skylar Halifax was the most amazing woman he'd ever seen. Saying she was beautiful didn't really suffice. She was...

Luminescent.

Rolland nodded his head vaguely in agreement at Shax's description. Her hair was the color of morning sunlight. She wore it casually tied back at the present, but Rolland could see that it was curly and long and abundant. Hair like that inspired serious fantasies in a man's brain. Her eyes were a fascinating blend of green, amber and brown. One of her most unique characteristics was her skin, though. It reminded Rolland of a smooth, pale peach. The soft texture of it and the mouth-watering uniform color immediately made him fantasize about what she would look like with all of that beautiful skin bared.

He felt himself harden when his eyes lowered to her breasts. Their fullness and shape couldn't be completely disguised in her loose clothing. Their size contrasted erotically with her narrow, delicate rib cage and small waist. He regretted his decision to give her to Shax once Duse was bound to him magically. But he already commanded Shax, didn't he? Perhaps there was a way that Shax would give her to him before Shax ultimately claimed her for himself.

Not a chance, Ockley, a cold voice echoed in Rolland's head.

Rolland grimaced in irritation. He'd ordered Shax to reside within him, intoxicated with the power that surged through him with their essences mingled. Rolland felt positive that people were responding to him with more awe and respect. But Shax was such an unpleasant and defiant body mate. He kept leaving Rolland of his own accord, moving to observe the proceedings in a non-corporeal form. Rolland had already had to mentally order him back inside himself twice since walking up to Skylar Halifax.

You're not the one who decides, are you? Rolland thought with what he hoped was as cold and threatening a manner as Shax's. Shax was a grim and stubborn familiar at his best, but when he was at his worst, he was downright frightening. Since he'd betrayed the Watchers and become bound to him, which was pretty much all of the time.

You're still bound by the rules of the original covenant, Magician, Shax spat out with so much hatred that Rolland almost jumped. If you want my brother to help you with your stupid immortality project, you'll give me Skylar. Those are the rules of the pact, which doesn't include you having the privilege of bedding her first. Skylar's essences are the most refined on the planet, and I'll be damned if I betrayed my own brother so some reptilian-brained human male can slobber all over her. By the way, here's a little something to chill your chubby, pea brain...you human men are such animals...Skylar's practically a kid.

Skylar's confusion showed clearly on her face when Rolland Ockley's expression went from cringing to defiant to suddenly looking as if he'd had icy water thrown down his pants.

Which is exactly what it felt like to Rolland, only Shax had just manipulated his brain psychokinetically to get the equivalent end results.

"She looks like she's at least in her late twenties!" Rolland thought furiously, realizing too late from the confused look on Skylar's face that he'd spoken out loud.

She's thirty-three years old, Magician. What's your point?

"Er...everything okay?" Skylar asked. She shot an unspoken question at her friend, Dan McMahon... *What's with this guy*? Dan just shrugged.

"Of course, Miss Halifax. I just caught a chill. I can't tell you how I've looked forward to meeting with you. Dan has filled me in on your progress with his research. Your abilities are truly miraculous." Rolland managed to get out through teeth gritted in anger toward the capricious spirit that he was supposed to control.

Fat chance anyone could rein in Shax.

Call me Jax, asshole. No one uses true names so casually.

Skylar smiled uncertainly. In truth, she felt anything but comfortable with the introduction that had been proposed by Rolland Ockley himself. He'd learned through the academic grapevine that her friend Dan McMahon was doing some research involving Skylar's unique ability to increase a plant's size one hundred times that of a control plant just by focusing her energy onto it for short periods of time. Her results were well documented and consistent across one hundred and fourteen trials. Skylar's skills actually far surpassed what she performed for Dan's botany research, but she had no intention of telling anyone else that. None of the employees at her nursery would have been too surprised to learn that she also had the ability to diagnose plant disease and heal damaged tissues.

Skylar had been able to read and manipulate all plant, animal, and human life energy—or auras—for as long as she could remember. Her expertise with humans had dropped off during adulthood while her ability with plants and animals had only grown. She was wary of human beings. Being able to see their auras with all the

emotion, disease and chaos inherent to it could be overwhelming. Plants, trees and animals, on the other hand, were calming and soothing to her spirit, which is why she spent so much time around them.

Skylar wished that she could cancel the lunch Dan had arranged so Rolland Ockley could meet her. She sensed something strange in his aura. It wasn't his physical appearance that bothered her. Something puzzled her about Rolland that she couldn't quite name. The sensation she might get from a rabid animal's aura flashed across her awareness. But there was definitely something else there, too...something dark and very compelling.

Dan McMahon jumped in to assist when he saw that the introductions between Rolland and Skylar weren't going very well. "Miss Halifax does something to plants that certainly is miraculous. I know you had some questions about the experimental design of my research, Rolland. We can talk about that over lunch. We'll wait while you wash up, okay, Skylar?"

Skylar started out of her musings about Rolland and gave Dan a quick smile. Dan was a nice guy. Sally Generis, her good friend and the manager of Halifax Nursery, had introduced her to Dan when she observed her uncanny abilities with plants. Dan proved to be such an easygoing, kind individual that he'd eventually talked Skylar into participating in some experiments in his lab.

Skylar was grateful for Dan's presence during their lunch at an Indian restaurant on Halsted Street. Rolland behaved in a very polite, attentive manner, but the way his liquid, dark brown eyes pinned her steadily during the whole meal gave her alternating sensations of prickly chills along her arms and heat flushing through her cheeks and chest. She found Rolland disturbing. Nevertheless, she acknowledged that the research that he did at the University of Chicago, in regard to understanding the aging process of human cells, was fascinating.

"Where do you hope that the knowledge from your research will lead you?" Skylar asked as she ate a succulent bite of curry.

Rolland followed the movements of her mouth and lips avidly. His voracious attention left her feeling self-conscious and uncomfortable.

"The key to immortality, of course," Rolland said matter-of-factly, after a pause.

"Dream no small dreams," Dan quipped with amusement when he met Skylar's surprised gaze.

"You can't be serious, Rolland," she said.

"Of course I am. Death serves no biological purpose, Skylar. Cells die because of toxins that they naturally create when they produce energy, building up over time. In some cells, the gene is preprogrammed to destroy itself at a given point in its lifespan. There are many obstacles to correcting nature's genetic programming, but I know it can be done. As a matter of fact, I have every reason to believe that I'm close to an amazing breakthrough."

When Dan pressed Rolland for the details, however, Rolland refused to comply, only giving a charming smile. "When I publish my work, I promise you that you can critique it as I have done yours, Dan. Speaking of which, one of the real problems I have with your experimental design is your sketchy descriptions of Skylar's 'meditation'. I don't see how anyone can attempt to duplicate the research with another person who shows a similar proclivity to Skylar's. I mean, are you doing a visualization, or just chanting a phrase over and over in your head, or practicing a mindfulness exercise while looking at the plant through the glass?" Rolland asked intently as the waitress cleared away the plates and brought coffee.

Dan nodded good-naturedly. "Yeah, we've been working on operationalizing that term, right, Skylar?"

"Yes...trying," she muttered. How could she describe to someone else what she did when she reached out to another living organism? It was like trying to create step-bystep instructions for describing how to think or how to talk.

Jax was getting fed up as he watched the interaction in non-corporeal form. By the Battle Gods, the magician was a fool! But being near Skylar made him feel that even the huge price he'd paid by betraying Duse was worth it. He didn't even feel lust for her right now, although she was on the brink of her Second Change.

He'd known Skylar—*Devon*, really, the true name she'd carried throughout her lifetimes—for two of the three incarnations, both in which she'd been mated to his older brother. Women such as Skylar were all too rare in the world of the Watchers. The energy that she could potentially provide during even one joining could feed the Watcher for hundreds of years, increasing his powers to the point where he would inevitably become more revered and exalted among his peers.

Maybe Duse would never believe this when he discovered Jax's treachery, but Jax would have betrayed his brother to join with Skylar even if he only gained the same energy from their coupling as he would from a nightly dream seduction from a normal sleeping female. The Watchers were incredibly sensual by nature, but it wasn't the thought of the potent eroticism he would gain through joining with Skylar that drew him. And he didn't want her just for the opportunity of fathering a child with her, either.

The fact was that Jax had fallen in love with his brother's mate almost from the moment he'd seen her over eight hundred years ago. He'd known on some instinctive level that Devon could have as easily been his mate as Duse's if his brother hadn't found her first and begun the mating process. Jax had gone over it in his head again and again. He'd considered the possibility that what he felt toward Devon was just the result of her incredible strength. But he knew that wasn't true. Jax had met and even been close to several human mates during his lifetime, but he never felt for them what he felt for Devon. She was the only one for which his spirit thirsted, the only one that could quench his need.

And he knew what Bale and Duse had planned for her during her current incarnation. The thought of seeing Skylar happy in Duse's arms for the next millennium

or so had scorched his being so painfully that he'd been willing to listen to the Watchers' most nefarious outcast, Asmoday, in order to accomplish his goal.

His spirit would be tormented for eternity by his betrayal. But Jax figured that was only a curse if your being wasn't already burning painfully with need and love for the one human woman the laws said you couldn't have.

Jax had little doubt that he could avoid the tragic results of Day's rape of Helen Ammadon. He was becoming more and more familiar with Day since their wary pact. Jax was beginning to realize, not only how heavy Day's "hand" was when it came to pleasuring a woman, but just how much Day seemed to like to force women to his will. Jax felt increasingly repulsed by the murderer, but he'd set his course. He was determined to see it through.

He had no intention of harming either Skylar or his brother. He'd always been the most sensual Watcher lover of human women, always intensely aware of the subtle differences in each woman's body and soul, the delicate balances of her individual nervous system, the exact amount of pressure that could be borne by her to take his most intimate of sexual touches. Jax Ammadon was cocky about several things, but one of the things he truly was gifted at was his ability to optimally pleasure a woman. And he didn't believe for a second that his powerful older brother could ever be actually subjugated by that fool human Ockley.

Yet, since he'd agreed to the pact with Ockley and Asmoday, Jax had still existed in perpetual torment about his betrayal.

To make matters worse, he had to sit and listen to this snake, this lizard, this fucking frog, try to humiliate Skylar to her face. Jax wanted to rattle every dish and chandelier in the restaurant until everyone ran for cover from his rage.

She has abilities that are far too refined and subtle for her to communicate them with your stupid toad language. And she's thinking you're a pompous ass right at this very moment. See the way her eyes are narrowing? Oh, no, sorry. She's actually thinking that you're a creepy son of a bitch, and she can't wait to get back to the far greater intellectually stimulating company of her potted plants.

Jax was on a verbal insult roll, but he was stunned into silence when the magician — ever the dramatist — thought deliberately, *Be gone*, *foul servant*.

Jax blinked once, then twice in disbelief, because he was back in Duse's Chicago headquarters. Ainge, who was visible at the moment, was staring incredulously at the space where Jax had just snapped into existence.

"What's with the surprise entrance, Jax?"

Jax quickly mentally shielded his thoughts from Ainge and Ron, who had just walked into the room.

Damn that human. Did he do what Jax thought he had just done? Jax immediately probed with his mind, trying to return to Skylar. But that puny magician was actually blocking him. A human was prohibiting Jax Ammodan from doing exactly what he wanted to do. Impossible.

Could the human have more power over his Watcher spirit than he had imagined?

She was supposed to eat the pastry I conjured, you asshole, Jax telepathically communicated to Rolland. Her change will come upon her soon. Very soon. I have to move quickly.

And she is eating it, as we speak, capricious demon. With my assistance, you'll have her soon, Rolland responded with irritating crispness.

With the magician's assistance? Jax just paused, suddenly filled with an almost human adolescent uncertainty when he was normally so confident. Why didn't Asmoday tell him that the magician would have this much power over him?

And what had he meant by saying that he would assist him in seducing Skylar?

* * * * *

Sherry Morton readjusted her skirt nervously as she got onto the private elevator that would deliver her directly to Duse Ammadon's north side Chicago penthouse. So, what if she had splurged and bought herself a brand-new skirt and blouse and was wearing them along with a pair of heels that hadn't seen the light of day for three years? This undoubtedly was the strangest job she could ever have fallen into, but it had its definite perks. The first benefit was the money. Duse Ammadon paid her like she was a high-priced corporate lawyer instead of the retired cop/private investigator that she was. The only instructions he'd given were that she be completely thorough in her work, report to him as many details as she'd gathered, no matter how trite they may seem, and to maintain utter and complete privacy in regard to his identity, location and anything she might observe while working for him.

Not that there was anything that bizarre about Duse. Not really. Not unless you would call his phenomenally sexy looks bizarre or the almost equally shattering impact that the four men that worked for him made. Those four gorgeous hunks were almost more than she could comprehend. And the way they watched her when she was lucky enough to run into one of them—especially the one called Ainge. Sherry was at a loss to describe it. If she hadn't known that she was a forty-three-year-old grandmother with twenty more pounds than she needed on her five-foot three-inch frame, she would have sworn these guys were looking at her like she was a sex goddess. Of course, she had to be mistaken about that, didn't she? Still, just being in the presence of these men had revitalized her flagging femininity and even had her wearing lipstick again.

Quite an unexpected job perk, indeed.

At first, she'd wondered if she'd managed to get herself involved in some kind of male prostitution ring. Maybe Duse Ammadon was the equivalent of those four phenomenal men's madam? But no, her private investigations had revealed that Ammadon Enterprises was completely legitimate, with diversified holdings in investment banking firms, but largely sustained by two biotech companies, RenGen and Grigori, Inc. Sherry was surprised to see that her boss was considered to be somewhat of an elusive icon in the world of biotech research, where his companies held several

exclusive patents related to protein synthesis and cloning. Apparently, not only was Duse a knockout, he was a genius, too. Some people had all the luck. When she'd seen Duse Ammadon's estimated total net worth, her eyes had widened in amazement. No, the studs that worked in his office ought to be outlawed for packing that much sex appeal, but there was no way even they could begin to bring in the amount of money that Duse Ammadon was worth utilizing sex as their sole commodity.

But Sherry reconsidered when Ainge met her in the foyer of the penthouse. He had to be her favorite. He was well over six-foot three-inches tall with muscles that wouldn't be denied expression despite the loosely fitted PacSun t-shirt he was wearing. He looked around thirty years old or so, and today, even younger-looking than Sherry thought in the past. Maybe it was because he looked like he'd just come from the beach, wearing some colorful, low-cut swim trunks and sporting a smooth, golden tan. His untamed, blond hair fell casually all the way to his broad shoulders.

Did nature really make men like this? Sherry just stared at him for a brief moment, as though stunned by some powerful sex laser. Yes, she'd definitely been wrong earlier. The women of the world would gladly hand over every penny of their life savings to spend the night with this man. Surprise and a vague sense of horror struck her when Ainge's lips quirked upwards in amusement. She had the uncanny feeling that he knew exactly what she'd just been thinking.

"Hey, Sherry. You're looking especially nice this morning," Ainge commented, his dark eyes running slowly across her legs in a way that was too reverent to be lecherous but still managed to get across his sexual appreciation loud and clear. His voice was as deep, rich and as sinful as dark chocolate.

Sherry shivered. That was another thing about these guys who worked for Ammadon. They were so sweet that a rational woman had to be suspicious. Sherry strove for a little briskness in order to break the spell. "Morning, Ainge. What's with the getup, dude? Didn't anyone ever tell you that there's no surfing in Lake Michigan?"

Ainge looked bewildered. "I wasn't surfing in Lake Michigan. I just got back from Australia."

Sherry shook her head and laughed. "Jeez, Ainge, and you didn't even take off your swim trunks before you got on board for that long flight?"

"Oh, yeah...well, I was really late for my plane. Almost didn't make it. You and Duse meeting again?" Ainge asked pointedly, obviously trying to change the subject.

Sherry nodded. "Yeah, he wants another report this morning. There isn't much new to tell since he called me in for that emergency meeting yesterday. He's getting really anxious about something, but I don't know what. If he could just give me a bigger hint of what I'm supposed to be looking for—" Sherry broke off when Ainge crossed his arms across his muscular chest, swelling his pecs even more impressively.

"Yeah, well, that's the way it is with Duse. We're all used to his domineering ways, but it took us more than just a couple years to get comfortable with them. Trust me, a lot longer than a couple of years. How's your grandson doing?"

"Marcie says he slept through the whole night only once last week."

"Wow, little Nick must have been really tired," Ainge responded, obviously impressed.

Sherry paused a moment to check Ainge's expression, but no, he looked completely serious. These guys were so strange.

"Come on, I'll walk you over to his office. Duse has been waiting for you."

Ainge reached out his hand as if to touch her arm and guide her, but let it drop before he made contact. Sherry gave another little sigh. Ammadon and his men might have invented the definition of *bedroom eyes*, but they never so much as laid a finger on you. Sherry would have had to be dead not to be disappointed about that.

"Where are the rest of your buddies?" she asked as they traversed the huge, opulent penthouse and approached the solid mahogany doors that led to Duse Ammadon's private office. Ainge was looking at the doors, seemingly distracted.

"What? Oh, Force and Ron are in the office working, and Jax is...around here somewhere." Ainge waved his hand vaguely through the air. "I forgot that Duse had a visitor. Hold on just a minute, Sherry."

Sherry paused several feet from the doors while Ainge knocked and entered. Through the partially open door, she thought she saw Ainge give a slight, but formal, bow to whomever he was quietly conversing with in the office, apparently the visitor he'd forgotten about until they were about to knock. Stranger and stranger this place was. Ainge finally opened the door fully for Sherry, giving her a drop-dead smile before he let himself out.

Ron stood out in the hallway when Ainge shut the office doors. "Was that Sherry?" he asked, grinning.

"Yeah. She is so bod," Ainge murmured, referring, not as a human man would be, to Sherry's body shape or size, but to her corporeal essence, her solidity in reality.

"Why don't you ask her out?"

Ainge sighed and glanced back at the doors wistfully. "Sherry treats me like I'm a kid or something. Besides, I don't think Duse would like me asking out an employee."

"Yeah, and you couldn't take her out to dinner, because your human eating skills are atrocious," Ron stated with mock seriousness. When he saw the expression on his friend's face, he disappeared, only his laughter lingering for a second behind him.

The large office where Sherry usually reported to Duse Ammadon was handsomely furnished and exceedingly masculine, just like the man who used it. She saw her boss sitting in one of the leather, wing-backed chairs. He seemed comfortably reposed at first glance, with his amazingly long, jean-clad legs bent at the knees and his hands hanging loosely over the chair arms. But Sherry was an ex-cop, and if she'd ever seen a man that looked like he could pounce into alert action before the third hand on a clock even quivered to register a second, it was Duse Ammadon. Maybe it was the cool, measuring look of his light blue eyes that made Sherry think that, or maybe it was just the way his

muscles, even when relaxed, seemed coiled with unreleased tension. All speculation aside, though, she'd once witnessed firsthand Duse sparring with one of his men in a large workout facility in the penthouse, and Sherry could only pity the man who would ever have to face him in a genuine fight. Sherry could almost feel the energy rolling off him. Whatever had her boss so worked up for the past few weeks was only intensifying.

Sherry knew that she should have been prepared for anything, but when yet another god-in-man-form stood up when she approached, she let out a little squeak of amazement.

"Sherry Morton, I'd like you to meet my brother, Bale Ammadon," Duse said in his characteristic deep, hoarse voice that always mesmerized Sherry and make her feel like she was being scratched in a place where she needed it the most. Sherry prided herself on her professionalism, but on two or three occasions, when Duse had been talking to her, a soft purr may have vibrated her throat. His voice had that kind of effect on you, so it was basically a good thing that he was usually a man of few words...at least if he was your boss, anyway.

"Boy, what do they feed you guys?" Sherry asked when Bale Ammadon unfolded from the wing-backed chair opposite Duse. Bale looked like he matched every inch of Duse's six-and-a-half feet and, maybe, even topped his brother by a scarce inch. Bale Ammadon shared many characteristics with his brother, most notably the jet-black hair and piercing light blue eyes. Duse Ammadon seemed to prefer faded jeans and expensive-looking lightweight shirts, while Bale Ammadon wouldn't have looked out of place in the corporate boardroom. While both men wore their thick hair clipped short, Bale was clean-shaven, while Duse had a goatee that highlighted a mouth that ought to have been outlawed for the X-rated thoughts it could elicit from a woman. But Bale didn't need a sexy goatee to make Sherry's eyes widen when he flashed her a quick grin.

"It's doubtful if you would believe me if I told you, Ms. Morton. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance," Bale said as he gave her a slight bow.

"You're English?" Sherry asked, referring to his accent as they reseated themselves in their chairs and Sherry sat down on the couch.

"Duse, Jax and I are all from Scotland." Sherry nodded as if she understood, but in fact, she was totally confused. For the most part, Duse sounded like a typical midwesterner, which was sort of strange when she came to think about it, because the bulk of his company's headquarters were in Glasgow. He had only moved to Chicago several years ago. And his almost painfully beautiful "little" brother Jax spoke like a born and bred American. There were times when an accent seemed to curve Duse's syllables with an exotic-sounding lilt. Sherry couldn't identify its origins any more than she could have put her finger on the Ammadons' ethnic influence. With their dark skin and hair, they might have come from anywhere from South America to Russia, but their startlingly exotic blue eyes seemed to peg them as having some type of European heritage.

"What have you got, Sherry?" Duse asked quietly.

Sherry opened up her file. "There's not too much since I reported to you yesterday, Duse. Let's see, there were twenty-six burglaries reported last night in the city. The culprit was actually apprehended in one of those cases, because the guy was stupid enough to be lugging the TV with him down Cicero Avenue. What an idiot." Sherry shook her head with amusement but got back down to business when confronted with the deadpan gazes of the Ammadon brothers. "A second working girl was found dead. My buddy at the police station says the talk around the precinct is that maybe their crack cocaine is being laced with some new kind of drug that's screwing up their brain, causing seizures and stuff."

"How old was she?" Bale Ammadon asked.

"The prostitute?" She quickly consulted her notes. "Yeah, here it is. Angela Ramirez, age twenty-three. Why? Is that important?"

Both men's faces were impassive, but she noticed they exchanged a quick glance. "Probably not," Duse finally said. "But just in case, can you get me any medical information on the two women's deaths?"

"Sure, it shouldn't be a problem for me to get a copy of the ME's report. They're definitely investigating the possibility of a new drug being leaked into the supply. Hey, is this the kind of thing that you're looking for, Duse?" she asked intently. Duse paid her a hell of a lot of money, and Sherry wished he would help her by being a little more explicit about the information that he wanted from her.

Duse's broad shoulders rose in a small shrug. "I'll definitely want to hear about any more cases like that. But no, Sherry, your instructions are still what they were before. I'm sorry I can't be more explicit, but I'll recognize what I need to hear when I hear it."

Sherry sighed in frustration. "Okay, if you're looking for the unusual, here's one for you. Ralph Ellis, a good buddy from the Sixteenth, had a really weird one last night. Seems that a woman called 911, insisting that there was an intruder in her condo in Lincoln Park. When Ralph and his partner got there, she answers the door, and she looks pretty beat up, right? Also, it looks like the same asshole that beat her up had ransacked the whole place. Furniture on its side, plants knocked over and glass on the floor from busted lamps...the works. So when they start to question the woman about who did this to her, she says she never saw the guy. And Ralph is like, 'You mean he came at you from behind?' But she says 'no'. Well, I could tell by his description that Ralph was kind of sweet on the lady, even though she must have been pretty crazy, let's face it. So Ralph asks her, real gentle-like, if she meant the guy attacked her while it was dark, or if he somehow covered her eyes, right? By this time, the woman is really upset, and she says—get this—the jerk that beat her up was completely invisible."

Sherry's jaw dropped open in shock when she realized that Duse and Bale Ammadon were suddenly looming over where she sat, even though she swore she never saw them rise to their feet.

"No. He couldn't have, not in his prison," Duse murmured tensely to his brother, leaving Sherry confused as to when the first part of their conversation had taken place.

"Sherry, you have all the information on that call? The woman's name, the address? Give it to me, then," Duse said when she nodded. Sherry saw the whiteness around his mouth, sensed the tension in his body.

"Her name is Skylar Halifax, Duse. But I don't think you'll find her at her condo right now. Ralph says she owns a nursery on North Clybourn. She's probably there this time of day, unless she stayed home to nurse her bruises."

Duse took the paper from her calmly enough, even though Sherry got the distinct impression that he wanted to rip it in haste from her hands. He scanned the information, his expression tense, but giving little else away. He hesitated when he saw her still sitting there. "You did great, Sherry. Can you come back next Monday at the same time?"

"Um, sure, Duse. Whatever you say."

"Ainge, will you see her out?" Duse asked.

Sherry jumped a little when she realized that Ainge was also looming over her from behind the couch. How the hell did he get there all of a sudden? The three silent giants surrounding her were too polite to say anything. Still, Sherry knew for a fact that they wished she was anywhere but there at that moment.

* * * * *

Bale stopped his brother from fading into invisibility the moment the door closed behind Ainge and Sherry Morton.

"Do you want me to come with you?"

Duse shook his head. "You know what I may have to do, what we talked about in order to keep her safe."

"But she hasn't reached her Change yet, has she?"

Duse moved restlessly, impatient to be gone. "It comes soon. I feel it."

Bale nodded grimly. He was as strong as any at magical spells. After Helen's murder, he had devoted his considerable power into finding a way to protect mated women from rogue Watchers, like Asmoday. He cursed himself daily, *hourly*, for not having created a protective spell earlier, but there had been no precedent for Day's taboo behavior. Their philosophers had taught that a human mated woman would not only die during intercourse with another Watcher, but that she would be unable to reach the pinnacle of orgasm. Without the orgasm, she would not be able to impart her energy onto the marauding Watcher. If the first bit of what Watchers had been taught had not been sufficient to prevent mate poaching, the second part certainly provided no further motive to engage in it.

But the philosophers had been wrong. Day had been able to force Helen Ammadon's brain into orgasm against her will, causing a hemorrhagic stroke in her right temporal lobe that had killed her. What Day had done had shocked the Watchers.

And for Watchers such as Bale and Duse who were mated, it became imperative for them to plan for the grim possibility that any power-hungry peer could potentially try to join with their women, solely for the strength of the mate's Rush and the subsequent exponential increase of their power in the physical world. Neither Duse nor Bale wanted to imagine that such treachery was possible, but they couldn't blind themselves to the possibility, either. Before Day had dared to defile Helen, no Watcher had ever even considered the idea.

A vial containing a clear liquid suddenly materialized in Bale's hand. He gave it to Duse. "Paim was impressed by your work, as usual. He told me that you deserved to be our chief genetic scientist more than he. Nevertheless, he did finish what you began," Bale said, emotion tightening his handsome features. Bale could only be joyful for what potentially lay in his brother's hands, but the circumstances made him acutely miss Helen. How long would he have to wait this time for her to reincarnate once again? The long wait for her through time was always almost unbearable, but his terrible grief at the traumatic way that she had last died made her absence weigh on him more and more as every day passed. Would the pain and violence associated with her death imprint itself indelibly on Helen's soul?

"You will be able to heal her, Bale," Duse said hoarsely, reading his brother's thoughts easily during his moment of vulnerability. "And then, she'll take the elixir, and your suffering will end, as well."

Bale was the first to break their locked gaze, feeling overwhelmed by the intensity of his grief. He grinned, trying to diminish its effect on him even if he could never lessen the emotion itself. "Devon will not be happy be with you."

Duse tried not to look doubtful at his brother's words. "I won't harm her, and it's for her own good."

"I've learned too well from Helen that women don't like it very much when you tell them something is for their own good."

"Would you do it, if you were in my place, brother?" Duse asked.

Bale hesitated only briefly. "Yes, I would do it. It will be difficult enough for you to resolve it with Devon. Imagine what damage I might do to Helen's traumatized spirit by, if not necessarily forcing pleasure on her, then at least being a lot less patient about it than usual. And still, I would do it. Hopefully, such actions can be rectified, but not their possible death if they are left unprotected." Bale sighed, capturing his brother's chaotic thoughts and emotions. "No, Duse, you know it is far different than what Day did with Helen. Devon is mated to you, exquisitely attuned to you. Part of her will respond immediately to your presence."

"If only they could remember us from one incarnation to the next," Duse muttered in frustration. "Although, I would not have her suffer as I do in her absence."

She likely does suffer, in her own way, Bale communicated telepathically. Duse shimmered in the air, his will to be with Devon so strong that he couldn't keep himself solid in the room.

Subtle Magic

I have to go, Bale. Someone needs to check that Asmoday is secure, though. And will you arrange for a car to be sent to this address?

Bale nodded, but Duse's form had already faded and disappeared.

Chapter Three

Skylar glanced around furtively, ensuring herself that she was alone in the potting room of her nursery. When she saw that she was, she spread her hand gently against the mottled aura of the spruce tree in front of her. Skylar knew this layer of energy that she touched so lightly was truly the beginning physical manifestation of the organism, not the concrete material that could be grasped with the fingers. She closed her eyes, focused on the subtle life force of the tree, acknowledged the uniqueness and beauty of its existence. After several moments, she opened her eyes, satisfied. By tomorrow or the next day, the little spruce's physical manifestation would show signs of healing, too.

Skylar sighed with the satisfaction of seeing this small job well done. She'd been avoiding everyone all day, self-conscious about the bruises on the side of her face. There were plenty more bruises beneath her jeans and blouse.

What had happened to her last night? She wished that she could explain it away by saying that it had all been a dream. But Skylar knew full well that the bruises on her body and the wreckage in her condo hadn't been the result of a mere dream. Skylar had never given much thought to the possibility of ghosts or poltergeists, but after last night, she was starting to consider the possibility in earnest.

It had all began with an erotic dream gone awry.

In the dream, a tall man was standing with his back to Skylar. She felt desperate for him to turn around so that she could look into his eyes. When she turned the man toward her, there was something achingly appealing and even slightly familiar in his piercing, light blue eyes. Skylar felt herself melting into those eyes.

"Did you enjoy the pastry, Skylar?" he asked in a deep, hypnotic voice.

Confusion entered her awareness at his strange question. Then she recalled the unexpected pastry that had come to their table that day at the Indian restaurant with Rolland Ockley and Dan McGregor. They had just about been waiting for the check when the waitress set a gorgeous fluffy, sugared confection before them. Dan had laughed, and told the waitress she had the wrong table. The waitress seemed confused, but then insisted that the owner of the restaurant had told her to bring the dessert to their table. Dan and she had ended up enjoying it immensely, although Rolland politely declined to join them.

"Yes, why do you ask?" she wondered uncertainly.

"It was my invitation to you, Skylar, and you accepted," the tall man said. Skylar felt drugged by the power and emotion in the man's blue eyes, but there was something about the sound of his voice that left her in doubt. He seemed familiar to her, but the sound of him, the sensation of him, was somehow wrong. In fact, the following day, she

couldn't remember much about the physical appearance of the man, except his great height, wide shoulders and those intense, light blue eyes that seemed lit from within.

"I don't know what you mean," Skylar murmured. But before she finished the sentence, her eyes widened in shock. She could feel gentle fingers stroking her face and twining through her long hair. She could feel it, but the dream man hadn't lifted a finger.

"Your Change is close upon you, Skylar. Perhaps it is only days away. We'll be together soon," he promised gruffly. Skylar blinked at the power of the longing in his beautiful eyes. She felt inexplicably drawn to him but doubt niggled at her, too.

Suddenly, a harsh voice entered her awareness, shockingly abrasive and alien within the confines of her own being. Skylar cringed at the impact.

"No, we won't wait! You will take her now."

To Skylar's amazement, the tall man seemed to hear the voice as well. He looked aside, anger creasing his features. "I'll do no such thing! It's sick for you to suggest it."

Skylar began to slowly back away, frightened by the content and manner of the unseen speaker. But there was nowhere to go. The dream held her prisoner.

"Do it. Do it now, while we are bound together. I command you, spirit!"

"Ignore him, Skylar," the man said when he saw her fear. But tension was beginning to pull at his facial muscles and sweat beaded his forehead. When he shouted suddenly, as if in pain, Skylar cried out in sympathy.

"No! I will not be forced to harm her, Magician. You don't know what you're asking of me. I'll see you dead before I do it."

What followed hammered away at Skylar's memory with painful relentlessness, refusing to fade. A wave of sexual arousal hit her with a powerful crash. Her nipples drew tight and achy. Just when they tautened to the point of pain, a thumb and forefinger plucked at her, both easing her discomfort and increasing her arousal exponentially. Her eyes widened in shock. Featherlight touches teased and tormented her clitoris until a pressure built that demanded release. She was immobilized, as if she'd been pinned on a needle of pleasure. The sexual pressure transformed into a tearing pain. She made a muted, fearful sound in her throat. The sound of the man's tortured voice decreased the unbearable tension, allowing her to momentarily breathe from the onslaught of arousal.

"I'm sorry, Devon. I'm so sorry," the man cried out with anguish, his expression agonized. The uncomfortable invasion of her senses relented only slightly before the other man's voice could be heard again, commanding the tall man to his will.

The next portion of the dream blended into a nightmare as Skylar's awareness was invaded again and again, and she repeatedly tried to deny the alien presence within her. One image that haunted her particularly within the dream was that of holding a beautiful girl baby in her arms while it nursed at her breast. Skylar's defenses against the dream invasion melted at the beautiful and very real sensation of the child taking sustenance from her body. Tears clouded her eyes and sadness clawed at her throat

when a measure of consciousness hit her in the dream. She pulled the beautiful child from her milky nipple.

"No. It isn't real. Get out. Get out. You're hurting me," she pleaded. Exhaustion overwhelmed her from trying to fight something she couldn't see or understand.

Loud noises suddenly awoke her. She screamed when every light bulb in her bedroom burst at once and a whirlwind of air began to move with restless violence around the room, knocking over picture frames and other items on her bedside tables and dresser. When she tried to get up from the bed, a strong force pushed her back onto it, causing the back of her head to crash into the headboard. Skylar tried three times to get up, only to be violently thrown back to the bed. Her fourth try was successful.

She staggered down the hallway but the violence only followed her. Something grabbed her hair from behind and threw her heavily against the wall. Plates began to shatter on the floor and against the wall in the kitchen. One of them would have struck Skylar forcefully in the head if an unseen force hadn't suddenly shoved her aside. Skylar whimpered in fear at the palpable quality of chaos and evil in the air.

She'd tried to move toward the front door of her condo to escape, but an invisible, solid wall prevented her, time and again. Even after she managed to reach the phone and call 911, the violent phenomena continued around her. She crouched in a corner of her living room, her arms covering her head, as light bulbs and mirrors shattered, glass flew around the room, and ceramic plant holders exploded into fragments. Slowly, the chaos in the room spent itself, until only the sound of her own ragged breathing reached her ears.

It had only seemed to make matters worse when the police came to investigate. They'd treated her kindly, but obviously thought she was nuts.

She brushed a long curl away from her cheek and glanced at her bruises in a small mirror tacked to the wall in her planting room. How was she supposed to find meaning in such bizarre and violent phenomena?

She turned her attention to straightening up the potting room. Her eyes widened in amazement when she saw the little spruce that she had just tried to heal. It was growing even as she watched it. Soft, light green needles sprouted forth and the tree grew taller by a half a foot before her very eyes. Her mouth fell open and she touched the tree's aura softly with her hand and her mind.

How can that be? she wondered incredulously.

She startled when a hoarse, deep voice actually answered her. "Your powers have grown. Your Second Change is upon you, Skylar."

She turned in amazement, not even fully registering what the man had said. It was the sound of the husky, resonant voice that drew her more than anything. That was why the man in the dream hadn't seemed right to her. He hadn't had that voice, the voice of this stranger who had suddenly appeared in her potting room without making so much as a whisper of noise.

He was a stranger. Wasn't he?

The man who suddenly shared the space with her in the small potting room seemed to swallow up everything with his presence. She stared at him in rising amazement. Skylar was not a short woman at five-feet six-inches, but this man seemed to be at least a foot taller than her, making her feel diminutive for the first time since she was a child. His shoulders looked wide and powerful beneath the casual, long-sleeved shirt that he wore. His hips were narrow, though, encased in faded, low-riding jeans. He appeared to be in his mid- to late-thirties. His black hair was clipped short and a sleek goatee encircled his mouth. Skylar's eyes lingered on his mouth a moment too long before her eyes flicked to meet his gaze.

"What are...? Can I help you with something?" she stammered uncomfortably. Anxiety crept into her awareness. The man looked extremely strong. She realized she was trapped in the room with him. Would her employees hear her if she cried out?

"Don't be afraid, Skylar." His voice was gentle and soothing, despite the rough quality of it. Skylar's eyes widened when she saw the expression in his light blue eyes. She felt comforted by that look, and unaccountably...cherished. For a moment, they just stared at each other in silence.

"I'm not afraid," Skylar said shakily after a moment. She realized that her words were true, not a bluff. The tremble in her voice hadn't come from fear.

Duse just nodded, sensing the truth of her words. This was never easy for him. Palpable joy surged through him at seeing his mate again after an unbearable absence of almost four hundred and eighteen years. Their time together had been so short, so precious. He wanted to reach for her, touch her corporeally, merge his being with hers. But, although he was overflowing with emotion toward Devon—no, Skylar, he should respect the subtle changes that came with every human incarnation—he was a stranger.

He allowed his eyes to feast on what he longed to touch. Devon looked similar from one lifetime to another, but there were enough significant changes that it made it difficult for him to track her by appearance alone. Her height varied, as did her weight, give or take ten or fifteen pounds. Certain things always remained constant—her soulful agate eyes, the incredible quality and color of her skin, the fullness of her breasts. Her breasts... Duse forced himself not to look down at her voluptuous curves. He'd always loved her breasts, been told quite a few times by an amused Devon that he had a serious fetish for them. Her hair color changed during the three incarnations that they had been mated, but it was always full and wavy, a delight to Duse's touch. There were subtle changes in her body, too. But she always possessed the same small waist and narrow rib cage. Her hands and feet were consistently graceful and beautifully shaped. Memories flooded his awareness as his gaze rested on her hands hanging at her sides. Strangely, it was the movement of her hands as she sat at a loom more than twelve hundred years ago that had first cast a spell on Duse's spirit, calling out to him, mesmerizing him, seemingly weaving the disparate and complex fabrics of their beings indelibly together.

Duse's eyes moved to her face, stilling when he saw her bruises.

"Someone has hurt you." Fierceness leapt into his eyes. He knew rationally what Sherry had told him was true, but seeing the dark bruises on his mate's delicate features made him tense with rage. For a moment, his gaze flicked around the room, reaching out to sense danger. His immense joy at being reunited with her had caused his guard to temporarily lower, made him forget the way she had been hurt last night.

Attacked by a fellow Watcher, Duse thought grimly. Skylar Halifax was the first Watcher mate to enter her Change since Helen Ammadon was murdered by Day. There was no precedent for what might happen now. While he wanted to assume that no Watcher would stoop to such base behavior, the bruises on his mate's face told him that someone was aware of her presence and sought to harm her. But how could a Watcher have known of her presence even before he did? It wasn't possible.

But somehow, it had happened.

Skylar touched the bruises on her face uncertainly. Something about her unexpected encounter with this man felt surreal, as if she were experiencing déjà vu, but not for the place, their words or their actions. For the feeling.

"Who are you?"

He held her eyes with his own. "Ammdusias Ammadon," he said formerly. His spoken name sounded strange to his own ears. Watchers didn't reveal their true names except to those whom they trusted and loved most dearly.

For a moment, hope and disbelief flickered into her agate eyes. "Duse?" she murmured dazedly.

But confusion, and then a rising sense of discomfort quickly replaced her shadow of recognition. Still, Duse would not let her brief gratifying acknowledgment of him go forgotten by her. "Yes, that's the name most people call me, Duse. Just as most people call you Skylar."

Skylar's brow wrinkled. That was a strange thing to say. "How do you know my name?"

Duse shook his head sadly as a rising sense of haste grew in him. "There isn't time to tell you, babe, I'm sorry."

The spell that Skylar had fallen under for the past few seconds seemed to shatter at his words. Had he just called her "babe" and managed to make it sound like the most natural and tender of endearments?

"Listen...Duse? I really think you'd better leave." She sounded much more confident than she felt. Inside, it felt like every cell in her body tingled with electricity, as if a billion points of magnetic awareness had just clicked in unison toward the direction of a universe of rich ore, this man. Would she really allow him to turn and walk away?

Skylar sighed at the fanciful turn of her thoughts. Of course. Why would she give him a further thought? He was a stranger who had accidentally walked into her potting room. Sally or another one of her employees must have told him her name. There was absolutely no reason to get sentimental over him—if that's what you would call what

she was feeling. Even as she thought it, though, she knew she was lying to herself. The potency of her feelings toward this stranger would hardly be appropriate for a Hallmark card.

Duse sighed deeply. For the first time, Skylar sensed unease in him, even a lack of confidence. The awareness of his conflicted feelings made her pause, causing her to feel less overwhelmed by him.

"Is everything okay?" she asked cautiously.

Duse stared at his mate. It was so like Devon to be concerned about him even when she didn't know him. His mind tossed aside one plan of action after another in quick succession. But no matter how much he wanted to deny it, the fact remained glaringly evident in his mind. He needed to activate Bale's spell to protect her, to mark her as his so that no other Watcher could do to Devon what had been done to Helen Ammadon. Duse couldn't take her to the protection of his home to activate the spell. He couldn't even wait another moment.

"It's going to be okay, Skylar. I know you have no reason to, but you have to trust me, all right?"

Skylar's mouth fell open in surprise, not only at Duse's words, but also at the fact that he began to come slowly but determinedly toward her as he held her in his hypnotic gaze.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked sharply. For a moment, Duse paused as she tensed like a hunted animal. She centered herself behind the large potting table. Clearly she was waiting to see which way he would go around so that she could flee the other way. Duse actually looked away at the painful sight. He had not had to psychokinetically manipulate her sexual response in order to bring them pleasure since the first time he had seduced her over twelve hundred years ago. Now that he knew what it was like to have her come to him freely, of her own will, wanting to pleasure him as much she wanted to gratify herself, Duse didn't want to make love with her any other way. As far as he was concerned, there was no other way with his mate.

Rage filled him and he cursed Asmoday Tertulious to eternal torment. His conflicting emotions made him pause. For a moment, he convinced himself that the spell wasn't necessary. How could he take from his true mate as he would a stranger, a dreaming woman in the night?

Duse's hesitation lasted only for a second, however, before an encroaching threat entered his awareness. He cursed his own stupidity and lack of courage. Now, he had endangered both of them.

Skylar cried out in alarm when Duse was suddenly standing within a foot or two next to her behind the table. "How did you do that?" she squeaked. Panic filled her, but so did something else equally as strong when she looked into Duse's troubled eyes. The scream rising in her throat stilled when he looked at her with genuine anxiety.

"I know it sounds bizarre, Skylar, but please, listen to me. I need to have intercourse with you. It will happen. I'll convince you by pleasuring you with my mind, if I have to,

and I guess that I probably will end up having to, judging from the way you're looking at me. But I want to give you the chance, us the chance." He cursed under his breath when he saw wild panic in her eyes. He intuitively began to telepathically communicate with her, trying to soothe her.

Hush, it'll be okay, babe. I know you're afraid, but please, please believe me. I'm not even capable of harming you.

Skylar closed her eyes, experiencing both a lessening of her anxiety and a wave of desire that submerged her, drowning out almost all else. He was doing something that no man had ever done to her before. He had edged himself right next to where her most subtle body began, what some would call her spiritual field, and then he had stopped. Skylar knew that he could sense the beginning of her true self. Oddly, this seemingly small gesture on his part made her want to cry. Her whole life, people had invaded the subtle bodies that together formed her true self. Many times after a day of interacting with other people, she felt the equivalent of being battered and bruised. Her spiritual, mental, emotional and ethereal bodies had been breached and pummeled so mindlessly by others. Skylar herself had the gentlest, most sensitive touch when she reached out for another living organism, knowing full well the potential energy changes she could make with her being.

"You can tell where I begin?"

Duse sensed her amazement. "Yes. In many ways, you are more like me and my kind than the other people you come in contact with every day. I'm going to touch you now."

She surprised herself by nodding. The sensation of their energies slowly, deliberately mingling and melding together as he came nearer made her breathing temporarily cease. She felt potently aware of the way that their sex and heart chakras pulsed in tandem. She'd never experienced anything like it. He leaned down deliberately to kiss her, his striking eyes holding her gaze steadily all the while. A little cry of wonder left her throat when his mouth firmly, reverently closed over hers. Their combined energies seemed to shimmer and glow brighter. The feeling was indescribable. Her entire being became focused on the erotic movement of his lips, and then his warm, slightly abrasive tongue as he slid sensuously between her lips.

"Open," he insisted in a low growl.

Skylar complied. She cried out shakily as he covered her lips with his own and applied a divine suction. Their tongues began to mate feverishly. He leaned her back over his arm and drank of her deeply. His taste was utterly male and sinfully potent...most definitely addictive.

That's right, Skylar. Accept me. Take me into you. Your instincts have never served you so true, Duse told her with his mind, his heady desire for her and her reciprocal response to him causing a temporary sense of drunkenness and euphoria.

If this was a dream, it was an exceptionally good one, Skylar admitted. His kiss transported her. It felt better than the best sex that she could imagine. She mindlessly

pressed her breasts into the solid wall of his lower chest, eager to alleviate the achy feeling that suddenly plagued the tips.

An animal-like growl came from Duse's throat, but not even that frightened Skylar. He tore his mouth from hers. An almost feral lust overwhelmed him. Later, he tried to convince himself that it was the sense of impending danger that caused him to act so aggressively, but he couldn't avoid the truth for long. The feeling of Skylar's breasts against him, the sensation of her nipples tightened to points of desire searing into his corporeal flesh—that was the true reason for what he did next.

Skylar let out a muffled cry of alarm when she became aware of a subtle change. She startled back, but Duse's arms held her like iron bands. "Oh, my God—" she started to shout out, but Duse stopped her by putting his mouth over hers and communicating with her telepathically.

It's okay. I told you I was going to make love to you. I had to take off your clothes, didn't I? Duse let her struggle in his arms, still not resorting to manipulating her response to him with his mind.

Skylar eventually realized that her body was pressed into a solid wall of uncompromisingly hard, naked male flesh. Her muscles went rigid with disbelief, but another part of her couldn't deny the erotic fireworks that were going off over every inch of skin that pressed against Duse Ammadon. She glanced downward. Her eyes widened at the sight of the generous, pale curves of her breasts against the stark planes of his chest. She couldn't stop herself. She rubbed her nipples against the crisp, black hairs and steely muscle to see if it felt as good as it looked. The next thing she knew, she was leaning over her potting table and the length of an alarmingly long, steely cock was throbbing against her ass.

"You're playing with fire, Skylar."

Skylar glanced around, seeing the grim expression on his face. Funny, she didn't feel threatened. Instead, his rough voice coupled with the molten heat of his gaze went directly to her pussy, igniting her, liquefying her in an instant. Drops of moisture trickled down her right thigh. She realized with a profound amazement and a vague sense of shame that she was like a volcano that was about to powerfully explode.

"I'm dreaming, right?" she asked, half afraid that her words would burst the fragile bubble of this incredibly erotic fantasy. She'd worry about getting psychiatric treatment later, after she awakened or got a break in her hallucinations. But for now...

"No. You're not dreaming and neither am I," Duse murmured hoarsely. The vision and sensation of her silky, plump ass cheek against his cock was making him see double. Given the fact that he hadn't been with her for several hundred years, Duse wasn't sure if he could make his body fully corporeal the entire time he made love to her. But he thought that was all he could probably manage until she fully empowered him again with her Rush. He was overwhelmed with the desire to drop to his knees and soak himself in her sweet sex juices. He felt dizzy with the prospect of sucking her

beautiful, coral-tipped breasts. He wanted to kiss and tongue every inch of her lovely, smooth skin and then start all over again.

But damn it, he needed to set the spell.

"You have to take me now, Skylar." He vaguely realized that he just sounded demanding instead of regretful, which was actually his strongest emotion at that moment besides lust and love.

"What?" Skylar asked with vague confusion. Her eyes widened as he put the broad head of his cock to her pussy and his meaning became entirely obvious. "Oh...you're so..." *Huge*, she thought with rising dismay. "I don't think I'm ready for this yet," she muttered desperately. The sensation of him gently parting her flesh with his fingers as his erect member probed at her insistently left her speechless.

"I know, babe. I'm so sorry. Please forgive me."

He thrust mercilessly at the same time that he massaged the kernel of nerve-packed flesh between her tender sex lips. Skylar's rough inhalation scored her throat.

"Oh God! Oh God!"

"By the Fathers, I'm so sorry, Skylar," Duse muttered with genuine anguish. And he'd told her that he wasn't even capable of hurting her! Duse blinked in amazement as he felt her divinely tight, muscular walls began to convulse around him.

"You're coming for me, baby?" he asked incredulously in an emotion-filled voice.

He gasped at the distantly familiar, longed-for sensation. He clenched his eyes shut as the first waves of her essence rolled into him. Ah, Gods! How could he have forgotten how incredible she was? It was like thirsting so greatly that even a thimbleful of tepid water would have satisfied immeasurably, but instead, discovering a vast, depthless lake of cool, pure water. That was how powerful her Rush was. He felt himself pulse into full, glorious material existence. Every cell of his being vibrated and tingled with new life and energy.

As her shattering climax waned, Skylar became increasingly aware of him moving deeper in her, stretching her just to the point where her pleasure peaked unbearably and pain originated before he eased out of her. By the time her eager pussy accepted every inch of him, she was gasping shallowly, riding the crest of another wave of orgasm. She shook and moaned when she felt him palm one ass cheek and then almost fondly smack the firm flesh while she was fully impaled on him.

"You're so beautiful, Skylar," he growled out hoarsely as he leant over and kissed her sweat-dampened neck. Gods, he wanted to absorb every precious sensation of her. The reality of her beauty burned his eyelids. His woman was here. She was right here in his arms. He was fully impaling her sweet flesh.

She instinctively pressed her cunt greedily against his firm balls.

An uninhibited shout of gratification escaped Duse's mouth. "You need to be fucked now, don't you, baby? Say yes. Because I need it so bad I can taste and breathe it."

"Yes. Oh God, yes...just like that!"

He began to pound into her at an almost frantic pace. Neither of them could still their loud cries of intense desire, nor did they even try to quiet the loud smacks as their flesh crashed together relentlessly again and again.

His desperate thrusts distributed the creamy essence of her arousal even while her prolonged desire caused more to gratifyingly flow, making for a fluid, tight ride. Duse gritted his teeth at the sheer cruelty of the pleasure. With a remote part of his brain, he knew that the danger was upon him, but the only salvation was to push forward into her sweetness. His worshipping hands reached for her secret, slick flesh, knowing just where to apply pressure to most please her.

Skylar struggled helplessly, overwhelmed by the sensations that rose in her from Duse's aggressive, powerful possession of her mind and sex combined with his insistent fingers on her clit. She whimpered with intense pleasure, but a measure of fear, as well. The feelings and sensations that swamped her were beyond anything in her experience, striking her as alien and alarmingly potent. Her rational mind told her that what they were engaging in was the sex act, but at the same time, she knew it was something different; a new, previously unknown behavior that resembled sex, but that was in fact something far more profound.

Duse saw the air before them begin to shimmer ominously. He cast a protective shield before them easily with his renewed power, but he couldn't shut out the figure forming behind it. The majority of his strength was focused on making love to Skylar. Subtly, he encouraged her to close her eyes, not wanting her pleasure to lessen or for her to feel frightened by what was happening in front of them. He acutely felt how overwhelmed she was emotionally and knew that her unrest was his fault.

It's okay, Skylar. You're safe. Come for me, baby, Duse urged her telepathically.

He lost all hold on reality momentarily when Skylar did just that. His guttural roar might have rocked the heavens as he joined her and his appearance briefly took on his most sacred image.

The figure that solidified before them as they climaxed together wasn't fully formed. He saw a hazy impression of a man through the powerful sensations of pleasure that racked his body...a human man. But very few humans actually knew how to use the astral body to become incorporeal. And there was something about the man that seemed more Watcher than human.

The eyes in the invading man's unfocused face certainly seemed inhuman as he registered the sight of Skylar in full-fledged orgasm, her eyes closed, her head tossed back, her beautiful breasts thrust forward and trembling as she came. Cries of pleasure skipped through her open lips at the same rate that spasms of pleasure blasted through her body. The man shouted in outrage and pain when he registered Duse's *sigil* blaze into existence above her right breast. The room began to tremor and quake. Pots rattled loudly on the shelves.

The intruder edged back in his displays of defiance when he saw the being behind Skylar Halifax. It was at least seven-feet tall and blazed with a light almost too bright to behold. Rolland Ockley shuddered with fear and awe when he looked into the powerful warrior spirit's wrathful gaze. He shouted out in terror when the being's eyes filled with bluish white-hot fire. His shout turning into a panicked scream when he felt the sensation of his own skin burning.

Jax faded before Rolland Ockley even had the chance to utter a command for a hasty retreat.

* * * * *

So, that was the spirit of Duse Ammadon? Rolland felt triumph even in the face of defeat. For a human being even to see such a spirit was a triumph. Duse Ammadon obviously far surpassed his limited ideas as to the meaning of power.

Rolland became aware of two things simultaneously, that he was lying on his living room floor in his apartment on the south side of Chicago, and the truly terrifying sound of his familiar, Jax, as he shouted out in grief.

"Shut up, Jax," he said nervously. "Skylar can still be yours, given time. We just need to plan a little further and be patient."

Rolland Ockley quailed in the presence of Jax's emotions. He suddenly felt as if he were in the vicinity of a catastrophic event, a tornado, an earthquake, a hurricane. Jax's grief battered at him relentlessly, feeling like very real physical blows. Rolland actually put up his arms in an instinctive shield against the sensation.

"What's wrong with you, spirit? I order you to desist this ranting."

Jax didn't speak for several moments. He was lost in pain. When he finally came to himself, Rolland Ockley quivered in fear where he lay on his living room floor, so cold and hollow was Jax's voice.

"She is his, now, you fool, never to be another's. Didn't you see his *sigil* over her breast, burning bright enough to sear through a Watcher's soul? Bale has been up to his spells again. It's over. Now I'm going to kill you for forcing me to harm her last night," Jax breathed out with eerie softness.

Primitive fear suddenly gripped Rolland as the implication of Jax's words registered in his brain. Jax looked terrifying at that moment, truly like the grim, relentless image of death. His eyes widened when he felt a sensation like a gripping hand inside his chest cavity, encircling his heart, preparing to squeeze...

"I order you to desist!" he barely managed to squeak out between fear-frozen lips.

After a moment, Rolland realized that he was still alive.

Jax kneeled on the floor in front of him, his forehead bent to his knees, his strong back and shoulder muscles bunched with tension. He had never felt so helpless in his long life. And he had no one but himself to blame for it.

"You are subjugated to my will, spirit! How dare you try to harm me?" Rolland raged.

Jax looked up at him from his kneeling position. Slowly, he rose to his feet, trying to claim the last ounce of dignity that he had left. "Let me go, Magician. Your plan has failed. If we can't take Skylar from Duse, then he'll never agree to assist you with your immortality project as a form of ransom to get her back. He will never serve you, Ockley."

"Don't be ridiculous, Jax. There are still ways we can kidnap Skyler."

Jax shook his head in disbelief at the man's stupidity. "Didn't you hear what I just said? No Watcher can touch Skylar now. He has marked her, eternally shielded her."

"But I'm not a Watcher, Jax. The same rules won't apply to me, will they? And you can move in and out of Duse's sanctuary freely, where he'll surely take Skylar for protection. Between the two of us, we can still create a plan to take her from right under his nose."

Jax and Rolland startled in surprise when a third voice sounded in the room. They turned to see the hazy image of Asmoday shimmer partially into visibility. Jax grimaced when he saw the depraved Watcher. Asmoday's skin was becoming coarse and flaking away in places. What could Asmoday be doing in his energy prison that was causing him to literally rot away like this?

"The magician is right, Jax. We will have Skylar, and through Skylar, Duse. Once Skylar is here with us, I'll see what I can divine in order to break Bale's spell."

The fool! No Watcher could subvert his two older brothers when they set their mind to something. He fell to his knees and howled out in grief at the sure knowledge of Skylar's loss. The image of her and Duse coupling pummeled at his subtle bodies with the equivalent impact of lethal blows to the physical body. Who had he been kidding? He couldn't lose Skylar. He'd never had her. She had always been his older brother's. She always would be. And now he seemed destined to continue on this course of action that would inevitably cause pain, heartbreak and perhaps death to those he loved. He had forsaken everything for her and miserably lost at his chancy wager.

Now there was no turning back from the consequences of his foolish actions.

Chapter Four

Skylar's eyes opened and she slowly came to full awareness when she felt the sensation of Duse slide slowly from her body. A sound of unconscious protest arose in her throat. She didn't want him to leave her, especially since he still felt full and aroused.

She looked around, blinking dazedly. Yes, she was still in her potting room at the nursery. She appeared to be completely awake. Her body still surged and hummed from the waves of incredible pleasure that she'd just experienced. She became aware of a vague soreness in her pussy, a definite touch of reality. A low moan escaped her throat when she felt his large hands gently stroke her bottom, hips and thighs.

"You're very beautiful, Skylar," he whispered hoarsely. Skylar let him touch her intimately, still feeling no shame, only pleasure from his knowing, almost worshipful hands. She slowly raised herself into a standing position and turned to face him.

"How did you do those things?" she asked, as the memory of the way he'd made their clothing disappear, his teleportation across the room and his telepathic communication with her surged back into her awareness. "Are you a...ghost or something?" Skylar didn't want to believe it, but she knew what her eyes had seen. Nevertheless, Duse Ammadon looked very real to her as he stood before her right now, nude and gloriously male.

"More like the *or something,*" Duse said. Skylar sensed that although his stony expression didn't show it, he was amused.

The sight of him standing there, undeniably solid and real caused the whole experience to come crashing down on Skylar. Was she out of her mind? Had she really just made love with a complete stranger in her potting room with her employees and customers only yards away behind a thin door? Heat flooded her cheeks.

"I shielded the room, Skylar. No one could have walked in while we made love or heard us," he assured quietly.

His words just caused her confusion to mount and her cheeks to flame even more. "What did you do with my clothes?" she muttered as she pointedly avoided his gaze.

He sighed, knowing that her sensual, generous acceptance of him was at an end. For now, anyway. He'd never had to do anything like this in her earlier incarnations, always finding her seduction most sweet and rewarding when he utilized patience and restraint. He swallowed heavily when he saw the *sigil* on her breast. At least she was protected now. He really couldn't regret what he'd done, given the clear evidence of a threat against her. Skylar hadn't noticed the mark over her right breast, yet.

Duse knew he was going to get in some serious trouble with her when she did.

He waved to the edge of the potting table where he'd materialized her clothing. He hesitated, then put his own next to it. Skylar was already freaked out enough without having him materialize the clothes directly on him. He pulled on his briefs, watching her with trepidation. She seemed self-conscious as she rifled her clothing, searching for her panties.

"Skylar, there are a lot of things I have to explain. You need to come with me where it's safe."

"What do you mean? Why wouldn't it be safe here?"

"It's not. You have to trust me."

Defiance blazed into her delicate features. "You keep saying that, but I don't know why I 'have' to trust you. Either I do or I don't. I certainly don't 'have' to."

Duse didn't flinch at her anger. "But you do. Don't you." It really wasn't a question. He knew Skylar's spirit like he did his own, and was sure she felt some intuitive trust in him or she wouldn't have given herself to him so completely.

Skylar's anger faded to irritation. "Yes," she acknowledged, but a stubborn tilt still angled her chin. "But I have no idea why. And you certainly shouldn't be so cocky about it."

Duse hid a smile, instinctively knowing she wouldn't like to feel humored at the moment. His eyes darted to the door of the potting room.

"Someone is coming."

Skylar yelped out in panic as she quickly reached for her clothing. To her horror, she realized the clothing was gone. She barely had time to acknowledge that she was miraculously fully dressed before Sally Generis opened the door and peeked in.

"Sky, the new shipment's arrived..." Sally paused in surprise when she saw there was a man standing beside Skylar. Her eyes widened. And what a man. Sally had an eye for the male of the species, and she couldn't believe this six-and-a-half-foot hunk of muscle and sex could have slipped by her out in the nursery without capturing her attention. She involuntarily smoothed her dark tresses and gave him her surefire grin. But the man's gorgeous light blue eyes remained aloof, if polite. She spoke to Skylar, but she couldn't pull her gaze off "tall, dark, and handsome".

"I'm sorry, Sky. I didn't realize someone was back here with you. I'm Sally Generis," Sally said with a warm smile as she entered the room and held out her hand in greeting. Much to her surprise, the man didn't take it.

"Duse Ammadon. A pleasure," he said quietly in his husky, resonant voice as he gave a brief nod of acknowledgement.

Skylar watched Sally's reaction to Duse with conflicting emotions. She knew how much Sally loved men. It had never before bothered Skylar. Why should it? Sally was a gorgeous twenty-six-year-old with an athletic body and lovely face. She was also pleasant and outgoing. In essence, Sally loved men, but men typically couldn't get enough of Sally in return. Skylar felt uncomfortable at the prospect of seeing the

inevitable spark of interest in Duse that came into almost every straight man in Chicago's eyes when they met her store manager. She wondered at her almost comical sense of proprietary interest over a man who was a stranger to her. A complete and total stranger, Skylar thought.

She jumped like she'd been goosed when Duse spoke in her mind.

I am far from being a stranger to you. And the woman is an unopened flower for which the only thought that I'm having at the moment is a wish that she would leave us alone. You'll soon understand. You're the only one that interests me, Skylar.

Skylar stopped herself from making a noise of surprise when Duse gave her his image and feelings associated with Sally Generis. Skylar couldn't comprehend why, but he saw Sally as almost being the equivalent of a child. He was vaguely amused by her eyelash batting and beguiling smiles, as a man in his prime might be by a precocious teenager, but otherwise, her presence barely skimmed his awareness.

Sally finally peeled her gaze away from the piece of eye candy before her when she noticed that Skylar hadn't spoken. For the first time, she noticed her boss's flushed cheeks and disheveled hair. So that was the way of it, was it? Sally couldn't help but experience regret when she recognized Skylar's prior claim on Duse Ammadon. Who would have guessed? Skylar usually was pretty aloof with men, although that didn't stop most of them from doing a lot of wishful thinking about her. Currently, Skylar looked anything but cool and aloof. As a matter of fact, she was the spitting image of a woman who had just been the lucky recipient of some sizzling-hot sex. Sally grinned.

"Everything good, Sky?"

Skylar grimaced at her friend's question. Sally could be incorrigible. "Of course. Would you mind checking the shipment yourself? I know that I said I wanted to, because Reynold's last shipment was damaged, but..." she trailed off weakly. Sally wasn't able to sense like Skylar could when the distributor had mistreated plants. What had she just been thinking? Of course she wasn't going to just walk out of here with a strange man...

"Skylar has to leave the nursery for a while. Do you think you can look after things here, Sally?" Duse asked. He ignored Skylar's look of surprise.

"Sure, no problem. I thought you needed to take some time off after what happened last night. God, I still can't believe someone broke into your place. It's so scary. You're going to put that deadbolt on your door that I was telling you about, right, Sky?" Sally asked anxiously. "Maybe you should come and stay with me tonight, and we can put the lock on the door together on Saturday."

"She'll be staying with me."

Both women's eyes widened at Duse's calm statement.

Sally raised her eyebrows in amused amazement as she glanced at Skylar. "Well, this is certainly an interesting development."

Both outrage and awe battled on Skylar's face as she met Duse's gaze. How could he look so calm, so utterly confident, as if he were a prince making a decree, as sure of his subjects' acquiescence to his every command as he was of his next breath? Still, an awareness of something larger than Duse's obvious audacity stopped her from defying him.

"Yeah, you can say that again," Skylar muttered instead between clenched teeth.

* * * * *

Five minutes later, Skylar walked with Duse out of the front door of her nursery onto Clybourn. It was a typical busy Friday evening, with cars whizzing past and parked cars jam-packed together on both sides of the street. Duse had said he would drive. To her surprise, he hesitated on the street, his expression tense and preoccupied for a moment.

"The car is right over here," Duse said. Skylar watched him as they crossed the street. He approached a sleek, dark blue Mercedes sedan and opened the passenger door for her. When he pulled the car smoothly into busy traffic a few seconds later, he did it without the use of his mirrors or even a backward glance.

Skylar swallowed back her anxiety. "You didn't even know where your car was just then, did you? Or even what it looked like?"

Duse glanced over at her. He definitely looked amused this time. Skylar just stared, enthralled by the first sight of his flashing white smile in his dark face and deep dimples in both of his cheeks. Oh Lord, help her. He was the essence of pure male sexuality.

"Your telepathic abilities are sharpening, Skylar."

"That's all you're going to say? That my telepathic abilities are sharpening?"

That's all he did say for several minutes. His large, strong hands gripping the wheel tightly were the only signs of his tension. Watching him drive a car was a surreal experience. He seemed to know not only the intentions of other drivers on the busy city streets, but also the timing mechanisms of every stoplight they passed. He casually swerved away from erratic drivers and moved into spaces that drivers seemed to have a desire to vacate just as he realized that he wanted to be there. It was a type of mastery that she'd never imagined, and yet Duse seemed to be doing it without conscious thought.

"It's not that amazing, babe," he murmured abruptly, surprising her. "You could probably do it, given practice, especially since your Second Change. It's just a matter of responding to the entire energy field instead of millions of separate and distinct pieces of information. You read subtle energy very well, from what I've seen."

Skylar stared at him in amazement. It seemed strange to have someone speak to her in a language that she understood. One of the reasons she'd always felt so alone was that other people didn't seem to share her particular sensations and observations of the world at all. "Are you saying that you're like me? Some advanced version or something?" Skylar asked.

Duse exhaled. When human beings learned of the Watchers seemingly miraculous powers, they assumed that they had all the answers. But the more wisdom that Duse gained, the more he realized how ignorant he was about the Watchers' existence and origins. His interest in their history and cosmology had only strengthened over the years as he came to realize how little he knew. "No, not exactly, anyway. Given your beliefs and definitions, you are definitely a human woman...if a very rare one."

"Oh, and so what does that make you exactly?" she challenged him, incredulity in her voice. Was Duse actually trying to insinuate that he wasn't human?

"I wasn't going to insinuate it. I was going to say it directly if you would have given me a chance," he said dryly. He glanced at her from the driver's seat, suddenly disliking the idea that they were having this conversation while separated by feet of space and a console. It was too soon for him to be parted from her physically. As far as he was concerned, it would still be too soon in decades...maybe even centuries, he realized with gratification as he thought of the elixir.

"It's kind of complicated, Skylar. Are you sure you want to start this conversation right now?" He sighed when he saw her steadfast nod. "Listen, it might be more helpful if you thought of the concept of 'humanity' in relative terms, instead of absolutes. It would be nice if I could say exactly where humanity begins and ends, but the definition is a lot stickier than you might think. My kind are called Watchers. Our origins are human, but only partly."

Skylar just watched him for a moment as he stared out the front window. There was no sound in the posh, insulated car. The silence between them tingled with tension. "What do you mean only partly?" Skylar finally asked cautiously, not sure that she wanted to hear the answer.

"We don't have clear records or memories of how we came into existence. Our philosophers say that beings that weren't from this planet fathered us by human women, but became ashamed of us. When they saw that we were, for the most part, sterile, that we couldn't breed either with human women or with their own kind, they abandoned as, leaving us here to watch over humankind as best we could."

"You actually believe that?" Skylar asked incredulously.

His gaze slid to hers. "It's a creation myth, Skylar. Humans have them, too. If you look close enough, you'll see that the Watchers' stories are mixed with yours. There's likely at least a grain of truth to them. But that's not the point. You asked whether or not I was human. You tell me. What do you think?"

Skylar looked away from his piercing eyes. Instead of answering him directly, she asked, "What did you mean that by my definition I am human? What about by your definition?"

"By my definition, you're human, too. Although there are very few Watchers, our essences have blended minimally with mankind over the millennia. So although you are human, there is something of us in you, Skylar, as well as...a trace of our gifted mothers. That's why you have the special abilities that you do." Duse glanced over at

her, both curious and worried about her reaction. She was staring fixedly out the front window. "Watchers have been irrevocably tied with humanity's fate from the very beginning. When our fathers left us here, they left only males. You see it was the males who in Watcher lore were the ones who were genetically defective. When a Watcher is able to mate, his offspring are only males. Perhaps it relates to what our fathers thought of us—that we were sterile. It's not something I've been able to understand, without genetic samples of the Fathers."

Skylar's gaze dropped unconsciously to Duse's lap. The last thought that came to her mind when she thought of this magical, strange creature was sterile. He was masculine virility personified, bringing to mind the horned pagan sex gods of myth. She was only partially surprised when he smiled.

"Thanks, babe. But back to your question, Watchers and humans aren't of the same species, or at least, not precisely. We usually can't interbreed..."

She turned and searched his profile. "Usually you can't?"

Duse took his turn in avoiding her eyes, afraid of what he might unintentionally reveal. "A Watcher may become lucky enough to encounter a human woman whose essence strengthens him immensely. If he bonds with her enough times, they become mated, their subtle bodies becoming templated like a lock and key."

"And that's when the Watcher and the human woman can conceive?" Skylar asked, curious. She didn't believe a word of what he was saying, of course, but she was enthralled by his story and confident manner, nevertheless.

"No, it's a hell of a lot more complicated than that," Duse murmured huskily. If that were the case, he and Skylar would have had a child together over twelve hundred years ago. He risked a quick glance at her, already knowing what he would see. She had herself convinced that he was absolutely crazy, but she was hanging on his every utterance as if the next thing that popped out of his mouth could save her life. Part of her knew. He could tell by her stillness, her look of concentration. Somewhere within her, Skylar knew this conversation was deeply personal. Besides, just the fact that she'd agreed to come with him spoke volumes. He wouldn't exactly call Devon's spirit cautious, but she was far from foolish or impulsive, either.

"Why don't I give you a hypothetical example?" he suggested casually.

"Yes. Do that," Skylar murmured.

Something in her voice made Duse's gaze skip over to her. She was turned so that he could only see delicate features in profile. "You okay, Skylar?" he asked gently. He alerted her mind prior to reaching out and taking her hand in his.

"Yes. But what about the example? The hypothetical one."

Duse felt intense gratification when she placed her other hand on top of his. Her essence filled him, rarified and intoxicating, even from this casual contact.

"Well, let's say that a Watcher man came into contact with a human woman that he found particularly...compelling. He might be able to sense something about her spirit that seems to fit with him, to call out to him. And when he blends with her essence..."

"You mean when he makes love to her?" Skylar asked, turning in her seat.

Duse hesitated. "Well, yes, but not exactly."

Skylar's eyebrows rose at his hedging. "It's not that complicated of a question, is it, Duse?"

Duse tried to control his tense exhalation. Why couldn't this conversation get any easier from one incarnation to the next? There were always similarities between Devon's reactions, but there were differences, too. She never ceased to surprise him on what she might find impossible to believe for weeks or months, and what she would accept immediately without hardly any further inquiry. He had to remind himself that her spirit was evolving from one reincarnation to another. "Most Watchers can't become corporeal, Skylar. Because he can use telepathy and psychokinesis, he doesn't need to in order to make love like a human man would."

A chill went down Skylar's spine. Duse's words reminded her of her dream. "You mean that you—he, I mean—could force a sexual experience on a woman through his mind."

Duse's head swung around. His eyes gleamed like icy, silvery shards. "A Watcher never forces anything, Skylar," he said, then added regretfully after a moment. "At least...we used to believe that. Now, it seems that there are those that would. But it's a heinous crime to us. The human equivalent to rape. And if a rogue Watcher forced a sexual response on a mated woman, the result for her is death."

Skylar turned her head again in profile.

"You're thinking about what happened to you last night, aren't you?"

Skylar didn't speak for a few seconds, her thoughts and emotions a whirlwind. "I don't know how you could know about that, Duse. It wasn't you that attacked me, was it?" Skylar asked shakily. She already knew the answer, though. When she saw the shocked look on Duse's expression, she instantly regretted her accusation.

"By the Fathers, no!" he said forcefully.

"I know," she said quietly after a pause. It was irrational to say it, but that didn't make it any less true. "I don't want to talk about it. Not now. Go on with what you were saying. About the hypothetical example."

Duse looked out the car window steadily so as not to give away his tension. He had to resist an urge to compel her to tell him everything she knew. A Watcher had somehow been responsible for her being attacked. But had he forced his way into Skylar's mind last night? She hadn't even reached her Second Change at that time. A deep sense of foreboding overcame him. Unconsciously, he squeezed her hand in his.

Skylar cried out in surprise when Duse suddenly pulled into a just vacated parking spot on Division Street. His features were rigid when he turned to study her face.

"Come here, Skylar," he ordered.

Skylar hardly hesitated before she moved into his arms. He lifted her easily into his lap. Duse had been so empowered by her sexual response to him earlier that he had no

difficulty in willing himself into fully actualized flesh. Bale had undoubtedly been correct when he had predicted that Duse and his mate would be able to conceive a child this time around. His ability to fully enter into corporeality had never been so strong.

He inhaled the scent of her hair and let his fingers entwine in the seductive, soft tresses. His cock lurched with new life. He closed his eyes, overwhelmed by the preciousness of her presence, the fact that she came to him so trustingly into his arms. How was it possible that he had ever become so blessed?

Skylar sighed with satisfaction when he bent his head and kissed her deeply, without preamble or warning. He tasted like distilled desire. She stilled when she felt him reach for the fastening of her pants.

"I want you again, baby." His breath against her ear, the husky words causing anticipatory shivers to course down her spine.

Skylar glanced around her nervously and began to sit up. Duse's hand on her shoulder held her immobile. She groaned in mixed arousal and protest as his first two fingers slid down to caress her still sensitized clit. "Oh! That feels so good. But..."

"It's okay. I've shielded us. Look." Skylar jumped when he laid his hand on the car horn. She clearly heard the horn wailing, but not one passerby on the busy street seemed to vaguely notice it. His pleasuring fingers continued their onslaught on her senses. His eyes were every bit as compelling as his fingers.

"A Watcher's sexual needs are great in comparison with a human male's."

"They...they are?" she gasped out as he pressed and rubbed and teased her clit knowingly with his fingertips. Her cheeks and chest flooded with heat. She began to pant.

"Yes. There will come a time when you will spread your legs for me no matter where we are or who is around us. It will be a matter of trust, because you'll know I would never leave you unprotected."

Skylar moaned uncontrollably. Her hips surged up against the heavenly pressure of his hand. What he was doing to her felt sinful, like a pleasure she hadn't known was available on earth. It frightened her, these unknown, alien feelings.

"Don't be afraid, baby. Give in to it. I'll keep you safe. Always," he whispered compellingly.

She came thunderously a moment later while dozens of people walked by within feet of her. Her head snapped back at the first jolt of pleasure. His hand was already in position to catch and cradle her while she rocked with pleasure. The contrast of the almost violent orgasm that he gave her and the gentle gesture nearly made her world unravel then and there.

Afterwards, it struck her that with other men, she would have felt a need to reciprocate, to give as powerful an orgasm as she had just received. But Duse seemed content despite the way his light blue eyes glittered with desire as he studied her. It was as if the stroking of her sex and the ensuing shattering orgasm had been the equivalent to him of a passionate kiss.

"Do you want to hear the rest, baby? About the example?" he asked after her breath had slowed.

Skylar nodded into his chest, suddenly embarrassed over her profound sexual response to him. Her eyes flew open at the sound of his low, rumbling laugher.

Duse caressed her slick, sensitive flesh one more time, savoring her post-climactic shivers in a way that was alien to a human man, before he withdrew and refastened her pants.

"A Watcher craves the sexual response of human women, Skylar. That much is true. But we don't believe in forcing anything upon a woman. That's not part of our culture. Watchers love human women, because their sexual responses feed our beings, make us more real, more powerful. That was what I meant when I said that the Watchers may or may not be of the same species as human beings, but we're irrevocably tied to them." She was very still in his arms. He began to stroke her back gently, trying to comfort the tumult of emotions that he sensed in her.

"If a particular Watcher were blessed enough to ever encounter a very rare and gifted type of human woman, a woman whose essences were so rarified and pure, that her response to him strengthened him immensely with every encounter, he would consider himself the luckiest being in existence."

Skylar tilted her chin up so that she could see Duse's face. "You mean he would be glad because he could become so powerful from her?"

"No!" Duse insisted, realizing how self-serving it sounded when she said it with so much naiveté. "I mean...yes, partly, but not in the way you're thinking. When I say 'powerful', it's true that I mean a Watcher's ability to perform what you would call magic, in addition to his increased ability to understand the subtle laws of nature, improved wisdom, if you will. But what I really mean is his ability to be in the world. I'm not an expert on human love affairs, but I don't think it's unfair to say that a human man may feel so empowered by the love that comes from a woman that it changes his self-concept, his way of relating to the world, the sense of meaning for his life. That's how it is for us, too, but it's much, much more than that. The power that comes from a female mate literally brings us into reality, into actuality. She breathes us into existence. A female mate is our initiatrix into the material world. Can you understand, Skylar?"

"I think, a little," Skylar said slowly, for the moment forgetting her thoughts about not believing him. His eyes were so compelling when he looked at her. "You really want me to understand, don't you?"

Duse reached down and swept a single tear from her cheek with his firm lips. His mouth moved to her upturned mouth, kissing her with both restraint and hunger, unable to resist the sweet temptation of her parted, pink lips. His fingers automatically fisted some of her soft curls. "Yes," he said hoarsely against her mouth. "I really want you to understand."

"Tell me the rest about the example," Skylar whispered after a moment of staring into his startling gaze.

"Like I told you before, if the woman is powerful enough, if she has a sexual response with a Watcher enough times, their subtle bodies will become bound, fitted to each other. What she gives him of her essence will bring him further and further into reality each time. But human beings are mortal, and the Watcher is forced to lose her time and again to death. Then he must wait alone, through time, until her spirit is reincarnated into another existence." He stroked her soft cheek. "When he finds her again, his long mourning ends. He comes back to life after a dark, lonely vigil."

Skylar reached up and traced his black goatee. "He must be pretty anxious to start again where they left off, huh?"

Duse glanced at her in surprise. He wondered if she was referring to the way he'd hastily made love to her earlier, but he couldn't divine her thoughts because of the embarrassment that suddenly interfered with his ability. He cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"During every incarnation, the Watcher will become more and more able to form a solid body, a true corporeal form. When he is able to make love with his mate and maintain full corporeality the whole time, then it eventually becomes possible for the couple to conceive a child."

Duse paused. There were a few particular details to that process that he didn't think it was advisable to pass on to Skylar at this point while she was being so attentive and trusting. Duse himself had just learned about one detail of attaining the corporal body that was required for conception from his brother Bale, who had been dutifully trying to prepare him for what could take place when he finally found Devon during this incarnation. Duse was personally far from comfortable with what his brother had told him, and still a trifle disbelieving. He had his doubts that Skylar would ever agree to doing what Bale had said was necessary.

But Duse would cross that bridge if and when he came to it.

"There is nothing so revered, so prayed for by my people, Skylar, than the idea that we can pass ourselves on, perpetuate our race. It is such a rare and holy event for us when a child is born of a Watcher's mate. Sadly, only forty-nine children have ever been born to us. My brother Bale is the most fortunate Watcher, in that aspect, because he has two children."

"And you, Duse? Do you have any?" Skylar asked, her beautiful agate eyes searching his face.

Duse shook his head. "No. I have none," he said quietly.

"Your brother Bale...he must revere his mate a great deal because she has borne him two children," Skylar said so quietly that Duse had to use clairaudience—his psychic hearing ability—in order to understand her.

"Bale reveres Helen more than anything in existence, but he would love and cherish her as much whether she had borne his children or not," Duse breathed out against Skylar's warm neck. He could feel the doubt in her as easily as he could sense the soft texture of her hair and skin. After several moments, Skylar moved her head back to look into his stormy eyes. "Weren't we on the way to where you live, Duse?"

Duse's face tightened with insecurity. He had never been so shielded from her thoughts. The fact that he was bothered him immensely.

Duse Ammadon was one of the most powerful of the most powerful of beings that inhabited the planet Earth. He wasn't used to feeling unsure. His light blue eyes blinked in disbelief when it was Skylar who was suddenly reassuring him.

"It'll be okay, Duse. Just take me to your home."

Duse studied Skylar with a sense of vulnerability that was only increasing as they rode the private elevator that led to his penthouse. "Skylar, there's something I should have told you earlier, something that was more immediately important than what we talked about in the car."

"What?" Skylar asked, her attention still captured by the posh detailing and luxury inherent in the high-rise where Duse lived on the near north side of Chicago. She had to smile when she recalled their earlier conversation. She knew it would remain etched in her mind as one of the most bizarre and touching communications of her life. "I can't believe there would be something more important than what you told me in the car."

"I said something that was more immediately important..."

Skylar inhaled sharply when the elevator doors opened and a crowd of people let out a deafening cheer. No, not people, Skylar realized as she stepped off the elevator uncertainly at Duse's urgings. Men. Skylar and Duse had stepped into a foyer of smiling, laughing, shouting, partying men. Her eyes skittered in disbelief beyond the foyer. No, she couldn't be so lucky as to hope they were just here in the entrance. The sights and the noises coming from within the large, luxuriously furnished living space told her that the celebrating men were everywhere.

And these were not just ordinary men, either. These men were tall, vibrant and incredibly handsome. And they seemed genuinely thrilled by the sight of her.

Duse stopped her firmly when she tried to get back through the already closing elevator doors. "Please, Skylar. I didn't have time to explain. These are my people. They want to welcome you. This is our traditional Dionytion Ceremony," he whispered hoarsely in her ear. "They're here for you, Skylar...to celebrate your Second Change. For us, it is like a human's name day, or a birthday," he explained patiently, all the while knowing that Skylar's Second Change meant much more to his race than a mere birthday. What he had told her about a human female being the initiatrix to her Watcher mate's corporeal body was true, but to a lesser extent at the Dionytion Ceremony, a Watcher mate was the initiatrix to the material world for all Watchers, mated or not. Through her sexual commerce with her mate, she granted all of them with a period of intense corporeality and opened the psychic awareness of every Watcher in existence, inspired him to strive for the highest, most ideal manner in which

to live and to love a woman. She gave their shrinking race hope, a genuine desire to build a meaningful future.

Duse's heart sank at the sight of Skylar's face. She looked pale, shocked, every bit ready to turn around and leave for good if he had allowed her to do so.

"I don't like being around people that much," she whispered covertly when an indescribably gorgeous man with brown hair entwined with gold caught her eye and raised his glass to her in toast.

Duse called out with his mind to a presence that he hoped would soothe Skylar. A large German Shepherd Dog bounded into the foyer and skidded to a halt before Skylar on the slippery wood floor. Duse felt gratification, but also wary amazement, when he saw tears of emotion literally gush from Skylar's eyes.

"Ravi?" she whispered. She didn't know how the name had popped in to her head, but the dog gave one sharp bark, affirming her guess. Skylar went down on her knees and hugged the dog unrestrainedly. "How are you, boy? How are you?" she murmured with happy disbelief. Ravi stood patiently while she petted his lush, healthy coat. When Skylar leaned forward to hug him again, the dog placed its head on her shoulder and gave a soft whine.

She recalls Ravi's name? Duse's eyes went immediately to his brother. The tone of Bale's question was sharp.

It would seem so, Duse answered telepathically, amazement edging his words. There is something different this time, Bale. It's not the only thing she's recalled. His sharp eyes scanned the room. Where's Jax?

Bale gave the equivalent of a mental shrug. *Got me. Probably off sulking somewhere.*

Skylar felt better when she stood. Or she did until she glanced around the room, taking in all the men once again. Duse tried to soothe her quickly reappearing unrest.

"Just bear with me for a little while, and I'll get you away from this, I swear. They're partying as much for what you mean to them than anything. Just give it a few minutes and we'll find some privacy. Okay?"

Skylar only had just absorbed what Duse had said when an extremely tall and impressive-looking man approached her. Her eyes widened not only at the impact of his presence, but because of his physical similarity to Duse. She hardly noticed when the legion of men quieted, so lost was she in the mesmerizing gaze of the man's blue eyes.

"Skylar, we welcome you to our number. As always, you are one of our most honored members. We have awaited your presence eagerly for a very long time. Ask, and your word is our command."

Skylar swallowed in embarrassment when the entire room of men quietly echoed the last words and lowered their heads in a brief, but solemn bow. Two seconds later, she thought she'd imagined the whole thing, because the rooms sprang into liveliness and activity, the men back to drinking, shouting and joking loudly.

The man who greeted her smiled down at her kindly. Skylar noticed that his similarity to Duse was uncanny, but that he appeared more formal in his appearance.

"You must be Bale," Skylar said shakily, her eyes clinging to the tall man's unexpectedly compassionate gaze.

Bale Ammadon nodded, thoughts of his Helen in five previous incarnations, enduring what Skylar was enduring now, currently filling his awareness. "Have pity on us, Skylar," he said softly. "We're just a bunch of extremely old men who are immensely glad to see you."

Skylar couldn't keep a straight face at the irony inherent in his words. In truth, she would have been stunned into silence by the masculine beauty of any one of the men surrounded her if he existed on his own. As it was, it seemed that well over a hundred such men caroused around her.

"I thought we agreed the Ceremony could be waived this time around, considering the circumstances," Duse said tensely to his brother. "Who was behind this?"

Bale's expression looked darkly amused as his eyes gave one rapid flick toward the handsome man who had toasted Skylar on her entrance.

"Che," Duse gritted out between clenched teeth when the man approached. *Some best friend*, Duse communicated to Che telepathically.

Some best friend you are, Duse, scheming to deny us this moment, Che Ammadon snapped back nonverbally, but his eyes stayed fixed on Skylar. He gave her a slow grin. Che could melt the defenses of the least devoted of married women as easily as the most devoted of nuns with the exact same smile, but with pretty much the same effect. Duse knew firsthand from experience. His eyes flew to Skylar's face. His mate only appeared bewildered, Duse noted with gratification.

"Hello. It's Skylar, right?" Che asked so kindly and with such an easygoing smile that Skylar just nodded mutely, overwhelmed by his casual potency. "I'm Che Ammadon. Duse's cousin."

How is it possible that she gets more and more beautiful every time? Che asked Duse telepathically, with genuine amazement and reverence.

Go and get your own mate and find out for yourself, Duse snapped. Skylar watched in alarm as both men eyed each other with growing aggression. She let out a sigh of relief when Duse and Che smiled broadly at the same moment, their white teeth flashing brightly in their faces. Duse's eyebrows went up in an unasked challenge before he put out his hand for Che to shake it. He clearly felt his cousin's strong heartbeat and the warmth of his flesh.

How do you do that, you bastard? Don't tell me you've got a couple sisters tucked away in the back room? Duse asked his friend with both suspicion and amusement, referring to the incredible strength that Che possessed, able to make himself fully corporeal at a moment's notice. And like Jax, Che wasn't even mated. The only possible way most Watchers could have pulled the same stunt was to have seduced a very powerful human woman just brief seconds or minutes before, or in Che's case, powerful human

women. His cousin had possessed a proclivity to making love to two women at once for as long as Duse could remember. Of course, it took a serious devotion to the task and some ingenuity to find a place where heterosexual women old enough to be in their Second Change regularly slept together in order to fulfill Che's sexual proclivities, and one of his favorite solutions was to pay regular night visits to a convent. He'd dragged Duse along on countless such erotic adventures before Duse had become mated to Skylar.

All Watchers are not made equal, my friend, Che replied with a rakish grin. When he noticed the puzzled look on Skylar's face, he switched to speaking out loud. "Congratulations, Duse," Che laughed as he pumped Duse's arm. "To you too, Skylar, although I doubt you know what you're in for with this bastard."

Duse abruptly shielded Skylar by curving his arm around her when Che left his hand outstretched after Duse dropped it. "Relax, Duse," Che said as he raised his eyebrows in wry amusement. "There's not a Watcher here who can't read your signal, loud and clear."

"Is it that obvious?" Duse turned to his brother intently.

"Oh, it's that obvious," Bale Ammadon assured him, his quiet words managing to easily convey the certitude of his answer. "Skylar? Would you allow me to introduce you to a few people? Don't worry, my wife Helen always tells me the fewer the better when it comes to the Ceremony."

Skylar's uncertain gaze flicked to Duse. The last thing she wanted to do was to be away from him in these bizarre circumstances.

"I'll be right here, Skylar. And I'll know if you need me," Duse said quietly.

She tried to smooth her unruly curls. "I wasn't really dressed for a gathering like this," she said self-consciously. Her face flushed when she realized that she hadn't showered since she made love with Duse. Surely others would be able to smell the musky odor that she occasionally inhaled.

The three Ammadon men worked in tandem, no overt collaboration necessary.

"You've never looked more beautiful," Che Ammadon said with so much genuineness that Skylar couldn't help but flash him an incredulous smile. Che looked like he'd just spent the better part of the day on a southern California beach. His hair and skin looked like they'd been lovingly caressed and kissed by warm sunshine. He was as tall as Duse, but not as broad through the shoulders. His body was lean and ropy with muscle. And those sparkling, mischievous aquamarine eyes... Skylar blinked and shook her head, as if to clear it. Talk about potent stuff. It was enough to make a grown woman suspicious. She saw Che's features pulled together in puzzlement when he sensed her distrust. Skylar realized he looked a little hurt.

"I really meant it, Skylar! I wasn't throwing you a bone or something. By the Gods, you of all people!" he said, obliquely referring to the fact that Duse's lovely mate had always been able to see right through his depthless charm.

Bale and Duse were having a rapid telepathic conversation in the meantime. What did she say about how she was attacked? Bale asked intently.

She wouldn't tell me explicitly, nor could I divine her thoughts. But whatever happened was very upsetting for her, and it related to someone entering her mind and manipulating her against her will.

Bale's expression became rigid. Was her brain damaged in any way?

Duse shook his head once slightly. No. She appears to be fine. But Bale, while the spell was in process, a Watcher appeared before us. He seemed to be merged with the astral body of a human.

Bale's gaze bore into his brother. You and Devon are all right, though?

Duse nodded distractedly. We're all right, but still, something is very wrong among us, Bale.

Bale mentally agreed even as he smiled when Skylar turned to him.

"Well, your cousin has a tongue of gold, that's for sure," Skylar said with amusement as she glanced at Che. "But even if I don't believe nine-tenths of what he said, I'd still like to meet Duse's friends. At least...as many of them as your wife, Helen, would have agreed to," she added hastily.

Skylar's amused gaze flew to Duse's eyes when Bale Ammadon erupted into deep, heartfelt laughter.

"Ravi," Duse said in a hushed voice, and the German Shepherd immediately went to Skylar's side. He felt glad when Skylar unconsciously reached down to pet the dog's head, taking reassurance from his presence. She had loved the animal so much in her last incarnation that Duse had preserved some of Ravi's cells and cloned the pet for her. Bale had only allowed it after much discussion with other leaders and philosophers. Watchers had strict laws that prohibited them from cloning human beings. Watchers with mates suffered greatly in their absence, and there was a concern among many topranking Watchers that cloning would be used to try and defeat the cruel, relentless enemy of death. For Duse, though, there was no real lure to the idea of replicating Devon. He found the idea disrespectful to the living, breathing, vital woman who he currently watched.

"By the Three, she's something else," Che said reverently as he watched Skylar walk away under the obviously competent hands of their king and leader.

"Bale says he wants the Council to meet with him in my office in five minutes," Duse said quietly as they both watched Bale introduce Skylar to Os, a powerful Watcher who was the head of a gigantic computer software conglomerate. Watcher lore had it that the Fathers had instructed them to watch over human beings when they left them on Earth. As such, King Bale and the Grigori Council encouraged Watchers that were corporeally strong enough to assume positions of power and influence. The gathering in Duse's home, at present, rivaled a United Nations meeting in regard to the influential leaders represented from the private, government and military sectors. The only

difference was that Watchers rarely met so exclusively, providing an opportunity for them to really relax and be themselves.

Skylar had no idea what kind of a wild party had just been thrown in her name, Duse thought wryly. Still, his eyes flicked uncomfortably around the room, searching for potential danger.

"You're not comfortable leaving her alone for five minutes among your own people?" Che asked abruptly, somewhat scandalized by his cousin's emotions and thoughts.

"Don't criticize me, Che, until you know what it's like to have a mate of your own," Duse bit out. But he amended his words when he looked into the startled aquamarine eyes of his cousin. "Or, at least until I can get a better idea of what's happening to the Watchers."

Chapter Five

The magically shielded conversation had been going on for ten minutes in Duse's private office while the party rocked on in the penthouse. The sounds of an obviously talented blues trio could be heard intermittently through the walls. Such an occasion as Skylar's Second Change guaranteed a private affair among Watchers, which meant that the soulful trumpet, guitar and drums that they heard every once in a while was a group of Watchers having a spot of fun. Watchers were incredibly talented and creative when it came to the Arts. As a matter of fact, Duse thought he recognized two of his own knights—Force on the trumpet and Ron on the guitar—pitching in to entertain the crowd of Watchers.

After the first initial sixty seconds of observing Duse's tortured expression as he kept watching the mahogany office doors, Bale tried to ease his worried mind. "Duse, she's with Uncle Paim. He's vowed to not let her out of his sight. Can't you focus for two minutes to tell us what we need to know? Think of me, and Dante, and Eli," Bale admonished Duse when he saw the desire on his brother's face to be with his mate.

Bale instantly regretted his harshness when he saw Duse's light blue eyes flash to him defiantly. "I'm behaving just like you would, Bale, given the same circumstances," Duse said angrily. "Or in Dante's, or Eli's...or in Che's or Zep's case if they had mates. If any one of you dares to contradict me, I'll call you a liar to your face. Knowing how I pushed her so hard at first contact, can you blame me for wanting to spend time with her in order to prepare for the Ceremony?"

A silence settled over the office, despite the occasional seductive wail of the trumpet and the melancholy chords of the guitar. Duse was the only man among the six to stand, unable to keep his seat in his anxiety. He felt wired, restless, like he could set an entire city alight from the power his body was generating alone. Part of it was the life that Skylar had gifted him with, but most of all, his concern for her. He paced back and forth before his carved desk, five pairs of steady eyes watching him.

"I'm sorry, Duse. You're right," Bale said after a moment. "If it were Helen, I would undoubtedly show less restraint."

Duse stopped abruptly in his pacing, moved by his brother's words. How could he be so selfish when Bale suffered so much? The depth of Bale's grief was almost too great for Duse to consider. He felt guilty for shying away from the extremity of his brother's pain. Skylar was alive, vibrant, and within seventy feet of him, stunning in her reality. Duse's gaze skimmed over to Eli, a fellow Grigori Council member who was mated and anxious about his mate's future reincarnation, given Asmoday's bizarre criminal behavior. Duse made eye contact with Dante, one of his closest friends, whose mate Arriasta was even now in her First Change incarnation somewhere in the British Isles.

Che and Zep were not mated, but as Watcher Council members, two of the most powerful and wise of their kind, they, too, were both eager and entitled to know about the details surrounding Skylar.

Duse's manic energy mellowed as the bigger picture entered his awareness and he hesitantly addressed his brother and the other four Council members. Although Watchers' governance was largely hierarchical, with Bale at the central position and the five Grigori Council members immediately below him, their style was relatively loose and flexible. While Bale may have the final word on a few important issues, his power was far from being absolute. Each individual Watcher was free to spend his time as he chose, as long as he followed their basic laws.

"Okay. Let's talk," Duse said grimly. He could easily sense Skylar out in the living room. The general emotions exuding from her had gone from fascination mixed with alarm to cautious curiosity and bemusement. It was the most that Duse could hope for given the state of things.

Bale inhaled slowly when he saw his brother consciously discipline his restless, fiery energy.

"The spell obviously worked," Bale began. The results were tangible to all of them. None of them could lay a hand to merely brush back Skylar's hair if they tried with all of their being. The only exception Bale had woven into the spell was that a Watcher could touch a mate if she was in dire need or danger.

Duse nodded. "Yes, it was very powerful. I owe you my thanks, brother." He proceeded to describe what had occurred when he cast the protective spell on Skylar. Bale and the Council members each asked questions successively about the entity that had tried to attack Skylar at the advent of her Second Change, but also asked about her attack during the dream.

"And you say that the entity faded as soon as your *sigil* appeared on her?" Dante asked intently.

Duse nodded, finally resting for a moment against his desk. "Yes. I recommend that you put your *sigil* on Arriasta as quickly as you can find her upon her Second Change, Dante."

Dante's brown eyes, which were flecked with gold, darted in wry amusement from his close friend Eli and back to Duse. "Skylar must not have appreciated your haste in that matter."

Bale glanced up with interest. "Yes. How is it that you managed to not totally alienate her? Devon is obviously uncomfortable here, but she does not seem to...hate you overly much."

Duse bristled as the five pairs of eyes focused on him with interest. "Well, thanks for acknowledging that my bonded mate doesn't hate me," he said irritably. They all just continued to stare at him patiently. He sighed. "I was ready to manipulate her mind, if I needed to, but...look, if it helps any one of you to know it, I probably

shouldn't have waited as long as I did. We sometimes have to do it for the Ceremony. It's possible that not doing so could have gotten her harmed."

"Or worse," Zep said.

For a moment, none of them spoke. Eventually, Eli Aurelius, a Watcher with all the appearance of a golden-haired Greek deity, said, "It's easy for you to say, Duse, since you obviously didn't have to resort to it. Half of Jean's incarnation was over before she forgave me for manipulating her mind at first contact. She was angry enough at me during her last existence when I had to during the Ceremony. She's always telling me that Watchers have too many unfair advantages as it is, and if we don't do some serious courting when we first encounter our mates after they've reincarnated, then we never will."

Che snorted. "As if that woman ever required more attention from you, Eli. You two couldn't even take your hands off each other long enough to allow Jean to pick up a fork and eat. It's a wonder she doesn't starve once you find her."

Eli just shrugged his wide shoulders, his expression obvious—what's a Watcher to do? Zep and Dante chuckled.

Duse was thoughtful. "Eli, I don't know if it will be the same for you and Jean as it was for Skylar and me. But I think you were right, Bale. I think our mates do recognize us in many ways. Maybe in more ways than I'd ever considered before. When you know that you don't have weeks or months to help her to understand, to seduce her back to you, it sort of forces you to the realization. But then again, there are many ways that a woman can accept her mate, and I still have a long way to go with Skylar." His expression abruptly tightened.

"Is everything all right?" Bale asked.

Duse nodded. "She's overwhelmed by all of this. And tired and sore, too. There's worse bruising on her body than on her face."

"Tell us all that you found out about that, Duse," Bale insisted. "I know you want to be with Devon—Skylar, I mean—but you must see how crucial this is. A Watcher knew of her location and existence even before you, and you should be the one who is most attuned to her, by far."

Duse hesitated, but compromised by telepathically communicating with Skylar. I'm going to be a while longer, Skylar. You've spent enough time at the party. Go and rest, or take a shower if you like. I'll be with you shortly.

Paim introduced Skylar to a charming, handsome man with an accent that could have melted a woman into a puddle of lust, even at long distance. After a few minutes of polite conversation, Skylar told Lotis Asher that she had visited Lichtenborg, the small country where he lived, when she was a college student. She recalled some of places where she had gone sightseeing. Paim Alexander, her kind escort, explained casually that Lotis was the president of Lichtenborg.

Skylar colored deeply. She'd just been talking about touring the president's residence, which just happened to be Lotis' current home. Lotis Asher glanced at Paim in concern when they both felt her embarrassment.

"Please, don't feel uncomfortable, Skylar. There is no reason. My country is so small, the men and women who live there practically have to take turns in public office," Lotis reassured her.

Skylar laughed incredulously. "Right. I expect if I'd stayed there as a tourist for another few weeks, they'd have requested that I run for Vice President or something."

Lotis's dark eyes were warm when he joined her laughter. "Now you've got it. I could use you, too. Do you think Duse could spare you?"

Skylar just shook her head in amazement. She knew he was just teasing, but she couldn't help saying, "Mr. Asher, I'm sure that Duse Ammadon could spare me anytime he wanted, seeing as how we're practically strangers to each other. We just met today, you know."

Was this for real? She'd asked herself that so many times since meeting Duse today that she was beginning to feel like the phrase no longer held meaning for her. Fatigue assailed her. She glanced up sharply when Duse spoke to her telepathically. The sound of his voice, even if it was just in her head, steadied her momentarily. She couldn't help but feeling a little irritated at him. He was the main reason why she'd suddenly been plunged into this bizarre world, after all. But mostly, she just felt relief at sensing his presence when she was starting to feel so overwhelmed.

A few minutes later, Paim led her through a door to a beautifully appointed private sitting area. He quickly showed her the layout of the suite, including a small bar stocked with water, juices, fruit and snacks. Skylar was eyeing the food items suspiciously.

"Paim, those are all of my favorite fruits and snacks." She blinked twice when she saw a canister of her favorite brand of tea, which although not rare, per se, was still not something you found on the aisle of the local grocery store.

Paim looked surprised, but Skylar was feeling pretty jaded at this point. "That's wonderful! Duse got lucky," he exclaimed. Skylar sighed. Despite the obviousness of his current playacting, she felt comfortable with Paim Alexander, inadvertently even calling him Uncle Paim twice after Bale Ammadon had introduced her to him in that way. He was one of the few men that she'd met that night who had any gray in his hair. Strangely, that little characteristic and all that it implied went a long way with Skylar. Maybe that was why Bale Ammadon had left her with him before he absconded with Duse.

After she'd warmly bade Paim good night, Skylar went into the large, luxurious bathroom. She didn't think there was room left in her for surprise, but she still experienced it when she saw her personal grooming items—items that by all human laws should have been back in her bathroom in Lincoln Park—set out for her.

When she returned to the bedroom, she noticed a pair of beautiful silk lounging pajamas folded on the sumptuous-looking bed. While she touched the sensual fabric, her attention drifted to a column-shaped stone on the bedside table. Her hand went out instinctively. She jumped with surprise when she touched the smooth stone. Electricity and heat tingled up her arm. She jerked her hand back. The memory of visiting Stonehenge during her senior year of college popped into her mind. Skylar had been amazed that the busload of tourists she went to the ancient site with hadn't clearly felt the vibrations coming from the monoliths. Didn't all people realize that Stonehenge was built with the purpose of focusing and containing subtle energies? Skylar guessed not, because none of the other people on that bus had passed out cold like she did when they came within fifty feet of one of the ancient stones.

This smooth stone on the table wasn't a monolith from Stonehenge, but it served the same purpose as they did. Skylar felt sure of it.

When Duse barreled into the suite a moment later unannounced, he found her curled up on the pillows of her bed crying softly. He sensed bewilderment and fear emanating from her. She wore the champagne-colored silk pajamas he had bought for her...or at least the bottoms. The top was only partially on her, leaving her lovely skin bared at her right shoulder. Concern crossed his features when he noticed the bruising on her shoulder. Was she in pain? She faced away from him, but Duse thought she realized that he'd entered the room. When she spoke, without looking at him, he knew that he was right.

"Why? Why is this mark on me?" Skylar asked shakily. Duse cringed when he realized the full extent of her fragileness. Che was right. He was a bastard. He should never have left her alone to find it with no one to explain. He sat cautiously beside her on the bed, reaching for her without conscious thought. But he received a subtle message warning him to stop. His hand dropped to the bed slowly.

"I'm sorry, Skylar. I should have explained before; not that it was ever going to be easy when I did. Still, I shouldn't have let you find it on your own," he said in his gentle, hoarse voice. Skylar turned around and assessed him cautiously. His face tensed with anxiety when he saw the tears in her large eyes and the way she looked at him with so much trepidation.

"It won't come off. I tried."

Duse forced his face into impassivity when she lowered a portion of the silk top, leaving her lush right breast exposed from just above the nipple. He saw the dark red *sigil*, but a good deal more too...at least for Duse's present comfort. He'd purposely avoided paying much attention to her breasts earlier when haste was required to set the spell of protection. Skylar had breasts that made him want to spend days in bed making slow, passionate love, interspersed with a few frenzied drill sessions, until she slipped into an exhausted, content sleep. Just the sight of her breasts had almost been enough to make him give up the necessity of making love to her in rapid, emergency-level strokes.

"Duse?" Skylar asked, trying to sound irritated. In fact, the way his light blue eyes caressed her breast made her feel anything but angry. Shame flooded through her when she realized that she was seriously considering lowering the silk, further exposing herself to his hungry gaze and cupping her breast in offering. Her nipples beaded painfully at the thought. Instead, she did the sane thing and buttoned the top clumsily, trying to ignore the sensual pull of the fabric across her aroused nipples. She forced herself to recall why she'd been upset when she noticed that Duse's attention was still on her breast, and that he was about as successful at ignoring her pebbled nipple beneath the soft, clinging silk as she was.

Duse easily read her thoughts and emotions. For a moment, his tight control faltered. He imagined roughly moving the silk top back over her shoulders, trapping her arms with it, exposing her large mounds with those pretty coral tips to his eyes, hands and hungry mouth. Blood and heat rushed to his cock. He felt himself thicken and harden almost uncomfortably. For a moment, he sat very still, trying to regain his control.

His eyes slowly rose to hers. Skylar suddenly felt strangely empowered, which was a potent balm to her earlier fear. As strong, mysterious, and inexplicable as Duse Ammadon was, Skylar admitted to herself that for whatever reason, she held her own type of power over him.

"It's true, Skylar. I'm completely at your command. There never has been and there never will be a reason for you to be afraid of me," he sad quietly.

Skylar breathed deeply. She wanted to believe him. She couldn't be sure why, but she did believe him. But still, he had no right to be messing with her life like this. "I wish you would stop reading my mind," she snapped irritably.

Duse's dark eyebrows quirked upwards. "You can block your thoughts from me, if you wish. You've already done it a time or two. You just need practice. Your emotions are more difficult to shield, especially the more basic and primitive ones, but it can be done as well."

Skylar's eyes narrowed in suspicion but he looked completely impassive, if not innocent. He hadn't been referring to her feelings for him earlier when he was looking at her breast, had he? Lust, surely, was the most primitive of emotions. "I want to leave here, Duse. This is just too weird." Alarm rumbled distantly in her again when Duse broke eye contact with her.

"Duse? What is it? It's not as if I'm a prisoner here," she scoffed. "Duse?" she prompted uneasily after a long pause.

"Of course not. Just tell me wherever you want to go, and either I or one of my men will take you. I'll take you," he amended, after a pause, trusting his knights, but not liking the idea of someone else having the pleasure of her company when he wanted to be the one to bask in it.

"I don't need anyone to take me anywhere! I'm not talking about going shopping on Michigan Avenue or running errands. I'm talking about going home. All of this is too much for me. I met a prime minister and the leaders of two European countries a little while ago, not to mention the owner of WorldSoft and a Nobel Prize-winning physicist, all of who claim that they're here for a party in my honor. Then, there's you. You keep talking to me in my mind. I saw you teleport across a room. You took my clothes off me and put them back on me somehow. And there's a tattoo or something on my breast that will not come off." Skylar paused, drawing in a ragged breath. Tears had begun to fall down her cheeks again, although she didn't appear to be aware of them as she listed her grievances to Duse. "And then there's just the small, relatively unimportant detail of me having sex with you in my potting room after knowing your name for all of two minutes. But hey, how important is that when other details of your day include being told that you're in the presence of an alien race of super-powerful beings?"

"I didn't say we were aliens, Skylar. This planet is as much our home as it is for human beings."

"Oh, great. I feel so much better then," Skylar laughed humorlessly.

"I know it's not easy to accept. And I'm sorry about the mark, Skylar, I really am. I needed to protect you. When we made love earlier, it activated the spell, and my *sigil* appeared on you. And you're right. It's never going to wash off," he added with regret. Most women wouldn't be too thrilled at the idea of having a permanent mark like that above their breast. For Duse's part, however, seeing the elaborate markings of one of his personal signs on her had caused a primitive surge of satisfaction. It only enhanced her beauty for him.

Skylar stilled at being given some concrete information. "What do you mean a sigil?"

"That mark, the design of it is my *sigil*. To another Watcher, it connotes Duse Ammadon. Not Ammadon. That's my shielded name, and has a different *sigil*."

"What's a shielded name?" Skylar asked, curious despite herself.

"Watchers utilize magic, Skylar. There is great power in the true name, and knowledge of it can be used against you. It is the same with personal markings, like the *sigil*. The spell utilized my known sign, because to put my secret *sigil* would have put you in danger, and that was what I was trying to protect you from."

"You mean most of the men—Watchers, I mean—out there at the party don't know your secret name or *sigil*?"

"Few do. We only reveal it to those we love the most dearly, and whom we know would never betray us. My brothers know my true name, and Che, and Dante."

"But you told me your name was Ammdusias."

He held her gaze and nodded.

Her eyes widened. She looked away, the emotional tumult within her spinning into higher gear.

"No. I'm not ready for this now. I want to leave, Duse," she said shakily. She sensed his hesitation. Her eyes flew to his accusingly.

"I can't let you go right now, Skylar. You can go wherever you want tomorrow. But tonight is the Ceremony. It's expected that we be together tonight. It's one of our traditions."

"Well, it's not my tradition!" she blurted out as she lurched across the bed in order to escape Duse's powerful presence. If she looked into his magnetic eyes a second longer, her willpower would vaporize. It frightened her to know the ease with which he could transform her into his willing slave. She yelped when he leaned forward and encircled her waist with his arm. She flopped back into her original position against the pillows.

"Let go of me!"

He immediately complied.

For a few seconds, she just watched him with huge eyes. Her heart squeezed in her chest even as her womb seemed to pulse inward, as if it had a will its own, as if it knew that it needed this impossibly beautiful male creature to fill her until the ache finally passed. "What exactly did you mean that it's expected that we be together tonight?"

His face remained impassive, but she felt the hesitancy in him.

"We're expected to make love here, while the others are present."

This time she almost reached the far side of the bed before he caught the slender ankle that she was about to put on the floor. He held her shoulders down while she struggled in panic.

"Skylar, stop it. Please. It would help if you let me hold you. Your feelings are chaotic. You're confused. I'll be able to help calm you, if you just let me in a little. My energy would soothe yours." He inwardly cringed when he saw tears splash onto her cheeks. By the Gods, he didn't know how to react to her when she was like this. Her behavior was unprecedented. It was all because of that damned spell, he knew it. He was pushing her too hard, too fast.

"I don't want you to hold me. I want to get out of here!"

Duse clenched his teeth. He recalled that she was bruised already. He might be harming her more by holding her like this. Damn it all to Hades.

Her hands flew above her head. Her legs opened and stilled. He considered avoiding her disbelieving gaze as he let go of her, but he knew that would be cowardly. Her hips twisted uselessly.

"You've tied me up?" she cried out in rising shock and anger.

"I'm sorry," he said woodenly. "You gave me no choice. I was going to worsen your bruising by holding you like that."

Skylar struggled against what felt like a soft, silky material binding her wrists and ankles. He hadn't ever moved. Good Lord, he'd just used magic on her again.

He raised his hand to try and soothe her but the look of undiluted fury in her eyes, when she glared at him sharply, made him stop. "Try to calm down, Skylar. I won't let you struggle like this for long. You're going to hurt yourself."

"What do you care?" she hissed between clenched teeth. She saw the way his eyes leapt with a white-hot fire when she said that. It did her good to know that she could hurt him a little.

"I care, baby, and you know it," he said starkly. He watched as she stilled under his stare. She bit her lower lip hard.

"What did you mean that we were expected to make love while the others are present? I won't, Duse. If you make me, it will be rape."

He grimaced. He'd telepathically caught the brief image that flashed through her mind. "By the Fathers, Skylar, I didn't mean that we were expected to make love directly in front of them. We'll be in here, alone. It's just that usually I'll shield the room where we make love. During the Ceremony, though, it's prohibited. You're one of the most powerful women in existence, Skylar. The energy that you release when you climax is enormous. There is a small minority of us who claim that it's unfair for mated Watchers to..."

"What?" Skylar asked pointedly, curiosity mingling with her alarm.

He sighed raggedly. "A small contingent of Watchers, led by a man who has since become a murderer, an outcast—Asmoday Tertulious—would have it that all Watchers should be allowed to benefit from the energy that women like you can confer."

"That's sick!" Skylar spat out. "I'm not even one hundred percent sure what you're talking about, Duse, but it sounds like slavery. I wasn't put here on earth to gratify a whole race of beings' sexual needs, or yours, for that matter."

"Damn it, Skylar. Haven't you been listening to what I said? It's about sex for us, yes, but it's also about power, and life, and existence!"

"Whatever. I wasn't put here on earth to be some kind of power generator for your race, either."

His expression froze. "You're judging us based on your own culture. You don't understand our ways."

Skylar gasped. "You agree with that man – Asmoday?" "No."

She startled at the intensity of his response. Duse paused while he tried to get himself under control. Gods, had he really just been telling Eli and Dante not fifteen minutes ago that their mates likely recognized them in ways he had never before considered? If anything, Skylar was currently reacting to him like he was an utterly frightening stranger, and that was just as unprecedented as her immediate acceptance of him had been tonight.

And he did need to make love to her soon, while the others were here. It was Watcher law.

"No, I don't believe that. I know that what a Watcher and his mate do together is private. It's theirs alone to cherish."

"Then why would you allow them to come here tonight? Why do you go along with it?"

Duse sighed. Now wasn't the time to tell her that he had doubts about the Ceremony as well, that he'd been one of the most verbal members of their race to argue against Asmoday's contingent as well as for the banning of the Ceremony. He'd been successful in the first case, but he hadn't been able to convince Bale and Che in the second. At least if all went well with Skylar, he'd never have to endure another Ceremony again.

Not that he had a right to consider that when he had her currently tied up on the bed and her usually gentle eyes threw fire at him.

"It's Watcher Law, Skylar. It's what the majority of my people believe is right. They don't see it in the same way that you do, baby. It's sacred to them. You're sacred to them. Most of the Watchers out there would give their life for you without a second thought."

Skylar bit her lip over her next outraged reply when she looked into his eyes. He seemed to be entreating her to understand.

"You didn't seem to mind my making love to you earlier. If you just relax, I'll make it good for you. I promise."

Skylar's eyes widened with disbelief. She'd come this close to giving in to him as she'd listened to his rough, seductive voice and images of their earlier lovemaking sprang to her mind. Then she recalled all of those gorgeous men out there. Pure panic rose in her.

"No! I won't willingly be the whore for your party, Duse Ammadon. Now are you going to let me go, or are you going to force me?" Her eyes blazed up at him. If there was one thing that she believed with all of her heart, it was that Duse would never force her to have sex with him.

"You're right," he muttered between clenched jaws. "I will never force you. Tonight, I won't have to either. I was thrilled that I didn't have to resort to psychokinetically stimulating your brain at first contact, but if I have to for the Ceremony, so be it," he said starkly.

Heat flushed Skylar's cheeks at the implication of what he was saying. "You could have done that?" Duse gave a nonchalant nod. "And you swear you didn't?"

Amusement pulled at Duse's lips, revealing that pair of devastating dimples. Skylar tried not to gawk. He really did have an incredibly potent smile.

"I swear it, Skylar."

Her eyes continued to examine him through narrowed eyelids. "Because what I did with you earlier was really...unnatural for me."

Duse gave up his attempts at hiding his grin. "No, Skylar. That's what I've been trying to tell you all along, but you haven't been able to hear it. Part of you knew that making love to me was the most natural thing in the world."

Her irritation was shallow and brittle, a means of hiding her emotional chaos. "That's an awfully cocky presumption," she spat out. She tensed when he reached out and began to slowly unbutton the pajama top while spearing her with his gaze. Skylar thought that the wild pulse at her throat might leap through her skin. "No. No, I don't want to, Duse." *Maybe I would if it hadn't been for what you just told me, but I can't now. Please don't make me.*

Duse paused, hearing her thoughts as if they were his own. A muscle in his cheek flickered with suppressed tension. He heard her sob when he resumed unbuttoning her top, slowly revealing a tantalizing strip of pale, light apricot-hued skin to his hungry eyes. He groaned when he flipped back the fabric. Just as he remembered, her skin was a lovely color. No tan lines marred her perfect uniformity. Only the large, peaking coral nipples offered a stark contrast to her translucent skin.

Skylar clenched her eyes shut and writhed against her bindings. She couldn't be sure if she moved in arousal or in order to escape. The look of undiluted lust on his handsome features as he stared at her breasts made her pussy flood with juices. God, her body was such a traitor. He must be doing what he'd threatened. He must be manipulating her brain. That must be why she wanted—no, needed—him to touch her breasts right now, to feel his rough tongue lashing her nipples, to finally know the sensation of him suckling and pulling on her deeply.

Her pussy clenched so tightly at the imagined vision of him doing just that caused her to cry out in pain.

Duse's cock surged just as uncomfortably as they shared the identical image. While her eyes were closed, he made his clothing disappear, freeing his straining cock from his confining jeans. She didn't verbally protest, but she was as stiff as a board when he glided his hands next to the smooth skin of her hips, pushing the pajama bottoms down over her thighs and off her. When he reformed her bonds, he spread her legs several inches wider.

"Open your eyes, baby," he said quietly, but compellingly. He watched as she slowly complied and her large eyes ran over his nude body cautiously at first, then with growing heat.

God help her. He was so beautiful that it hurt to look at him. She inhaled deeply, taking in the image of Duse's nude body into her being slowly, by measures, as though innately aware of what the intoxicating result of drinking him in too quickly could be. She tried her hardest, but the inevitable wave of inebriation came anyway. Her eyes caressed over dense, molded muscle covered in smooth, flawless, olive-toned skin. He exuded masculine beauty and sexual potency, evoking flagrant images of wild, uninhibited—even taboo—sex. For wasn't that what most humans would call sexual commerce with such a creature? Her tongue ran over her lower lip hungrily at the sight of his enormous, erect penis. He looked so powerful, so masterful as he stood before her

unashamedly. She eyed the smooth, blunt head with a measure of trepidation. Had she really been able to accommodate that inside her body?

Duse's cock leapt uncontrollably as she visually caressed him and he sensed her thoughts. The sight of her nude body stretched out on the bed before him was doing strange things to him...unexpected things. He seriously considered covering up her succulent breasts. Just looking at all that tender, shapely flesh and seeing his *sigil* stamped on one made him feel like he was on the verge of losing control. He'd always loved to play with Devon's breasts, but for some strange reason in this incarnation, he was afraid to touch her there, intimidated by the power of his enormous hunger.

"We won't have intercourse if it's not what you want. But I have to make you come, Skylar. Are you going to try and run away if I release the bonds?"

"No."

"Liar," he growled.

Their gazes clung as he knelt on the bed between her thighs.

"I won't forgive you if you do this, Duse," she said desperately as he leaned down over her pussy. Her body betrayed her words though, as her exposed cunt swayed toward him, thoroughly charmed.

"You'll forgive me, in time," he said coolly.

He tried to still his warring emotions and his overwhelming lust. Being this close to her pussy was driving him mad. Her neatly trimmed, golden bush couldn't hide the alluring delicate folds of her sex. He inhaled her deeply. Tears actually stung his eyes when her familiar scent—only different from her other lifetimes in the slightest, most exciting way—pervaded his subtle matter. Nothing could have stopped him then, not even Skylar. He heard her gasp as if from far away. He moaned deep in his throat.

She tasted like the nectar of the Gods.

Skylar's eyes sprang wide, as though she'd just been imparted with the secrets of the universe. "Duse! Oh God," she moaned desperately. The sensation of him eating her was unimaginably exquisite. He traced her delicate folds with the tip of his tongue before he made hard, lashing movements over her clit and his mouth formed a divine suction. Skylar writhed beneath him helplessly, all thoughts of the crowd outside the suite, all thoughts of everything except the sensation of Duse's pleasuring mouth forgotten in an instant. He tasted her everywhere. He ate her patiently, deliberately, as if he was savoring every sensation and storing away every precious detail while he built a powerful fire in her. When he dipped his long tongue into her liquid core and vibrated in her deeply, Skylar knew she couldn't stand any more of it.

"Duse, please," Skylar heard herself begging. Her clit felt heavy and achy. Her nipples had pulled into hard, puckered bullets of throbbing nerves. The soles of her feet simmered. She burned for relief.

"What do you want, baby?"

"You know what I want," she cried out with mounting frustration.

Duse tenderly kissed the inside of her moist thigh. Skylar craned her head up to see him. She bit her lip over a groan. His smooth, black goatee and his beautiful, hard mouth glistened with her juices.

"I'd like to hear you say it," he muttered hoarsely as he began to carefully slide his tongue along a sex lip.

"C...co...come," she managed brokenly as she watched him skim right past her painfully erect clit within a millimeter. Some part of her was distantly aware that he suddenly held the strange stone that she had touched earlier in his hand. But she was beyond speculating about why. She wavered on the crest of orgasm.

"Please, make me come."

No sooner were the words out of her mouth than he enclosed her outer sex in his warm mouth and suckled her. She arched off the bed as the pressure that he had been powerfully building in her uncoiled abruptly. Her sharp cries of disbelieving pleasure echoed in her ears long after the last spasm of orgasm coursed through her. When she glanced down minutes later, she understood why her sex continued to sizzle with a barely banked flame. He met her gaze steadily when she glanced down at him, but all the while he flicked at her clit with his tongue with rapid, lashing movements.

"Enough," she whispered.

No. Not yet.

Skylar blinked when he spoke directly to her mind. She thought of how she'd just screamed out in orgasm. Every man in the penthouse had probably heard her. Her cheeks flamed. But she couldn't stop her hips from surging forward to get more of Duse's torturing tongue.

"You must be so proud of yourself, knowing that you have to force a woman to have a response with you," she taunted.

She gritted her teeth in unintentional protest when he stilled.

"I wasn't manipulating your brain just now, baby. You came because you wanted it...because you needed it."

Her mouth fell open in disbelief. "Now you're lying!"

"I don't lie to you, Skylar! What would be the point? Surely you get it by now. You're my life mate. That wasn't a hypothetical example I gave you in the car, and you know it. All you would have to do is desire to know if I was telling the truth or not, and you would either know it was the truth or that I was hiding something," Duse almost shouted out in frustration.

"You've hidden things from me before," Skylar accused abruptly. Her emotional turmoil was spinning out of control. She could barely comprehend what he'd just said, let alone what had just happened. Her eyes narrowed on him. "You never told me before the truth about the Ceremony. Why should I believe that you don't psychokinetically manipulate my body all the time so that you can get exactly what you want?"

Duse forced himself not to gasp in disbelief. Was she saying what he thought she was saying? Did she actually have memories of other Ceremonies from their previous lifetimes? No, it wasn't possible. It had never happened with a mate before. She was just making stabs in the dark. He wouldn't give her the satisfaction of knowing that her guess had been correct.

Skylar shrank back on the pillows when she saw the way his expression hardened with resolution. "You obviously don't remember much, baby."

"What do you mean?" she asked warily.

"There was a time, in the very beginning, when I only made love to you by manipulating your brain. You hadn't conferred me with a body yet. If you really remembered what it was like, you would know that wasn't what just happened. Shall I refresh your memory?"

"No, that's not..." Her head jerked back on the pillows as a concentrated, unbelievably powerful stab of arousal pierced her genitals. No, not just her sex. Her entire vulva pulsed with erotic, forbidden sex energy. She tried to speak, to assert her identity in the midst of such vast pleasure, but she couldn't. Her brain had short-circuited, becoming an organ fashioned solely for the purpose of conferring pleasure. She heard Duse's voice, but at first, she wasn't able to decode what he was saying.

"I'm laying it on a little heavy to make a point," he said quietly. "I can do that because I know your nervous system more intimately than I do my own. You can, in fact, take more pleasure. Trust me, we've experimented enough to know."

Skylar inhaled raggedly when the tension lessened slightly. Her eyes widened in disbelief and she stared at Duse. He stared back from between her legs. She saw how one hand gently cradled her hips. The other lightly pressed the column-shaped stone just above her genitals. Her eyes widened. It seemed to pulse at the same rate as her body's points of energy focus, her chakras. Especially her sex chakras. She met Duse's gaze again. No, her heart chakra also vibrated so exquisitely with the aid of the stone that she could almost hear the result, like a sublime, surging song.

Duse didn't move. Nevertheless, Skylar clearly felt his talented tongue stimulating her clit again. And that wasn't all. What felt like two of his long, thick fingers were fucking her pussy aggressively while his forefinger corkscrewed against her anus.

"Let me in," he demanded tensely from between her thighs.

The sound that left her throat wasn't English, or any other known language for that matter. She was incapable of recognizing words, let alone forming them as she pushed against him and his finger slid into her ass. He continued to stare at her steadily, his eyes piercing her as surely as his fingers did as he stimulated all of her sacral erogenous zones simultaneously.

Do you want more?

I don't think I can take it.

You can take it. Trust me. I asked if you wanted it.

God, yes!

Her eyes rolled back in her head at the sensation of the smooth, thick head of his cock against her moist entry It was impossible. She knew it was. But realizing that didn't stop her from continuing to clearly feel his mouth on her enflamed clit and his finger massaging her ass. His bulbous head pressed to her gently...teasingly.

Please.

Her body flung up and tensed back when it reached the limits of her bounds at the sensation of his cock slicing clean down to her core. It was all she needed. She cried out helplessly in the throes of the most violent orgasm she'd ever experienced. She felt her entire sense of self break apart and shatter into a trillion pieces.

And when she came back to herself, she was different. When she came back to herself, she remembered.

She remembered Duse.

Chapter Six

Duse's eyebrows crinkled in concern. It had been an incredibly powerful orgasm for her, but that didn't explain the erratic quality of her heartbeat.

"Skylar?"

She gasped for air painfully. "Duse?" Tears sprang out of her eyes like a fountain before she clenched her eyelids shut. "Oh, no. Oh my God," she muttered desperately, unable to name the powerful feelings arising in her. She'd never had a panic attack before, but she suddenly felt as though she was on the verge of one. An uncomfortable weight seemed to sink slowly down on her chest. Every second that passed seemed to push it down farther and farther into her struggling lungs.

"Shhh, it's okay, baby," Duse whispered as he dissipated her bonds and moved up the bed to take her in his arms. Gods, what an unholy jerk he was. He just had to prove it to her, didn't he? "Breathe with me. Everything's going to be all right." He willed his being into calm, despite the rising concern he was having for her. He stroked her curly hair soothingly, but her emotional chaos only escalated.

"No. It's not okay, Duse," Skylar choked out into his chest abruptly. She tried doing what he'd suggested, to breathe deeply. His masculine, rich, singular scent enveloped her senses, but the exquisite sensation only added to her panic.

"I remember you doing that before," Skylar suddenly gasped out raggedly.

His hand stilled in her hair. "Doing what?"

"That...touching my hair like that," she cried out as if in pain as she leaned back to look in his eyes.

Duse's eyes widened, as much as by what she'd said and by the intensity of her emotions. "You do?" he asked softly, amazement creeping across his features.

She nodded, her expression tortured. Duse intuitively sought to alleviate her pain. It's okay, Skylar. It's okay. We're together now. Again.

Her words spilled in confusion directly from her mind to his. He stilled, stunned by the strength of her accompanying emotions.

I remember you. I can see you wrestling with a little boy and both of you laughing when Ravi jumped into the fray, barking his head off. I remember what it was like when you first took form in front of me. You were so beautiful, and I was so afraid. But my desire for you was greater than my fear. And...oh...God have mercy. I can see you throwing your head back and laughing. I can see you leaning over me while you were deep inside me, so much love in your eyes...

His amazement turned to a panic that approximated Skylar's when she suddenly curled her legs up to her stomach and chest and moaned as if in intense pain. Tears fell freely down her hot, flushed face. Sobs racked her body uncontrollably. For a few seconds, Duse just stared at her in rising dismay. What was happening to her? He couldn't tell if her pain was physical or emotional, it was so intense, and Duse himself was so tied to it. He realized he couldn't inhale as the impact of it hit him.

Bale, come quickly. Something is wrong.

* * * * *

Force met Ainge's eyes dazedly. For almost a minute, neither of them could speak. The rest of the Watchers were reverently silent and still as well. Slowly, movement and voices began to animate the penthouse again.

"By the Blessed Mothers," Force muttered. He glanced down at his fully corporeal hand in wonderment. "She's stronger than she ever was."

Ainge touched his fingers to the pulse at his neck. He resisted an urge to go to Sherry Morton right that second. She probably wasn't even asleep yet. "She's incredible," he agreed. Awe still tinged his voice. "Ron overheard Bale saying that Duse and she would likely be able to conceive this time. Can you imagine having a little kid running around here? One of us? Fucking blows my mind to think about it."

Force blinked in surprise when Jax came into existence beside him. "Jax, you just missed it! It was the most major Rush ever. You can still catch the last vibrations. Skylar is amazing. Why weren't you here?"

Jax flickered into full visibility. A scowl twisted his handsome features. "Because this is an archaic ceremony that is extremely insulting to Skylar, that's why. She doesn't even know what's going on, and meanwhile you guys are out here copping off her sex energy. You're talking about her like she's already pregnant, like she's your fucking property!" Jax's eyes lanced fiery ice at his friends. "I'd like to take both of you on in the sparring room right now!"

"Chill, Jax!" Ainge exclaimed with surprise. "It's a tradition. Just because you disagree with it doesn't mean you have to let loose the royal temper! Besides, if Duse went along with it, it's hardly your place to question it."

"Yeah, it was real sensitive of him," Jax muttered sarcastically through a stiff jaw. Most of his attention was on the fact that Bale had just abruptly faded from the room.

"Something's wrong with Duse," Jax whispered. The increased sensitivity that he'd acquired for having been inside Skylar's essence caused him to tense with anxiety. Something was wrong with Skylar, too. Even a vague glimpse into her current emotional state caused Jax to flinch.

It struck him painfully that he was probably responsible for her suffering.

He couldn't take this anymore. The only escape left to him was the Path of Sorrow. Was he really going to have to resort to that? Perhaps. He flatly refused to be forced to harm Skylar again. But first, he owed it to himself to pay a call on Batos. His friends were so absorbed in wondering about Bale, they didn't even notice when Jax's being faded from the room.

* * * * *

Bale materialized almost instantly beside his brother. Duse stared up at him from where he lay on the bed, holding Skylar as she quaked in his arms. There was entreaty in his light eyes when they searched Bale's face.

"What happened?" Bale asked.

"I don't know. I made love to her the second time psychokinetically. I was being stubborn. I wanted to prove something to her. Did I do this to her?" His face tightened as another strong wave of Skylar's overwhelming emotions hit his awareness. "I'm going to take her to a human doctor. She's in terrible pain."

Bale sensed his brother's anxiety and realized that he felt responsible for what his mate was experiencing. But he sensed that Skylar's pain was purely emotional. It was having an effect on her physical body, but not in a way that a human doctor could help. When he spoke to her, he tried to pass on a degree of calmness to her with his mind. He was more able to reach her than Duse, who was so acutely tied to her essence and her emotional upheaval.

"Skylar, it's Bale. Why are you so upset? We want to help."

Skylar cried out. Her body curved further into a fetal position. "I don't know what's happening to me! I can feel what it was like. I remember what it was like to lose you, Duse! It's too much! Please, help me!" she gasped out between sobs that wrenched at her narrow rib cage.

Duse didn't hesitate any further, unwilling to see her in such cruel agony another second. He gently probed the delicate workings of her brain with his psychokinetic touch, manipulating the more subtle aspects of her physical essence.

Skylar, listen to me. I'll be right here when you wake up. This is a special kind of sleep. It will refresh you. You'll be at peace. Please trust me. Everything is going to be okay.

"Don't leave me, Duse!" she cried out pitifully. Her panic increased momentarily, but she could struggle only minimally against the powerful wave of warmth and heaviness that submerged her consciousness and eased her torment.

I'm right here with you, and I'm not going to leave you for a second, do you understand? When you awake, it will be in my arms. I promise.

Duse and Bale watched as the tension and pain slowly left her body. Duse's expression was rigid with shock as he softly caressed the side of her neck and cheek, reassuring himself of what he already knew perfectly, that she was merely sleeping deeply. When he finally met Bale's concerned gaze, his eyes silently begged for an explanation.

"It was grief," Bale said, finally. "It was as if she was experiencing the loss of you from her three other lives all at once."

"But why? This has never happened before. And I'm the one who loses her to death every time, not the other way around."

Bale shook his head uncertainly. "You're wrong, Duse. Death separates you both. You're forced to leave her as much as she's forced to leave you. Human beings record all of their emotions indelibly on their souls."

Duse inhaled sharply. How he had suffered day in and day out without her for centuries. To think of Skylar experiencing those feelings, but in a distilled, rapid rush of grief filled him with compassion and a profound sense of regret.

"I pushed her too hard," he muttered blankly as he stared at her.

Bale just shook his head, unsure in the face of this newly exhibited behavior among one of their mates. His eyes went uncertainly to his brother, easily sensing Duse's feelings of dismay and guilt, but unsure of what to say to alleviate it.

* * * * *

Skylar's pain and tumult had passed by the next morning when she awoke next to Duse. She was fully conscious by the time her eyes opened, knowing immediately whose body was curved around her protectively. He had told her she would awake in his arms, and some vague memory told her that Duse always kept his word. The focus of her consciousness probed cautiously at her memories for the day before, anxious that the powerful emotions would rise like a tidal wave and crash down on her again uncontrolled. For a moment, loss and grief did enter her awareness, but their impact was nothing compared to the emotional onslaught she had experienced yesterday. Her mind's natural shields against unbearable pain must have been erected while she slept.

Skylar turned in his arms and stared at Duse's face. He looked wonderful to her, in the truest sense of the word. Awe swelled into her awareness.

Duse. How could she possibly have forgotten him? It didn't even seem conceivable. How could you forget a part of who you were? Skylar couldn't remember details about what her lives with him had been like, but she sensed deep emotion and flashing images.

Her body shuddered again in grief, but Skylar wasn't afraid of the feeling overpowering her this time. He had always been so calming with her when she had died in her previous lifetimes, so unselfish. Her mind and spirit had shielded her from the extent of her own suffering, but how could she have always protected herself from the depths of his?

She reached up and cautiously stroked his face. Her hand stilled when she looked into his opened, exotic eyes. For a moment, their gazes locked. Skylar felt the emotion rise in her again, but determinedly banked it, doing her best to block it from his awareness. He had suffered enough. She had allowed him to shoulder the grief inherent in their situation for too long, taking only the love and pleasure of being with him, while leaving him to deal with the sorrow and loss alone, time and again.

"You're awake?" she murmured softly. Her fingers continued to caress him.

Duse's eyes roved her face, searching for signs of her state of being. "I don't really require sleep the way you do, Skylar," he said in a low voice edged with anxiety.

"I'm okay, Duse. You don't have to worry," Skylar said quickly.

Duse blinked several times, unsure of how to proceed. He realized for the second time in as many days that his mate was trying to comfort him, even given the newness of her exposure to him and the extraordinary pain that she had experienced yesterday. He probed her essence gently. "Are you sure, Skylar?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm sorry about yesterday. Thank you for staying with me." Her eyes went to the bright May sunlight edging around the draperies. "Is it really Saturday morning? If you don't sleep, it must have been really boring for you to stay here. We're really different, aren't we?" she murmured quietly.

She avoided his gaze, afraid of what she would communicate to him unintentionally.

"Well...yeah. We're different, but that's not necessarily bad, is it?" Duse asked. He had never felt so perplexed with her, so unconfident. It wasn't that he couldn't sense their connection. It was perhaps stronger that it had ever been. But a subtle shift had occurred, one that he couldn't name.

"I'm sorry," she said suddenly. He watched in growing concern as the many colors of her eyes – green, brown, amber – began to swirl with tears.

"Skylar?" he queried anxiously when she suddenly stood up from the bed, keeping her back to him. Even the sight of her firm, round butt couldn't divert his worry.

"I think I'll shower, and then maybe take you up on your offer yesterday. I just want to check on things at the nursery."

"Skylar?" he repeated more loudly and with a touch of growing impatience. But to his amazement, he realized she was shutting her emotions away from him as easily as she separated her physical body from his when she firmly closed the bathroom door.

* * * * *

"You're sure she's doing all right?" Bale asked cautiously as he watched his brother prowl around his office restlessly the following Wednesday morning.

"How the hell do I know?" Duse growled. He was supposed to know, wasn't he? Skylar's and his emotional and spiritual bodies were templated with exquisite precision to one another's. Why couldn't he answer Bale's question? "She seems fine, but she's shielding herself from me. Skylar learns too quickly. I just told her last Friday that it was possible for her to shield herself, and by Saturday, she was doing it already."

Duse tried not to think about what was happening with their physical relationship, because the answer was both as it should be and distressing at once—nothing. He'd been overwhelmed with feelings of guilt and remorse after seeing and sensing Skylar's immense pain.

But being with her during the day and holding her in his arms at night while she slept was driving him slowly and irrevocably mad with supppressed desire. He was positive that he held the Watcher record for the number of times he'd jacked off in the past week. Granted, masturbating wasn't an entirely unheard of behavior for Watchers. They were exceptionally sensual creatures, after all. But given the fact that the majority of them made love with a refined essence, and that their true peak could only be reached when their lovers achieved orgasm, it was rare enough behavior. Duse felt like a depraved human taking his pleasure solely for his own benefit. He didn't even know how it was possible without Skylar's involvement, and he was too embarrassed to ask Bale about it.

And yet his desire had still never been so acute, no matter how many times he tried to take the edge off it. Being near her and not fucking her until both of their ears rang was metamorphosing him into some kind of creature he didn't even recognize.

Yet Skylar seemed to genuinely want to sleep in his arms at night. The Gods knew that Duse wouldn't have denied himself the privilege of holding her for the world. And yet, it was a slow type of torture, too, not to at least kiss and caress her, not to make her shudder with orgasm even in the most innocent of ways, by suckling her nipples or rubbing her cunt through her clothing while they kissed, or stimulating the pleasure centers of her brain with a featherlight touch just as she rose out of deep sleep. Those were the things that he would have at least allowed himself during seductions in her past incarnations, no matter how slow he'd taken things with her. Presently, he felt like he was walking on eggshells around her, fearful of accidentally evoking a memory that would trigger another traumatic response.

But, of course, it had been wonderful to have her here with him, too. Although Duse needed to work during the day, he spent as much time with her as he could, making sure that he paused in his busy schedule to be with her during meals or to accompany her to her nursery. They always spent the evenings together. The evening after she'd arrived, she'd challenged Duse to a game of chess. Now, it had become a regular routine for them to play chess after dinner. Duse liked to watch her face in serious contemplation as she considered her moves. He only half paid attention to the game. Most of his attention would be on some compelling characteristic of Skylar's features—the soft, corkscrew curls of her golden hair, or the way she bit at her full, lush lower lip while she concentrated, or the gentle rise and fall of her full breasts. Yeah, he'd definitely had to excuse himself during those chess matches more and more frequently to engage in that depraved, selfish human behavior.

But he also felt moments of profound peace with her, like when they would walk together with Ravi at the lakefront, talking quietly or just enjoying each other's presence in silence. Yesterday, Skylar had spontaneously reached for his hand to hold it, and then gave a little cry of alarm when she realized that her hand had passed through his as it would through a mist.

"I'm sorry, Skylar," Duse said quickly. He willed himself into corporeality. Being directly next to Lake Michigan made him have to work harder to do it. Duse was most

strongly an air spirit, but fire was one of his strengths, as well. He was a powerful being, but he had his shortcomings. Being just a few feet from a large body of water didn't totally damp his magical abilities as it might some, but it could certainly make things more difficult for him. It didn't bother him at all once he got a hundred feet away, or so, but when he was right next to it, the effect was a hurdle to his powers.

"I wasn't expecting you to do that."

Her eyes were wide in shock for a moment. After a few seconds, though, she surprised him by saying, "No, I'm the one who's sorry. I shouldn't have just reached out for you without preparing you first." She hesitated a moment. "Can I now, Duse?"

Duse nodded. When her soft, warm skin touched his, he exhaled with satisfaction. Something about the fact that she had reached out to touch him at that moment and her gracious understanding of what had happened when she realized he was not fully corporeal, though visible, moved him deeply. He had wanted nothing more at that moment than to take her back to the penthouse and spend the next week in bed with her, making love to her wildly and tenderly, and by the Glorious Gods, without a thought for restraint or worry!

Bale paused presently, unsure how to proceed. His brother was already a live wire of suppressed energy. "Duse, you don't think it could have anything to do with her shielding her emotions from you in regard to the night she was attacked, do you?"

"Other than the fact that she's blocking me out in both instances, I don't see the connection." Duse's eyes hardened on his brother. "You're not suggesting that she actually knows something about whoever is behind this, are you?"

Bale shook his head, refusing to back down from his brother's powerful stare. "I'm not saying that at all. But I have to wonder what connection there is between Skylar's unusual behavior of Friday night and the fact that someone is obviously trying to harm her."

"Well, I'll tell you the connection, brother. Because of Asmoday's twisted mind, I was forced to put that spell on her and make love to her quicker than she could handle."

"Your explanation doesn't take into account that someone found her and attacked her, even before her Second Change. I would think that is related to her memories of her past lives more than you making love to her." Bale snorted abruptly. "Lord knows you've made love enough times to her in the past and she never had her memories return." You'd better start doing it again, too, little brother. You're giving all of us bad nightmares in the state you've been in for the last few days.

Duse scowled at the telepathic portion of Bale's message. They stared across the room at each other aggressively for a few seconds before he shrugged uneasily. "I don't understand it, either. Asmoday's energy allotment is too scarce to have allowed it. Che and Eli inspected Asmoday's bonds themselves, and there's nothing inherently wrong with them. Even though Day couldn't have harmed Skylar, I somehow still have the

feeling that he did. Somehow. If it wasn't him directly, then he was involved. Do you think it could have been one of his followers?"

Bale exhaled slowly. "It might be," he said neutrally.

"Thanks for the input, King."

Bale scowled at the bitterness in his brother's voice. "What do you want me to say, Duse? It would be irresponsible for me to sit here and point fingers at the followers of the Rush Initiative. You know as well as I do that those Watchers are as law-abiding as you or I. Just because they have a differing opinion from you doesn't mean that they were responsible for attacking Skylar."

"They want to use Watcher mates as chattels! Gods, it's no wonder Skylar fought me so hard the other night. She was right! She's not an energy storehouse for our people any more than Helen is."

"I voted down the Rush Initiative, Duse! Why are you acting like I'm the enemy?" Bale shouted, his eyes blazing. "How can you think I would ever subject Skylar to that, let alone Helen? Watchers have vigilantly encouraged anti-slavery ideation among humans from the very beginning! But our race must survive. We must have hope. Our mates are amazing women, the equivalent to us of goddesses in the old religions of the humans. They aren't that different than how our mother, or Che's mother, was considered by their people—a revered, sacred representative of the divine feminine. I won't deprive our race of that!"

Duse sank back in his chair resignedly. It was far from a new conflict for him. He knew that it wasn't a black-and-white argument. Even though he'd traditionally been more of a moderate on the long-standing Watcher debate, after spending more and more time with Devon and studying Watcher history, he'd begun to swing to the more conservative end of the spectrum. He sighed heavily. Maybe his current outburst at Bale wasn't just related to his irritability about being sex-deprived. He undoubtedly was not only feeling guilty about insisting that Skylar take part in the Ceremony, but also the fact that she'd remembered that he'd lied to her in the past about what really occurred on that night...if lying by omission counted, anyway.

"If only we could ensure that the Ceremony encouraged love and respect for the Watcher race and the women who perpetuate it—the sacred divine, as you aptly put it—instead of inspiring power-hungry greed," he muttered thickly.

"I know, Duse. I'm aware of the conflict."

Duse sighed. "I know that you are, King."

Bale exhaled slowly, hearing the respect in his brother's voice along with the inherent apology for his earlier aspersion. A long pause ensued as both of them gathered their frayed tempers.

"I'm surprised that you let her go with Ainge today."

"What was I supposed to do? She wanted to go to her nursery. I told her specifically that she's not a prisoner here. When we were on our way out the door and Sherry arrived, I had to admit in front of Skylar that I had scheduled an appointment with her.

Ainge offered to take Skylar to the nursery, and Skylar kept insisting it would be fine," Duse said grievously.

Bale laughed softly. "Don't go feeling sorry for yourself. I saw Skylar last Friday, felt some measure of what she was feeling toward you. Her emotions for you are extremely powerful, seemingly inhuman in their strength. They must be overwhelming for her. She just needs some time, that's all, and you're doing the right thing by giving it to her. And you were correct about it being okay for Ainge to take her. She'll be fine."

Duse sighed. "What did you think about Sherry's report?"

"It seems pretty cut and dry. Both women had significant amounts of cocaine in their systems when they died."

"Yeah, but Sherry said that they didn't find any clear evidence of the synthetic lacing that they'd been expecting. And the seizures originated from damage to their right temporal lobes."

"Those women who died of the seizures were young, twenty-three and twenty-four. No Watcher could have been involved in their deaths."

"Yeah, well, it seems that things are changing," Duse said gruffly as he stared out the window of the penthouse. The bright reflection off Lake Michigan in the distance made his light eyes glow with banked power. "No one could have forced their way into Skylar's mind before her Second Change, either. But someone did, Bale."

"You need to ask her about that night, Duse. I know you're hesitant, but the information could be important to keep her safe in the future," Bale said quietly.

Duse just nodded grimly, knowing full well his brother was right.

* * * * *

"I think you should ask Sherry out. She would be so flattered, Ainge."

Ainge was weaving in and out of traffic on Lake Shore Drive exhibiting admittedly less skill than Duse had driving, but still more ability than the most adroit human racecar drivers possessed. Skylar had wondered what she was getting herself into earlier when Ainge had enthusiastically told her that this was his third time driving. Ever. Skylar had insisted that she would drive, but when she saw the disappointed and hurt expression on Ainge's handsome face, she'd relented. She'd asked him why he just didn't drive more on his own if he liked it so much. Ainge had looked surprised by her question.

"Because, I need to be corporeal when I drive a car. I only have the energy to do that right now because Duse suffused me with some of his energy so that I could take you. I wouldn't be able to otherwise. Well, unless Duse asked me to drive you around on the night of the Ceremony," he added with a gruff laugh of amusement.

His eyes had suddenly widened and he pointedly looked away from her when he realized what he'd said.

Skylar watched in bewilderment as his knuckles whitened on the wheel of the car. It took a while for it to fully soak into her understanding that Ainge's excitement over taking her to the nursery was more for the experience of becoming corporeal for a period of time than it actually was for driving. The realization amazed her. Humans were so obsessed with immortality and becoming more "spiritual" in their essences. Many religions prioritized the spiritual self versus the material body. But Watchers were fascinated with the material body because for them, attaining it and maintaining it was the optimal demonstration of strength and wisdom and Will.

"I'm not too sure that Duse would think it was such a great idea, me dating one of his employees. Do you really think she'd go out with me, Skylar?" Ainge asked as he pulled onto inner Lake Shore Drive.

Skylar's eyebrows rose in disbelief at Ainge's insecurity. Like all Watchers, Ainge was a beautiful specimen of masculinity. He practically exuded sex through his pores. "Yeah. I definitely think so," Skylar murmured with wry amusement. "Didn't you see the way she was eating you up with her eyes when she got off the elevator?"

Ainge just shrugged his broad shoulders. "Oh, that. That's just because of sex, though. She probably has some trace memories of when I've visited her."

"What do you mean you visited her?" Skylar asked slowly.

"You know. While's she's sleeping," Ainge answered as he pulled the car into the high-rise parking garage smoothly without touching the brakes.

Skylar stilled at Ainge's words. She hardly noticed the way he zipped up the curving ramps at speeds that most people could never hope to control. "You mean you've had sex with Sherry...while she was sleeping?"

"Sure. She's incredible. Very powerful. I mean...not like you or anything, but still. We can't all be as lucky as Duse or Bale," Ainge said matter-of-factly as he whipped the car into one of Duse's private spaces. He glanced over in surprise when he noticed Skylar wasn't getting out of the car. "What's wrong, Skylar?"

Skylar hesitated, realizing if she gave off the wrong signal, Ainge would clam up. She hadn't stayed in the penthouse for long, but she knew intuitively that Watchers like Ainge worked for Duse and were loyal to him even above Bale.

"Does she remember you? When she's awake, I mean?"

"I wish that she would, but I sort of doubt it. Human women have to be in full REM sleep before we can enter, so they usually just think it's a dream. From what I understand, humans vary in what they recall from their dreams when they wake up, right?"

Skylar just nodded, her mind buzzing. "And you like to 'visit' Sherry because..."

Ainge's grin could have turned a cup of ice to steaming water in an instant. "Because—she is so bod. Her essence is intense! When she responds to me, I become corporeal for several minutes afterwards. I'm getting close to being able to get her to climax a second time with my physical hand. She's incredible," Ainge added. His dark eyes looked lost in seductive memories.

Skylar blushed at his casually graphic description. "Er...exactly how often do Watchers have to do...that?" she asked, determined to get information while it was available. Duse had been treating her like she was a piece of rare china lately. Skylar was getting desperate for operating data. No, she was getting desperate, period. She was getting so sexually overheated from spending so much time with him and not knowing the sublimity of his lovemaking that she thought she might go mad very, very soon.

What was worse was that she had no opportunity for release. The burning-hot memories of their lovemaking combined with spending so much time with Duse was making her aroused twenty-four hours a day. She wasn't joking anymore when she told herself that she was on the verge of going crazy. She longed to bring herself relief, but she felt like the privacy of masturbation had been stolen from her since she'd entered the world of the Watchers. Hadn't Duse told her that aside from the Ceremony, he would shield her response from others, both human and Watcher? Skylar scowled as she pretended to look for her lipstick in her purse in order to stall Ainge. She couldn't masturbate in the shower or even in her private bathroom at work. No matter what she did, a Watcher was always in her near vicinity.

She really needed to talk to Duse about this. She'd vowed not to make him worry about her anymore, but this was getting out of hand. Why was he acting so cautious around her?

Despite the fact that she sensed that he was still sexually aware of her—very aware—he hadn't so much as kissed her forehead since last Friday. A sinking sensation came over her as she listened to Ainge talk so comfortably about the strange sexual practices of Watchers. Surely Duse couldn't be doing the same thing that Ainge was doing with Sherry to some other human woman besides Skylar. Could he? Because she was sure he wasn't doing it with her. Dream or not, Skylar would have sensed his presence inside her. She knew it without question, just as she knew confidently that it hadn't happened since he'd entered her mind last Friday when he had made love to her with such mind-shattering impact.

"As often as we can!" Ainge interrupted her thoughts with a short laugh. Skylar was definitely reminded of human male's similar pervasive fascination with sex. She couldn't stop herself from smiling at Ainge's candidness.

"I don't mean how often do you want to. I mean how often do you have to," Skylar prodded him.

"Well, for minimal operation in the physical world, maybe four times a week or so, but I've never known a Watcher to be so masochistic that he actually tried to limit himself to that. Hey, are you okay, Skylar? You look sort of pale. We better get you inside. Duse will kill me if you get sick while you're with me. By the Three, I hope it wasn't my driving that made you ill."

Chapter Seven

Duse paced restlessly in the large living area immediately outside the foyer. This was the last time he let any of his men take Skylar anywhere. They were supposed to have been back over an hour ago. She was okay, he knew, but still...what the hell were they doing? He had to resist a strong urge to march down the parking garage and demand the answer then and there. The elevator door opened a few minutes later. He heard the sound of Ainge's deep voice. His relief at knowing Skylar was safe within the warded realms of the penthouse turned quickly to irritation when she responded to something Ainge said with warm laughter. The familiarity and comfort he sensed in their new acquaintance really ate at Duse. Skylar rarely seemed that uninhibited with him. Of course, there was the fact that he'd hardly been carefree and natural with her, either, but still...

"Prince Ammadon." Ainge nodded semi-formally when he saw Duse standing there. He did a double take when he sensed Duse's barely leashed irritation.

"You're late."

Skylar's eyes widened when she took in the impact of Duse's presence. The hard set of his mouth and the tension that seemed to coil in his muscles alerted her immediately to his tightly controlled anger. He was wearing a black collared short-sleeved shirt and a pair of faded jeans that hugged his hips and strong thighs in all the right places. The combination of his dark clothes, skin and hair acted as the ideal backdrop for his magnificent light eyes. Skylar felt scorched by them as they sought her out and rested on her like a high-powered beacon.

"It was my fault, Duse. I asked Ainge to stay until I checked the final shipment. Early summer is an especially busy time of year for us," Skylar insisted. The last thing she wanted was for the amiable Ainge to get in trouble because of her.

"You could have let me know," Duse said softly. His eyes ran over her hungrily, ostensibly assuring himself of her safety, her reality. His gaze warmed in appreciation when he took in how feminine and pretty she looked wearing a pair of jeans, and a short-sleeved, pale yellow knit sweater that accentuated the shape of her breasts. His nostrils flared in arousal. He'd been the one to pick out the knit top, and once again, he'd been right about the color looking stunning against her luminescent skin. He'd been pleasantly surprised by the fact that Skylar had accepted the things he had bought for her. In previous incarnations, she'd refused the things that he had wanted to give her for extended periods until she felt completely comfortable with him. He supposed he should find it stimulating that so many aspects of her remained a mystery to him, but currently, he just felt bewildered.

"I'm sorry," Skylar said. "I'll call next time we're going to be late."

"I wasn't talking to you," Duse said as his blue eyes left her and shifted rapidly to Ainge.

Skylar sensed a communication pass between the two men, but she couldn't glean exactly what it was. Ainge was totally polite when he turned toward her, though.

"I'll see you later, Skylar. Thanks for all the advice."

"Don't forget about our dinner plans, Ainge," Skylar called after him. "I'll meet you in the kitchen at...say, seven?"

Ainge's eyes pointedly avoided Duse. "Oh...right. See you then."

Duse steadily watched his knight's retreating back as he headed toward the large office space shared by all four of his men. When he glanced back at Skylar, she was eyeing him cautiously. "What was that all about?"

"He wants to ask a human woman to dinner. He told me that Watchers don't eat. I'd never thought about it before. Why didn't you tell me that you weren't really eating every time we sit down to a meal together?" Skylar asked him irritably.

Duse was going to kill Ainge. For what exact crime, he couldn't say. He doubted that making him look foolish in his mate's eyes could be considered an actual infraction of Watcher law. "Ainge has atrocious human eating skills. If he takes a woman out to dinner, she'll run screaming out of the restaurant," Duse scoffed.

"Well, that's why I told him I would help, Duse," Skylar said slowly, like she thought he was an imbecile or something. "Why didn't you ever help him before? Your manners are perfect at the dinner table."

Duse just laughed. Skylar obviously was very kindhearted, but she didn't know what she was getting herself into. "Babe, it doesn't have anything to do with manners. Is that what you thought Ainge meant by eating skills?"

Instead of responding, Skylar jumped in on the offense. "Why did you fake eating like that? Why were you trying to fool me?"

His mouth came open in amused disbelief. "I wasn't trying to fool you. I wanted to spend time with you. I figured you would be uncomfortable if I was just sitting there staring at you while you ate."

"Oh," Skylar murmured, her irritation forgotten. Her eyes flicked to his uncertainly. The moment stretched as their gazes clung. "That's really sweet, Duse. But you shouldn't have to make all these sacrifices for me. I mean, you're already staying with me every night while I sleep."

"I do that because I want to."

"Oh, well, all right. I want you to, as well," Skylar admitted, feeling vulnerable. "Duse, I would really rather you didn't keep me in the dark about everything." She swallowed heavily, wanting to ask him about what Ainge had been describing in the car about taking sustenance from human women. She cleared her throat determinedly.

"Do you think I could talk to you in private after dinner tonight?"

Duse's brow wrinkled slightly in concern. As was becoming annoyingly typical, Skylar was shielding her thoughts from him again. "Okay," he finally murmured cautiously. "I have something I want to talk to you about, as well."

* * * * *

Skylar flipped open several cabinets and then stared into the freezer later that evening, pondering. Now that she knew that the Watchers didn't eat, she found Duse's fully stocked kitchen poignantly amusing. "How much food do you think I actually consume, Duse?" Skylar asked wryly. The freezer was jam-packed with more meat than Skylar would probably be able to eat in ten years.

"Jax's lem—" Ainge stopped abruptly at the sight of Duse's irritated scowl. "Uh...girlfriends eat here, too, sometimes."

Skylar shrugged. It was still way too much food, even if the rock-star gorgeous, elusive Jax Ammadon had a busload of groupie girlfriends, which wouldn't have entirely surprised her. The mention of Duse's younger brother and his girlfriends made her blush. She stuck her head determinedly into the refrigerator to avoid Duse's hawklike eyes.

It had just happened yesterday, right in this very room, much to Skylar's intense mortification. She'd plunged through the heavy kitchen swinging doors, intending to get some orange juice after her yoga workout. She'd stopped dead in her tracks at the sight before her. For a second, she couldn't logically make sense of what she was seeing. But her body had surged to life instantly, not requiring a rational explanation.

She'd walked in while Jax Ammadon and Jana were in the midst of making love. That was bad enough. But it was the way he was making love to her—like a vertical sixty-nine position—that made it even more flagrantly embarrassing for her. Only an extremely strong man could have ever done it. Even now, almost twenty-four hours later, Skylar felt her pussy flood with heat. They were both completely nude. Jax stood. His powerful muscles were rigidly defined as he held Jana upside-down over him. Her slender legs crossed behind his head and she was making concentrated, writhing movements of ecstasy as he ate her pussy lustily. Jana was just as hungrily stuffing Jax's enormous erection into her mouth and vibrating his shaft with a hum from her throat.

The sight had been downright pagan and primitive...and unbelievably erotic. Jax's body and overall size was very similar to Duse's. In fact, the three Ammadon brothers shared a remarkably strong family resemblance. She couldn't help but imagine she and Duse making love in the same way. What would it feel like to have Duse hold her so securely in his strong arms while she hovered in such a precarious position and they ate each other until they consisted of nothing but quivering, mindless conduits for pleasure?

She'd stood there gaping like an idiot for a second before Jax's piercing gaze arrowed over to her. Skylar froze. She made a mortified sound in her throat when he abruptly turned Jana in his arms and lowered her to the floor.

"Jax, what the..." The bemused Jana took in the fact that she and Jax weren't alone. Her voice turned petulant. "Hey, I thought you said it was impossible for anyone to walk in on us when you shielded the room!"

Or at least that's what Skylar thought she had said. She'd been too busy forcing her eyes away from Jax Ammadon's powerful gaze and practically diving out of the room. She'd actually yelped in panic a second later when she heard her name being called.

"Skylar? Wait."

Skylar paused, but for a second she couldn't force herself to turn around she was so embarrassed. Although she'd gotten to know Bale Ammadon fairly well, and most of Duse's "knights", Jax Ammadon had barely said two sentences to her since she'd arrived at the penthouse. It was bad enough to walk in on anyone at such a private moment, but she was especially embarrassed that it had been Jax. Skylar couldn't help but feel that he didn't especially like her or her presence there.

She partially turned around. Good God, he hadn't come after completely naked, had he? She breathed out in relief when she saw that he was clothed in a pair of faded jeans and an un-tucked t-shirt. Of course—he could don and shed clothing with the magical ease that Duse displayed.

"I'm sorry, Jax. Please forgive me. I didn't know."

He didn't speak for several seconds, only studying her face impassively. "There's no reason to apologize. I just wanted to check and see if you were okay. You look pale."

Her feet moved restlessly with an irresistible urge to get away from this embarrassing situation. She realized that he was being polite. It seemed that everyone in the penthouse, and Bale, too, knew that she'd been "ill" the other night.

"I'm fine, really."

"Skylar?"

She startled at the sound of Duse's voice. Her smile was another anxious apology as she moved past Jax. She had smiled reassuringly when she saw the shadow of concern on Duse's face.

Skylar sighed at the memory. She hated the fact that Duse seemed to feel it was necessary to worry about her so much.

"Let's see. How does broiled salmon, a baked potato and a salad sound, Ainge? It shouldn't take me long at all."

Ainge shrugged dubiously.

"Why don't you just let him practice on a single kernel of popcorn, or something?" Duse wondered with a wry grin.

Skylar threw him a dark look that faded to appreciation within a second. He was leaning against the island counter, arms crossed over his wide chest in a gesture that clearly illustrated his amused patronization of the proceedings. He was so tall that the counter hit at him at his upper thigh. He had to bend his knees to let the lower curve of his muscular ass rest on the edge. Skylar looked away quickly from the beguiling sight,

but Duse noticed. She swallowed spasmodically. He noticed everything. Amusement vanished from his eyes, only to be replaced by a flash of heat that temporarily incinerated all rational thought from her mind.

She peppered the two men with questions while she efficiently prepared the meal. "Watchers never eat anything? What about drinking? At the party, it seemed like a lot of men had a drink in their hand."

"For the most part, no. Although, Watchers are highly sensitive to scents and odors and we can sometimes metabolize the subtle energies inherent in them. Watchers' histories are so intertwined with humans, though, that we share similar customs. Offering a guest a drink is a common show of courtesy and hospitality. There are some instances when food or drink is magically imbued with an essence that allows a human being's psychic awareness to open, giving them better ability to sense our subtle bodies. Food and drink are very symbolic to Watchers," Duse explained.

"What do you mean?"

"Food is how humans bring the outer world into them, how they change coarse physical energies into subtle ones that their bodies can utilize. It's a miracle to us, and strangely, the exact opposite of what we do in the case of forming a corporeal body. We incorporate the subtlest of energies and use them to create denser matter."

Skylar considered what Duse had said with fascination. She'd never given much thought to the process of eating before, and she certainly would never have called it miraculous. "Are you ever able to absorb or use food or drink?" she wondered.

"Bale can ingest food sometimes, but only when his mate is with him," Ainge said matter-of-factly. Skylar's eyes went to Duse when she suddenly realized that Ainge's answer had bothered him somehow.

She couldn't help but wonder how a being with Duse's refined essence could find her appealing. She suddenly felt too dense, too burdened with the materiality of her spirit. Her thoughts must have not been shielded very well, because Duse suddenly spoke to her telepathically.

The Highest Organizing Principle of the Universe takes pleasure in the creativity inspired by dense matter as well as the subtlest, Skylar. While the Principle may seem to limit itself with greater densities, there's an inherent paradox. The denser the matter, the greater the mystery and the beauty that lies hidden. The allure is great. That's what I see in you—a vast mystery. Every small detail, how your emotions alter the color of your eyes or how the light filters through your hair, the miracle of your laughter, these things and millions of others captivate me and inspire me to want to know more of your mysteries.

Duse watched her steadily from where he stood. Her agate-colored eyes were wide. She looked bewitched. No. It just wouldn't do. He had to find a way to make love to her. How could he have resisted the temptation of her for this many days? Her cheeks colored and her soft, pink lower lip fell away from its mate. Duse forced himself to resist a powerful urge to cross the room and take her right here, right now, in the

kitchen. He suddenly knew for a fact that she'd just been fantasizing about them making love in here, just as he was.

Skylar blinked when Duse made a low growl of arousal in his throat. Her cheeks grew redder when Ainge glanced between the two of them, his brows raised in interested speculation. Skylar looked away from the compelling sight of Duse, embarrassed that they had just shared one of the most intimate moments of her life in front of someone else. What he'd said was so beautiful, she felt like laughing or crying, or both.

In the end, Ainge was the only one to show any composure. He offered to set the table, but Skylar—who was definitely feeling the heat in the kitchen—insisted she would do it herself.

When they sat down to eat a few minutes later, Skylar smiled encouragingly at Ainge. Concern crossed her face when she noticed his anxiety.

"Er...maybe it would be best if you just started, Ainge. That way, I could get a better idea of where we need to work the most."

Okay, so far so good, Skylar thought as she watched Ainge pick up his fork. At least he wasn't fisting the utensil in his hand. His movements were actually quite graceful. Her eyes widened with delight when he effortlessly stabbed one of the cherry tomatoes in his salad with his fork and popped it into his mouth.

"See? That wasn't so bad, was it?"

Her brow creased in concern, however, when she noticed that his mouth wasn't moving, as though chewing. "Oh, no," she murmured, when he went to take a second bite, and the exact same tomato he'd just put in his mouth suddenly appeared back in his salad. Ainge looked embarrassed.

"It's okay, Ainge. Just remember to make chewing motions. That will go a long way to covering your mistakes," Skylar said quickly, hating to see how overwhelmed he looked. After she'd practiced chewing motions with him for a second, she glanced over at Duse. He looked thoroughly amused. Skylar shot him a dirty look. When she turned to her attention to her own plate to eat, she let out a little yelp of surprise. The tomato that Ainge had been struggling with had appeared impossibly wedged inside her broiled salmon, as though it had always been a part of the fish's body.

"By the Three, I'm sorry, Skylar. It's a lot harder than you might think, making the food disappear permanently while I'm thinking about so many different things," Ainge muttered in defeat. He seemed all too glad to escape after the meal.

"I suppose you're going to say that you told me so," Skylar murmured wryly when she and Duse were alone.

"That actually wasn't what I was thinking at all."

Skylar glanced over at him cautiously. "Oh? What were you thinking, then?"

I was thinking that if I don't make love to you soon that I may be the first Watcher in history to have to be admitted into a psychiatric facility.

Duse swallowed the reply that was poised on the end of his tongue. It almost made him gag. He knew he needed to be cautious with her. He knew that he had to try and restrain himself at all costs. Gods, look at the pain he'd caused her the other night! But he also knew that it was impossible to resist her for much longer. The sheer incompatibility of his knowledge and his needs created an almost unbearable friction in him.

"I was thinking that you hardly ate a thing during that farce. Come here."

Skylar's heartbeat began to pulse heavily in her throat as she came around the dining room table. When Duse took her into his arms and settled her firmly in his lap, she felt hot blood thicken and pool in her sex.

"Did you remember that I wanted to talk with you?" she asked breathlessly as he laced his fingers in her loose curls.

"Yes. But that's not what we're going to do right now."

"No? What do you want to do right now, then?" Her heart seemed to stop in her chest when he smiled slowly.

"One of the things is to feed you."

Skylar shivered. Duse could use his rough, resonant voice alone to seduce her. Instinctively, she squirmed in his lap. She stilled when she saw the fire leap high in his exotic eyes.

"Open," Duse ordered her softly as he fisted her soft curls, holding her head steady. His cock batted up against her ass at the sight of her lush lips parting at his command.

Skylar moaned when he slid a morsel of fish between her lips using his fingers. They sat in silence for the next several minutes while Duse fed her and their sexes throbbed painfully next to each other in unison. Skylar was panting shallowly by the time he placed the last bite in her mouth. Their gaze felt palpable as he sensually slid his fingers out between her slightly pursed lips.

"Chew, baby," he whispered hoarsely with amusement.

Skylar smiled as she complied and swallowed. God, who would have ever thought that salmon could be such a powerful aphrodisiac? Things were so slippery between her thighs right now, Skylar was surprised she didn't slide right off his lap. She wondered if he'd read her thoughts when he smiled tenderly and placed his fingers next to her lips.

"Suck me clean."

He couldn't restrain his growl of arousal as he narrowly watched her eagerly vacuum his fingers into the cave of her warm, moist mouth. She didn't just suck him clean. The suction she applied was so powerful that he wondered if she would pull his fingers directly down her throat. By the Fathers! The thought of her doing the same to his cock made him temporarily see only the red haze of pure lust.

Skylar blinked in disorientation when he abruptly stood and placed her feet on the floor.

"Do you want to talk while we play chess?" he asked.

Duse gritted his teeth when he took in the sight of her moist pink lips hanging open in surprise and the sex-drugged glaze of her wide eyes. He had no one to blame for this torture but himself.

"Talk?" Skylar asked stupidly.

"That's what you said you wanted to do, right?"

"Wait, Duse!" she called out desperately as he headed for the den where they usually played chess. "I don't feel like it tonight. Why don't we go to my bedroom...suite?" Skylar added the last hastily when embarrassment surfaced.

Duse's brow wrinkled in confusion. He could easily sense Skylar's arousal, but what was she so anxious about? He realized it must have to do with whatever she wanted to discuss with him. Gods, it must be serious. His bewilderment only amplified when he tried to sit down in the seating area of her suite and she waved her hand to stop him.

"I'm feeling a little tired. Do you want to lay down with me on the bed?" Skylar asked, breathless. When Duse gave her a puzzled look and shrugged, Skylar wished she had gotten more information from Ainge. How did one go about seducing a Watcher, exactly? Duse didn't seem overly thrilled about her attempt. Sex and sensuality seemed to come so naturally to Watchers. He'd turned even the banal act of eating her evening meal into a red-hot sex ritual. He would undoubtedly find her seduction clumsy and boring. But damn it, she had to do something. Duse Ammadon was not going to take sustenance from the sexual response of other women, especially when Skylar lay next to him night after night as her body nearly combusted with need for him.

Chapter Eight

Ravi tilted his head in confusion when Skylar wouldn't allow him into the bedroom with her. He'd slept on the floor at the end of her bed every night since the first night she'd arrived. "Sorry, big guy, not tonight," she whispered, hoping Duse wouldn't hear. Duse paused while Skylar tossed aside a couple of pillows on her bed and made an inviting gesture for him to lie down.

"Skylar, what in Hades are you doing?" Duse asked suspiciously when he reclined back on the bed, but Skylar didn't join him. She stared down at him, seemingly preoccupied.

"Oh. I was just thinking that it was kind of warm in here. I'll just...take off some of my clothes." She watched his face carefully for a reaction, but Duse could be as inexpressive as a rock when he wanted to be. Besides, she could have sworn he had suddenly shielded her from sensing his emotions and thoughts telepathically. She hesitated for a few more seconds, but reminded herself of what Ainge had said in the car. She had to convince Duse that she wasn't going to break into a million pieces if he made love to her like he had on that first day.

He had to remind himself to breathe as Skylar turned her back shyly to him and pulled her shirt over her head. A swift wave of desire and blood rushed to his cock instantly when his eyes traced the alluring curve that led from her small waist to her shapely hips and bottom. She may have thought she was being modest by turning away, but the sight of her from behind as she lowered her jeans was far from innocent. Her hips shimmied erotically as she shoved them over her ass. Duse made a desperate sound in his throat when they briefly caught on her silk underwear, pulling them partially down over her pale, shapely bare bottom before she quickly whisked the silk back into place again. He stilled when she turned around and faced him. Duse thought she seemed unsure, but her smile was bright. Too bright, Duse realized with rising unease.

"The panties and bras you bought for me are so pretty. I don't think I've thanked you for them. What do you think?" Skylar asked.

What did he think? Was she crazy? The sight of her walking toward him wearing nothing but a few slips of white silk drove all thought out of his mind. How was it possible to think when such temptation was right in front of you? His eyes clung hungrily to the curves of her breasts and the deep cleft between them. The sight of his *sigil* among all of that warm, overflowing female flesh made him pant like a dog on a hot August day. She stopped within a few feet of him. Duse realized that he'd been staring avidly at her breasts for several seconds. And Skylar had just been standing there, letting him have an eyeful.

The realization made his eyes skip to hers warily. "Maybe this isn't such a good idea," Duse muttered thickly.

"What's not such a good idea?"

"This," he hissed out between a rigid jaw.

Skylar moved her feet restlessly. "I don't understand. Why not? Don't you think I'm attractive?"

"Attractive? You're my bonded mate, Skylar. Are you crazy? I find you a hell of a lot more than attractive," Duse stated with rising exasperation. Attractive. What a lame human descriptor.

Skylar was getting desperate. She didn't mean to raise her finger and point accusingly but she found that was exactly what she was doing. "I don't want you entering into some strange woman's dreams to get what you need to survive, Duse! If it's true that I'm your mate, I should be the one to give you the energy that you require!"

"What?" Duse asked, incredulous. This experience was quickly moving from strange to surreal. Was Skylar actually trying to seduce him? "Why would you think that I was getting energy from sleeping women?"

"Ainge said that you needed to do it several times a week to survive. I...I don't want you to, Duse. Maybe you'll think it's selfish, but I would rather make love with you, like we did the other day. Or...however you want to, really. The important thing is that I want to be the one to sustain you."

His mouth fell open. He was going to kill Ainge. "Babe, you don't understand. I could live off the energy you gave me from making love the other day for hundreds of years."

Skylar's eyes widened. "Really? So you haven't been...pleasuring other women telepathically or psychokinetically while I was here with you?"

"That's what you thought? God, Skylar, of course not." His hand swept back his black hair restlessly. Well, at least that explained her behavior. His eyes went back to her lovely body like a magnet, settling on her lush breasts. His cock surged with a stabbing, unbearable need that he'd never experienced in his long, long life. By the Gods, what was happening to him? Something about Skylar's current incarnation was turning him into a rutting pig. He was frightened of losing control with her. And that was the last thing he needed to be afraid of after he'd caused her so much pain the other night.

Skylar felt her nipples pebble erotically when she noticed Duse's hot eyes on her. Her hands shook as she reached behind her and unfastened her bra.

"Duse?" she asked uncertainly a few seconds later when he didn't speak. He seemed as still as a marble statue as he stared at her bared breasts. Only his eyes glowed with a preternatural light. "Duse?" she repeated desperately.

"Skylar, I want you to put your clothes back on right now and leave this room," he said thickly.

"Why?" she cried out, poignantly hurt by his abrupt rejection. Her sporadic, sometimes vague, sometimes vivid memories of Duse from her other lives gave her no preparation or insight into his current behavior.

"Because I'm afraid of hurting you again! And by the bloody Gods, Skylar, I swear that if you don't get out of here right this second, I'm going to fuck you so hard you're going to be walking sideways into next week!" he roared out abruptly. He dangled at the frayed, fragile end of his rope of control. Wildness leapt into his eyes when Skylar just stood there, eyes wide like a frightened doe. He stood abruptly.

"Damn it! I SAID GO!"

She came back to life at his final shout. Duse never yelled at her. Never. "I'm not going anywhere, Duse Ammadon. What are you so afraid of, anyway? I'm not afraid of you fucking me hard." She stepped toward him, her eyebrows raised in challenge. "In fact, that's exactly why I asked you in here tonight."

"Why you little..." He temporarily went blind. When he regained the few wits he had left to him, he was in the process of straddling her on the bed and ripping off her underwear. He began to shake like an old man when his eyes landed on her glorious breasts again. This was it. He'd completely and utterly gone over the edge. He growled in outrage at his inability to control himself. With the last remnant of his will he conjured Skylar's shirt back on her body.

Skylar cried out in helpless desire when he spread her legs wide and drilled his cock down to the balls into her.

"Why did you put my shirt back on me?" she managed to ask in the midst of the acute sensations of being pinned to the bed by an extremely long, thick cock.

Duse's face contorted with the immensity of the pleasure. "Because..." he gritted out between clenched teeth as he began to pound into the tight, juicy heaven of her pussy. "Just the sight of your beautiful breasts bouncing in front of my face is turning me into this." He emphasized his point by pushing back her legs and fucking her even more relentlessly. "Ah, Gods. You're so tight, baby. I can't stop myself," he muttered desperately.

Skylar's eyes rolled back in her head. It really was too much. She definitely would be walking sideways into next week, and most likely the week after, too. The size of his cock was enough cause for concern, but he was so strong, and he took her so forcefully. But Christ, it was wonderful. This was exactly what she needed—all of him, without mercy or restraint. She longed to absorb him, all of his fire and his passion and his vulnerability. She needed this. To be the one who for once cradled and cared for him during his unrest, just as he had done for her so many times in the past.

He continued to crash into her. The bed shook and rattled as if it were in the midst of a great storm. A glorious orgasm loomed and beckoned her. Before she succumbed to it, though, she worked the knit top over her breasts. She felt him still in the midst of his frantic thrusting.

"Don't, Skylar," he warned ominously.

"Yes," she whispered brokenly. She cupped her left breast and urged his suddenly rigid body down with a hand at his neck. For a second, she felt him sway and begin to lower as his eyes fixed on her offering.

"Nooo!" he ground out abruptly. He began to fuck her again, this time even more violently than before. His paradoxically icy-hot gaze drilled down to her very soul as ruthlessly as his cock did her body. "I tried to warn you, Skylar! Now there's nothing for it. Just hold your ass still and take it."

"Ahh, God, Duse!" Skylar screamed as her body began to quake and shudder in climax.

Duse fell down over her, gasping like a dying man at the exquisite sensation of her pussy milking and squeezing his cock as she came, at the mind-altering Rush of her incredibly rarified energy pouring into his being, blinding him in its impact. He pushed her legs wider and thrust one last time, slicing down into her depths until the head of his cock pressed hard against her womb. His head whipped back and he roared like an animal as orgasm ripped through him.

Then, for a period of time there was nothing...only blackness.

Duse came to full consciousness slowly, first becoming aware of the erotic feeling of Skylar's bare breasts crushed beneath his chest, then her warm, erratic breath on his throat. His cock swelled again in the harbor of her warm womb. He blinked in confusion.

By the Fathers, what in Hades was wrong with him?

Skylar murmured dazedly in protest when she felt him abruptly move off her. They both groaned in unison when his cock slid out of her.

"Are you all right?" he asked pointedly as he stood. Surely he hadn't just done what he thought he did. Not only had he given her a horrendous cock pummeling, he'd just come before he'd been able to prepare her for the sight of...

"I wasn't scared, Duse." She leaned up on her elbow and regarded him soberly. His emotions were so chaotic that she had no difficulty reading his thoughts with ease. "You were beautiful. You...shone," Skylar murmured, still in the hold of the miracle of seeing Duse's true image emerge as he came inside her so powerfully just now.

Duse exhaled slowly. "Skylar, I asked you a question," he said stiffly.

"I'm fine. Surely you must know that. Didn't you tell me before that you weren't even capable of harming me?" she asked softly.

Duse stared at the door blankly. He wasn't sure what he was capable of at this point. His eyes widened slightly in surprise at the sound that entered his awareness.

Gods, why was she laughing?

"Duse, please. Don't lay this guilt trip on yourself."

He just stared at her incredulously. How could she laugh when he'd just practically raped the woman that he treasured more than life itself?

Skylar just shook her head and forced the smile from her face. It obviously was upsetting him even more. "Duse, I think you should talk to Bale about this...change in you."

"Bale won't understand! How could he? It's an aberration to us, Skylar. I ought to be imprisoned like Asmoday, or exiled at the very—"

"Duse!" she said sharply, cutting off his self-flagellating diatribe. "I know you're a very wise being. But don't you think it's possible that I might occasionally intuit things that you can't?"

His mouth hung open at her words. "What's that got to do with it?" he asked after a moment.

"Because. That's what's happening right now. In my other lives, I knew about things, didn't I? Women's things?"

He pushed back his hair in bewildered desperation. "What are you talking about, Skylar? How is my acting like a human caveman a woman's thing?"

Skylar pursed her mouth as her focus turned inward. She finally nodded. "Yes. I'm sure it is. But that's all I know for now. Ask Bale. Something tells me that he knows, because of Helen. Yes, you should definitely ask Bale."

Duse just watched her, speechless, as she gathered her clothes and shook out the wrinkles with all the practicality of the village wise woman and mother that she had frequently been in her past lives.

Chapter Nine

Asmoday Tertulious watched the young woman make her way through the crowd of drunken, loud young people with veiled interest. He'd first noticed her a moment before, when she'd asked him what he wanted to drink. She was vulnerable. Day could tell by the almost laughable ease with which he was able to enter her mind. He casually sorted through her assortment of weaknesses and her pitiful hopes and dreams. He required women like this one for his energy maintenance, women that he could control easily and quickly. He had no time for long-term seductions. The sheer number of women required to sustain him was enormous. He needed them eager and needy and as desperate as possible.

He cast a minor charm over himself as she approached. When Liz Elliot looked at him shyly as she set his drink in front of him, she couldn't see the slight rotting of his flesh that directly paralleled the rapid degradation of his spirit. She only saw the most handsome, sophisticated man that she'd ever encountered in her life.

Day gave her a charming smile while he gently manipulated the pleasure centers of her brain. He wanted her to associate him with the drug that her body had begun to need and crave. A dazed, euphoric expression suffused her youthful features. Day inwardly gave a bored sigh although his smile never faltered. He hated having to even spend this short amount of time with such worthless, vapid human woman. The Ammadons would discover what he was doing soon enough. He needed to amass his energy supply quickly, while he was still capable of doing so.

* * * * *

Duse fluidly maneuvered the car through sluggish traffic on North Avenue. His eyes flicked over to Bale. Even with his adjusted height, Bale looked too large in the passenger seat of the car. If Duse would have turned around, he knew he'd have the same thought about Jax, who was sitting in the backseat. Duse scowled when he thought of his younger brother. He'd asked him to come along with Bale and him to investigate a third young woman's death by seizure, this time in the Bucktown area.

He was worried. The women who were dying were young and healthy, give or take an occasional STD that certainly wouldn't have caused this type of death. So far, every woman's seizure had originated in the right temporal lobe. Not good. A human man's orgasmic response originated in the lower brain, the older, more primitive part of the brain—the "frog brain" as Jax and his friends called it. But a woman's orgasmic response originated in the cerebral cortex, the evolutionarily newer part of the brain that was associated with higher processing. More specifically, the part of the cerebral

cortex associated with orgasm in human woman was the right temporal lobe. This was a primary target area the Watcher's subtle stimulation during incorporeal lovemaking.

These were young women, First Changers, who had died. First Change women didn't have the ability to sustain a Watcher. So why did Duse have the uncomfortable feelings that these deaths were caused by a Watcher, and more specifically, by Asmoday himself? As an expert in subtle body chemistry, Duse knew that it should be impossible for them to utilize that coarse energy.

But what did they really know about it, anyway?

Duse had telepathically requested Bale's presence that morning after Sherry Morton had briefed him and left. He'd planned on asking his brother to come to Chicago, anyway, after what had happened with Skylar last night. Plus, as uncomfortable as he'd felt around Skylar this morning, he knew that for her own safety, he had to ask her about what had happened to her when she'd been attacked.

On a whim, he'd called Jax in and asked him to accompany them on the investigation. His younger brother needed to become more involved in Watcher responsibilities. Duse expected big things from Jax and he knew that Bale and almost every Watcher in existence did, too.

Jax had definite promise. But he'd been so damned moody for so long now. Many called him a loner. In Duse's darker moods, he just called Jax a pain in the ass. He'd never seen Jax as downright belligerent as he had been for the past several months. How long had it been since he'd seen his brother's easygoing smile? How long since Bale, Jax and he had kidded and ribbed each other like they used to? Duse shook his head, truly unable to recall. It might have been over a thousand years ago.

All three of them had altered their appearance so that they didn't stand out so obviously during their little information gathering session. It was one of their many powers that they could alter their physical characteristics at will. This time, they hadn't opted for anything too complicated, just bringing down their heights well over a half a foot. Bale had altered his characteristic light eyes to a liquid light brown, while Duse darkened his to a brown that was almost a compelling black. Jax merely covered the highly noticeable and piercing eyes that they all three shared with a pair of sleek sunglasses. Jax had lightened his long, shaggy hair into a brownish-blond shade. With the glasses on, and in profile, Duse could definitely see the family resemblance to Che Ammadon. Bale had put a generous amount of gray into his hair, a detail that Duse noticed he utilized more and more when altering his looks.

He's starting to identify with the idea of aging, Duse realized. Although it would probably be four or five centuries before Bale ever did get his first true gray hair, Duse found his brother's experiments with the concept interesting and endearing.

"It's incredible that Skylar was able to resist whoever was trying to get a response from her," Bale said slowly from the passenger seat. They'd been discussing Skylar's dream experience. Bale looked deep in thought. The past few hundred years, and even the past seven days, had given the Watchers much to consider. Not only had they learned that it was possible for a Watcher to force sexual release on a mated woman, but now, they learned the opposite was also true under different circumstances, and that the woman could resist.

Jax suddenly broke his prolonged silence and spoke gruffly from the backseat. "You make too many assumptions, Bale."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"There've only been seventy or so Watcher mates that we've known of over the past several thousand years. It's hardly a big enough sample to base theories off of," Jax stated sullenly.

Duse had to admit that his surly brother was right. Watchers knew so much about typical human women, the type that could be brought to orgasm while they slept. They had an enormous amount of knowledge about that. Women who had the inherent power to become mates were extremely rare, though. As they were learning with Helen and Skylar, their responses and behaviors varied more than the Watchers had thought possible.

Duse sighed as he glanced over at Bale. "Jax is right. I don't know how Skylar resisted. I'm just glad she did. Maybe it has to do with the fact that she hadn't reached her Change yet, or that the Watcher was being manipulated himself. Skylar said that he fought the idea of seducing her before her Second Change. I can only assume it was a human that was compelling the Watcher, but that doesn't make any sense either."

Bale idly rubbed his full lower lip with his forefinger while he stared out the window. "Batos says that many thousands of years ago, human magicians were able to successfully compel Watchers and leash them to their will." He referred to Barbatos, one of their "oldest" and most powerful members. Watchers went to Batos for advice and counsel, since in addition to Paim his memory about the Watchers went further back than any of theirs. Batos also offered confidentiality to those Watchers who sought his wisdom. Bale allowed it, knowing that every living being had, at times, the necessity to unburden themselves without dire consequences.

"You mean all those human stories about the Magician King who forced a legion of Watchers to build his Kingdom? I'd sure like to know where all those Watchers are now," Duse said wryly. "Those are just myths, Bale. Surely you don't believe that it's possible."

"Every story has a grain of truth to it, brother."

Duse just shook his head, unable to believe that a human being could compel a Watcher. "Well, if there's a grain of truth in those stories, perhaps another aspect is true, as well. The human trying to control the Watcher gets more than he bargained for," Duse murmured as he parallel-parked the sedan.

"The only problem is, we're likely to be the recipient of something more than we expected, as well," Bale said tensely as they exited the car. "Why don't you two start on the floor where Liz Elliot died, and I'll check out the first floor."

Christie Mortensen heard the ominous sound of someone knocking on one door after another down the long, dark hallway. She pressed her ears to the door, listening. She was surprised when she heard Claude Anderson in 3A and Erica Gonzalez in 3D actually open their doors to whoever was knocking and engage in a conversation. Claude and Erica knew, as well as Christie did, that one did not freely open their doors to strangers at the Ashford Arms, unless they were asking to be beat up, robbed or killed. What were Claude and Erica thinking? It must be related to Liz Elliot's death. It surprised Christie that someone would be taking so much interest, though. From what Christie understood, her death had been from natural causes as bizarre as that seemed given Liz's youth and vitality. She wasn't technically a working girl, but Christie expected that Liz picked up men sometimes at the Astral Light, a nightclub on Damen where she worked as a waitress. While Liz may never have had sex for money, per se, Christie guessed that the young woman wouldn't have been averse to turning a trick to feed her crack habit. Christie knew firsthand the damage that the drug could wreak on a person's life.

She tensed when she heard the knock at 3E, and the silence that ensued. Bette Donaldson wasn't home at this time of day. She was working at her part-time job in the ice cream store over at the YMCA on Chicago Avenue. Bette was yet another living example of the tragedy that always seemed to accompany drug abuse. Christie didn't know what had gotten into Claude and Erica, but she would be damned if she was going to open the door to whoever was in the hallway. If they were Chicago cops, what they were doing was too little, too late, as far as Christie was concerned.

When the inevitable knock came on her door, however, Christie unlocked it and opened it without a second thought. It was as if her previous doubts and fear had never existed. She flung open the door and stared up at two very somber-looking men.

"You guys here about Liz?" she asked abruptly, already knowing the answer.

The one that wore the dark glasses with the sexy tousled hair nodded once. Liz peered closer. She felt the power of his eyes even though the meager shield of the lenses.

"Did you know her?" the other one asked. Liz's eyes swung to him. Her mouth opened to make a, smart-aleck comment, but when she looked into the man's liquid dark eyes, she stopped herself. "Yeah, I knew her. Not well, or anything. But still, we were neighbors, right?"

The man continued to stare at her...into her. Christie found herself unable to look away. What's more, she didn't want to look away. The man's gaze was potent and fascinating, and he was drop-dead gorgeous. The thought suddenly occurred to Christie that she should let these guys know everything she could about the night Liz died. It couldn't hurt, right? They could really help other girls like Liz—and Christie, too—who were so often the target for predators.

Much to her surprise, she opened her mouth and everything seemed to spill out. Christie lost track of time. She might have been rambling on for five minutes or an hour, but she became aware that these two beautiful men were hanging on her every word as though she was the most fascinating woman in existence.

"And you're sure that you never saw this man before?" the guy with magnetic dark eyes asked her with a hoarse, deep voice that made Christie shiver.

"Believe me, if I'd seen this guy before, I would have remembered," Christie insisted. "Liz must have picked him up at the Astral Light. She still had her waitress outfit on when I saw them in the stairway. Although, I can't figure it out, because I never see guys like this one at the Astral Light."

"What do you mean?" Dark Eyes asked.

"I'd be willing to bet that his clothes cost him more than I make in a year of working, and I could have sworn the watch he had on was a Rolex. He was definitely way out of the league of the usual losers that hang out at the Astral Light. He was really tall, too, like maybe three or four inches bigger than you guys, even. He had thick blond hair and some wickedly gorgeous light brown eyes. I say wicked, because for a second, while we were there on the stairway, I could have sworn he was considering asking me to join Liz's and his little party. This guy would have been drop-dead if it weren't for his skin."

"What about it?"

"It looked...unhealthy. I don't know. It looked scaly, and like it was flaking off in places."

"Is this the man that you saw, Christie?"

"Yeah! I mean, well...it could have been the guy..." Christie blinked suddenly and glanced around her in confusion. What had just happened? Had he shown her a photo? Yeah, that must have been it. Funny, it seemed like the man's frozen image had just popped into her mind, clear as day.

"Were you the one who told the police Liz's age, Christie?"

Christie felt temporarily speechless when she heard her own name uttered with his husky, deep voice. Had she told them her name? She must have, but she couldn't recall. Christie was suddenly glad she did. Otherwise, she wouldn't have had the opportunity to hear it slip past his full, sexy lips. "Yeah, I told them," she finally muttered. "I know for a fact, because Liz's and my birthdays were only three days apart, even though I'm eight years older than her. Liz just turned twenty-one last month."

On the way back to the penthouse, Duse and Bale argued hotly over what they'd found. Duse was wired. He knew that it had been Asmoday that had killed Liz. The two of them were in such a heated debate that Duse looked back in surprise when Jax suddenly spoke up on a completely different topic.

"That woman—Christie Mortensen. Why don't Watchers help women like that?" "What do you mean?"

Jax just shrugged and stared out the side window. "Women like Christie and Liz Elliot. We should do more for women like that. Humans walk all over them."

Bale glanced over at Duse, clearly at a loss. "We are trying to protect them by investigating, Jax. That's what we were doing there today."

None of them spoke for several seconds, deep in their private thoughts. "Watchers should do more for them," Jax stated quietly after a while. Neither Bale nor Duse said anything. Jax's sullen statement was hardly something you could argue with.

Or deny.

* * * * *

Later Bale paced in front of Duse's carved desk as Duse finished his conversation with Sherry Morton. "Did she know anything about other women dying under similar circumstances in other states, or other countries?" Bale asked when Duse hung up the phone.

Duse shook his head. "She's going to look into it, though. She said she'll warn her friends in the police department to expand their investigation. In the meantime, we have to add something to Asmoday's bond that would prohibit him from seducing First Change women," Duse said with determination.

"You know I can't do that, Duse. It is an alteration to his sentence. Day has to be tried again for the new charge."

Duse slammed both of his hands against his desk hard. "Gods to Battle, Bale! You suspect Day of murdering those women as surely as he murdered Helen. How can you protect him?" Duse roared.

Bale didn't flinch but his face tightened. "I can protect him because I stand for the law of our people. In your position, the same should be said of you," Bale said quietly. "I'm sending Che to interrogate him, Duse, and to watch him. I can't alter his sentence until he's been retried for what he's allegedly done, but I won't allow him to harm anyone else."

Duse stood up abruptly from his desk chair. "Why are you sending Che? Why not me?"

Bale just watched him steadily for a moment before answering. In the ensuing seconds, Duse became aware of how tense his corporeal body was from rage. He breathed out deeply. Bale had been waiting for him to become fully aware of his own anger.

"You're too invested in this, Duse. As I am. I won't allow you to interrogate Asmoday for the same reason that I wouldn't stand as final judge of him for what he did to Helen. We can't be sure if he was the one who attacked Skylar, but I know that's what you believe. As such, you're too personally involved. You'll notice," he said with a touch of asperity from emotion, "that I didn't allow myself to do it, either. Besides, you wouldn't want to be away from Skylar for an extended period of time, would you?"

Duse slowly sank down to his chair. "He might have killed her," he said starkly.

"But whoever attacked her didn't kill her, Duse. She's alive and well."

The two brothers sat in silence for several moments. By degrees, Bale felt his brother's emotional turmoil diminish. "I will get a report? About what happens with Che and Asmoday?" Duse asked finally.

"You will."

After a moment, Bale experienced a shift in Duse's emotions. While they were still tumultuous, he sensed discomfort more than anger.

"There's something else I need to discuss with you, Bale, before you go," Duse said. When Bale nodded in understanding, Duse cleared his throat uncomfortably. "There has been a...change in my response...when I make love to Skylar," he began uneasily.

"Duse, can you be just a little bit more specific?" Bale asked, although he had the sneaking suspicion that he might know already. He vividly recalled Helen's incarnation when she became pregnant with Agares, how overwhelmed he'd been by the transformation of his being. Helen and he had wondered over it. While Helen's body had undergone a drastic alteration once she became pregnant, Bale's body had done the same in order to make her that way. Bale thought he'd been going crazy, for sure. But once he'd surrendered to the process...well, there really weren't any words to describe how wonderful it had been for Helen and him.

Duse inhaled slowly. "Last night, when...that is, I have always loved Devon's..." Duse cursed under his breath. Damn, this was difficult. He wished he could just telepathically communicate with Bale, but that would send way too much information for Duse's comfort or Bale's. Bale waited patiently for Duse to gather himself.

"Skylar's...breasts. I lose control when I just look at them. Gods, Bale, I practically raped her last night! I don't even remember what happened completely." He looked away, unable to meet Bale's eyes.

"Duse, I tried to explain to you about that. You have the strength now to conceive with Skylar. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised by the fact that it's happening so soon, given how strong she was at the Ceremony," Bale murmured, his expression interested in an abstract way.

"Well, it definitely is happening! Or some damned thing is!" Duse said sharply.

"Calm down, Duse. Didn't I tell you that Devon—Skylar—would have to offer you your first corporeal food? You will need to take sustenance from her breasts. It has been the way with all Watchers who have ever become fully actualized on the material plane. It will be the only thing that your new cells will be able to grow and metabolize to create energy. You have to allow it to happen, though, Duse. It is very beautiful, really. Your mate truly does bring you into your fully physical body."

"Yes, you told me that." Duse sounded like he was going to choke with anxiety. "But what in the hell does that have to do with this?"

"Think about it, Duse. It makes sense, doesn't it? Not all of us have been as fortunate as you and had a wise older brother to tell them what to expect," Bale said with a gleam in his eyes. "The intense pleasure that you feel when you make love to your mate in that way will inevitably set the process in motion. No guidelines are required," Bale said with a flashing smile. "It all comes naturally. The only thing is, brother, you have to give in to it. Don't fight it. Quit trying to control what you can't. It doesn't work, anyway. Trust me, I should know. You're used to getting the energy for corporeality from Devon's sexual response. But this is different. This is how you must feed your vulnerable flesh once it does enter full reality. At first, you might feel overwhelmed. But allow that to consume you, and there will be something more. Something much more, I promise you."

Bale had to fight another smile when he saw the desperate look on Duse's face. It had been difficult for Bale, as well. Watchers had many preconceptions about themselves as lovers, perhaps the most pervasive being that they valued control during lovemaking since they were so hyper-sensitized to their lover's pleasure. Considering the type of creatures they were, their survival depending upon them being so. It was extremely difficult to have the rules change on you in the third quarter of the game.

"You mean I'll lose control every time I..." Duse left the sentence unfinished, but Bale got the idea.

"You can't fight it, Duse. The needs of your growing body and the needs of your spirit for a child are too strong. I can only tell you that in my experience with Helen, once I gave in to it, it provided immense pleasure to take sustenance from her. Not just for me, either. For Helen, as well." A thought seemed to clear the shadows from Bale's eyes. "Does this mean that you and Skylar have discussed conceiving already?"

"No."

Bale grinned. Duse suddenly looked exactly like their sulky younger brother. "You should, you know, Duse. This is all new to her. And you need to tell her about the aging process and the elixir as well," he said softly.

Duse opened his mouth to respond when someone knocked at the door. Duse barked out an order for entrance, and Ainge stuck his head in the room. "Duse, King Bale," he said briefly, giving a slight bow to both men. His dark eyes swept the large office. "I didn't think she was in here."

Duse tensed. "Skylar? Where is she?" he asked. His anxiety built when he tried to sense her location, something that should have been easy for him. But he couldn't. Other than the fact that he knew she wasn't here in the penthouse, he couldn't tell where she was. Fear slowly began to build in him.

Ainge shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. That's why I was looking. She and Jax and Ravi went to the nursery early this afternoon. I assumed they were still there, but Sally Generis, the manager, just called here to ask Skylar a question. She said Skylar and Jax left the nursery over an hour and a half ago."

Bale rose to his feet to face Duse, who had already stood. "Calm down, Duse. They probably just stopped by the store or something on the way home."

"No," Duse said harshly. "I can't sense her."

"Your fear is blocking your ability. Calm yourself."

Duse did as his brother commanded. He closed his eyes, shutting out Ainge's concerned expression and Bale's impassive one. He reached out to Skylar with his mind. A feeling of relief hit him when he realized he could faintly sense her vibrant presence. Yet, the connection was unnaturally weakened. He tried to communicate with her, but couldn't. He got a brief image of Ravi sitting contently while Skylar petted him. At least Ravi wasn't upset, which meant that Skylar likely was probably calm, as well.

"She's by the lake. She and Jax must have taken Ravi for a walk without telling anyone," Duse said grimly. He hadn't actually seen Lake Michigan, but deductively, given his shortcomings when it came to large bodies of water, and the brief image he had received, it was the obvious conclusion. Still, his bond was so strong with Skylar, he should have been able to sense her much better than this.

"Ainge, you take Oak Street going north, and I'll take North Avenue going south. Skylar's sitting somewhere, or at least she is as of this moment," Duse ordered tersely.

"Can you sense that something's wrong?" Bale asked intently.

"No. She's okay. It's just that..." Duse trailed off, unable to put into words his feelings of unease. "I'm trying to communicate with Jax, but I can't. Can you, Bale?" Perhaps that was from where his feelings of unrest were originating. Although Duse was not strong in water, Jax was very strong. He should have been able to pick up on Duse's weak attempts to contact him.

"No, I can't either," Bale said after a moment, a little surprised. Bale was strong in air, like Duse, but his other talents were evenly distributed among water, fire and earth. In addition, both he and Duse typically had a strong telepathic connection with their younger brother.

Duse's mouth hardened when reality hit him. "Jax has shielded them," he said incredulously.

Bale's face still gave nothing away, not wanting to prejudice or defend either brother's actions. "I'm coming with you."

* * * * *

Jax mentally checked the shield that he'd put in place to guard him from Rolland Ockley. He felt gratified when it was still present, seemingly as strong as it was when he'd set it since Skylar had asked him to go to her nursery with her. His visit with Batos had offered Jax hope, something Jax had completely lost on the day that Duse had marked Skylar with his *sigil* and he'd realized the depth of his stupidity and dishonor.

"Maybe Duse should come and play chess with these guys," Skylar said as she nodded toward the chess pavilion just south of North Avenue Beach. She, Jax and Ravi were sitting nearby the structure that housed curved benches and tables that included black and white chess sets. Four pairs of players were competing presently. Three of them were regulars that Skylar noticed frequently on her walks with Duse. Today, she especially liked the match-up between the fourteen- or fifteen-year-old Goth girl and the ancient, shrunken black man who chewed incessantly on his unlit cigar, slowly causing it to disappear. "Duse can beat me in like...eight moves," Skylar said with a laugh. In truth, their chess matches usually lasted longer than that, but that was just because she suspected Duse was humoring her.

Jax gave her a rare smile. It faded slightly when she returned it so generously. His love for her was only growing painfully every moment that he spent with her. Gratification filled him when he saw how natural she seemed to feel around him once he'd finally reached out to her. He'd been a little worried that she'd been completely alienated from him when she'd walked in while he and Jana were making love. He hoped that she didn't have a clue how incendiary that bit of information would be to Duse if she ever happened to mention it to him.

He'd been avoiding her purposefully, knowing nothing good could come of it. By now, Jax knew how selfish his betrayal had been. It had been for his own benefit, not Skylar's. She was obviously very happy being Duse's mate. His restless energy and desperate need for her had distilled to a painfully sharp feeling of loss and heartache. Devon would never be his, not in this place, not in this time. The only way that he could serve her would be by protecting her from his asinine mistake.

"That's not too surprising. None of us can beat Duse at chess, not even Bale. Uncle Paim taught him, and he's the only one who can still beat him."

"Really?" Skylar asked with wide eyes.

"Yep," Jax said. Skylar liked the way his normally cool eyes warmed when he looked at her. "I imagine they're about even at this point."

"Tell me more about you, Jax."

Jax was surprised out of his usual cool withdrawal by her question. "What do you want to know?"

"Well, Bale is the Watcher leader, right? And Duse is a leader, too, and he's a scientist, as well. What's your specialty?" Skylar asked. She liked talking to Duse's younger brother. Jax had some of the impenetrable calm of Duse and Bale, but there was also a strange blend of confidence and cocksureness about him that contrasted with a vulnerability that called out to Skylar. His hair was long, untamed and as glossy as a raven's wing. His jaw was often shadowed with whiskers. He was indescribably beautiful in a savage, exotic way. She thought she might even have some memories of him, but they were brief...elusive.

Jax shrugged his broad shoulders. "I hate to disappoint you, Skylar, but I don't think I have one."

"Sure you do. Everybody's got something they're good at." She realized her casual topic of conversation was likely a mistake, however, when Jax didn't speak for several moments.

"When you have brothers like Bale and Duse, it can be kind of hard to compete," Jax finally said quietly.

Skylar let out her breath slowly. She hadn't meant to touch on such a vulnerable chord, but now that she had, she couldn't just leave it. "Yeah, I can see what you mean. But do you have to compete with them? Isn't there anything you enjoy doing despite whether or not your brothers do it or excel at it?"

He frowned. "I have what a human might call the 'money' talents."

She raised her eyebrows in question.

"I have the ability to sense things that are hidden, both in the subtle world and the material. I'm able to locate water far beneath the earth, so I can tell companies where to sink artesian wells. I can sense fossil fuels, too, but Bale and the Council won't let me exploit that talent—too touchy for human international politics. I can sense the location of valuable minerals and metals within the earth. I can divine things that humans hide, too."

"Like...treasures, or something?"

"Like treasure, yes. And other secrets that people would rather keep buried."

His gave her a depthless stare that made Skylar shiver with awe and anxiety, despite her comfort with him. It was at times like this when she fully sensed how alien the Watchers were.

"That's incredible, Jax."

Jax noticed her wide-eyed look. "Among Watchers, it's not as important as it is to humans."

"But you must be unbelievably rich," Skylar burst out impulsively.

He shrugged insouciantly. "As much as any Watcher. Our laws won't let us hold human money past a certain amount, so we have to give back to charitable organizations." Jax glanced out to the lake, becoming more aware of what he'd been saying. Batos had been right about a couple of things. The human magician didn't think that his talents were as insignificant as Jax did. Once Jax began to tap into Ockley's greed, he began to recapture some of the power that he'd lost. He'd been so stupid to fight against Ockley over even the smallest matters. Now that he'd started to comply with wishes that Ockley requested that had nothing to do with Skylar or Duse, his power over the human began to grow. Ockley was becoming obsessed with Jax and the power he represented.

"Why did you pledge to Duse and not Bale?" Skylar wondered.

"I used to be pledged to Bale. I only joined Duse several hundred years ago. I wanted to learn more about the biochemistry and properties of subtle bodies, and no one is more knowledgeable in that than Duse," Jax explained. He continued to avoid

eye contact. There was no way he ever wanted her to divine that the only reason he had switched his loyalties was to be nearer to her during her next incarnation.

Skylar studied him earnestly. She was an only child, so she couldn't really guess firsthand what it would be like for Jax. Standing constantly in someone else's shadow couldn't be easy. "You remind me of both your brothers sometimes, but you're different, too. Are you even interested in emulating Duse and Bale?"

He leaned back against the step where they sat. "Everyone else seems to think that I should be. Everyone is always saying that I have the potential to be like them," he grinned crookedly. "Gods, I get sick of that word sometimes."

"I can imagine," she laughed airily as she stroked an appreciative-looking Ravi. "I like you, Jax Ammadon. Despite that nasty potential thing you've got going on, you're all right."

Jax stared at her curving lips and sparkling eyes.

Enough already.

He dragged his eyes away with great difficulty. There was nothing left for him now but to embrace the pain. Skylar would never be his. He'd already sacrificed his honor. Now, the only thing left to do was to either regain it or end his life.

"Here comes Duse," he said impassively without looking at her.

Skylar glanced at him in surprise. Then she immediately sensed what he meant. Duse's arrival was like the approach of a powerful thunderstorm, seemingly quiet, but ominous in its leashed potential. Her gaze went directly to him, as though her eyes were magnets and he a mother lode of iron. The comparison was apt, because he looked cold as he approached them, and hard. Very hard. He wore a pair of khakis perfectly tailored to his waist and lean hips along with a dark blue button-down shirt, rolled back casually to expose his strong forearms. His eyes looked more silvery than light blue as he approached them. He might look angry as hell, but Skylar couldn't help but melt inside when she saw him.

They hadn't seen each other all day, not since he'd stiffly questioned her this morning about the night she was attacked. Poor Duse. He was so needlessly worried about his abandoned, wild lovemaking last night. Skylar's cheeks flushed red-hot at the memory. She certainly had been sore this morning, but she was more than eager to repeat the experience...right this second if Duse was interested.

Skylar wanted to stand up and encircle him in her arms, but she realized that she didn't know if he was corporeal. His light eyes pinned her. She wondered if he'd read her mind, because even before speaking, he reached for her hand and urged her to stand. Skylar breathed in deeply of his essence when she found herself in his arms, her cheek pressed to chest. He felt warm, and hard, and safe.

"I was worried about you," he said next to her ear. Skylar didn't try to hide the shiver that tickled her neck from his breath on her sensitive skin. She pressed into him.

Yes, Duse was definitely fully solid right now.

"We were just walking Ravi and watching the chess players," Skylar murmured contentedly as she looked into his face. Concern began to filter into his expression, but anger was still there as well. "Duse, I have to live my life. You treat me like I'm in a witness protection program or something."

She felt him stiffen at her words. "Someone tried to hurt you last week, Skylar, There's no telling what they had hoped the end result would be if you hadn't been able to resist them. We still don't know who did it or why. It's foolish to think that it was just a one-time fluke. Someone wants something from you, Skylar. Or something from me." His cool gaze flicked to Jax, who was still seated.

"Why were you shielding yourself?" he asked in a voice so sharp, it could have drilled diamonds. "There's no excuse for that, Jax."

Skylar's anxiety grew as the two brothers stared at one another. Ravi must have sensed the building emotional tension because he gave a deep growl when Jax stood, never breaking Duse's eye contact. Skylar knew that Jax and Duse were communicating telepathically, but she felt blocked from comprehending. She breathed a sigh of relief when she heard Bale's voice.

"He's explained himself, Duse," Bale said quietly. "Jax was trying to protect Skylar by setting a shield."

Duse didn't look convinced. "You have no right to block her from my awareness," he said ominously. "It would have been better to let us know where you were and left all lines of communication open in case something went wrong."

Skylar's eyes went nervously to Jax. He continued to hold Duse's gaze as he spoke. "I'm sorry, Skylar. Duse is right. I might have endangered you." Jax looked pale, but there was dignity in his bearing, something that refused to bow down to Duse's anger. She felt Duse's body tense even further, and she realized why. Duse thought that Jax should have apologized to him as well as to Skylar, but Jax made a point of refusing.

Skylar tapped on Duse's chest, trying to get his attention. Duse could certainly become caveman-ish at times. Which made her consider for the first time ever, if Duse's father had mated with a human woman, exactly what type of woman would it have been at that point in time in Earth's history?

"Duse, I was the one who suggested the walk, not Jax. If you should be mad at anyone, it's me. Personally, I don't think you have the right to be angry, though. It was just a walk at the lakefront."

She almost cringed back when he turned his fierce gaze on her. "Just like the night you went to bed last week was just a normal night for you, Skylar? Do you really think that if someone were going to harm you that they'd choose some really bizarre, rare incident to attack you? Of course not. They would attack you doing one of the things that you do every day, routines that you've become comfortable in, things like just taking a walk on the lakefront."

Skylar opened her mouth to defend herself, but the impact of Duse's stare made her mute. Instead, she broke away from his arms. She bent for Ravi's leash.

"What are you doing?" Duse asked when she began to walk toward Ainge and Bale.

"I'm going back, unless you think we need more than four Watchers to be my formal escort to the penthouse," Skylar replied coolly.

Duse cursed in a dead language when he saw how her eyes studiously avoided his.

Chapter Ten

Rolland Ockley chose the post-coital moments of relaxation to ask questions. He stroked behind Sally's thighs and over the firm globes of her bottom as he slipped out of her body. She had a delightful ass. He wondered idly what she would think if he ordered her over his knee for a sound spanking. His cock swelled with new life. He knew he was about to find out what she thought. Sally Generis was a nice little fringe benefit to this new plan. She couldn't alleviate his lust for Skylar Halifax, but she certainly could make it less intense for a short period of time.

If Rolland wanted Skylar, he was going to have to be the one to kidnap her himself. According to Jax, Duse had the penthouse magically warded. Jax himself couldn't touch her because of the magically applied *sigil*. But if Rolland associated himself with one of her good friends, maybe, just maybe, he would find a way into Duse Ammadon's stronghold. He continued to stroke Sally's ass, sliding his fingers into her tight cleft. Thoughts about holding Skylar Halifax captive always got him hot. Sally hardly seemed to notice what he was doing since she was so winded from their recent coupling.

"How come your boss has been gone from the nursery so much lately?" Rolland asked casually. The question was relevant, since they'd just fucked like a couple of animals on the leather couch in Skylar's office.

Sally shrugged and sat up on her elbows. Rolland Ockley was certainly a good-looking man. Still, he was nowhere near the category of those men that Skylar had been hanging around lately. Skylar always said the guys were Duse's relatives, but Sally wasn't buying it. The blond knockout named Ainge didn't resemble Duse in the slightest. Sally had no problem believing that the guy who came with Skylar today was Duse Ammadon's brother, though. Jax had been his name. Sally had gotten caught up in some serious fantasies over him. He was sort of Duse Ammadon mixed together with James Dean or something—soulful, edgy, wounded. She'd practically done everything to get him to notice her except for "assume the position", but the result had been nada. He'd been unfailingly polite, but not a spark of sexual interest. Sally, on the other hand, couldn't stop thinking about Jax Ammadon. It seemed utterly unfair to her. Skylar already had that delectable hunk of a man, Duse Ammadon, looking at her like she was the light of his universe. How did she get so lucky as to have Jax Ammadon doing the same?

Her sexual preoccupation with Jax over the course of the day most likely was the source of her especially energetic lovemaking with Rolland this evening. She kept imagining that it was Jax behind her hammering into her pussy. Rolland was okay, but he was much older than her and he did seem pretty smug and condescending

sometimes about the work that he did, not that Sally actually understood what his work entailed.

"Don't worry. Skylar isn't going to walk in and surprise us. She's been seeing this guy, Duse Ammadon. Lucky Sky, because it seems that this guy is not only gorgeous, he's rich as a baron. When someone broke into her condo, Ammadon just whisked her off to his penthouse in the clouds. Skylar's been staying with him ever since. I don't think he likes even letting her out of his sight, because he either accompanies her when she goes out, or he sends one of his relatives with her."

Rolland tensed slightly at the possible reference to his familiar. But no, there was no way that Jax could have had Skylar in such a vulnerable position and not informed him. Maybe a week ago he would have expected it of Jax, but not now. He had become the perfect familiar, perhaps finding comfort in his newfound servitude. Rolland wanted to open his mouth and tell Sally Generis just how rich he was becoming, perhaps even more so than Duse Ammadon. It was so easy, the way that Jax could locate treasure for him. It made Rolland drunk with the prospects before him. Why had he been focusing so much on Duse Ammadon when he already had Jax Ammadon bound to him? Jax was one of the most powerful creatures on the face of the earth, and Rolland had foolishly just been seeing him as a means to another end. Which, of course, was still true. Rolland was obsessed with holding the key that would open a door that every human being on the planet would be begging to have access to enter. He would become hugely wealthy, but it was the power that Rolland wanted most of all. But it didn't hurt to become magnificently rich along the way.

"Did you say Duse Ammadon?" Rolland asked with simulated vague interest as he began to massage a small, plump nipple. The sweat from their earlier romp was causing a nice glide across her nipple as he stimulated her. He grinned when Sally moaned and squirmed her round bottom. His cock swelled against her ass. "He's one of the biggest names in biotech research. I would give anything to meet that man."

Sally looked down, enjoying the sight of his fingers squeezing her nipple. "Yeah, well, I guessed he was rich, but I didn't know why. Biotech. Does that relate to what you do? Ooh, Rolland!" she exclaimed suddenly when he pushed a finger into her ass.

"Hush, little girl. That's what you get for wiggling your fanny next to my cock," he teased. "Yes, it relates to my work. I'd love to be able to meet Ammadon. He's an icon in my industry."

"Oh, well, maybe I could introduce you two if the opportunity ever arises," Sally said breathlessly as he pulsed in and out of her asshole with his longest finger. "Would you like that, Rolland?"

He opened the palm of his other hand and idly slapped a firm buttock as he plunged into her tight anus. She stilled, but he continued to fuck her ass and spank her despite her initial hesitancy. In a few seconds, she was moaning and gyrating her hips lustily. Little slut, Rolland thought with satisfaction. She was like putty in his hands. He wondered if Skylar Halifax would moan and writhe beneath him so sensually when he made her his captive.

"I suppose it would be nice to meet him sometime," he answered distractedly. Now that he'd reached his objective, it was time to have a little fun.

"You know it strikes me that you're a very bad girl, Sally, for letting me fuck you in your boss's office. I think you may need to be punished for it. Don't you?"

"What? Oh...I guess so."

He grinned as he pulled her up by her hair. Sally cried out in protest, but Rolland didn't care. "That's what I thought you would say. Now down over my knee. You know what happens to bad girls."

Sally's eyes opened wide at the first serious swat on her ass, but by the third, she'd fully joined in the game. Sally didn't think it really did any harm that she imagined that it was Jax Ammadon smacking her bottom like a maniac. It certainly helped in making the experience a hell of a lot more enjoyable.

* * * * *

When Duse and Jax faced off in Duse's office after they'd returned from the lakefront, Bale immediately knew that their conflict would end in blows. He'd never seen either one of them so angry and the combination of two Ammadons' out-of-control tempers was too combustible to result in anything but violence. A sinking feeling of fear entered Bale's awareness. He could fully understand Duse's anger, but why was Jax so emotional? Unless...

"If you're going to fight, do it deliberately. Let's go to the sparring room. Jax...you appear to be physical presently, although I don't know how long you can maintain your body that way. Duse, you would understand if I gave him the energy to make things equal? Or, you could fight on the Astral Plane." Bale didn't like that idea even as he mentioned it, however. The Astral Plane required exquisite control, and both of his brothers were so angry right now, Bale was worried about them losing control even in the physical world.

Jax bared his teeth in mounting frustration. "By the fucking Fathers, Bale, whoever's ass you and Duse have your heads shoved into is getting one hell of a ride. I don't need to fight on the Astral Plane. I've been strong enough to maintain the solid body for extended periods of time for the past several centuries!"

Bale's face went rigid. He slapped Jax's face, hard. Jax paled with fury, highlighting the reddening handprint that Bale had just made. "Watch your mouth, Jax."

"What? The truth about the noble Fathers hurts a little, is that it?" Jax breathed out with barely leashed rage. "Come on, Bale. I'll take you on, too. I'm sick to death of both of you."

Duse's eyes glittered dangerously as he pointed his finger toward the office door. "Fine. If you're so damned impressive these days, let's go. But I'm going to be the one to teach you some manners, little brother. It's been too many years since I planted my

fist in your sulky face, and personally, I wouldn't want to kick your ass anywhere than in the physical world."

"No weapons," Bale said threateningly even before Jax had a chance to reach for a practice quarterstaff or Duse a sword once they'd reached the sparring room. He'd recently seen Jax practicing with their cousin Che, who was the greatest master of all the Watchers with the quarterstaff or spear. Bale didn't think Che had been flattering Jax when he told him that it was only a matter of years and solid practice before Jax bested him. And of course, Duse's swordsmanship was as legendary as it was lethal. Bale would have to be the one to heal them after they'd finished, and he knew firsthand how much damage his brothers could wreak with practice weapons. They'd been practicing on each other for millennia, after all. Bale forced his own anger down and focused on the situation. How the hell had Jax become so powerful that he could maintain his physical body for so long? Technically, it wasn't possible. Jax wasn't mated. Maybe he and Duse had been doing a lame job when it came to their little brother's development after all, Bale realized with rising discomfort.

Duse and Jax circled each other slowly, their stances misleadingly open and calm. Since Watchers possessed the ability to read others' intentions as well as the ability to shift their beings from the corporeal to the subtler, fighting became a dynamic interplay between the purely physical and the mental. A Watcher could only attack while he was physical, but his opponent could elude the blow by shifting to incorporeality. The Watcher's best chance for strikes against the other occurred while he was being actively assaulted. Thus, Duse's and Jax's neutral stances invited the other man to attack, drawing him in to where damage could be done.

Jax struck first, landing a powerful blow to Duse's rib cage. Duse grunted at the impact, but efficiently defended his brother's follow-up blow to his temple. When his fist connected solidly with Jax's jaw, causing Jax's head and then his body to snap backwards, Duse felt a surge of primal satisfaction. Yes, there was nothing like a good, physical fight to get rid of some serious frustration that a snot-nosed little brother could cause.

Bale just shook his head as he watched. His two brothers together began to resemble a whirlwind of kinetic energy and motion. Some punches landed, and some were wasted in the loosely spread molecules of incorporeality. Bale had little doubt that plenty of blows were hitting their mark, though. The resounding thud of bone against flesh or bone against bone was unmistakable and all too frequently heard. That, and the sound of Duse's and Jax's sharp grunts of pain and occasional curses must have alerted Duse's knights. Bale glanced over when Force opened the door to the sparring room and peered in with excitement. Bale saw Ainge behind him.

"Why didn't you tell us Duse and Jax were sparring?" Force asked, wide-eyed with excitement.

"Are you blind? They're not sparring. They're practically killing each other," Bale muttered darkly. His hand came up threateningly. "Close that damned door, Force, and you had better be on the other side of it when you do."

Force closed the door rapidly. Every Watcher in existence knew that you didn't argue with King Bale when he was in this kind of a mood, rare as it was.

Bale started concentrating his healing powers now. At the rate his brothers were going, there wouldn't be enough energy left between them when they were done with each other to light a match. He was right. Before a full ten minutes had elapsed, they were on the mat. Duse had obviously been the stronger of the two since the very beginning, but his wrath had faded by this point, and with it, his desire to continue beating on his brother. Or perhaps his anger hadn't faded, it had been smashed to smithereens admirably by his little brother's skill. Duse staggered into a standing position and placed his hands on his knees as he stared down at Jax who was trying his damnedest to sit up. Both Watchers were so bloody and beaten that Bale honestly couldn't tell who was worse off when he approached.

"Finished, are we?" he asked both of them sarcastically as he bent beside Jax.

"How the fuck did you get so strong?" Duse accused Jax, ignoring Bale. There was genuine surprise and dawning admiration in his voice.

"Shut up," Jax said absentmindedly through a swollen jaw. He winced in pain when he touched it. "Bale doesn't like it when we say 'fuck'."

"I don't give a fuck if you say fuck, Jax, and you know it. You shouldn't say it in association with the Fathers." Bale's face tensed in irritation when Jax fell back to the mat and he groaned in obvious exasperation. Bale realized he must have sounded pretty sanctimonious when he saw Jax glance up wearily and make eye contact with Duse, who responded with a bloody grin.

"Some things about Bale never change. He's still convinced we were created in the laboratory," Duse muttered to Jax before they joined in pained, abbreviated gasps of laughter because of their injuries.

"That's right, laugh it up. See how quickly it will get you healed," Bale threatened in the same tone that had made Force quake in fear just minutes before. His brothers' only reaction was more pained laughter.

"Fucking idiots," Bale murmured, trying to look serious. His grin broke loose anyway when Jax muttered with exhaustion into the mat.

"It's good to know that you at least realize your brothers don't shun the descriptor, even if you do feel it's your sacred duty to defend the Fathers against it."

* * * * *

Skylar had managed to keep her anger at a low boil the entire way back to Duse's penthouse. By the time they'd gotten home and she'd headed straight back to her suite, however, her temper was ready to explode. Adding to her foul mood was the fact that Duse avoided her all evening, presumably talking to Bale and Jax in his office. Skylar further blamed him for allowing her a rightful target for her irritation. How dare he humiliate her like that in front of the three other men and then not even have the

courtesy to allow her the opportunity to vent her anger at him? Men! Be they human or Watcher, they were universally jerks.

Skylar heard a firm knock on the door of her suite that evening at around midnight. Her eyes widened a little in surprise when she opened the door.

"Hi Bale. Don't tell me Duse sent you to plead his case for him."

"He doesn't know that I'm here," Bale said honestly. "Can we talk for a minute, Skylar?"

"Sure, come on in," she said politely. Bale sat down in a chair that looked far too small for him. "You know, I'd rather Duse defended himself instead of you having to do it. But since you're here, let me just say that this isn't the Dark Ages anymore. Women don't like being treated like possessions."

Bale grinned sardonically. "If I remember correctly, Skylar, you didn't much care for it back in the Dark Ages, either. I'm not here to plead Duse's case. I only wanted to explain to you what it's been like for us since I lost Helen."

He paused, as though waiting for her consent to continue. Skylar merely nodded. Bale glanced away uneasily when she'd settled onto the couch.

"For millennia, Watchers had lived as though in a paradise. By that, I mean we had no recorded memory of one of our kind harming another. There were a few extremely rare instances of Watchers being too aggressive in their seductions of human women. But even in those cases, no physical harm came to the woman. The Watchers' crime in those instances equated to what you might call harassment, bothering a human woman when she was making it clear that she didn't want his advances. I can only think of it happening three times in our history. The offenders were punished. It takes a rare sort of circumstances for a human woman to reject us."

Skylar couldn't help but smile a little at this assertion, but she could clearly see Bale's meaning. He wasn't being cocky in his statement. Just honest.

"When Day turned rogue, and murdered Helen for his own pleasure and empowerment, it was like...our fall, Skylar. Until that time, we'd lived in comparative innocence, never worrying about a Watcher bringing harm to another. We weren't concerned about it, because we never assumed that it was even conceivable. You may think it was foolish of us—I certainly think it of myself, in retrospect—but we had no language or consideration for the idea of betrayal."

Skylar shook her head sadly. She couldn't help but be affected by Bale's words. He was the leader of his people. It was bad enough that he felt that he hadn't been prepared for betrayal, but the betrayal itself had struck at him personally. He must feel doubly responsible both to his people and for his own mate's death. The healer in Skylar was filled with compassion.

"How could you when you had no experience with it? You would be a poor ruler, indeed, if you assumed vice when there had only been virtue before."

Bale sighed deeply. "Actually, Skylar, it is a ruler's responsibility to be aware of what is, not what should be or always has been. But that isn't the point. I'm trying to

describe the impact on us of Day's betrayal. It was as if our world was turned upside-down. Suddenly, it was conceivable that any Watcher, not just Day, had the ability to turn rogue for purposes of their own greed. There is nothing specifically I would have pointed to in Day that would have marked him different or more likely to give in to his more base desires than another. In fact, Day was considered one of our more wise and powerful members. He'd often aligned himself against my brothers and myself, and Che as well. But conflict is inevitable and healthy when it comes to governing a people. Day's knowledge of magic and spells was much revered among us. He was cocky and overconfident at times, but many of our members hold those characteristics. When we fully understood what Day had done to Helen, it was like your human creation myth story of the Garden of Eden. Because of Day's actions, it was as though sin marked us all."

"I don't see why," Skylar insisted. "Your essential character didn't change because of his selfishness. Your honor and integrity aren't marred by his choices."

"In part, you're right, Skylar. But you're wrong, too. You see, he opened up a possibility of choices for Watchers that previously we hadn't assumed existed. When he attacked and killed Helen, he presented to the collective Watcher consciousness a whole new unexpected avenue of behavior. His sin changed our awareness of ourselves, and so in that way, it marked us all."

Skylar considered his words. Although she would never even consider harming plant, animal or fellow human, there was always the awareness in her mind that she belonged to a race of beings that, throughout history, had committed violence and war against its own kind. The fact that she belonged to such a race inevitably affected her ideas about who and what she was. Maybe that was what original sin actually was. That was what Bale was trying to convey to her; Day's actions had forever changed Watchers' consciousness of who and what they were.

"I think I understand what you're trying to tell me, Bale," she said slowly.

Bale nodded. Duse's mate was extremely sensitive and adept in capturing elusive meanings. "Skylar, did Duse tell you that you were the first Watcher mate to enter your Second Change since Helen was murdered?" He watched as she shook her head, wide-eyed. "To say that we have been worried is an exceptional understatement. Duse has been frantic. We didn't know what to expect, how Day's actions had affected our brethren. While we tried to prepare for the worst, I don't think we actually believed, in our deepest hearts, that a Watcher would actually try to harm one of you. Still, we prepared for the possibility as best we could."

Skylar's face was filled with compassion. "And then I was attacked."

Bale examined her expression. "Exactly. It confirmed everything we most feared but hadn't yet fully faced. One of our numbers had indeed tried to harm you. In doing so, he not only betrayed Duse, but everything that Watchers are supposed to stand for."

Ravi must have sensed Skylar's sadness, because he laid his head onto her hand and gave a low, sympathetic whine. Skylar began to pet him, not even fully conscious of

her actions. "But Duse said that I was protected now from harm by any of the Watchers."

"You should be, Skylar. But today, we found out that there is a possibility that Day—or another one of us—has been preying on First Change women. It seems that many of our taboos are being broken. Duse was very upset this afternoon even before he discovered that he couldn't sense you and that no one seemed to know where you were. We're admittedly becoming a little insecure about proclaiming what should or shouldn't be an absolute fact."

Skylar absorbed Bale's words. She thought of the way Duse had looked today, when he had walked up to them at the lakeshore. He had been angry, yes, almost to the point of exploding. But Skylar realized that his anxiety for her was his deepest emotion, and that his anger was a mask for his feelings of vulnerability. Poor Jax. He had undoubtedly taken the brunt of Duse's anger.

"I still don't think Duse should have treated Jax that way."

Bale shrugged. "Duse has the right to expect certain things from his men, Skylar. I can't say that I myself understand why Jax chose to shield you that way."

Skylar bristled, a little of her irritation returning. "But Duse said that Jax had no right to shield his awareness of me, like I'm Duse's personal property or something."

A small smile touched Bale's lips. The true source of Skylar's anger at her mate reminded him strongly of Helen. She wouldn't have appreciated the statement that Duse made any more than Skylar appeared to. "As your bonded mate, Duse is primarily responsible for your safety and well-being, Skylar. He only meant that Jax had no right to keep him from his responsibility. I know it's a new concept for you, but you and Duse are a part of each other. Your essences have intermixed. Jax's actions essentially blocked Duse from sensing you, something that should come as naturally to him as breathing."

Skylar accepted what he said thoughtfully but said nothing. Bale rose.

"I'll say good night, then. I hope my visit hasn't been an imposition. I just wanted you to understand things from a Watcher's point of view," Bale said.

Skylar smiled. "You're a good big brother, Duse. I say that for Duse's sake as well as my own. Bale...stop!"

Bale turned in surprise at the lash-like quality of her voice.

"What is it?"

She swallowed heavily. The image of King Bale Ammadon wavered in front of her eyes for a moment. "It's about Helen."

Bale's gaze became predatory. "Skylar, do you remember her? You and Helen were incarnate together during your second lifetime."

"I think I might," she muttered in confusion. Why had she called Bale back? He was suddenly looking at her like he was a starving man, and she had nothing to give him.

"Memories for things other than Duse are dreamlike, more similar to emotions than actual visual recollections."

"What exactly do you remember?"

Skylar shrugged helplessly.

"I...I remember her spirit, how she shone. She was your Helen, but she was *the* Helen, too...the Helen of myth, the light in the darkness of matter, the spark that inspires dreams and hope for the future. What Asmoday did to her has made her flame fade. Her essence is bound, shielded even from you. But the spark is there, ready to be fanned to life brighter than ever. But for now, she despairs. Her soul cries out into the blackness. She who has been the spark and the fire for so many finds nothing to comfort her.

"She's alive. She will come to you only if you lower the barriers."

Skylar gasped when she realized Bale towered over her with both hands close to her shoulders and his muscles straining.

"Where is she?"

"What?" Skylar asked brokenly.

"Helen! You said she was alive!"

Skylar backed away in frigid fear from the battering, stormy emotions that surged off the inhuman creature that stood before her. "I...I don't know. Please, I...Duse!" She flew around Bale and crashed into Duse's arms when he flung open the door to her suite.

Duse took in Skylar's wet cheeks and his brother's wild expression in less than a second.

"What in Hades is wrong with you? What have you done to her?" he bellowed.

Bale's eyes glittered in his rigid, mask-like face. "She said that Helen was alive. She was prophesizing."

Skylar shook her head into Duse's chest. "I don't know anything else, Duse."

"She said that Helen was alive and that I had to find her or it would be too late! Where is she, Skylar?" Bale demanded.

"She doesn't know!" Duse thundered. "Stop harassing her!"

A silence ensued. Skylar could almost feel Bale pulling together his frayed emotions.

"She only died ninety years ago," Bale mumbled. "She couldn't have been reborn already."

The realization that the indomitable Bale Ammadon sounded like he was on the verge of breaking into a million pieces made Skylar turn around slowly in Duse's arms and face him.

"She has been, though, Bale. She has."

* * * * *

Skylar turned off the water for the shower and stood for a moment, hands on the faucet, head forward, eyes closed. The hot shower had felt wonderful, melting the bonechilling cold that had come over her after she'd...prophesized? Is that what Bale had called it? She sighed as she wrung out her long hair. Well, why not? Heaven knew that one less unusual occurrence wasn't going to make her new life any less bizarre that it already was.

She froze when she opened the shower door and she saw Duse leaning in the bathroom doorway. He had left the suite hours ago with Bale.

"Is he all right?" Skylar asked softly.

Duse just shrugged. It struck her that he looked tired, which was strange. Duse never looked fatigued like a human being did. She sighed as she got out of the shower.

"He's not going to be all right until he finds her again, is he?"

"No. He hasn't been all right since she was killed," Duse said starkly.

Skylar opened her mouth to respond. But her words hung on her lips when she saw the way Duse's light blue eyes moved over her wet, naked body with barely controlled hunger.

"Skylar, I..."

"I know," she said tremulously. "I need you too."

Their gazes remained locked as they moved together slowly. All of the emotions that had been building during the past twenty-four hours surged and popped like electricity between them. Duse pulsed for a moment against her outermost, most subtle body, nonverbally requesting to penetrate her essence, to merge their beings, to allow the storm that had amplified between them all day to run its powerful, natural course. Skylar moaned at the erotic sensation. When he heard her arousal, he plunged forward and took her mouth hotly with his. His hand came up to cradle her jaw, holding her mouth captive under him. Skylar moaned when he tore away her towel. By the time he pressed their bodies together his clothes had already disappeared.

The heat liquefied her everywhere that his hands touched. He firmly skimmed her rib cage and sank his fingers into her hips to drag her even closer against him. They both groaned into each other's mouth at the pleasurable sensation of his heavy, thick penis pushing insistently into the soft flesh of her belly. His voracious mouth left her lips and began to heatedly explore her neck while his fingers flexed aggressively into the rounded globes of her ass.

"I was so worried about you, today, baby," Duse whispered raggedly when his mouth came closer to her ear. He knew he would die if he was like Bale, that something should happen to his mate because of their association.

"I know," she said. It was true that Bale had helped her to understand Duse's reaction, but even if she'd never learned the logic behind it, she would have forgiven

him anyway. Her hand found his swollen cock. She fisted him tightly and began to stroke his length. Duse hissed as he raised his head to stare down at her.

"Come into the bedroom, baby. Sit there. On the edge of the bed," he instructed gruffly a second later.

Skylar looked up at him with wide eyes as he just stared down at her for a moment. She sensed his need, like a spiraling, spinning vortex that was quickly dissipating his hesitancy. Skylar gave a muffled cry when he suddenly leaned over and spread her thighs wide. He knelt before her. His eyes glowed with preternatural light.

Duse heard Bale's words in his head as he stared at the vision of Skylar's full, ripe breasts just inches away from his face. He may as well give in to it. He didn't need his older brother to tell him that it was hopeless to try and fight it, anyway. His hands shook slightly as he cupped her weight, squeezing her, lifting her, forcing her nipples into even further pronouncement for his mouth.

"Look at that," he whispered, mesmerized. "You have phenomenal breasts, Skylar. Your nipples are so large, but delicate and sensitive at the same time. I'm going to suck on you until you burst for me, baby, and then I'm going to suck more until you come again."

Skylar moaned shakily, enthralled by what she saw in Duse's eyes and his flagrantly sexual description. Her pussy sucked inward painfully, even as her juices spurted onto her thighs and ran into the dark crevice between her ass cheeks.

There was something incredibly erotic in the tension that she felt rolling off him. Skylar suddenly wished that her thighs weren't open, because she had the urge to clamp them tightly shut to alleviate the enormous pressure at her liquefying core. When he brushed his thumbs lightly across her nipples, Skylar groaned, arching her back, granting him greater access to what he held so reverently in his hands. She felt his touch permeate her all the way to her womb. Her fingers clenched into his thick hair desperately when he leaned forward and glided his slightly rough, warm tongue across her erect nipple. She gasped at the surprising intensity of pleasure. To her amazement, a deep, animal-like growl began to emanate from his throat when he took the nipple fully into his warm mouth. He continued to finesse it with his tongue, but the feel of the vibration from his throat made her melt with desire. She called out his name, shaky with passion. Duse answered her call by drawing on her powerfully, sucking hotly, maintaining the suction just beneath her threshold of pain. Skylar's eyes crossed at the sharp arrow of desire that sliced through her.

Duse visually appreciated the results of his ministrations with a small grunt of satisfaction a while later. He'd pulled her so tightly that the defined center of her areolas had swelled to three times its normal size, seeming to beg him for more attention. He lifted her other breast to his mouth, but fingered the other one longingly, genuinely hating to leave it. His mouth worked its magic all over again.

Skylar squirmed with intense arousal and a need for release. She didn't know what had overcome Duse, but he suddenly seemed entirely peaceful. His focus on her was

sharp, precise, honed to a laser beam of single-minded intent. His tongue continued to alternate between lapping at her with erotic languor, lashing her with rough intensity and sucking her with unapologetic greed. When he bit down on her gently and scraped her sensitized flesh over the ridge of his teeth while his tongue fiercely whipped her, Skylar cried out as the first powerful wave of orgasm crashed into her.

Without breaking the tempo of his mouth's motions on her breast, Duse lowered his right hand to her cunt and patiently nursed her through her tumult even as her powerful essence slammed into him. After she'd calmed, he dipped a long finger into her. He was intensely gratified and aroused by the creaminess of her tight channel, but he was surprised to realize that he no longer felt an overwhelming need to rut on her like he had last night. At least for the moment, he acknowledged wryly as he continued to stroke her and draw on her lovely nipple.

Skylar moaned at how good it felt to have him pleasuring her breasts and pussy at once. When he removed his finger and massaged her aching clit, he brought an abundance of her cream with him, making for an intensely slick glide. He'd barely begun to stimulate her swollen flesh before Skylar was holding his head to her breast desperately, calling out his name as her release broke over her again. She quaked and moaned uncontrollably, but Duse didn't break his hold on her breast. She gave a small cry of wonder when afterwards his hand rose to her left breast again, lifting her into the warm cave of his pleasuring mouth.

Afterwards, Skylar realized that the only way that she could have described Duse's level of awareness was to say that he was in a zone. His focus on her was complete, absolute. Skylar closed her eyes and allowed herself to sink into this state with him momentarily. Her head rolled back. Her hands left his head and went to the bed, pressing up slightly, thrusting her breasts forward even farther. He seemed aware of her joining him in whatever erotic zone he existed in, because he growled once again, deep in his throat, and pushed her farther into his mouth by applying pressure at her back, pressing her nipple to the roof of his mouth. When her arousal became too much for her to tolerate, his hand left her breast and went to her pussy, fingering her knowingly until she shattered again with orgasm.

That's right, honey. Give it to me. Let more of your sweet cream gush across my fingers.

After he'd done that for the fourth time in a row, Skylar started to realize how onesided their lovemaking was. Before she could open her mouth to say a word or make a movement to interrupt what Duse was doing, she heard him speak to her telepathically.

No, Skylar. Don't move. This is what I want right now. What I need. Come back here with me.

Skylar gave a small sigh of surrender. She put her hands back on the bed, giving herself to him, letting go with her mind. She knew instinctively what Duse had meant. He wanted her back in that zone with him. Skylar didn't need to be asked twice.

Some time later—Skylar couldn't say for sure how long—she opened her eyes and looked directly at him. Into him. She felt so close to him. She realized that she was lying

back fully on the bed, and that Duse was directly over her. Her eyes flicked down over him before returning to his magnetic gaze. His erection was huge and stark in the semidarkness. Skylar opened herself wide to him.

Their gazes stayed sealed while he slid into her inch by erotic inch. When his length was halfway into her snug channel, he paused for a moment. Then he sank the rest of himself into her with one powerful stroke.

"You're too sweet, baby. So damned tight," he breathed out harshly.

Her fingers clutched at his muscular, tensed ass. She didn't know what had overcome her, but she was so damned horny from what he'd done to her earlier, she was going to combust into ash and smoke any second. "Fuck me hard, Duse," she muttered desperately as she tongued one of his dark brown, erect nipples. "Fuck me harder than you did last night."

"You loved it, didn't you?" Duse muttered with amazed gratification as he began to give her what she wanted. Skylar watched him, even as her hips surged up to meet him, her lips parted in wonder. The extent of his desire seemed enormous, easily matching hers. While it had been strangely banked earlier, it currently surged uncontrollably past the barriers. He looked tortured by it. She brought her legs up, granting him more access to her. He pushed down on her knees, taking what she offered greedily, deeply. Their flesh began to crash together more and more relentlessly as Skylar keened with increasing desperation and Duse grunted aggressively with each powerful downstroke. He felt her tottering, wavering on her crest.

"Come for me, baby. Then I'm going to fill your little pussy with more cum than you've ever known," he growled. Skylar screamed wildly as the first wave of orgasm hit her. Her hands guided his ass, telling him without words how she wanted him to take her through her climax—hard and without mercy. Duse complied, practically putting his entire weight into his thrusts, giving all of himself to her as her essence pounded into him. He felt his being blaze with power a moment later as orgasm coursed through his being.

Skylar opened her eyes into narrow slits so that she could see the true form of her lover flare into brief visibility. She thought that what he'd said about his cum must have been true. His climax seemed to last forever as he convulsed and thrust and convulsed more while his seed spurted hotly into her womb. When she reached up to caress his sweat-dampened neck a moment later, Duse seemed all too human. His strong arms held himself off her, but he was gasping for breath. Skylar made long, smooth strokes along his back and buttocks, trying to soothe him. She could feel him inside her, still impossibly pulsing with desire. Her vaginal muscles clutched at him tightly, not wanting him to leave her. Duse grunted in awareness of her tight hold on him. His eyes slowly opened and focused on her.

"Do you want to tell me what that was all about?" Skylar whispered. She knew she didn't have to explain to Duse what she meant. She could easily sense the wonder in him, as well.

He inhaled deeply, trying to catch his breath. His eyes stayed locked on Skylar while he tried his damnedest to control himself. Once he felt he had a semblance of control, he slowly, regretfully withdrew from her life-giving warmth.

"Duse?" she murmured in protest.

"I'll try to explain, Skylar. Later. Right now, I'm not finished with you, yet," he explained raggedly. He gently flipped her body over and knelt between her thighs. She felt him dip his fingers into her drenched pussy and slide up the tight crevice of her ass. One large hand parted her cheeks. Her eyes opened wide and she gasped when he began to massage the tiny, puckered hole there. "I'm going to fuck you at your root now, babe."

Her lips parted and a fresh surge of blood and desire pooled into her sex and cheeks. She knew what part of her body was associated with her root chakra! "You mean in my ass? But I've never done that before, Duse!"

He chuckled as he gently, but masterfully, penetrated her with his finger. "Yes, you have. Many times," he said in a low, seductive voice that had the effect of a sensual rake along Skylar's spine. She moaned desperately at the sensations he was building in her with his massaging, fucking finger. A strangled sound of arousal escaped her throat when he bent and kissed the back of her thigh then lightly danced his hot tongue over her hyper-sensitized clit. As she keened, he slipped another finger into her.

"You just mean you've never done it in this lifetime, with a human man. And that you don't remember it with me. Right?"

"Yes," she managed helplessly. She glanced back over her shoulder anxiously.

His smile was so beautiful as he came up over her that her pussy literally made a sucking sound as it tightened around her emptiness. Her eyes were huge with anticipation as he placed his thick, bulbous head against her tiny opening.

"That's just one of the things that I love about you, baby. You always save your little ass just for me. Now arch your back, just let your nipples touch the comforter, and offer up your pretty bottom to me, Skylar," he ordered in a desire-roughened voice. He pressed firmly against her with his thick head. "Relax. You can take me," he soothed. She gasped as the round head of his cock slipped into her body. He must have done something with his magic, because although she felt stretched impossibly wide, his entry had been smooth, as though she'd been lubricated. She cried out with shocked arousal.

"Hold steady, Skylar," he muttered thickly. His big hands came up to hold her ass immobile for his conquering cock. He slowly slipped farther into her, then began to pulse inside her erotically while she moaned and gripped desperately at the comforter. "We're both going to like this very much. And you're much more powerful than you've ever been before, baby. At the end, there's going to be such a nice surprise for you."

It took Skylar's heartbeat a good twenty minutes to return to normal after Duse was finally done with her. A surprise? That's what Duse would call it? More like peeking at nirvana, Skylar thought with disbelief.

"Duse?" she asked thoughtfully. They sprawled together on the bed in postorgasmic satiation, their limbs intertwined. "Are you immortal? Do Watchers die?"

He paused before reaching up to entwine his fingers in her abundant, wavy hair. Craving more of the sensation, he reached back and pulled it over Skylar's shoulders, causing most of it to spill across his chest. He gave a small groan of satisfaction, intoxicated by the feeling of the soft texture of it tickling his nipples and hypersensitized skin. When he still hadn't answered for a moment, Skylar tilted her head to question him with her gaze.

"Sorry. Again, it's a more complicated question than you might think. A Watcher can exist in different planes of existence, different vibrational levels of reality, depending upon how strong his Will is, how much he can maintain his focus on a given world. But the part of us that can be experienced through the earthly world can die, Skylar. Thirty-six of us have died. Eleven accidentally, by violent catastrophes while they were fully corporeal. The rest of them didn't die because of disease, or aging, or violence. They willed themselves out of the material world."

"Why?"

Duse shrugged. "Imagine what it would be like, if you can, Skylar. I know it's difficult, because for humans, death is inevitable. As a result, humans crave life. But for us, there isn't a period at the end of the sentence that is our ceaseless existence. We just go on, year after year, century after century, millennium after millennium. I have reason to believe that we do age, but very slowly in comparison to humans. The length of our lives is so long in relation to human beings that it just seems as though we are immortal. I've talked with Uncle Paim and Batos quite a bit, as their memories seem to go back further than any of ours. According to them, the length of Watchers' lives thus far has been a mere trifle to our fathers' lifetimes. But some Watchers reach a point where they no longer choose to go on. It saddens us, when a Watcher chooses the Path of Sorrow, but...we understand, too."

Skylar studied Duse's face intently. Her eyes suddenly widened in shock. "You've considered doing it. You've considered ending your earthly existence," Skylar breathed out with dread. Sadness shadowed her features.

"Skylar, no. At least, not in the way you're thinking, not the Path of Sorrow. Do you remember when I explained to you about how it was possible for a Watcher to become so corporeal with his mate that he could have a child with her?" He waited tensely for her acknowledgement. "Well, one of the reasons that we don't age in the way of humans is that we spend the majority of our time in incorporeal form. As pure energy, we're not subject to the laws that eventually claim humans' physical bodies. But I believe that the stronger the Watcher becomes in corporeal form, the more likely it is that he will age, if slowly, and that death will eventually claim him."

"You mean that if you ever did have a child, it would lead to your own death?" she asked, thunderstruck.

Duse felt like his mouth was lined with sandpaper as he watched her. "Probably," he finally said with a calmness he was far from feeling. "Bale is the most powerful Watcher in existence, able to become corporeal for extended periods of time. I've done some research on his corporeal cells. They show signs of aging, Skylar, about the equivalent of an eight-year-old human child's. Nevertheless, the effect is clear to see."

Skylar sat up slightly. During the party and over the weekend, talking to Duse's men and Bale, she'd learned that Duse was revered among them for his wisdom and abilities in the chemistry of both subtle and corporeal matter, genetics and molecular biology. According to Bale, Duse had always shown a proclivity for such knowledge. This whole conversation reminded her of Rolland Ockley, the researcher from the University of Chicago who was trying to stop human cell aging. Skylar had little doubt that if Rolland Ockley was on the brink of discovering how to stop or reverse aging, Duse already had long ago mastered such knowledge. "But you could stop it, couldn't you, Duse?"

His eyes gleamed with banked power when he met her gaze. "I could."

"But you won't?" Skylar asked incredulously.

"Not unless Bale changes his mind, no."

For a moment neither of them spoke. Skylar looked away, troubled. "And what about us?"

"What do you mean?" he asked cautiously. He hoped he was blocking his emotions sufficiently from her right now, because he couldn't recall ever being so nervous about a conversation in his life than he was right now.

Skylar swallowed. Her voice shook a little, despite her attempts to stay calm. "If we conceive a child, and you begin to age, what will you choose?"

Duse's heartbeat began to pulse more rapidly at his throat. That she would accept the strangeness of their situation so rapidly, so wholly, that she was able to ask such a question left Duse with a sensation that he could only define after the fact as being heartsore. "It's your decision, as well, Skylar. What would you choose for us?"

Skylar reached out to his shoulders, as though to steady herself. "Duse, by us, you don't mean..."

"No, Skylar. You're not pregnant already," Duse said quickly.

A long pause ensued. Duse wondered vaguely about the intense corporeality of his body when he felt beads of perspiration break out on his forehead.

"I'm not willing to be a part of that," she finally said softly. "I'm not willing to participate in something that will eventually lead to your premature death."

Duse inhaled slowly, trying to control himself. Her back was turned to him. He felt like he was in the presence of a skittish wild creature that would bolt if he made any sudden moves. He reached out and captured a lock of her soft hair, slowly winding it between his fingers. Duse wanted to give her space, but he was unwilling to let her run

from him. The hold on her was gentle, easily broken by a slight move by Skylar, but it was contact, just the same.

Skylar felt the tentative caress in every cell of her being. She glanced back at him, but she didn't return to his arms.

"Skylar, you're the most important thing to me. I would give up everything—my immortal life, the chance to have a child, all of my power—just to be with you. Those things would have no meaning for me without you."

Tears fell down her cheeks as she looked into his eyes. He sat up slowly, careful not to break his eye contact with her, anxious not to shatter even that tentative hold. He gently took her in his arms and urged her to lie back on the bed. He leaned over her.

"You believe me, don't you??"

Skylar nodded miserably. Of course she believed him. How could she not after he'd just opened up the most personal, sacred places in his soul to her? What kind of a heel did that make her—that she wasn't willing to give up everything like he was willing to do for her?

"You're not being selfish, baby. You're telling me that you care about me so much that you wouldn't want to risk losing me. I'm deeply touched by that," Duse said as he wound her hair through his fingers. "Skylar...there is an option that I want to present to you. I hope that it's not too soon, that it won't upset you."

Skylar's eyes met his anxiously. "What do you mean, Duse?"

"Paim and I have created a formula, an elixir that would greatly prolong a life."

Skylar stilled. "And you could take this elixir to stop the effects of the aging?"

Duse shook his head. His gaze on her was intense. "No, Skylar. The elixir wouldn't work for me."

"But..."

"The elixir would be for you, Skylar."

"What?"

"I created it for you," he said quietly. "You were always so sad when we parted due to death. I couldn't help but think of how much sadder you would be if you had to leave a child behind, especially such a young child, considering our life spans. We can't make the timing perfect, but no couple in existence can hope to die simultaneously. One usually always witnesses the death of the other. With the elixir though, your life would be exponentially lengthened. Mine would be shortened. If we're blessed enough to have a child, we would be able to watch him grow together. We would be a family, Skylar. It's everything that has been denied to Watchers in the past."

Skylar trembled at the sight of sheer awe on Duse's handsome face.

It's what you want more than anything, she thought to herself. She was incredibly touched.

"No, Skylar. I told you before, you're the most important thing to me. I'll take you any way I can have you."

Fear and confusion and desire warred within her.

"But what about...after. If Bale dies, Duse, will his spirit be reincarnated again, like mine is?" Hope flared briefly in her eyes.

He looked sad, knowing what she was thinking. "I don't know, Skylar. There isn't a precedent for us."

"And Bale is willing to accept the possibility that he may not return? That Helen will come back, and he won't be there to find her, to be with her?"

"It's a possibility that he and Helen discussed," he said gently. "There's uncertainty in their decision, yes. I admire their courage for making it, though. Life is about taking chances. Besides, Agares and Ares, Bale's sons, show every sign of having life spans far past humans, but they're still aging much more rapidly than we do. Do you think Bale wants to witness his own sons' death? As a human, I would think you would understand that. If a being makes a conscious choice that will set the terms of his existence, knowing full well what he will sacrifice, but also what he will gain, then I believe his choice should be respected."

Tears sprang to Skylar's eyes at Duse's words.

"Ah, baby," he whispered as he bent to kiss away the tears on her cheeks and then her soft lips. "Don't cry."

* * * * *

He made love to her again, wanting to help calm her chaotic emotions and pain with his own being, needing her to know how much he cherished her. Afterwards, because she deserved to know, he explained to her what Bale had told him about his feelings of being out of control when he made love to her, about the change that was occurring in his body. He studiously avoided making eye contact with her. Thankfully, the bedroom was almost dark, the only light emanating from the bathroom light they'd heedlessly left on earlier.

"I hope you don't think that I'm going against your wishes, Skylar," Duse said quietly after he'd explained the bulk of things and she had remained disconcertingly silent. "Just because I become more corporeal doesn't mean that we have to conceive. My semen will fully actualize if I feed from you, but there's no reason that we can't use birth control, like human couples do. I would stop my own process, if I could, but Bale says it's an imperative, something I have to go through now that I've reached this point. I can't stop it, Skylar."

Duse leaned back against the headboard, his voice sounding strange in his ears. The thought of a Watcher utilizing birth control seemed thoroughly bizarre, completely counterindicative to their whole culture. Maybe he should save his rare corporeal seed, preserve it for a time when Skylar was ready? He certainly had the ability to do it. But no, practically as soon as he'd thought it, he'd rejected the idea. Such an action would likely make Skylar believe that having a child with her was the most central thing to

him, and that just wasn't true. He would do it right with her, with her full compliance, or he wouldn't do it at all.

He realized that Skylar hadn't spoken for several minutes. When he glanced down at her face, he saw her eyes on him, thoughtful and soft. Duse couldn't help but grin slightly when he saw her expression. She was so rare, so precious to him. Most women would undoubtedly be completely freaked out by what he'd just told her. He stroked her cheek softly. "Thank you for listening to me and not running out of the room screaming." Skylar just watched him, her return smile elusive and mysterious. "What are you thinking, Skylar?"

"That I love you," she said without a pause.

Duse's grin slowly widened to a full-fledged smile. Skylar just shook her head at her private thoughts. He could make a fortune with that smile alone. Duse slid his body down next to her, so that their faces were only inches apart.

"I love you, too."

Skylar's finger came up to trace his goatee. "I was also wondering why Bale married Helen but you never married me."

Duse's eyes widened slightly at the unexpected turn of the conversation. He'd never discussed specific details of their previous lives together, figuring Skylar would bring it up if and when she was ready. "There are a lot of different reasons, Skylar."

"Tell me a few, then, Duse," she murmured wryly.

"Well, first of all, marriage is a human custom, not a Watcher one. Our bonding to each other goes much deeper than the exchange of marriage vows. When we mated, our subtle bodies intermixed, templated with each other. I would never want to leave you, Skylar, but even if I wanted to, I couldn't. We're a part of each another."

Skylar nodded as she continued to listen intently.

"Skylar, in the first incarnation when we mated, you had a human husband and a family. In the next two, you were widowed, but you still had children. You've always been the embodiment of the mother, the nurturer, the wise woman, the healer."

"What are you saying?" Skylar almost shouted in her incredulity. There had never been any indication of this in her memories. Her vague recollections all surrounded Duse and her immense love for him. She reached out to touch him almost desperately. She groaned as if she was in pain. "How terrible for you!"

Duse's eyebrows went up. "Terrible? I'm not sure that I know what you mean," he said cautiously. He'd always been tremendously drawn to Skylar's mothering aspects. She was so powerful in her ability to give and nurture.

"That you would wait all those years to find me, and I had gone and started a life with another? God, I'm so sorry, Duse. It must have been awful for you." Her eyes widened in disbelief when Duse actually smiled.

"I was usually just so glad to be with you that I never gave it a second thought. It's true, I had no fondness for your first husband, but neither did you. He was a mean son

of a bitch who took pleasure in hurting you, Devon," Duse said, his mouth hardening at the memory.

Skylar looked up, only vaguely surprised at his unconscious use of what he had told her was her true name. "You weren't jealous of him, then?"

"Jealous? There was nothing to be jealous of, babe. You couldn't stand to be around him. You were a beautiful and devoted mother, despite the fact that your so-called husband practiced the equivalent of rape to get you pregnant with your children." Duse exhaled, trying to release some of the anger that the memory could still easily evoke. "I know there were good and decent human men existing back then, Skylar, but you also wouldn't believe what human women had to endure within the sanctions of marriage."

Skylar watched him cautiously as he tried to use his breathing to calm himself. "I'm glad I can't remember it," she said softly. "I only have memories of you, Duse. You didn't have to...watch that, did you?" she asked, genuine concern in her eyes.

It took Duse a moment to realize that what she meant. She was worried about him seeing her being forced into sex with another man. "God, no," he said harshly. "I just knew that from what you'd told me. From the moment I entered your life, Skylar, your imbecile husband definitely lost the urge to ever have sex again," Duse said vehemently.

Skylar blinked. "You can do that?"

"Hades, yes!" Duse muttered. His exotic light eyes blazed. For a moment he looked away from her. He didn't want to tell her exactly how he'd permanently stopped her violent husband from ever touching her again.

"I was just trying to explain to you about why we never married, Skylar. You must understand, that it's your custom, not ours. I would have been happy to join you in celebrating your ways, but you never wanted it before, babe. I think that, like me, you sensed that we were more irrevocably attached than any wedding vows could ever create. Plus, I don't think you thought that positively of the institution of marriage, given your experiences with it."

Skylar was fascinated by what Duse told her, but suddenly she didn't want to hear another word. It was hard enough, remembering how she had left Duse so many times. She didn't like to think about leaving behind children, as well. It was amazing. She had been a mother.

But she'd never been a mother to Duse's child.

Duse watched Skylar as she absently reached up and touched one of her breasts. He stilled at the sight.

"How long will it take before I can feed you?" she whispered almost dreamily.

Duse had to clear his throat before he could speak. "Bale says that after...what we did tonight, and if we continue, you will begin to produce sustenance for me within days," he said gruffly, his entire being focused on where Skylar lightly touched her nipple.

"It's beautiful in a way. Isn't it, Duse?"

His heated gaze moved to meet her eyes as his warm hand joined hers at her breast. Skylar felt the impact of his stare deep within her being.

"Yes, Skylar. Very beautiful."

Chapter Eleven

"But you've only known him for, like, seven or eight weeks, now!" Sally Generis laughed with amazement. "You can't be serious, Sky. You're actually going to marry him?"

Skylar nodded, a wistful smile on her lips. She closed the expense log that she'd been examining and tucked it behind the counter at the nursery. Had it really only been eight weeks ago that Duse Ammadon had suddenly materialized in her potting room, changing her life—this life—forever? Unbeknownst to her, the small smile on her face was dreamy, mysterious. She was thinking about the past weeks spent with Duse, her lover, her life mate. She would never guessed in a million years that she would be the one to ask her future husband to marry her, but that was exactly what she did.

Considering what Duse had told her about his thoughts regarding the human convention of marrying, Skylar hadn't been prepared for the joy that had leapt into his eyes when she'd suggested it last night. They had just made love, but that night was even more special, charged and erotic than their frequent forays in bed over the past seven weeks. Last night, Skylar and Duse had created a child. Their child.

Once Skylar had made her decision about having a baby with Duse, she found that she still had a lot to learn about Watcher ways. Her first anxiety was that he would be disappointed if she didn't conceive.

"Don't get your hopes up too high, Duse," she'd tried to warn him after she'd broken the happy news. "I mean, I'm not exactly old, but I'm no spring chicken, either. Lots of women my age have trouble getting pregnant, and then what if there are problems with birth defects, or..."

But Duse had only picked her up off the ground and kissed her soundly. "There's nothing to worry about, Skylar. I'll choose the egg. I'll pick the first healthy one I find."

"What?" Skylar asked stupidly.

Duse couldn't help it. He began to laugh, a deep, low rumble when he saw the look on Skylar's face. Joy filled him, spilled over, impossible to hold within him. He hugged her to him so tightly that Skylar felt the full impact of his laughter in her entire being. She began to laugh with him. When she felt his laughter change to a low, predatory growl as he began to kiss her throat, Skylar stopped him before he got carried away.

"No way, Duse Ammadon. You're not going to make love to me again until you explain that little comment."

"You mean about the egg?" Duse asked distractedly as he began to unbutton her blouse. A lock of his dark hair had fallen onto his forehead and he had a mischievous

glint in his eyes. She almost considered giving in for a second. But his casual reference was too tantalizing. She stilled his eager hands.

"It's not feeding time yet, Big Boy."

He laughed, white teeth flashing in his face. Skylar smiled. She'd do almost anything to see him this happy.

"You know that I can sense your body in different ways, Skylar. The night that I entered your brain and manipulated your central nervous system was a much more complex and subtle bit of magic than merely probing your supply of eggs for one with no chromosomal damage or anomalies. Ensuring that it is the one that will be fertilized isn't all that complicated, either," Duse stated matter-of-factly.

Skylar just stared. "When you put it that way, it doesn't sound all that spontaneous or romantic, Duse," she said doubtfully after a pause.

His eyes remained intent on her, but Skylar saw amusement quirk his sensual mouth. He pulled her down into his lap and pressed his erection into her ass. "I'm sorry you don't think so. As you can see, though, I think it's the most damned romantic thing I've ever considered."

Skylar had snorted with laughter, but within seconds she and Duse were coasting around in the clouds in their own personal heaven. Which is exactly where her consciousness had remained for the past seven weeks. Sure, she had moments of sanity during the day, while she and Duse worked and existed separately. But those moments were pleasantly interspersed with intense, long nights of lovemaking, or the quiet, but no less erotically charged, times when Duse would take sustenance from her. The thought made her aware of the achy fullness of her breasts. She quickly checked the clock on the wall behind the counter at her nursery.

"I feel like I've known Duse for a lot longer than eight weeks," Skylar said distractedly to Sally.

Sally shook her head as she studied Skylar. "Look at you, Sky. You're actually glowing. I mean literally. God, the sex must be phenomenal. But are you sure, Skylar? Duse is really the one for you? Forever?"

Sally's words made her think about the elixir. She had asked Duse if it would be possible for her to take the elixir once she became pregnant and he had told her confidently that she could. When she continued to question him, he remained steadfast in his assertion. "Do you think I would even consider harming you, or our child, Skylar?" She'd been relieved, but she still hadn't told him what she'd decided about the elixir, yet.

Her eyes skittered to the clock again, the slow ache in her breasts causing a feeling of urgency. Duse had told her that he no longer needed to take sustenance from her, now that she was pregnant, but that didn't stop her body and her mind from telling her otherwise.

"There's never been a decision that I've made in my life that I've made with so much confidence and joy, Sally. Will you come on Saturday? To celebrate with me?" Skylar asked.

Sally's mouth fell open with amazement at the look on her friend's face. She looked beyond happy. She looked peaceful, ethereal even. Sally reached out and impulsively hugged her. "Of course, I will. Jeez, I wouldn't miss it for the world. Congratulations, Sky."

Skylar hugged Sally back tightly. "I have to go, Sally," she said after several moments. "I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

"Sure thing," Sally called with a wave. And then, as an afterthought, she added, "I can bring a date to your wedding, right, Sky?"

* * * * *

Che watched Duse where he sat behind his large desk with trepidation. He knew that his cousin wasn't going to like his news about Day, but he hadn't been prepared for the degree of Duse's disquietude. When Che spoke, his voice sounded calm, soothing, an automatic foil to Duse's obvious anger. "There's no way that we can prove it was him, Duse. We have no tools, no experience with tracing energies related to First Change women. But you don't have to worry that he'll do it again. I let him know loud and clear that we knew what he'd done. He knows that we've set up a tight surveillance across the globe in order to monitor unusual trends in regard to women's deaths or illnesses."

"What did Day say when you told him that?" Duse asked quietly, despite his jaw being clenched in anxiety at the news that Day would never pay for what he had done.

Che shrugged. He'd had trouble himself controlling his irritation with Asmoday. Despite Bale's confidence in him, however, Che had to reign himself in several times from not exerting his greater strength over Day and truly hurting him. Day was altogether too confident and cocky for a being that was supposed to be deprived of his power. And he didn't want to say it in front of Duse, who was a volcano ready to explode if given the slightest nudge in the right direction, but Che knew for a fact that Day was as guilty as sin for the crime for which Duse alleged he'd committed.

"You know how Day can be," Che sufficed to say after a moment. "Cool as a Chicago winter wind. I'll be honest with you, Duse. I was sensing him pretty clearly when I told him about how we'd set up a program for monitoring First Change women. I got the honest impression that Day couldn't have cared less." Che watched in amazement as Duse's cheek twitched once with suppressed anxiety.

"Duse," Che said uncertainly after a moment. "You're more corporeal than you've ever been." The stunning degree of Duse's actualization and power were clear for him to sense, but the seemingly innocuous tic in Duse's cheek sealed Chi's assessment. Duse was so solid that his emotions were unintentionally affecting his solid flesh.

Duse focused on his cousin's words. His anger and anxiety were seemingly depthless at that moment. He knew for a fact that Day had murdered those women. He still suspected that he'd been behind Skylar's attack. The fact that they couldn't pin it on him was practically driving him crazy. Che's words made him step aside a little from the intensity of his own anger, however.

He inhaled deeply, then exhaled, trying to cleanse his subtle matter of the unhealthy rage that he was feeling toward Asmoday. There was nothing more he could do. He would just have to accept what Che had told him. Bale was right. In his position, he was there to uphold Watcher laws, not break them at his own selfish whim.

"Skylar is pregnant," Duse said suddenly, seemingly apropos of nothing.

Che stared at him for a long, silent moment, in which Duse sensed so many things from his cousin—joy, envy, shame, longing and uncertainty being just a few. Duse felt a moment of anxiety as he recognized the unexpected depth of Che's emotions at the news and his subsequent vulnerability.

The poignant irony of the situation filled his awareness. In many ways, Watchers were much more powerful and knowledgeable in comparison to humans. But always in the Watcher unconsciousness was the fact that the Fathers had deemed them defective in their sterility. It had supposedly been the reason they abandoned their sons on Earth without a backward glance. It was a psychic wound of which Watchers didn't speak. The pain of the Fathers' abandonment, and the shameful fact that they could so rarely perpetuate their own species, had created a vulnerability that stood in sharp contrast to their superhuman powers and the wisdom of more subtle worlds and bodies.

"Already?" Che finally muttered incredulously.

Duse just nodded. The flicker of a smile touched his lips. The slight change in Duse's expression brought the reality of his friend's words home to Che. "Well, I'll be damned! You didn't waste any time, did you?" He didn't wait for Duse to answer before he suddenly let out a whoop of joy.

"Shut up, old man," Duse muttered through a sheepish grin. "I haven't told anyone else, yet. My men will think I'm killing you in here or something."

"More likely they'll think I'm killing you," Che returned cheerfully. "Well? Aren't you going to offer me some champagne, or a cigar or something?"

Duse complied, his grin unknowingly widening into a smile when he recognized Che's unbridled enthusiasm. He'd never felt closer to his friend than he had at that moment, knowing so clearly that joy was his most intense response given all of his other reactions. He also had never felt so blessed for his own vast fortune.

Che's cheeks hollowed out temporarily from the intensity of the draw he took on the cigar that Duse had magically supplied.

"Technically, I don't think human males hand out the cigars until after the child is born," Duse said with a laugh before he inhaled the fragrant aroma of his own cigar. He appreciated the flavor, but unconsciously, he reached out to sense Skylar. He hungered for her.

"Well, Skylar's pregnant, isn't she? That little baby is as good as born, as far as I'm concerned," Che laughed. He shook his head, his aquamarine eyes alight with joy. His boyish grin suddenly became serious. "Hey, what do we have to do now?"

Duse looked amused at his friend's abrupt sobriety. "I don't know what you're going to do, but I'm going to keep loving Skylar until she's sick of me and wait for our child to be born in ten and a half months," Duse said wryly around the cigar in his mouth.

Che nodded, considering. "Ten and a half months," he repeated the known gestation period of a child conceived by a Watcher and a human woman. "That's not very long. Are you sure you're ready?"

Duse removed the cigar from his mouth and shrugged. "As ready as anybody is when they first find out they're going to be a father."

Che grinned. "I do believe that translates to no fucking way."

Duse shot his friend a dark look, then grinned sheepishly. He started to take another draw on his cigar when his eyes suddenly flicked toward the mahogany doors. "Che, do me a favor?"

"Yeah sure, whatever," Che answered.

"Get lost. Come back on Saturday at two o'clock or so. Skylar and I are getting married then. Your presence is mandatory."

Che rolled his eyes. "Great, I guess the bachelor party is over already. I have to say, it was a pretty lame one, Duse. Can I at least take the cigar with me?"

Duse's attention momentarily lessened a degree from his focus on Skylar's return to the penthouse. He smirked at his friend. What Che was suggesting took a great deal of strength. Duse had conjured the cigar from the essence of his own being. Che's magic would have to be strong to take the cigar with him, intact. "If you can take it with you, I wish you all the pleasure of it."

Che just raised his eyebrows with two quick successive movements, inhaled sharply on the cigar and disappeared. Only the smoke from Che's last, slow, defiant exhalation remained.

Duse just shook his head. "Bastard. How does he do that?"

* * * * *

Skylar knocked twice before she stuck her head in Duse's office. "Am I bothering you?" she asked. Her eyes skimmed around the room. "I thought I heard voices."

Duse flexed his long legs, causing him to stretch back in a lazy gesture. He took a moment to absorb the alluring sight of his mate. Soon-to-be wife. Warmth suffused him. It was true what he'd told Skylar. Marriage was a human institution, something that meant little to him. But when Skylar had asked him to marry her last night, he'd been surprised by the intensity of his emotions. Sure, he'd been worked up already. They'd just conceived a child. He'd not only enthusiastically participated in the lovemaking

that led up to it, but steadfastly observed and guided the conception with his mind. It was no wonder he'd been experiencing a profound sense of meaning and joy.

But Skylar's proposal had unexpectedly sent him even higher into an orbit of euphoria. Duse realized that it did mean something to him, because it meant something to her. It meant that Skylar—Devon—had gotten past her either terrible or indifferent experiences with marriage in the past. She cared for him so much, that she wanted to enter a union with him that did mean something to her culture, even if it meant little to his. Or at least, Duse had thought before that it meant little. Maybe it just mattered to you if you had a spouse. He thought of Bale, the way his brother always called Helen his wife first and foremost. The human ceremony must have come to mean something to Bale, too.

Duse let his eyes linger on Skylar before he answered her. He'd watched her dress this morning. So why did the sight of her, even after eight hours of absence, excite him almost as much as it had after seeing her for the first time during her present incarnation? It was a kind of magic that was too subtle for his understanding. But he gave silent thanks that he could bask in its full power without knowing exactly how it worked.

She was wearing a pair of form-hugging gray pants and a button-down pink blouse. He knew from his alert observation while watching her dress this morning that she was wearing a soft, clinging white camisole beneath it. Just the memory of her pulling that camisole down over her breasts made him harden. He noticed that she hadn't even dropped off her shoulder bag before she sought him out in the office. That little fact made him smile to himself.

"It was just Che. I told him to leave when I sensed that you were home," Duse said hoarsely.

Skylar came into the room and leaned against the door until the latch clicked shut. "That doesn't sound very hospitable."

Duse shrugged. "It was to you, not to him, maybe. He'll be here on Saturday."

Skylar pushed herself away from the door and began to close the distance between them. She utilized all of her control not to launch herself at him. Ron had taken her to the nursery today. She'd had to bite her lip time and again to prevent herself from telling him to hurry up on the way home. Once the desire had hit her to see Duse, it couldn't be quieted until she gave in to it. The sight of him sitting in his desk chair, paradoxically both calm and tense with anticipation, was a powerful aphrodisiac for her.

"Did you tell Bale and Dante and Uncle Paim?" she asked. Even as she walked across the office, holding a polite conversation with him, she tossed her purse aside as though she had a mission in mind.

Duse's eyes flared with desire at the sight, but he answered her with a semblance of control. "Yes, they'll be here, too."

"Good," Skylar said breathlessly. "I contacted a minister from the nondenominational church on State Street, and he says he'll be here at 2:15 p.m. on Saturday. Sally is coming, and your men will be there. I'm sorry that my mom won't be able to meet you until after we visit her in Iowa," Skylar said. Her father had died of a heart attack when Skylar just turned thirty years old, and her mother's health had been somewhat frail since his death.

Duse noticed the vulnerability on Skylar's face. "We'll go and visit your mother whenever you say you're ready, Skylar."

Skylar nodded. It was hard to concentrate when her breasts felt so full and tight. She hesitated, for a second, unsure. Duse no longer needed to feed from her in that way. It was probably indecent of her to still want it. Need it.

Duse watched Skylar where she had paused beside his desk, his eyes like glowing embers. He felt as if he couldn't breathe when she bit into her full lower lip, undecided.

"Duse?"

"Umm-hmm?" he asked. His eyes focused on her mouth.

"Can you tell if I'm still pregnant?" Skylar asked shakily.

Her question caused a slight dent in Duse's growing sexual torpor. "Of course you are, Skylar. Why would you ask that?"

"I know that you said that you don't need to take sustenance from me anymore. But, I think we should cut it out slowly, instead of cold turkey like this," Skylar said. She quickly unbuttoned her blouse and shrugged it off her shoulders before she could change her mind. It fell heedlessly to the floor. She cupped her breasts with her hands. Much to Duse's disbelief, Skylar's tone was almost apologetic. "I ache, still, Duse. It hasn't stopped, yet."

His light blue eyes flicked to her gaze. "I never said it was going to stop just because you conceived," he said throatily.

"But...you said that you wouldn't have to anymore, not after I was pregnant."

"I said that I wouldn't have to," he said quietly. "I meant that I would no longer have to maintain ultimate corporeality because you were already pregnant. I didn't say that the desire for your sustenance would stop immediately. I don't actually know when that will happen."

Skylar's eyes widened. Relief came into her expression. "So, you think it's okay if we..." It took her a minute for Skylar to register the expression on Duse's face. His message came through loud and clear, telepathy or no. *Are you actually asking me what I think you're asking me*?

Skylar barely paused before she grabbed the camisole with both of her hands and pulled it over her head. She braced her weight on Duse's shoulders and crawled into his lap, facing him. She gripped the back of his hair into her hand, leaned back, and brought him to her right breast. "I thought maybe..." she sighed with relief when she felt his warm mouth surround her, felt his lips tighten. She watched as his cheeks

hollowed and she experienced the familiar gratifying pull. "I thought maybe you wouldn't want to, anymore," she said breathlessly.

But Skylar knew Duse wouldn't answer. His focus was always so complete. She lay back in comfort upon the pillow of air that he'd unconsciously supplied for her before he'd sunk into his zone. When he'd first supported her with a firm, but soft layer of air while he'd fed from her, Skylar had been amazed and touched by his consideration. When Skylar had asked him about it during a moment of sanity, Duse said that he'd done it on instinct, worried that if he held her like that for hours at a time—which was how long he could potentially stay focused on her while he took sustenance from her—she would become uncomfortable. Skylar had told him that when she joined Duse wherever he was mentally while he fed, she, too, lost track of all time or discomfort. Duse had merely shrugged at her response.

"You may not consciously mind," he'd said, "but I'll bet your muscles would be telling you the next day if I kept you poised in one position for hours at a time."

Skylar widened her eyes and watched Duse intently, trying to resist the delightful haze that would inevitably overwhelm her if she joined him while he fed. She wanted to record what this experience was like for her indelibly. Who knew how much longer it would last for them?

Warm liquid squirted down her pussy and thighs as she watched him. His eyes told the whole story, even though they were closed, and Skylar could only see his eyelids. His incredibly long, dark lashes looked still, peaceful where they lay against his cheekbone. Duse's cheeks hollowed slightly as he pulled at her, manipulating not only her breast, but some as of yet undiscovered subtle pathway that connected straight to her pussy. Skylar moaned at the intensity. She watched as his red tongue came out to soothe her nipple, eagerly catching the clear drops of fluid that emitting from it.

A vague anxiety overcame her. Was this wrong of her, to let him feed from her as a child would, even if Duse had assured her that the substance that came from her breasts was not the same as the milk that fed an infant?

Skylar was genuinely shocked when Duse looked up at her suddenly, his gaze holding all of the intensity that she'd grown used to seeing in his eyes when he was at his most alert. Never once, in their seven week-long experience had he appeared so aware while he fed from her.

"I know what you're thinking, Skylar," he whispered huskily. His ragged breath caused her nipple to pull impossibly further to attention. Skylar suppressed the moan in her throat at the impact. Duse saw both the arousing unconscious tightening of Skylar's nipple and the expression of surprise in her eyes. For a second, he couldn't decide which to respond to first. "It's not an aberration, babe. It's just how we do things."

"Duse?" Skylar asked in amazement. Conscious, rational thought had not been a part of this experience as Duse's body solidified and prepared itself for impregnating her. Skylar felt unexpected feelings of caution as she fully absorbed Duse studying her. There was still arousal in his beautiful eyes, but suddenly, there was also the cutting

edge of his considerable intellect. Her breath suddenly felt irregular. "I know it's not an aberration, Duse. I just feel guilty because I like it so much." Skylar tried her best to ignore the melting feeling at her core when Duse grinned slowly.

"You like it, so you think it's wrong? Considering how I feel about it, you must think I'm the biggest pervert in the world, huh?" He held her eyes in his heated gaze while he deliberately lashed at her nipple with his long, rough tongue.

Skylar moaned and moved restlessly on Duse's lap when he applied suction, drawing on her gently. All the while he continued to pin her with his gaze. "Duse, why are you so...alert?" she asked unevenly.

He took his time answering. When he finally released her breast from his lips, his fingers came up to console her flesh. "I don't know, Skylar. It's my first time with this, too, you know. I feel different, though. I still want to suck on your breasts for the better part of the day," he said a little sheepishly. "But I'm a hell of a lot more...worked up right now than I would be if I were in the zone." He'd picked up Skylar's description of how he seemed to her when he fed. Duse had told Skylar that during those times in the zone, it wasn't as if he was unaware of what was happening around him. Actually, he felt hyper-aware. That was how he knew that he should provide Skylar with a cushion of air because he could sense her muscles' rising tension. And that was how he knew precisely when she was near her peak of orgasm. He was acutely aroused when he took sustenance from her, but it was as if everything happened in slow motion. When he surrendered himself to the process, his buildup was exquisitely intense, but measured. By the time he made love to Skylar after he was finished feeding, however, he was usually half out of his mind with need.

Skylar stifled a cry of desire when he pushed her breasts together so that he could pleasure both nipples at once. Skylar squirmed in his lap. She felt drugged with a potent form of passion. Poignant stabs of arousal throbbed in her sex when Duse's light blue eyes focused on her.

I want to be inside you right now.

"Yes," she responded aloud, getting excited thinking about the number of times that he'd fed from her breasts while his cock was buried deep inside her, how he'd occasionally pause to alleviate her need by moving her up and down on him with his strong arms as he continued to calmly feed. God it had felt so good. And after he'd finished... Skylar bit her lip to stifle a groan at the erotic memories that flooded her. The moan broke free when she realized that he'd dissipated their clothing. She reached for his cock and fisted the thick root.

That feels so good. Let me put it in your ass, baby.

"Ah, Duse," Skylar murmured desperately. "It'll be too much."

You didn't like the lightning path? he teased.

She responded in kind. Like it? Like isn't really a word that's adequate to describe an experience like that. I just was glad to have survived it!

Duse chuckled next to her breast. You're right to be wary. It can be dangerous for some. But I was there to guide the energy. And I've never seen anything so beautiful in my life as I watched you come that night and saw the expression on your face. "Please, baby? I need your tight ass tonight."

Skylar laughed. Duse knew exactly what he was doing by switching to using his speaking voice. The rough, husky sound of it was a potent aphrodisiac to her. She just nodded her head. He gave her a pleased, thoroughly wicked grin. She groaned in anticipation when he ran his thick fingers down her sensitive stomach and dipped his forefinger between her sex lips, lightly massaging her erect clit.

"Ah, Duse!"

"Yes, baby. You're so wet and warm. I think your pussy is trying to tease me away from your little ass," he murmured hotly as he thrust his middle finger high into her snug channel and continued to stimulate her clitoris. He grasped a large, hardened nipple between his lips and suckled hungrily. Skylar keened and rode his finger desperately. Duse sensed her increasing arousal in the quivering walls of her pussy and the energy that danced and pulsed around her. He transferred his fingers so that Skylar rode two of them in her pussy while he pushed a third gently into her tight rectum. With his mind, he gently electrified the sensitive nerves of her clit. He watched her in wonder as she screamed her head off and bounced on him wildly, without an ounce of restraint. Her juices rolled down his fingers.

"Nobody comes hotter than you, baby," he complimented when Skylar's dazed gaze finally met his. "Now are you ready to give me what I need?" he asked as he thrust a second finger into her ass and began to guide her up and down on him with a hand at her waist.

"Yes. Ooh, Duse! That feels good! How do you want me?" Skylar managed between clenched teeth and desperate gasps. She couldn't believe that the pressure was building in her again after she'd just had such a shattering release, but it was. It definitely was.

"Just like this. Lean back and I'll give you a pillow of air to lie on. Bring your knees back and put your feet next to my waist," he whispered roughly. His eyes caressed her nude body hotly. He couldn't believe the lovely quality and color of her skin. Seeing her like this, completely bared in his lap, leaning back with her thighs parted and her knees back, was incredibly exciting for him. He rolled her back more and parted her ass cheeks so that he could see the tiny, closed bud of her asshole.

Skylar watched him with huge eyes from where she reclined on the soft cushion of air that he'd formed for her while he brought the thick, round head of his turgid cock to her exposed anus. His eyes flashed to hers briefly before he glanced downward. They both watched as he pushed his cock slowly into her body.

"Duse!"

"Shhh," he soothed. He paused with his cock half penetrating her tight ass. He felt her convulse and quiver erotically around him. By the Gods, it felt good! Skylar waited until the sharp pain had passed before she nodded. Duse's smile at her was sublime. He held her hips with both of his hands and began to pulse in and out of her slowly.

"Yes!" he muttered between tight teeth. "By the Fathers, you're hot and tight! You were made for me, Skylar!"

"And you for me." Passion hoarsened her voice as the sensation of him fucking her fully penetrated her consciousness. Controlled, hot, electrical explosions began to detonate all along her vulva, stretching all along her pussy and causing her clit to sizzle. The vision of his dark, enormous cock sliding in and out of her most intimate place was indescribably erotic. Knowing that they were both watching it redoubled the sensation.

"Brace yourself, baby. Relax your muscles," Duse instructed gently.

Skylar did as he said at the same time that she pushed farther down on him. Duse shouted out in guttural triumph when his balls pressed to the soft globes of her ass cheeks. She whimpered in pleasure when he levered her body down to the head of his cock and plunged her back down on him again.

"Gods, I have to take you hard, Skylar. We won't last long..."

"Yes! Yes!" Skylar assured him as they both became lost in the torrent of their stormy lovemaking.

Duse's breath hissed past tightened lips as he watched Skylar take his forceful thrusts so generously. As he pounded her, her lush, firm breasts bounced erotically. He almost came at the sight alone. "Skylar, reach up and play with your nipples, baby."

Duse didn't know where to train his eyes, on the erotic sight of Skylar pinching her own beaded, tight nipples, the rapt expression of incipient orgasm on her strained face or the sight of his hard cock fucking her ass so forcefully.

Skylar felt the almost unbearable pressure crest. She longed for release, but the memory of what had happened before made her hesitate with doubt. Was she really strong enough to handle that much pleasure? Or had it just been a fluke?

No, Skylar. It wasn't a fluke. Trust me. I'll be here to guide it.

Skylar panted shallowly as she pinched her nipples hard. She let go. When Duse felt her submit to the powerful experience, he thrust high into her and moved his thumb down to stimulate her eager clit.

Skylar's eyes opened wide in shocked amazement at the wave of pure sensation and pleasure that overcame her. She could literally almost see it, threatening to crash down on her, drown her and obliterate her entire existence. She squeaked out in fear.

I'm here, Skylar. Wait. Just wait.

Skylar was heartened by Duse's calm reassurance. She trusted him more than she trusted herself. And then it happened. Just as the orgasmic tsunami of pleasure seemed about to extinguish her life, the force narrowed. None of the power was lost, but it was refined into a beam of pure sexual pleasure that exploded at her root, then her sex, and then pushed its way like a slowed bolt of electricity straight up her spine. Skylar felt

suffused with a sensation that was not power and not pleasure, but somehow, both combined. Tiny shocks of awareness vibrated in her, as though her subtle bodies were loosening from her physical one. Then, all at once, the energy shot like a laser straight up her spine and through the top of her head.

She was vaguely aware of Duse shouting out his release as her orgasmic energies suffused him. Then, something happened that she didn't recall happening the first time Duse had taken her this way. It was as though she was viewing them from outside her body, several feet above them. She glanced over in tingling anticipation and saw Duse regarding her soberly in his true form. He was so beautiful it made her heart clench and release with longing and love. Love seemed like a true force of nature at that moment, like the wind or the ocean. It vibrated between them, warm and alive.

And then, she magically saw in his eyes the reflection of herself. Only it wasn't her physical body that she saw, it was her true form. She quivered in awed disbelief. To think that she, like Duse, was a powerful, luminescent being...and she had never really known.

When she came back to earthly consciousness she was gasping and sobbing softly into Duse's chest while he ran his fingers through her hair and made soothing sounds.

"I'm a goddess!" Skylar mumbled incoherently into his chest, still dazed and disoriented from the shattering sexual, physical and spiritual experience.

Duse smiled and softly kissed her damp cheek. "Indeed you are. All human beings are gods and goddesses who have forgotten their identities. If you believe that Watchers get their powers solely from our fathers, you would be gravely mistaken. Although it is a belief that many Watchers cling to strongly," he added wryly. He waited patiently until her breathing had slowed. Eventually, she leaned back and regarded him with large, somber eyes.

"I've decided to take the elixir, Duse."

At first, his face remained totally impassive as he studied her intently. Then a flame leapt into his eyes and a radiant smile lit his face. She couldn't begin to put into words what she felt at that moment as he reached up to cradle her cheek reverently.

Chapter Twelve

Skylar was surprised to find that she was genuinely nervous on the night before her wedding. It probably would have been helpful if she'd allowed Duse to come to bed with her, considering it was hard for her to feel anything but desire when she was in bed with her mate. But when Duse had followed Skylar into the bedroom suite last night, Skylar had stopped him before he entered the door. She'd almost relented when she saw the incredulous look in his eyes when she let Ravi come in but not him.

"We shouldn't spend the night together the day before our wedding," Skylar whispered. She felt silly saying it. Who was she kidding? She was thirty-three years old, and she'd already made love to Duse more times than she had any other lover in her life and in far deeper, more intimate ways, too. She blushed a little presently as she thought of some of those ways. And now, she denied him access because of a silly human custom.

Duse looked irritated. "Where do humans come up with these ideas?"

Skylar rolled her eyes. "Well, technically, a bride is supposed to be a virgin, you know, Duse." Her eyes narrowed on him when she saw him smirk.

"One night without me isn't going to get you there, babe."

"Duse." Skylar's eyes begged him. "Please? I know you don't believe in it, but couldn't you just do it for me?"

Of course, Duse wouldn't have dreamed of pushing it after that. He merely took her in his arms and chastely kissed her temple. His breath was warm against her ear when he spoke. "Skylar, you haven't been away from me at night since we've come together this time. You probably don't realize it, but it's not that easy for you to separate from me in the way that you're talking about. It would take some serious magic to do that. We'll still be very aware of each other."

Skylar's eyes widened as she realized what he meant. "Couldn't you shield yourself from me, just for tonight?"

Duse looked into her eyes and shook his head slowly. "Didn't I ever tell you? My shields would never work for you. A Watcher can't shield his mate. It's not even a remote possibility." He kissed her softly. "Good night."

Skylar almost had called him back, but in the end, she'd held firm. Or she sort of had. Well, maybe she hadn't really succeeded at all. She'd tossed and turned for most of the night, her anxiety building when she realized it was 3:15 a.m., and she still hadn't slept. She had a million things to do in the morning, including an appointment to have her hair and nails done. Flowers and food were being delivered before noon.

She'd only been partially successful at blocking Duse from her awareness. She kept unconsciously reaching out to touch him with her mind. Finally, at around 3:40, she received a clear telepathic message from Duse.

Is this self-inflicted torment part of the ceremony of marriage? Duse wondered, bemused.

Of course not, Skylar hissed back. I'm just more nervous than I thought I would be. And I'm not used to sleeping without you.

Can I come to you now?

No, Duse, she told him with more conviction than she felt. She lay on her side, her eyes closed, relaxing for the first time that night. All because Duse's voice was in her head, seemingly so near and close.

Skylar, why are you nervous?

I don't know. I want to be a good wife to you, Duse. I don't want to mess up. We're going to be together for an awfully long time. You might get sick of me.

That's not very likely, babe, Duse said wryly. After a moment, he said, I liked the vows that you chose. They're Celtic?

Yes. My parents are an Irish–Scottish blend.

Then our child will have Celtic ancestry from both sides.

Skylar lifted her head from her arm for a moment. What do you mean?

I did tell you I was part human, Skylar. Our mother was a powerful priestess in what's now called Scotland. Che's mother was her sister, also a powerful Druaghish priestess.

What was your mother's name?

Her name was Rhedae. Duse knew this because of some ancient scrolls that Batos kept. Most Watchers weren't fortunate enough to know anything of their parentage. Batos had a theory, though, that Bale's designation as king of their people and Jax's, Che's and his own designation as princes were somehow associated with their mothers' royal lineage versus their fathers'. I have no memory of her, Skylar.

Skylar sensed his sadness. You will have a family of your own, soon, Duse. And you will see part of your mother in your son's eyes.

I already do have a family. I have you, Duse said softly in her mind.

Skylar felt the first heavy, warm wave of sleep suffuse her body. She sighed with contentment when she felt Duse playing with her hair in his characteristic soothing gesture. A peaceful purr vibrated her throat. *You're not really here, are you, Duse?*

No, I'm not really here, Skylar. At least, not in a way that's breaking any human traditions that I'm aware of. Go to sleep, and let me worry about things for a while.

* * * * *

Sally had woven a beautiful, delicate crown of mistletoe with white berries, laurel and baby's breath for Skylar's wedding ensemble. After Skylar had put on her dress and shoes, Sally placed the crown upon her head. Her hair lay loose around her

shoulders in glorious disarray. Of course, the effect wasn't entirely natural. It had taken the better part of two hours to achieve at the hairdresser's this morning. Still, it was perfect. She looked a little fey, otherworldly. Totally appropriate for this ceremony, considering who she was marrying. She'd chosen a simple ivory-colored sheath with thin shoulder straps. The dress had a rounded, low neckline that clearly displayed Duse's *sigil* on her breast. Skylar didn't care. She'd come to love the exotic mark on her, finding its exquisite detail mysterious and fascinating. Her breasts were especially full, still ready for Duse to feed from her, even though he'd been doing so less and less as their lovemaking returned to a more normal pattern.

"Oh, my God, you look beautiful, Sky," Sally said quietly. Skylar grinned when she glanced at her friend's face, but Sally looked completely serious.

Skylar had been surprised, a little unsettled earlier, when Sally had showed up at the penthouse to assist her in dressing, and Rolland Ockley had been with her. But the day promised to be so golden that Skylar couldn't even allow Rolland's disturbing dark gaze on her to bother her.

"It's almost time, Sky. Do you want me to go out and see if they're ready for you?"

Skylar nodded, her eyes suddenly anxious. She hadn't seen Duse all day. She wasn't trying to avoid him, but he just never seemed to be in the same place she was as she prepared for the small wedding ceremony. Or maybe he'd been purposefully avoiding her, feeling guilty about coming to her last night? Skylar lifted her eyebrow wryly at her expression in the mirror. She knew very well that Duse would never feel guilty about any such thing. It was more likely that she was the one who felt guilty at the fact that she had so little willpower when it came to him.

Sally's eyes were bright with excitement when she stuck her head in the door. "They're ready for you, Sky."

Skylar's legs were weak with anxiety as she entered the large living room where everyone had gathered for the ceremony. She hadn't planned anything elaborate, not wanting music or pageantry. She'd just wanted to solemnly swear vows with Duse while others bore witness. Her eyes instantly sought out Duse, seeking the comfort of his gaze, his touch.

He was standing where the minister had told him to wait for Skylar. But he didn't hesitate for a second when he saw his mate hesitate at the entrance. He immediately walked across the room to get her. No Watcher could touch her but him. The only people in the room who could lay hands on her were Sally, her date, the minister and himself. Duse figured he was the most appropriate one out of all of them, even if it wasn't a human tradition. He was glad to see that Skylar didn't mind. She gave him a heartrending smile when he approached her.

Emotion swelled in Duse's throat. He didn't think he'd ever seen her so beautiful...ever, in any of her lifetimes. She looked like Diana, the virgin huntress. Even the white berries of mistletoe in her hair matched the comparison. And for him, she truly was the embodiment of a goddess. She was innocent, mysterious, alluring. *Sexy*,

Duse added emphatically when his eyes skimmed her neckline and saw half of his *sigil* exposed at her breast. Skylar raised one eyebrow slightly when Duse's light blue eyes burned at her breast for a moment before meeting her gaze again. He smiled rakishly, trying to alleviate the anxiety that he easily sensed emanating from her.

Skylar's eyes took in Duse's appearance lovingly. He looked impossibly handsome in the dark suit she'd picked out for him. The suit had been tailored perfectly, highlighting his powerful shoulders and trim waist. The crisp, white shirt that he wore created a handsome contrast against his olive-colored skin. He took her hand in his and placed it on his arm.

Are you ready to do this?

Skylar nodded. *As long as I'm with you, I'm ready*.

Duse led her before the minister, a man with a kind face and ready smile. Skylar had liked him immediately when she had greeted him earlier and introduced him to the Watchers that had already arrived. Even though Reverend Marsh was all of five-feet four-inches with his shoes on, he hadn't batted an eye when surrounded by six or seven men of almost giant proportions. The minister explained to those assembled that Skylar and Duse would ritually drink from the same cup in order to symbolize their unity and shared destiny while they took their marriage vows.

The ceremony was simple, partially based on some Celtic wedding vows that Skylar had discovered from her own parents' wedding and partially traditional. Skylar's eyes had filled with tears when she looked into Duse's light blue, steady eyes while he repeated his vows to her in his low, husky voice.

Skylar tensed a little as she watched Bale present Duse with a gold goblet. Duse brought the cup to his lips but only pretended to drink, his eyes all the while on Skylar's pale face. Despite her anxiety, Skylar managed to repeat her vows to Duse, taking comfort and strength from his steady gaze. When Bale handed the goblet to Skylar, she heard Duse clearly in her mind.

You don't have to, Skylar. It's okay to change your mind. You can always drink another time, if you choose. Or not at all.

No, I want to, Duse. I want to share the full term of your life with you. I want to see our child grow. Despite her words, Skylar felt a little lightheaded as she took the goblet Bale handed her in her leaden fingers. Do I drink it all, Duse? she wondered uncertainly.

She experienced her mate's hesitation. Yes. If you decide to drink it, drink it all, babe. You know I'll love you just the same either way.

Her resolve crystallized at his words, spoken with so much calm conviction in her mind. She raised the goblet to her mouth and drank deeply. Surprisingly, the elixir tasted sweet and pure. Skylar didn't feel any different physically after she'd emptied the goblet, but she felt a lightening of her spirit. She'd made her decision, and there was no turning back now.

Skylar gasped in amazement when they exchanged rings, and Duse slipped a beautiful pavé diamond and emerald ring on her finger. It fit perfectly. Her eyes leapt to Duse's, silently admonishing him, but beaming with pleasure, too. The simple gold band she gave him looked strangely natural on his hand, as if he'd always worn it.

Her lips parted in wonder when she heard the minister say that Duse could kiss the bride. Duse leaned down, taking advantage of her opened lips to brand her with a kiss that managed to be both reverent and lusty at once. Skylar smiled up at him when he raised his head and looked down at her. Her husband.

Afterwards, Skylar stood by Duse's side and accepted the good wishes of their few guests. She felt strangely transported with joy. She would have never guessed that this ceremony could have so much meaning for her.

"It meant more to me than I thought it would, too," Duse suddenly said quietly from where he stood shoulder to shoulder with her.

"It did?" Skylar asked, glancing up at him with amazement.

Duse just nodded, a small smile on his lips, the answer to her question broadcast clearly in his light eyes.

Duse had sensed Jax's leashed tension during most of the afternoon of his wedding to Skylar, but he couldn't understand its source. Hadn't they at least nominally made up after their fight? Yet, things had still been tense between them since then, and Duse knew that Jax was avoiding him. Besides, his attention on Skylar had been complete. But all of the guests had departed now, with the exception of Sally, who had stayed behind to help Skylar clean up. Duse took the opportunity to ask Jax if he could speak to him privately for a moment. Ron and Force took the hint, and excused themselves amiably.

"What are you upset about, Jax?" Duse asked quietly, despite the fact that he and Jax were the only people left in the large living space. Concern entered Duse's awareness when Jax's gaze flicked everywhere in the room, but never on Duse himself. It seemed so unlike his younger brother, who was usually so confident, even defiant. "There's something you need to tell me," Duse said slowly, gleaning the truth of his words even as he spoke them.

Jax swallowed heavily. His eyes finally met his brother's piercing gaze. He couldn't salvage his own honor, but perhaps, if he was lucky, he could protect Skylar. Jax wanted to warn Duse, but the words, the message were strangely blocked by his connection to Rolland Ockley. How could he tell his brother that he had betrayed him and endangered his mate, no matter that he currently regretted it so painfully that he was considering death as an alternative? There was still a chance that he could protect Skylar, but Jax needed to be very careful in conserving the limited amount of energy that he'd managed to gain from the magician's newly formed obsession with him. Still, Jax had forgotten what a powerful being Duse was. Although his secret was shielded from his brother, he couldn't keep all things from Duse when his brother examined him with such an intense strength and Will. Jax panicked a little when he saw Duse's eyes widen in incredulity and not a little pain.

"You've been considering taking the Path of Sorrow," Duse whispered, his shock apparent. "Why, Jax?

Duse's lips felt numb as he uttered the words. He knew that his statement was true. He didn't question it. A heaviness settled in his chest. That his younger brother would be considering ending his life on a day that had been the happiest of Duse's existence seemed unreal. What could have happened to Jax to cause this unhappiness? Duse searched his memory, struggling for explanations. But there was nothing, nothing that could explain such a degree of misery. Or had Duse just been too wrapped up in his own life to pay any attention to his younger brother?

Jax blinked at the burning sensation in his eyes. Grief and hopelessness overwhelmed him. His vulnerability was so intense, that for a moment, he could not protect himself. Duse's face became rigid when he suddenly felt the impact of his brother's grief. Jax just shook his head, knowing there was no way to explain.

"I'm sorry, Duse. You'll never, never...know how much," Jax muttered brokenly.

Duse's forehead wrinkled in confusion and concern as he watched his brother. His focus was so intent, Bale had to call out his name three times before he turned his head toward where Bale stood at the entrance to the living room.

"What?" Duse asked distractedly, pulling his eyes away from Jax's rigid face.

"I asked you if you knew where Skylar went just now."

"Went?" Duse asked, as though Bale was speaking a language he barely understood.

Bale stepped into the room. He spoke insistently, concisely. "Where is she, Duse?"

Duse's expression glazed. He stood abruptly. "I don't know." The three words clearly signaled the dawning of fear. He opened his mouth to ask Bale what he knew, but before he could, he saw the subtle look of disbelief on his older brother's face when he looked past Duse's shoulder.

"What?" Duse asked, confused.

"Jax," Bale murmured. "Why would he just leave at a moment like this?"

Duse's already significant unrest tripled when he saw the empty chair where Jax had just been sitting.

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Skylar broke the surface of consciousness sporadically, as though she could only bear quick snatches at a time. The first thing of which she became aware was a stabbing pain behind her right eye. The second thing was that she was going to be sick because the earth was moving. She opened her eyes warily. Her nausea increased. Where was she? The thought that she had no idea caused panic to seemingly push whatever was in her stomach farther into her throat, causing her to gag. Her throat and mouth burned. She began to cough harshly.

She was lying on a narrow bed in a small, but luxuriously furnished room. The room looked too barren to be lived in, with no personal items or pictures. Something about the small dimensions of the windows and the sickening surging motion made her realize that she was on a boat. When Skylar glanced down and saw her wedding dress, she curled up to stop herself from vomiting.

The door to the room opened and someone walked into the room.

"Where's the bathroom?" Skylar groaned. Her mind registered that the person in the room with her was Jax, Duse's brother. But the only thing she was concerned about at the moment was relieving her stomach.

The next thing she knew, Skylar was being carried in his arms, which only seemed to increase her disorientation and nausea. Hadn't Duse said that no Watcher could touch her? But there had been some caveat to the spell. No Watcher could touch her unless it was to assist or protect her when she was in need. Jax set her down gently in a luxurious bathroom. Skylar tried to lean over the toilet to be sick, but she was too weak, and she began to crash to her knees. She let out a small yelp of surprise when a soft cushion of air prevented her from hitting the tile floor hard. Someone was speaking angrily behind her, but her convulsing stomach took most of her attention.

"What the hell did you give her?"

"Chloroform. I use it in the lab. Don't worry. I used the correct amount for a general anesthetic. She'll be fine, once it's out of her system."

Something beyond her personal safety triggered immense anxiety at those coldly spoken words. Her mind was fuzzy. She couldn't put her finger on it. After she'd vomited until she was completely empty, she felt the soothing sensation of a cool cloth being held to her face and forehead. Her eyes were heavy and her head pounded incessantly. The world lurched, and Skylar vaguely realized someone was carrying her again. The vertigo that enveloped her when she was put back on the narrow bed was unbearable.

"Duse? Where's Duse?" she murmured.

"Shhh, quiet, Skylar. Everything is going to be okay. Here, drink this water. You need to force the poison out of your system." Skylar complied and drank the liquid that was pressed to her lips because her throat and mouth felt parched and burned. She swallowed thirstily. "Jax?" Skylar wondered vaguely when she glanced up to see who held the glass to her mouth. "Where's Duse?"

She lay back, overwhelmed with dizziness. She was wearing a wedding dress. Was this the dream, or had her marriage to Duse been one?

Someone spoke to her soothingly, even lovingly in a deep, compelling voice. Whoever it was seemed to want to comfort her, but it wasn't Duse. Even in her enfeebled state, she tried desperately to reach for her mate with her mind. But there was only her vertigo and the sickening movements of the boat. Where was Duse? Why couldn't she reach out to him? The fact that she couldn't touch him with her mind,

something that had become so basic to her for weeks now, caused her to bend over again in rising nausea and renewed misery.

* * * * *

Duse hung up the phone. Watchers rarely used human law enforcement agencies. But he was purposefully being blocked in his connection to Skylar. Duse knew that the next several hours or so after Skylar's disappearance would be crucial to finding her. He needed to utilize the eyes and ears of human beings in order to provide them with any leads. Besides, Duse was beginning to suspect that humans were involved in Skylar's abduction anyway. It only made sense to have other human beings in on the hunt.

"I could see her from the open office doors," Bale said. "She was talking to Sally. I saw them hug in the foyer, and then Sally got on the elevator." Bale paused, trying to recall the details of what he'd seen. He'd been talking to one of his human employees in London on the phone.

Duse's eyes pinned his brother. He felt both numb and preternaturally focused at once. He must find Skylar at all costs. The fact that she was in danger was a new, unexpected reality of his life. Duse knew he couldn't deny the truth. For Skylar's sake, he needed to make an abrupt switch from feeling like he was the luckiest being on earth one moment to realizing he could easily lose everything in the next. Maybe he already had. The sooner he forced himself to make the harsh adjustment, the better. There was no room for wishful thinking. Duse needed to assume the worst.

"What happened next, Bale? Why did you seem alarmed when you found me?" Duse prompted coldly.

"I saw Skylar standing in the foyer for a little bit after Sally left. She was touching the flowers on the bouquet there. I saw her remove a white flower, smell it." Bale went on to explain how he hadn't noticed anything else for the next several minutes as he talked on the phone. At some point, he had realized that the elevator door was opening, and then closing again. "I guess some part of me must have been aware that all of the guests—who would use an elevator anyway—had left. The foyer was empty, but I saw that on the floor." Bale nodded to the single white hydrangea that he'd placed on the desk.

Duse picked up the lush flower and examined it. "She never felt alarmed. I would have sensed it." He paused, reflecting. "Or maybe I wouldn't have," he realized grimly. He went on to tell Bale how upset he'd been after realizing that Jax had been contemplating taking the Path of Sorrow. "It's possible that if she was abducted at that moment, my concern for Jax overwhelmed my awareness of her." His mouth became even harder. "Still, whoever took her must have knocked her out or something. Even if my concern for Jax overshadowed my awareness of Skylar for a brief moment, it wouldn't have lasted for long."

Bale sat down in one of the wing-backed leather chairs heavily at the news of Jax. "Are you sure, Duse? Why would Jax consider the Path of Sorrow?"

Duse carefully placed the white flower back on his desk. When he turned to face Bale, his face was as hard as granite and his eyes were twin beams of icy light. "He had something to do with this, Bale. Surely you see that."

Bale was not easily surprised, but his expression clearly showed that he was now. "You believe that Jax was involved in Skylar's abduction?"

Duse was the first to break away from his brother's intent gaze. He didn't like to spread his pain to Bale, but his brother was their leader, and he had a right to know. "He's been acting strangely lately. Why did he disappear like that when you asked me about Skylar? And why is he shielding himself from us now?"

"I don't know," Bale said slowly. He sat quietly for a few seconds, considering. When he spoke next, his voice was regretful, but resolute. "Maybe you're right, Duse. Maybe. I don't know why Jax is behaving this way, but it's possible he's behaving against his own will."

Duse looked incredulous. "You can't force a Watcher to do anything he doesn't want to do."

"You can, Duse. Anyone can. All you have to do is control something that the Watcher wants or needs sufficiently enough."

For a moment, the two men stared at each other. After a moment, Duse moved away from where he'd been leaning against his desk. "I'm going to call Sherry. She might be able to help with this."

* * * * *

The next time Skylar awoke, the pain in her head had receded and she could think more clearly. She tried to observe her surroundings calmly. Yes, it was the same small, but luxurious bedroom. She recognized the rolling sensation, more gentle this time. Somehow, incredible as it seemed, she was on a boat. Her hands ran over her body in an unconscious effort to gauge her well-being. Someone had placed a blanket over her, but she still touched her wedding dress at her shoulder. Her fingers flew across the beautiful ring that Duse had given her.

Skylar grappled for her last memories. Yes, she could recall exchanging vows with Duse, the intensity of his light blue eyes on her. She remembered talking to guests and watching Duse while he thoughtfully chewed a bite of their wedding cake, then suddenly met her gaze and responded with a grin. It had been one of the first things that he'd ever truly eaten in his long life. The thought brought the burn of tears to Skylar's eyes. Duse wasn't here. He had nothing to do with her being here. Her mate wouldn't have left her like this, disoriented and sick. Someone else had brought her here, and whoever that person was, they certainly didn't have her best interests in mind. Jax? Had Jax done this to her?

The thought caused her hand to come up and touch her abdomen in panic. She sat up from the bed and stood cautiously. She hated the slight rolling motion beneath her feet. The view outside the small windows, curtained in dark blue, did nothing to bring her ease. There was only gray, choppy water as far as her eye could see. Skylar guessed it was Lake Michigan, but she couldn't be sure. She'd never been much for boating, as she got seasick very easily. Even the thought brought an awareness of rising nausea.

Skylar began to pound angrily on the door to the room when she realized it was locked. "Jax? Let me out of here. Why is this door locked?"

In a matter of seconds, the door swung inward. The narrow hallway looked inadequate to hold a man of Jax's dimensions. Skylar barely noticed the tension and concern on her brother-in-law's face. "I'm going to be sick again. After that, you better be prepared to tell me what the hell is going on, Jax Ammadon," she said shakily. Skylar didn't wait for Jax to respond, but staggered out into the hallway in the general direction that she recalled from her hazy recollections of being carried there earlier. She would have preferred if Jax would have left her alone, but if he wanted to stand there and watch her throw up, so be it. She didn't have energy to spend on niceties.

After she was done, she flushed the toilet and put her hands on the small pedestal sink before she stood. She looked ghastly in the small mirror over the sink. Her hair was wild and her face extremely pale. Her large eyes were watery and tearing, but not from emotion. Skylar noticed that her eyes, nose, and mouth were rimmed with red, the skin inflamed and tender. She touched it briefly.

Jax watched Skylar from the doorway. He was worried she was going to fall and hurt herself. She seemed to have no balance whatsoever. He forced himself to stay calm when she noticed the inflammation from the chloroform that had been held to her face by Ockley and glanced back at him in the mirror with hurt and confusion.

"You did this to me?" she asked in wonderment. "Why?"

"I didn't do that, Skylar," Jax defended himself automatically. He closed his eyes briefly in self-recrimination. "At least, not directly."

Skylar kept her eyes on him warily as she turned on the tap and splashed her face with the cool water. "Is this water safe to drink?" she asked hoarsely. Her throat felt raw, perhaps from vomiting so much.

Jax nodded, pointing to a glass by the sink. Skylar filled it, first rinsed her mouth of her sickness, and then drank deeply. She set the glass down on the sink with a shaky hand, but when she spoke, her words were firm. "If I lose my baby because of this, I'll find a way to make you pay, Jax."

For a few seconds, she held her brother-in-law's gaze in the mirror. At first, Skylar thought Jax hadn't reacted at all to her words, but then she recognized the glaze of shock over his expression. Skylar heard footsteps in the hallway, and another masculine voice. "What did she say, Jax?"

"Nothing," Jax said, not breaking Skylar's gaze. "She was asking if she could have some privacy in the bathroom so that she could get cleaned up."

"Well, I suppose we could manage that. Not much chance of her escaping from here, huh?"

Skylar's eyes widened in shock when she saw Rolland Ockley in the reflection of the bathroom mirror. "Rolland?" she accused angrily as she spun around. "What the hell do you think you're doing? Get me off this damned boat and let me go back to the penthouse." A thought struck her. "Sally isn't here, is she?"

Rolland looked amused. "Sally? Of course not. She was just a convenient way for me to get into Duse's penthouse. We've been trying to come up with a way for me to enter Duse's stronghold for weeks, but he's set too many shields against unwanted visitors. It was very hospitable of you to plan a wedding and invite me personally inside, though."

Skylar's eyes skipped to Jax in increasing disillusionment when Rolland said "we've", clearly referring to Jax. "Why would you want to abduct me?"

Jax opened his mouth to reply, but Rolland spoke for him. He smirked as he spoke, his chest swelling with newfound confidence. "It's not you that I wanted, Skylar, or at least...that wasn't how it started out," Rolland said as his gaze lowered to the neckline of her dress. "You were to belong to Jax. And of course, the bait so that I can get control of your lover...husband, I should say, although I don't think Duse is ever going to get the chance to fill that role." Rolland laughed, as though it were all really a good joke. "Now, it seems that I'm the only one out of the three of us that can even touch you! The spoils to the victor, hey, Jax? Now, I can have you and Duse's knowledge and power in order to complete my research. As you can see, Jax isn't too happy about it, but I really came out the winner when Duse Ammadon set that protective spell on you, Skylar." Rolland's gaze on Skylar went beyond intense, bordering on greedy. He seemed to be feeding on her increasing disgust and fear. "Did you ever know that Jax and I saw that little spell being cast, Skylar? In the potting room of your nursery? I have to tell you, that witnessing that bit of magic has caused me quite a few sleepless nights. I can't tell you how much I've looked forward to having you here, Skylar." His dark brown eyes gleamed eerily.

Skylar didn't want to acknowledge what she thought he was insinuating. She clearly felt now what she'd only vaguely sensed upon first meeting Rolland. The energy surging in his aura reminded her of a sick, rabid dog. Only now, it was as if the disease had amplified and spread. Surely he was completely mad. Her gaze darted again to Jax. She didn't want to believe that Duse's brother had been a part of this, but there he was. Jax wasn't trying to defend himself. Yet there was something in the way that he was holding himself so stiffly that suggested there was more to the story.

"What do you mean there are three of you?" Skylar murmured. She needed to know fully what she was up against here.

"Asmoday is one of our number!" Rolland looked perplexed and a little hurt when Jax gave him a dark look of disgust. Jax had been so cooperative lately. "What, Jax? What difference does it make if she knows? Besides, he'll do what he can to break Bale's spell. Wouldn't you like that, Jax?" Rolland asked obsequiously.

Jax wouldn't meet Skylar's eyes when he spoke, but there was genuine power and command rang in his deep voice when he spoke to Rolland. "Just remember the

covenant, Magician. You will not touch Skylar in lust or violence until it can be proven by Day that there is no way that I can have her. You agreed."

Rolland almost pouted as his eyes raked over Skylar. "I remember. But surely Day won't be able to do anything. Bale is very powerful, isn't he?" Rolland asked, as though he were soothing himself. "Day says that they are guarding him heavily, but he will be able to slip away for a few moments, perhaps tomorrow."

Skylar tried to focus on her anger so she wouldn't have to experience her fear. If she hadn't just heard Jax's words with her own ears, she would have never believed this of him. "Asmoday?" she asked sharply. She spoke directly to Jax, ignoring Rolland Ockley. "You have put yourself in league with the man who murdered your brother's wife and mate in order to betray Duse?"

Jax forced himself to meet his accuser's eyes. Skylar would never know it, but it was the most painful, difficult thing that he'd ever done in his life. Her beautiful eyes cut at him, sliced through the very core of his spirit, left him gashed and bleeding. He knew he would never be the same after looking into Skylar's disbelieving gaze. His existence still served a purpose—to keep her as safe as possible. If he didn't believe it, he would have taken the Path of Sorrow now, with no further hesitation.

Her eyes would be burned indelibly in his memory. There would never be any escaping them.

"I did, Skylar," he said quietly.

Skylar continued to pin him with her gaze. She sensed so much regret and sadness emanating from Jax that she almost felt sorry for him. Almost. Somehow, he'd made a decision along the line to betray Duse. He may regret his choice now, but Skylar felt too overwhelmed to consider forgiving him. She suddenly wanted nothing more than to be away from both of these men. The rolling motion of the boat was making her nauseated again, and part of her wanted to fall on her knees and break into tears.

Skylar broke eye contact with Jax. "I...I want to be left alone in here to clean up."

Jax continued to study her, but he nodded. "Here are some things for you to change into," he said gruffly. He pointed with his hand, and Skylar noticed some clothing and a towel folded on a small table in the bathroom. They hadn't been there just a moment before, she was sure. Jax didn't move away for a moment, even though Rolland Ockley vacated the doorway. Skylar's eyes flicked back to Jax warily. "Skylar, do you get seasick?"

She paused for a moment, but then nodded.

Jax looked relieved. "I'm glad it's that. Not that I want you to be sick. I was just worried it was still the effects of the chloroform." He hesitated, wanting to tell her that he hadn't known what Rolland Ockley would do. He had been preoccupied for the past several weeks in keeping the magician happy with treasure and money, even things like the yacht they were on. Jax had been shocked to see him in the penthouse today.

When Skylar told him that she was pregnant—with a Watcher child, his own nephew—Jax had felt like he'd been kicked in the stomach while fully corporeal.

"Skylar," he said in a whisper after flicking his eyes down the hallway. "Don't tell anyone else about the baby." He hesitated. "In truth, any Watcher would sacrifice himself to the magician for the child's safety. It's a powerful weapon for Duse's enemies to have."

Skylar hated to see the look on Jax's expression, but she forced herself to look him in the eye. "Just like I am, right, Jax?" She shut the door resolutely in the face that reminded her too poignantly of Duse's, even though it was infinitely more vulnerable and lost.

Chapter Thirteen

Force escorted out the two Chicago cops who had responded to Duse's call. Sherry Morton had sat in while Duse briefed the cops on what had happened on the day of his wedding. She'd been taking notes in a small notebook, but now that the cops were gone, she had a few questions of her own for her boss.

"Duse, can you give me a little more description of what Skylar was wearing today?"

"I already said. She was still wearing her wedding dress with some ivory-colored sandals," Duse said with a distracted shrug.

She glanced over at Ron and Ainge, who had also sat in while the police were briefed so that everyone could be in on the hunt for Skylar. Sherry knew that Duse sent one of his men with Skylar everywhere she went. "Do any of you guys know where she got her wedding clothes from?"

Ainge nodded. "Sure, Sherry. She got everything at Barney's over on Oak Street. Everything but the shoes, that is. I think she got those when she was with Duse, right, Duse?"

"Where did she get the shoes from?"

Duse's cold mask broke for a second. "For Christ's sake, Sherry! How important can that be?" he growled out angrily.

Sherry appeared nonplussed. "No offense, Duse, but you're a guy. Which is fine and all, but the chances are, half the people who might have inadvertently seen Skylar between when she was snatched from here and wherever the kidnapper took her are women. Now, Skylar's in the perfect outfit to get noticed, right? Everyone notices a bride. So the guy is probably going to try and cover her with something, a coat or a jacket. But he can't cover the shoes."

Duse tried to hide his emotion as Sherry painted such a clear picture of Skylar being abducted by someone. Sherry couldn't have known it, but she was bringing up a memory that was particularly difficult at a time like this. Duse's emotions surged uncomfortably as he thought of Skylar and him shopping for items for their wedding at Neiman Marcus earlier in the week. He thought of the way Skylar had looked at him, admiring and hungry as he was fitted for the suit he wore for their wedding today. His eyes moistened when he thought of the sight of Skylar when she tried on the singularly sexy, high-heeled sandals he'd picked out for her. She'd been casually dressed in shorts and a t-shirt. She'd looked gorgeous when she put on those heels. Duse hadn't appreciated that he wasn't the only male in that portion of Neiman Marcus who had noticed, either. He recalled the way Skylar had laughed when he'd insisted they were getting them, the way she'd pulled the box out of his hand when she'd seen the price of

the shoes. But he'd won out, in the end, and those were the shoes she'd been wearing today.

The shoes she'd been wearing when some asshole took her from him by force.

"Neiman's. We got them at Neiman Marcus," he eventually muttered stoically.

Sherry gave him a warm smile. "Perfect. Rare merchandise and sky-high prices. You think you would recognize those shoes if you saw them again, Ainge?" Sherry asked with forced casualness.

Ainge glanced at Duse uncomfortably. "I'd recognize them," he said after clearing his throat.

Sherry nodded. "Great. You come with me to Neiman's and we'll get ourselves another pair of those. You don't mind, do you, Duse?" Sherry asked briskly as both she and Ainge stood.

"Sure," Duse said, only granting half his attention.

"One other thing before we go, Duse. I know you mentioned that guy, Rolland Ockley, to the police. You think he was the one who took her, don't you?" she asked with quiet intensity.

Duse stared at Sherry, his eyes giving nothing away. "I don't know for sure, Sherry. I know that he's a stranger to me and that I have no reason to trust him. I got the impression from something Skylar said once that he gives her the creeps. Skylar is amazingly adept when it comes to reading other people. You know that nobody usually enters this penthouse unless I'm very familiar with them. At least I have some acquaintance with Sally, and I don't think she would have done anything to hurt Skylar, but I intend to look into it, still. There's the minister, too. But yeah, I'm betting on Ockley. You also should know that my brother Jax went missing at the same time that Skylar did." He noticed Ainge shift uncomfortably and Ron and Force glanced at each other uneasily. Duse waited until Force came back into the room. "Do any of you know what's going on with Jax or know where he is?"

Ainge hesitated. "He hasn't been around a lot lately. And when he is, he's pretty moody." His other knights nodded their head.

"I don't know if it means anything or not, Duse," Force began. He continued when Duse nodded his head. "But Jax mentioned that he'd gone to see Batos recently. I don't know what for, or anything, I just remember thinking that something must really be up with him for him to make a point of going to see Batos."

"Who's Batos?" Sherry asked.

"He's a—relative of ours. Someone who is very wise and revered by us," Bale said finally. "It would seem that Jax was in some sort of trouble, and felt like he couldn't talk to his friends, Duse or myself."

"Uh-huh," Sherry said as she jotted something down in her notebook. "Duse, if you were your enemy, where would you take Skylar?"

"I don't think they could have taken her that far. I'm assuming that they knocked her out in some way to get her out of here with relative ease. Whoever took her would want to have her wherever they were planning on keeping her by the time she awoke. I would guess they have her somewhere on Lake Michigan."

Sherry looked up sharply from her notebook. "Why would you think that, Duse?"

Duse wasn't looking directly at her, but she could tell that his expression was hard. "You asked me where I would take Skylar if I was my enemy. I'm telling you. She's probably out on the lake somewhere. If my enemy was worth anything, he would know that I don't like the water."

Sherry opened her mouth to ask Duse more, but when she noticed the set of his mouth and the sharp look in his eyes when he suddenly made eye contact, she changed course. "Okay. So we've got someone who takes Skylar from here, wants to get her locked away tight as quickly as possible, and wants to get her out on the water." She closed her eyes and started to count the harbors that were within miles of Duse's north side penthouse. She stood briskly.

"Okay, Ainge. First we go to Neiman Marcus, and then we start trolling the harbors. This could be tough; it's the high season for boating. We'll start with Belmont first, and then move south. Do any of you other guys want to start at Burnham harbor and start moving north?" Force and Ron nodded and stood. "Good. Have you guys got a cell phone?" She didn't notice Force's and Ron's dubious glance at each other. Watchers didn't need cell phones when they could easily communicate through telepathy. Ainge just shook his head slightly, as if to insinuate that they needn't answer. He was getting to know Sherry pretty well, and he could tell she was too wound up to notice.

"Duse, we're going to find your wife. Don't worry, now." Sherry had gotten to know Skylar Ammadon and taken a genuine liking to her. What's more, she liked the way Skylar made her boss seem so much more approachable and...human. If there was truth in that, though, Sherry realized there was truth in the opposite, too. Whoever dared to defy Duse by taking Skylar away from him was bringing out his more chilling aspects.

When the phone on Duse's desk rang, none of them seemed to pay much attention except Duse. Sherry, Ainge, Force and Ron were on their way out the door, but Duse stopped them abruptly. "Wait a second," Duse said abruptly. "This could be what I've been waiting for."

Duse picked up the phone, but didn't bother to offer a greeting so sure was he that the call was from Skylar's captors. He affirmed that the caller was, indeed, talking to Duse Ammadon. Before the male on the other end could say anything further, Duse said, "I'm not going to listen to you say another word, Ockley, until you say that you're about to put my wife on the phone so that I can hear for myself that she's all right."

Rolland Ockley paused uncertainly as he gazed out on the gray waters of Lake Michigan. He was standing on the deck of the small yacht that Jax's money had enabled

him to buy, staring in the general direction of Chicago. He could just make out the outline of the John Hancock building far in the distance. Duse's words and his casual use of his name punctured his puffed-up pride. Rolland didn't know why it hadn't struck him before that he should be afraid. It hit him hard that fear is exactly what he should be experiencing when he heard the ice and control in Duse Ammadon's voice. "She's just fine, Duse. You have nothing to—"

Duse firmly clicked the end button on the phone, disconnecting Ockley. "It's Rolland Ockley, all right. Ron, start doing some research on this guy. See if you can't get a hold of a picture of him for Sherry and the police. He's a medical researcher at the University of Chicago. Get all of his credit card transactions and phone records, too, for say the past three months."

"Sure thing, Duse," Ron said and left the room quickly.

"What did he say?" Bale asked quietly.

"Nothing worthwhile. Let's see if this guy has a single working neural pathway left," Duse muttered as he stared at the phone. A muscle twitched in his face. Everyone was quiet and tense with expectation. When the phone rang, Duse waited for three rings before picking it up.

"Skylar?"

"No, it's Ockley. Listen—"

Duse clicked the end button again. Another uncomfortable silence ensued, this one more extended than the last. Finally, the phone range again and Duse picked it up before the first ring had completed. Sherry realized that somehow, her boss had intuited that Skylar was going to be on the other end this time.

"Skylar?"

"It's me, Duse. Are you okay?" Skylar asked.

Duse's eyes closed briefly as he gave profound thanks at hearing the sound of her voice. "I'm fine, babe. Are you all right?"

"I guess so," Duse heard her say shakily. "I'm not hurt or anything. Um, Duse, he's saying that I have to give him the phone now. I love you."

Duse tensed. "Wait, Skylar. Listen to me. Concentrate on what we made together last Monday night. Do it as much as you can—"

"Satisfied?" Rolland said into the phone, interrupting Duse's communication. "I told you she was fine."

"As far as I'm concerned, you're already a dead man, Ockley. But if you harm her in any way, you're going to make your dying much more extended and unpleasant," Duse breathed out with so much eerie calm, Sherry felt a shiver run down her back. She definitely wouldn't want to be in Ockley's shoes.

Rolland's fear increased at Duse's threat, but so did his anger. This guy was worse than his brother, Jax. A real bully. But who pulled the strings while Jax danced at the ends now? And Duse Ammadon was going to be dancing the same jig as his brother in

a few days. "If you dare to threaten me again, Duse Ammadon, I'll go out of my way to hurt your little wife, and I'll make sure that you hear it while I do. I'll bet she regrets not having her honeymoon. If you keep up this macho attitude, I'll be happy to stand in for you to service the blushing bride. I'll bet you'd love to hear that, right? And you would have no one but yourself to blame. You haven't forgotten that I'm not affected by your spell, have you, Duse? Maybe you just need to remember who's in control, here."

Duse blanched at the man's words, but his voice belied nothing. "Get to it, Ockley. You obviously want something from me. What is it?"

"Very well. I'm glad you can be reasonable, if need be. By now, you must have realized that your brother Jax is my accomplice. In fact, he's more than my accomplice, he's my familiar, and he does whatever I order him to do. Just as you will, Duse. I plan to have a little summoning ceremony here tomorrow during the full moon. It will be you that I summon, and you had better comply. If you don't, I can't be held responsible for the fate of your wife. At the very least, I can assure you that you'll never see her again. Your brother has been very cooperative in giving me your secret symbols and name. Yet, I understand that even with these things, I can't conjure you without your explicit consent. Tell me now that you consent, Ammdusias Ammadon."

Duse gritted his teeth. This idiot human couldn't know what it was doing to him to here his true name spoken by someone who not only didn't care for him, but was his established enemy. Or perhaps Ockley did know, and did it just to egg him on. "If I consent, how do I know that you'll release Skylar safely?" He turned his desk chair toward the wall, not wanting the others in the room see him so vulnerable.

"Because, when I summon you and you appear, there will a covenant between us. I am going to give up your wife in order to have control over you. You're going to sacrifice your freedom in order to gain your wife's safety. You know as well as I do that both parties must give up something in order to gain something. It's the checks and balances system of the universe. If I harm Skylar, or refuse to let her go free once you appear before me, then you are automatically freed from the pact. And as tempting as your wife is, I have such big plans for you, Duse. Not even she can lure me away from being the one who holds the key to immortality. That's what you'll give me, Duse."

Duse lowered his voice so that Sherry Morton couldn't hear it from where she stood across the room. "I agree to allow you to attempt to summon me with your ritual in return for the emotional and physical well-being of my wife. From this moment forward, you will not touch her unless it is to assist her if she is in need of it. The moment that I appear before you, you will order my brother Jax to return Skylar with all haste and safety to my brother Bale. The terms of the pact will not be valid if she is harmed in any way, or if you delay for even seconds in turning her over to Bale. When my brother Bale informs me in his own words that Skylar and Jax are safely with him, then you will release Jax from his bond to serve you. The covenant will be completed. Only then will I do your bidding. These are my terms," Duse said succinctly.

"But that's not what—" Rolland began, but Duse cut him off in a soft, compelling voice.

"Agree to it, Ockley. I have more power than you can imagine, and all of it will be at your disposal."

Rolland's mouth sagged, his protests falling away forgotten. "I agree, Ammadon," he finally said in a voice that was barely above a whisper. After he'd hung up the phone, he cursed himself for allowing Duse Ammadon to dictate terms. But his pride took over, and he realized that he'd just successfully got one of the most powerful spirits in the world to do his personal bidding. What did that make him—Rolland Ockley—then? By the time Rolland called out to Jax in order to tell him about the conversation with his brother, he was convinced things had gone as smoothly as he'd ever hoped.

Duse hung up the phone, deep in thought despite the four pairs of eyes watching him expectantly. He couldn't help but wonder what Rolland Ockley had sacrificed in order to fulfill his terms of the covenant with Jax.

After everyone but Bale and Duse had left the office, Bale asked quietly, "What did Ockley say, Duse? And what are you planning? Surely you aren't actually considering letting yourself be controlled by that human?"

"I plan to do everything in my power to stop it. But getting Skylar back safe has to be my priority. If I'm unable to find a way to prevent it by tomorrow night, I'll have to stick to my agreement. I said that I would. How could Jax have done this?" Duse asked, his voice suddenly filled with the emotion that he'd previously carefully controlled.

A veil seemed to drop across Bale's features as he leaned back in his chair. He hesitated. How could he best maneuver through this morass of dangerous territory that Jax had created by his betrayal? After a moment of consideration, he decided that honesty was as good a choice as any other when none of the choices seemed very desirable. "I have to admit that I would never have noticed it myself, but once Helen brought it to my attention..."

"What to your attention?" Duse asked intently.

"Helen felt that Jax was in love with Devon. By the time she spoke to me, she'd observed Jax with her on several occasions. She didn't speak of it lightly. Although I disagreed at first—you know how unmated Watchers convince themselves that they're in love with our mates—I changed my mind after watching him. It wasn't that hard to notice once you knew what you were looking for." Bale shook his head when he saw Duse's expression of disbelief and anger. "No, Duse. I don't think he ever went anywhere with his feelings. Not until now, anyway. And as far as I could tell, Devon was completely unaware of how he felt, even during all of her last incarnation. I believe, as did Helen, that she cared greatly for Jax, but only as a sister would love a brother. The love that a woman holds for a mate, she always held exclusively for you."

Duse studied his brother. Bale's face was impassive, but he sensed that there was something troubling him, something he wasn't revealing.

"What, Bale? Tell me all of it."

"I don't know if I'm right, Duse, but...it's possible that Jax knew in some way something that I have sensed before." Bale paused, clearly hesitant. He needed Duse to be as tolerant and nonjudgmental as possible in regard to Jax's crime. Jax had already caused enough of a rip in the fabric of their family without Duse tearing it further asunder by harming Jax outside of the law. What he had to say could potentially alienate Jax and Duse further or it could cause Duse to eventually feel some compassion for his brother. Bale knew Duse almost as well as himself. In the end, he opted in favor of Duse's strength and character.

"Duse, if you hadn't found Devon first, I believe that Jax could have also bonded with her. I have sensed before that while your and Jax's strengths and weaknesses are different, your spiritual templates make a very similar pattern."

Duse stared at Bale with amazement and not a little anger. "You're saying that Devon was meant for both Jax and me?"

"No, Duse. Our ways only allow for one bonding to happen, you know that. Skylar is your true mate. I'm only saying that...if you didn't exist, Jax could have bonded with her, as well."

Duse felt like he couldn't draw a breath. This was too much to take on top of everything else. When he spoke, he did so very slowly and carefully, as though he realized the volatile nature of what Bale and he discussed and he wanted to prevent an explosion. "Jax did this in order to get me out of the way? Jax wanted me dead?"

Bale stood quickly. "No! I wasn't saying that, Duse. Jax will have to defend himself at some point, but I don't believe that he wanted you harmed. I told you this information for one reason and one reason only. I'm asking you to do something very difficult, but I'm asking it of you, anyway. If your positions had been changed, and Jax had been the first to find Devon, how would you have felt seeing him with a woman that you not only loved, but who could have easily have been your bonded mate as well as his?" Bale's face gave nothing away, but he watched his brother with a great deal of trepidation. Duse looked frightening at that moment. His eyes blazed with fire.

"You are wrong to suggest this, Bale. If you want to ask me to forgive Jax, you have a right. But you have no right to ask me to have pity for him because he could have been Skylar's rightful mate. You just said it before. Our ways allow for only one true bonding. Skylar is mated to me. Jax is the one who needs to accept that. I do not accept that he has any claim on her because of what you've told me," Duse roared.

Almost without thinking, Bale wove a spell to shield Duse's emotions from those who were close to him. The last thing he needed was for Duse's knights to be aware of their conflict during such a stressful time period. Bale put up a hand, as though to offer peace. "I'm not suggesting that what Jax has done is anything but wrong, Duse. Surely you can see that. He will be punished for what he has done under the full extent of our law. I only mentioned this to you because I hoped that it would improve your understanding of why he did what he did. You know Jax as well as I do. Perhaps neither one of us knew him well enough," Bale sighed, clearly at a loss. "The point is, he can be impulsive and overly confident at times. He has much to answer for. Now, I

have to ask something else of you, brother. I need your pledge that you won't try and harm him in any way and that you'll leave his punishment to Zep, Eli and Dante. Che is as close to Jax as you and I are."

The fire in Duse's eyes still gleamed eerily, but it no longer flamed. "He doesn't deserve so much thoughtfulness on your part, Bale. He's put Skylar in danger. All because of his selfishness." Duse raked back his hair with his fingers. For a moment, his expression was overwhelmed, lost. Duse loved Jax. How could he have done this to him? Or to Skylar, if it was true that he loved her? His mind went to what Bale had just said, but he pushed the explanation aside. He couldn't focus on Jax's feelings. He needed to think exclusively of Skylar's safety. If he could bring Skylar home safely, it would cost him relatively little to offer a pledge not to harm his brother. "I promise you, Bale, that no intentional harm will come to Jax from me." He said after a moment, "I will not promise you the same in regard to the human."

Bale sighed. There was nothing in Watcher law that would prohibit Duse from punishing Rolland Ockley. In fact, since Watchers were supposed to guard humans, there had been instances where Watchers had eliminated dangerous human beings because of their threat to innocents. Bale considered for several moments. He finally nodded once in agreement.

They stared at each other in silence for a moment, feeling the full weight of Jax's actions. "I agree not to harm him, Bale, but I will never forgive him if something happens to Skylar or our baby. Strike that. I'll never be able to forgive him either way," Duse eventually said.

"Skylar is pregnant?"

Duse glanced anxiously at his brother before he began pacing restlessly. "Yes. We were going to tell you after the wedding, but then Ockley took Skylar. You and Che are the only ones that know now."

Bale looked shaken as he fell back into the chair.

"What is it, Bale?"

Bale shook his head sadly. He seemed overwhelmed. "It just makes this so much harder."

Duse paused. "What do you mean?"

Bale's expression seemed to beg understanding from his brother. "Duse, you must know that as the leader of our people, I can't allow you to knowingly put yourself under the human's control. It goes against everything we stand for. There's no telling how much harm a man like that could do if he had powers such as yours at his disposal. He could order you to do things that clearly go against our mandate to protect humans. I can't allow you to become a weapon that could be used against human or Watcher. When Jax is eventually judged for his actions, his crimes against Skylar will be taken into account, but the far greater crime is that he ever allowed himself to be subjugated and allowed his powers to do harm. Under no condition can I allow this to go any further."

The color washed out of Duse's face. "Saving Skylar is the most important thing, Bale."

Bale shook his head, his expression desperate. "No, Duse. It isn't. It can't be. I'm sorry. If you were less emotional about this, even you would realize it. Your agreement with Ockley goes against your prior pledge to the Watcher Council, a pledge that is etched into your very being that says that you will do whatever is necessary to ensure the safety and well-being of both human and Watcher. I don't even think that Ockley's summoning spell could ever be accurately completed because of your former pledge."

For several tension-filled moments, Duse just stared at his brother. He knew he shouldn't feel betrayed by both Jax and Bale. Bale's intentions were at least honorable. No, they were more than honorable, Duse admitted to himself after a moment. The truth made him want to explode with anger and rising panic. Bale was right. He couldn't possibly put his powers at the disposal of a man with no discipline, who perhaps was already becoming mad from the intoxication of Jax's powers.

"I can't believe that a human could have such power over us," Duse said, dazed.

Bale just nodded. "I think the sooner we believe it, the better. I would imagine that Jax never believed it, either. Think back to what Skylar told you about the night she was attacked. Jax obviously had no intention, or even desire, to seduce or harm her, and yet he couldn't stop himself. What if the magician ordered you to do the same, Duse? Skylar's and your essences are merged. Ockley could likely do great harm to her, even once she was under my care. No one has greater access to Skylar than you. Do you want to allow yourself to become a weapon that would bring her harm?"

Duse turned his back on his brother. His mind worked desperately for answers even as he calmed his unruly emotions. When he finally turned around to face Bale, determination had hardened his jaw and gaze.

"I have to divine Skylar's location before tomorrow night and figure out a way to make Ockley believe that his spell has worked so that he'll release Skylar and Jax. Instead of him summoning me, I have every intention to go there under my own full power. Rolland Ockley will see me there and believe that his magic was successful. He will release Jax and Skylar, but instead of having the compliant servant that he expects, he's just going to have one pissed-off and vengeful Watcher on his hands. I can't wait to cure that son of a bitch of his infatuation with black magic."

Bale relaxed a little when he realized that while Duse was still bitterly angry, he had leashed his rage to be used for a purpose.

"Tell me what you're planning, Duse, and I will do whatever is in my power to help you."

Skylar stood up from her bed wearily. She understood what Duse had meant about concentrating on what they'd made last Monday. He'd meant their baby. She didn't know why he wanted her to do it, but Duse wouldn't have said it without reason. For the past three hours, she'd lay curled up on the narrow bed concentrating all of her

attention on the tiny group of cells that multiplied in her womb by the second. After a while, she began to have a shadow of understanding of what Duse had meant.

Something was prohibiting her from sensing him. Probably some kind of shield placed by Ockley or Jax. Hadn't Jax placed a shield around them on the day at the lakefront? Skylar understood completely why Duse had been so angry about that now. But why had he eventually been able to sense her then, when now they seemed to be utterly severed from one another? Skylar wished she had asked more questions that day.

As she became more and more aware of the dividing cells in her womb, however, assurance and hope slowly entered into her consciousness. She felt assured because until Duse had made the suggestion, Skylar had no way of knowing if a baby still grew within her. She recalled what Rolland Ockley had said about the chloroform, how terrified she had been at the possibility of losing the child because of the drug in her system. Currently, Skylar couldn't tell if there were any anomalies in the cells, like Duse probably could, but she could still sense the slowly growing life force that was not hers, and not Duse's, but some combination of both of them, something unique.

She began to realize that while magic had obviously been utilized to sever her and Duse's awareness of one another, no one had considered her and Duse's unique connection to their growing child. Perhaps that was what Duse had meant when he told her to concentrate on the child. Maybe the child could act as a link that told Duse exactly where Skylar was.

She could only hope it was possible.

She cautiously went to the door of her room and checked the knob. The door opened easily. She cast a glance up and down the narrow hallway, but it was empty. Part of her knew that there was nothing she could likely do to contact Duse. Why else would Ockley have allowed her door to remain unlocked? Still, it wouldn't hurt to at least look around a little.

She opened several doors warily, only finding dark, empty bedrooms similar to her own. When she slowly opened the next door down the hallway, she froze when she heard a deep voice issuing a soft, but firm command.

"Relax and take it, Carol. You have fought me on this one time too many! You will take my full cock in your ass tonight. I need the Rush of your strongest orgasm."

Skylar peeked around the door. Her eyes went wide in shock at what she saw. It was the yacht's bar and game room. Jax's girlfriend, Carol, was on top of the billiards table on her knees with her ass raised into the air. Her cheek rested on the felt bottom of the table. The globes of her firm, small breasts trembled as her erect nipples scraped against the fabric. Her face was drawn tight with wild arousal and tension. Skylar noticed that her hands were tied behind her back.

Jax stood behind her and held her pale hips and plump buttocks in his powerful hands. Because of the height of the billiards table, his cock was slanted downward as he

fucked Carol's ass. His muscular arms and back bunched and flexed as he drew her up and down on half of the length his long, thick shaft.

"Relax and let me in all the way, little one. Or you know what you'll get."

Carol's blue eyes opened wide with arousal. "No! Don't spank me!"

Jax's face was impassive as he watched himself move into Carol's wet pussy. Finally, he gave a small smile. Skylar thought she was mistaken, but no...despite his cold features, tears wet his cheeks. It was like seeing a beautiful, marble statue crying. His voice was a rough caress that caused a shiver to course down Skylar's spine.

"You are being a bad slave girl for not letting your master into your little ass. So I believe that a good spanking is exactly what you're going to get."

He gently set Carol fully on her knees, all the while continuing to plunge in and out of her rectum. Carol began to thrash and moan, in what Skylar now recognized as a parody of protest. Instinctively, she knew that Jax was playing to Carol's forbidden fantasies in order to evoke a powerful orgasm from her.

It was the way of the Watchers.

Jax stilled her with one strong hand and, without further warning, landed a stinging slap on a plump ass cheek. Carol moaned with undiluted lust as he continued to spank her until her pale cheeks glowed pink. All the while, Jax took advantage of the distraction and availed himself further of her tight asshole.

"That's right. Now you're taking all of me in your little ass," Jax grunted. "Now, you'll take all of me. Hard."

"Oh, no!"

"Yes. Hold still and take it," he ordered darkly.

Skylar thought dazedly that Carol looked transported by pure desire as Jax began to utterly possess her. Her cheeks—both on her face and her ass—were bright pink. Her eyes were clenched tight in impending orgasm.

"Yes, yes! Harder, Jax, harder!"

She knew she should turn around and leave but the sight of Jax's powerful, muscled body, his slick, enormous cock slanting down, in and out of Carol, all combined with the poignant tears flowing down his face somehow held her prisoner.

"Jax! Oh God!" Carol called out helplessly. Her head snapped back and her eyes opened wide in shocked pleasure. Jax continued to pound into her ass as she convulsed and shivered in an obviously powerful climax. Skylar couldn't breathe as she sensed the woman's subtle energies flow into Jax. Every muscle in his large body flexed impossibly hard as he plunged down one final time, burying himself deep between Carol's round cheeks.

He roared like a wounded beast as he came.

Skylar breathed in raggedly when she realized what she was about to see. But it was too late. She couldn't turn away. Jax's most sacred form grew and pulsed before her. Her mouth dropped open at his inherent power and beauty.

He turned and regarded her steadily. Dark blue flames roared powerfully in the place of his eyes.

Skylar gasped and slammed the door shut. She raced to her room and threw herself down on her bed.

She couldn't put into words why she was so upset. Nausea and a wave of dizziness struck her.

Hours later, when Jax awoke her, her cheeks were wet with tears.

Skylar inhaled the scent of chicken broth. She couldn't decide if the pains in her stomach were from further nausea or hunger.

Jax looked down worriedly at Skylar where she lay curled on the bed. He'd given her a band earlier so that she could tie back her long hair. She was wearing an oversized t-shirt and sweatpants. He hadn't wanted to give her anything to wear that might spark Rolland Ockley's sexual obsession with her. Jax sighed. At least the bargain Duse had made with Ockley presently safeguarded Skylar from that jerk.

Why had Duse bargained for his own safety as well as Skylar's? Jax was entirely confused about that. He felt grateful, but utterly shamed. He wished Duse hadn't done it. It just added to his feelings of guilt and unworthiness. Jax would rather have set his own punishment and sentence.

"I brought you some soup, Skylar. You should try and eat," Jax said gruffly. His already tumultuous emotions frothed even more when he saw how small and vulnerable she looked.

"Did Rolland tell you what Duse said on the phone?" Skylar asked without sitting up. She couldn't meet his gaze. What had happened earlier—what she'd seen earlier—seemed like an unreal dream. Still, she knew it wasn't. She was beyond humiliated, but she needed all the information she could get from Jax in order to help Duse. She didn't protest when he sat down cautiously at the end of the bed, but she moved her feet away from him warily. Skylar felt the bed give some at his weight and wondered at it. According to Duse, it took a great deal of strength for an unmated Watcher to make himself corporeal. Yet, if the weight she sensed at the end of the bed was any indication, Jax was corporeal right now. She moved restlessly beneath his cold, steady gaze.

"Duse agreed to allow Ockley to summon his spirit tomorrow night in exchange for the release of both of us," Jax said quietly.

Skylar stilled. "What do you mean release both of us? I thought you were here of your own free will."

Jax swallowed with difficulty. "It's true that I agreed to let the magician summon me. I didn't believe that he would be able to command me to his will. I was very foolish, Skylar. Because of what I did, he's been able to force me to do things that I didn't want to do. Things that I hated to do."

Skylar sat up on her elbow. "But that means he'll be able to do the same with Duse!"

"In theory, yes."

"Jax, tell me what you're talking about," Skylar insisted.

"I've been working extremely hard to build up enough energy to resist Ockley. The information that he has in regard to Duse's secret *sigil* is incorrect. He won't be able to summon Duse with it."

Hope flashed into Skylar's eyes. "That's good, right?"

Jax shrugged impassively. "It will only buy us a little time, Skylar. Duse will have to come up with something on his own to save you. I'm not sure how much more I can do."

Skylar heard the muted anguish in Jax's voice. She tried to harden her heart against him. He had put Duse, their child and herself in danger. But her attempts to lock him out of her heart failed. Skylar could sense his torment, despite the fact that he was trying to protect her from it. It seemed too immense for him to adequately disguise.

"Why, Jax?" she whispered abruptly. "Why did you do this to Duse and me?"

Jax stared past her. His jaw was hard, but Skylar saw the moistness in his light blue eyes. "You don't know, Skylar?" he finally asked unevenly.

Skylar shook her head. But when Jax shifted his gaze onto her, understanding began to slide over her awareness. It was as if he'd opened his soul briefly to her, and she saw all of him through the window of his eyes.

"I have always loved you, Skylar, since I first saw you," Jax said, his voice breaking. He closed his eyes briefly, afraid to see what was in Skylar's expression. He feared her condemnation, or even worse, her pity. When he opened his eyes and registered what was in her gaze, a fully actualized tear fell down his cheek. There was only sadness in her depthless eyes.

"Jax, don't you know how much I love Duse? He's everything to me," Skylar finally said softly.

He closed his eyes and nodded. Skylar waited while he gathered himself. "I know you can never forgive me for doing what I did. But please believe me when I say that although I was very stupid, I never meant any harm to come to you or Duse. Once I was enslaved to Ockley, I knew how monumentally stupid I'd been." He breathed in harshly between clenched teeth. "Never, never again will I allow myself to be manipulated like that. I was foolish enough to believe that it wasn't possible to be commanded by a human. It's not commonly known among Watchers, although Batos didn't seem completely surprised when I confessed to him. Still, there's no excuse for what I did. Ever since that night that Ockley forced me to hurt you..." Jax stopped. His face had gone utterly rigid and white.

Tears ran freely down Skylar's face. She didn't speak as she watched Jax struggle. There was nothing she could say, nothing she could offer to alleviate his guilt and grief. After several minutes, Jax brought himself under control.

"I realize that I can't take back what I've done." Jax's voice was low and resolute. A spark of alarm went off within Skylar at the resignation in his voice.

"Jax, what are you planning to do?" Skylar said slowly, remembering his tears while he made love to Carol, recognizing his strong will to action, but not able to understand exactly what it was he intended to do.

Jax's eyes met hers. "I will do everything I can to ensure your safety, Skylar."

"That's not what I meant," Skylar said warily. "You wouldn't do anything to harm yourself, would you?" She reached out with her feelings to cautiously probe his essence. But he had successfully managed to block his emotions from her. When she looked into his eyes searchingly, she saw only tenderness. "Promise me you won't hurt yourself, Jax." When she saw his hesitation, she suddenly sat up on the bed and pointed her finger at him accusingly. "No! I do not accept that! You're the one who has wronged me. I have the right to ask this of you. Watchers have laws. You'll allow yourself to be judged by them. You've already taken enough into your own hands, Jax. Swear to me that if we get out of this, you won't take your punishment into your own hands. Swear it to me, Jax! You owe me that, and I ask it of you, here and now!"

Jax's mouth fell open in genuine disbelief. He'd never known she could be so fierce. "I swear it," he said without a second thought. He would do anything in his power that she asked of him, even this, as abhorrent as the idea was of continuing to live with the burden of his guilt, and knowing that Skylar thought so poorly of him. "I will accept the punishment of a Watcher court if Duse doesn't kill me first," he said.

Skylar's hand lowered to the bed shakily. "He won't kill you. You're his brother."

"And you're his bonded mate," Jax countered calmly. Skylar stilled in horror, recognizing that Jax was saying that this was reason enough for Duse to kill him, brother or not.

Chapter Fourteen

Late into the night and into the morning, Skylar huddled alone in the darkness. Fatigue assailed her and her breasts ached painfully for Duse. She had been doing what Duse asked of her, concentrating on their child growing in her womb. She was afraid to fall asleep again, ashamed that she had wasted precious time when she had done so earlier.

Skylar wasn't sure if she was helping Duse or not, but she knew that focusing on the miniscule cluster of cells in her womb helped her. It made her feel connected to Duse, even though she knew it was probably just wishful thinking. She thought of the night when their essences had joined, and with the guidance of Duse's powerful will, their child had been conceived. Skylar still couldn't believe it. It had been a genuine miracle. She almost smiled as she thought about how Duse would respond to her thought.

It wasn't a miracle, Skylar. It's just our way.

Skylar muffled a shout of surprise in her throat and stilled her body with a force of will. There was only silence. *Duse*? she queried tentatively. She wondered if the sound of his voice, which seemed to vibrate through her heart chakra rather than mentally, as it usually did when Duse communicated telepathically, was entirely her imagination. She'd been so filled with thoughts of their baby and of him.

No, Skylar. It's not your imagination. I'm communicating with you through our mutual attachment to our child. Are you all right? Duse asked in a rush.

Skylar nodded her head even as tears leaked through her eyelids. She could suddenly sense him, although his essence was muted, as if he had been painted in watercolor when Duse's personality called for bold oils. I'm all right, Duse. Can you hear me? And then, before she could control herself, Duse, is our baby okay? Skylar could almost sense his ensuing disquiet at her request, then his stillness and utter concentration. She waited anxiously.

Yes, Skylar. He's fine.

Skylar pressed her face into her pillow to stifle of surge of emotion that rose in her throat.

Duse experienced Skylar's intense flood of relief. His head fell back against the desk chair where he was sitting. He'd been there for half of the night, trying to weave the intricate, complex web of magic that would allow him to contact the life force of his growing son. Bale was sitting nearby blending his strength with Duse's to produce the inestimable amount of energy that was required for such a task. Finding every single chromosomal anomaly in every organism at the Lincoln Park Zoo and duly recording it would have been a happy-go-lucky leisure pastime in comparison with this. But even

when he had finally been able to wield this powerful and precise piece of magic, he would have failed to communicate with Skylar if he hadn't sensed her presence there, in the same place where he focused. He wanted to reassure her, ask her why she was so concerned about their child, but he was worried he wouldn't have time.

Babe, I'm sorry, I don't know how much time I have. Can you tell me anything about where you are?

I don't know, Duse. I was really out of it when Rolland brought me here. I'm in a boat out in the water.

What does the boat look like? Does it have any name or markings on it?

God, Duse...I don't know. It seems pretty large...

Skylar sounded panicked at her ignorance. Duse had to calm his spirit to prevent himself from wasting important energy and time in soothing her. It's okay, Skylar. Don't worry about that. Is there a window where you're being kept? He closed his eyes, acknowledging her assent. Duse hated how distant she seemed. He felt as though he was communicating with her through the childhood game of cans and strings, and even then, she was far more distant than a few yards away in the schoolyard. Good. Go there now and look out, babe.

Skylar stood and looked out her little window, despite her rising nausea. But even with her lamp extinguished, there was only blackness outside the window. She tried her best to make something out, but her stomach only threatened to respond to her newfound defiance by forcing her to vomit.

Why do you feel sick, Skylar?

I've always been seasick, Skylar said, not wanting to focus on something so unimportant when Duse seemed so desperate as to whether their communication would last. She utilized her concentration and strength to communicate to him what she saw in front of her, as useless as it seemed. I'm sorry...I can't see anything out the window.

It's okay, Skylar. I'm not looking for anything visually. For a moment, Skylar heard nothing from him, but she sensed a Will so powerful, it stunned her, despite everything she knew about Duse. After a moment, she felt his presence again. Or perhaps it was more correct to say, that she sensed Duse transfer his intelligence more into something she could comprehend. Good. This is good, babe. Do you know what a pentagram is?

Skylar thought for sure that she hadn't understood him. A pentagram?

Yes, Skylar. Duse concentrated and carefully showed her what he meant. First, he formed an upside-down V, then slanted up to the left, went straight across and slanted down toward the left where the line touched where he had originally started. A star. You used to make them when you were a girl, do you remember, babe?

Skylar nodded to the affirmative, and Duse vaguely sensed it. Okay, now listen closely, Skylar. If you look outside your window, you will see one of these pentagrams. This is part of Ockley's magic to keep me away. You can't see it with your eyes, Skylar. But you have the ability to see it. You have to be able to do this, Skylar, because you have to dissipate it, or I won't be able to enter.

Genuine fear entered Skylar's awareness for the first time since Duse had contacted her. She had no idea what he meant. Her eyes searched around the window desperately, but there was nothing. Just blackness. *I don't know what you mean, Duse. There's nothing.* "I'm afraid", she wanted to add, but had the courage to keep from his awareness.

Skylar, listen to me. Do you remember, the day when I first met you in your current incarnation? How you asked me how I could maneuver through traffic, and I told you with so much confidence that you could likely do the same? This is the same. I just haven't had time to tell you these things...we've been too preoccupied with other stuff. I'm sorry, babe. Duse cursed himself, even though Bale was fully aware of him at that moment. Instead of making love to her so much, he should have been teaching her something about how powerful she had the potential to become.

Skylar took a deep, determined breath. Don't apologize, Duse. Just tell me what to do, and I'll believe you and try. God, I want to be with you so much.

Duse's eyes scrunched together in a paroxysm of pain. He felt Bale's presence bracing him. Skylar, you have the ability to do this. You understand about your subtle bodies. Concentrate at the subtlest of all, at the intersection of your third eye, he said, referring to the chakra point of energy on her forehead.

Skylar did as Duse directed. At first, she sensed nothing. After several moments, a flash of light caught her attention. I hope it's not just my imagination, Duse. But, yes I see some lighted lines around the window. I can't tell if it's a star...a pentagram.

No, it's not your imagination, Duse assured her. It's part of Rolland Ockley's magic. As soon as we stop communicating, you need to try and dissipate that particular pentagram, Skylar. It will respond to your Will and imagination. If you can't make it disappear, envision it weakening. That will help me, too.

His words reminded Skylar of what Jax had told her about his agreement to be summoned by Rolland if she and Jax were released. Duse, Jax told me what you agreed to with Rolland. Don't put yourself under his control. Please. You wouldn't believe the degree of Jax's misery for allowing it to happen. Duse, Jax also told me that the sigil he provided Rolland wasn't correct. He said it would only stall things. He has been building up his energy against Rolland, using it to will himself to defy him. But as soon as Rolland knows that the summoning spell doesn't work, he will compel Jax further to give him the correct information. I believe him, Duse. She experienced his thoughtfulness at her words.

If what he says is true, that could be very helpful to me. How do you know you can trust him, Skylar? He has betrayed me and endangered you.

Duse, he regrets what he's done. He also has promised to stand before a Watcher court and be judged for his actions. Please, don't hurt him, Duse.

Duse swallowed, trying to rid himself of the sudden surge of bitterness. He couldn't recall experiencing jealousy ever before in his long existence, but he currently recognized that emotion for what it was. It frightened him a little, feeling something so powerful and potentially...evil. He sensed Bale's awareness of it, and his resulting

sadness. His heart seemed to spasm in his chest. Watchers were changing in more ways than he could name. All because of Asmoday.

He didn't know if Skylar read his mind, but suddenly she said, There's something else you should know, Duse. Rolland told me that Asmoday has collaborated with him and Jax. He said that Day would try and come here, and try to break Bale's spell of protection over me. I think that...

What, Skylar? Duse asked sharply.

I think that Asmoday told Rolland he would try and break the spell so that Rolland could complete his pact with Jax. Jax is going along with it, in order to keep Rolland at bay. The thing is, Duse, I don't understand why Asmoday is doing all these things for Rolland. It doesn't make sense.

Duse and Bale communicated with lightning quickness. It made sense to both of them. Rolland Ockley, that foolish human, had been making pacts with Asmoday. While one Watcher could not compel another, they could compel human beings. And Rolland Ockley had found a way to command a Watcher. It all boiled down to who held the ultimate pair of puppet strings. Asmoday had been plotting all along for those puppet strings to be in his hands, and for Duse Ammadon to be dangling at the other end with Rolland Ockley as the intermediary.

When Duse spoke again to Skylar, his voice sounded resolute. Skylar, I don't want you to worry any more about Asmoday. The spell will continue to protect you from Watchers, and Rolland Ockley won't touch you as long as he believes that doing otherwise will cause his magic to fail. I can't keep talking to you in this way, babe. It's taking a lot of energy from Bale and me to keep the pinpoint of precision required. I will come there as soon as I can. It's imperative that Ockley believe that he has been successful in summoning me. When he gives you the opportunity to leave with Jax, you must take it, Skylar. Promise me.

I don't want to leave if you're here with him, Duse. She suddenly felt Duse's fear surge strongly through their feeble connection. All right. I promise, she amended quickly, hating to think that she was weighing on him when he was thinking about so much else.

I have to go now, Skylar. Remember to try and dissipate the pentagram. I love you, and I'll be with you by tomorrow night at this time. I promise.

Skylar couldn't help but smiling a little. She knew she was in danger. Surely Duse's assurance bordered on cockiness. Of course, that much confidence probably came naturally when you were as powerful as he was. She tried her hardest to insert a little humor in her voice. You better be right, Duse Ammadon, because I can't seem to get a good night's sleep without you by my side, and this is two nights in a row.

Asmoday flicked at the lace at his wrist and smiled amiably at Duse, Bale and Che Ammadon. He had been sitting alone on a chaise lounge in the garden of his home in Rome. The Watchers had no such thing as prisons. Before Day, they'd barely had crime, and so had no need of any. Since they were primarily energy beings, it made more

sense for them to imprison Day with energy. Day had been allotted only enough energy to survive within the narrow confines of his home.

Of course, Day had found a way to expand his energy reserves enough to give him a measure of freedom. Luckily, he had banked some of those reserves for what was about to come.

When he saw Duse Ammadon's expression, however, he began to doubt if it would be enough.

Day refused to rise from where he was sitting, knowing that he was clearly showing defiance and disrespect to King Ammadon, or the princes, for that matter. He cared little. Day knew there was a time for saving face and a time when it didn't matter how much you played innocent. His little games were at an end, for now anyway. Day only had to look at the cold fire in Duse Ammadon's eyes to see that.

"Ah. The Ammadon contingent, is it? Minus the youngest, I see. I do hope Jax is all right. It does seem that our youth group is somewhat misguided these days. Looking for a leader that will answer the needs of their restlessness, I would imagine. It's ever the way with youth. Well, your arrival, King, surely signals some sort of important occasion. Even the unfortunate death of your wife wasn't crucial enough for you to face me, was it?" Day mocked.

"Rise, Asmoday," Duse bit out, using a loop of air to force Day to comply. Asmoday couldn't keep his rage and hatred from showing on his face when Duse made him rise against his will.

He hadn't laid eyes on Duse or Bale Ammadon for decades and the sight of them, so sure and self-righteous, was causing Day to lose what little control he had. Orange flames leapt into his eyes and he reached cautiously for his reserved energy. When he felt it there, too coarse to be fully sensed by the Ammadons, he let himself relax a little. "What is the meaning of this? What right do you have to treat me in such a fashion?"

"By the right of the Grigori Council and Watcher law, Day," Bale pronounced coldly. Bale looked calm, but Duse easily sensed the deep, vast pit of his brother's fury at the sight of Asmoday and his incendiary words. Duse resisted glancing at Bale with surprise. He'd always known how much Bale had suffered for what Day had done. But Skylar's prophecy about Helen being alive and needing him right now must have him on the knife's edge of losing control. Letting his temper overrule him just wasn't something that Bale did. Ever. Even after Day had murdered Helen. Duse never realized the sheer weight or the volume of Bale's rage until now.

By the Battle Gods, how did Bale survive it without buckling to his knees or going mad?

"I am putting you under arrest for collusion in the abduction of Skylar Halifax Ammadon. You may choose the eight-foot by eight-foot location in your house under which you will be put under constant surveillance."

Day's mouth pulled into a snarl. "You have no proof of my involvement! You can't confine me further without providing me with another trial!"

"You're wrong, Day. With sufficient evidence, which we now have, we have the authority to confine you until your trial can be arranged," Duse said in a hard voice. "Choose the location of your cell or I will choose for you."

Day shook his head with feigned resignation, but a spark of malevolence briefly lit his dark eyes. "You Ammadons are so power-hungry. How much do you think that the other Watchers would be interested in knowing that it was possible for a human mate to have a bond with more than just one Watcher, Duse? Do you suppose that they might not like having that bit of information? It undoubtedly would at least bring back new life to the Rush Initiative," Day taunted quietly. He noticed Duse's stillness and rising anger, but his refusal to be goaded paradoxically taunted Day himself. "You needn't blame Jax for telling me. I'm wise enough to sense such things myself. That's how I knew that your younger brother would be so vulnerable for betrayal. It's comical that you Ammadons never noticed until now. Comical, but typical, too. You can't imagine that an Ammadon would ever be anything but perfect. I, on the other hand, noticed how Jax's essence reacted to your mate upon the Watcher gathering for her Second Change eight hundred years ago. Don't you think several Watchers are a little disgruntled by the idea that out of forty or so Watcher mates, more than thirty are bonded to the highest-ranking Watchers? It seems clear to me that you're upholding a system that works solely in your favor, and I believe that many Watchers would agree with me."

Che could sense the explosive quality of Duse's anger and moved on the offensive to protect him. Besides, after spending so much time with Asmoday recently, he was sick to death of his spite, nasty innuendo, and manipulation himself.

"Great, Day. You go ahead and start your little political coup. Just point out the eight feet you want to stage it from, and you can get going on that right away. I'm sure everyone will be ready to follow a known murderer and kidnapper who is so rotten through and through that his skin is falling off in clumps," Che said wryly. Che's head nodded toward Day's chair, where a few strips of his scaly skin remained behind. "It looks like your own skin can't even stand to be around you anymore, huh, Day?" Che asked, his aquamarine eyes wide with mock innocence.

Asmoday hadn't known he was going to do it a moment before, but Che Ammadon's cockiness made him see red. He'd had to deal with Che's constant accusations and bullying for too long when he'd come here to interrogate him about the deaths of those First Change women. Fine. If Che Ammadon wanted to know about First Change women, let him learn firsthand. He reached back into his coarse energy reserves and struck at him full force.

His eyes flamed orange and an excited, cruel grimace curled his lips. Day may regret his impulsivity later on, but he had to admit, he would long relish the look of disbelief on Che's cocky face when a ragged flame of black and orange fire seared through his right side.

Duse had sensed that Asmoday's taunting boded ill, but there was no way that he could completely prepare for the unexpected attack. Later, he couldn't say why he had

done it. Day shouldn't have enough power to harm a flea. Nevertheless, he instinctively had begun to erect a subtle energy field of air around them. He still hadn't secured the edges, however, when Asmoday struck suddenly at Che. The flame seared through his cousin's subtle matter, but Duse's air shield was there too, pushing into Che's body along with the fire.

Duse clung onto the fragile barrier desperately. He sensed that Bale had restrained Asmoday by sending a wave of electricity woven with the essence of his Will into his being, freezing Day's ability to move or act. Yet that didn't stop Day from watching with satisfaction when Che collapsed onto the flagstones at his feet, holding his side. Che's handsome face looked vaguely stunned.

Duse's jaw clenched, indicating his struggle with the shield of air that still existed between Day's coarse fire energy and Che's subtle body. Day's energy continued to surge forward, as though it had a life of its own separate from Day. Duse lost all awareness of his surroundings as his concentration deepened on his task. The sinews and muscles of his body flexed and strained unbearably, although it was primarily his subtle bodies he was using for the struggle. Yet, his corporeal body followed the suit of his rare essences. Sweat began to bead his face. For a moment, it was as though Day's energy and that of air shield were too evenly matched for movement. But as Duse's immense intellect probed the essence of the coarse weapon, a concise understanding struck him.

Let him go, Bale, Duse communicated firmly to his brother. He didn't know if Asmoday caught a glimpse of either Duse's message or just the grim resolve behind it, but a look of fear flitted over his patrician features. When Duse felt Bale's withdrawal from Day, he abruptly snapped and pulled at the air shield. It sprang back with all the power of a rocket boomerang.

Day's eyes widened in disbelief. A loud sucking noise vibrated the air around them. The coarse fire energy that had been within Che's being abruptly surged back in the opposite direction. It was as though Day, as its source, was a powerful vacuum pulling it back into the essence that had called it forth.

Within a matter of seconds, Day was gone. The ragged stream of black molten fire had crackled back into him, leaving a large, gaping hole at his center. Day had stared down in shock, but even as he did, his entire body began to implode into the emptiness.

"Murderers! You Ammadons are a disgrace to the Fathers! This isn't over! You'll rue the day you ever crossed me!"

Duse barely registered Day's malevolent threat and hate-filled eyes before both were also fed into the vacuum of nothingness.

Skylar looked out her small window at the setting sun. Exhaustion assailed her. She'd hardly slept last night, and today, she had continued to concentrate her energy on sensing and dissipating Rolland Ockley's closest shield. Her seasickness continued to bother her. Earlier, Skylar had cautiously wandered out into a large living area of the

yacht, a room that seemingly consisted entirely of leather, brass and rare woods. Rolland had been preparing for his summoning ritual. He'd cleared away most of the furniture from the center of the room and was laying down painted planks in order to form a triangle upon the floor. Jax was nowhere in sight. Skylar wished she knew enough about magic to do something to help Duse, but she was utterly ignorant. So she returned to her room and continued to do exactly what Duse had instructed. Skylar thought her mental exercises were working, but only time would tell, she realized anxiously.

Sometime before nightfall, Skylar arose from where she was meditating on her bed to look out her small window. She heard the sound of a motorboat slowly approach and grow louder. When the engine quit, Skylar heard the thumps of someone boarding the yacht. A few minutes later, there was a light tap at her door. Skylar hesitated, sensing who it was.

"Come in, Jax," Skylar called out softly. No matter how overwhelmed she'd been by her last few experiences with Duse's brother, Jax had to be twice as uncomfortable.

Jax loomed in the doorway before he shut the door behind him. He studied Skylar where she stood by the window, her hands braced behind her on the sill. Jax wondered, not for the first time, if her intense seasickness was the result of her and Duse's shared essence, a consequence of their mating. She looked wan and vulnerable.

"Have you eaten since I left?" he asked softly. Skylar nodded. She had technically eaten some crackers.

Then she'd promptly thrown them right back up again.

Jax sighed, suspecting the truth. He glanced uneasily toward the door. He could sense Ockley's attention and focus, solidly preoccupied elsewhere. "You'll never guess who I saw on the dock when I was retrieving the motorboat. Sherry Morton and Ainge. They were there with a couple police officers."

"Did they see you?" Skylar asked in disbelief.

Jax shook his head. "I'm not sure how they figured out where Rolland was keeping the boats. He used a different name to reserve the slips and he paid with cash. It's a good thing, though, because they should be able to get a physical description of the boat, now. The police can probably begin searching with a helicopter, or something." Jax shrugged. "You should be ready to leave by around nine o'clock or so, Skylar. That's when Ockley will try to summon Duse. Duse would want me to get you out of here as soon as possible."

Skylar looked away doubtfully. She wanted to get off this boat more than anything, but she couldn't bear the idea of leaving Duse behind. Jax sensed her apprehension.

"It will divide his attention in a dangerous way if he has to think about your safety, too," Jax said gruffly. Skylar just nodded without meeting his eyes.

* * * * *

At around eight-thirty that night, Skylar sat, rigid with apprehension, on the chair in her bedroom. She could no longer sense the shielding pentagram. She hoped she'd been successful. Rolland Ockley suddenly entered the room without knocking first. Skylar faced him determinedly, her face a mask. Would he sense the absence of his shield? She had no way of knowing how powerful Rolland was. The only thing she could sense from him was the chaos and sickness in his aura.

Skylar watched him with distaste as he condescended to tell her that she would be free to leave with Jax as soon as Duse appeared. She wanted to ask him if his all-black clothing served some magical purpose or if he just had bad taste. Now that she had seen Duse wield magic so naturally, Rolland Ockley's attempts to play magician tickled a perverse funny bone.

"Do you use a wand, too, Rolland? What about a cape with stars on it?" She taunted, half hoping that if she made him angry, he would be less likely to notice the missing shield.

Rolland's pale cheek twitched with rage. He hated the fact that he'd agreed not to touch her before she was taken from him. It was bad enough that she didn't appear to desire him as he desired her, but when she showed him so little respect, he experienced a dark need to punish Skylar and bend her to his will. She usually wasn't openly defiant toward him as she was now. But the way that she always ignored him and spoke to Jax, as if Rolland wasn't even there was almost as bad as her obvious contempt.

"You know nothing about the science of magic, Skylar. Duse must be very disappointed to have such an ignorant creature for a wife. Your paranormal abilities come to you like an animal instinct. You know nothing of the art of manipulating the world according to the Will, the years of training and work that it takes."

"Or the degree of self-importance and narcissism?"

She wasn't completely surprised when Rolland suddenly grabbed her by the arm and forced her to stand before him. His hand shook with rage where he held her in a painful grip. "You're almost as smug as your lover, Skylar." Skylar tried to move away from him when he brought his mouth down close to hers, but Rolland fisted her hair at the nape, forcing her head back and steady. "Do you think you've seen the last of me? Once I have control of Duse, Skylar, you're no longer his. You should know that right now. After tonight, you'll be mine. And I want you to know, I'll be punishing you severely for what you just said to me," Rolland said ominously against her lips.

"No!" Skylar shouted so abruptly and with such force that Rolland didn't resist when she twisted from his hold. She felt panic and disbelief at what she'd just sensed. She fled across the room and opened the door. "Don't you have anything better to be doing, Rolland? Please leave," Skylar said. Her breath was ragged and uneven.

Rolland bristled, but was also strangely satisfied to see her loss of composure. Skylar's calm contempt really ate at his pride. Rolland tossed her a dark look as he headed for the door. She was right. He had more important things to think of right now than a piece of ass, no matter how enticing that ass was. What he'd said to her earlier

was true. He had a honed, disciplined will. A woman like Skylar was inconsequential in the scheme of things. Eventually, she would be his. He just needed to be patient.

Skylar shut the door hastily behind Rolland and turned to the room.

"He doesn't deserve your attempts to save his life, babe," Duse suddenly said quietly. An area of air shimmered in front of the windows. Before he had fully corporealized, Skylar ran to his arms.

"I don't want you to kill someone because of me, Duse." Duse had lifted her when she reached him, bringing her higher onto his body. Skylar's hands clutched at his shoulders and moved desperately to his face. He felt so warm, so real. "Oh, my God. It's really you!"

Duse felt the same way about holding her. She felt small and light in his arms. He ran his hands over her body automatically, even as his essence probed hers, assuring himself that she was whole and unwounded.

Duse understood what Skylar had just said about not wanting him to kill someone on her behalf. It seemed strange that she had said it, considering that just today, a Watcher had killed another Watcher for the first time in their recorded history. And he had been the killer.

"I told you I would come. You did a good job of dissipating the pentagram, Skylar. Thank you." Before Skylar could say anything else, he lowered his mouth over hers hotly. For several seconds, they inhaled and tasted the other's essence, adding these new sensations as further proof of each other's presence. He broke away from the kiss regretfully and pulled her tighter into his embrace. He buried his face in her shoulder and neck. For the first time since her disappearance yesterday, he allowed his expression to show his intense vulnerability and fear. By the time he leaned back and looked into her eyes, it was gone.

"He will start his ceremony soon, Skylar. You're ready to go with Jax?" he continued when she nodded anxiously. "No one else could come here but me, because of my link to our child. But Bale and Ainge will be waiting for you at the dock. Do you understand?"

"And he can't truly command you to do what he wants, can he, Duse? He's crazy," Skylar whispered. Even as she spoke, her sensitive fingers went to his face, lightly touching his lips, his cheeks, and his smooth goatee. Her heart seemed to cry out in love and concern for him. Duse heard her emotions as clearly as he could her voice. He placed his hand on top of hers. He brought her palm to his warm mouth and kissed it solemnly.

"I have already looked at the sigil that he uses. It's not mine, Skylar."

"And you won't...kill Rolland, will you, Duse?" she asked anxiously. She'd been terrified earlier when she'd suddenly sensed Duse's presence while Rolland Ockley had been threatening her. Although she couldn't see him, she'd suddenly known that Duse was there. Not a Duse that she was familiar with, but a being of infinite coldness and precise action. If Skylar hadn't suddenly realized his intent and begged for him to cease,

she had little doubt that Rolland would have been at her feet within seconds, either dead or struggling for life. She still felt frightened at the memory.

Duse's face became impassive and his hold on her went slack. He could sense her fear. Never before had he experienced what he was feeling right now from his mate. But to be honest, he admitted to himself, he had never allowed her to see the part of him that she'd seen just now. He felt diminished somehow, but also resigned to reality. His voice and eyes were cold when he spoke, but Duse hadn't intended them to be. He just thought that if Skylar couldn't have him exactly the way she wanted him, she at least deserved his honesty.

"I can't promise you that, Skylar. The truth is, I have killed for your sake before. Not because you asked me to, but because it was the right thing to do. You beg me not to kill Rolland, but I've sensed what you think of him, Skylar. You've compared him to a rabid dog in your mind. If he had his way, he would have raped you, hurt you, humiliated you. He already has humiliated and shamed my brother to the point that he craves death. In order to fulfill a covenant with Asmoday, he agreed to accept Asmoday's orders in regard to commanding me, Skylar. There is no telling what sort of crimes I would have committed against Watcher or human at Asmoday's bidding. If Watchers deem that a human being is dangerous to others, we hold the right to eliminate that threat. We never judge lightly, Skylar. But we watch. We know things that humans cannot. I realize that it isn't within human laws to allow for someone to be punished without a trial of their peers. But I am not a human being, Skylar."

Skylar went still under the impact of his gaze and words. Tears swelled in her eyes. "You killed my first husband, didn't you?" she eventually asked shakily. Skylar knew it was the first time that she'd ever asked him ever, even in her former lifetimes.

Duse didn't need to use words. His grim look said everything.

Skylar clumsily broke away from his arms. She experienced some of the disorientation and grief that she felt on the night that she first spent with Duse, when her memories began to crash down on her. Skylar suddenly knew that she had been aware at least on some level, in that lifetime so long ago, that Duse had been responsible for the death of the man who had been her husband. But she had blithely refused to consciously acknowledge it. As usual, she firmly placed the burden on Duse's shoulder and left herself free of pain and guilt.

Emotion froze her throat. She couldn't speak.

Duse felt her emotional turmoil and knew that she was appalled by what he'd done. Although Asmoday was even a more heinous criminal than Rolland Ockley, his death was still hanging heavily on Duse that evening. To be the first Watcher to take another Watcher's life was no easy thing for him to accept, no matter that he would have done it again in the same circumstances without a second thought. Given everything, it wasn't surprising that Duse assumed Skylar thought the worst of him.

"I have to go now, Skylar. Your appeal for Rolland Ockley's life hasn't gone unheard by me. If I can spare him and still be assured that justice will be done, I'll do it."

"No, Duse, you don't understand..." Skylar said quickly when she heard his words. She realized that Duse thought that she was blaming him for his past actions and for Watcher ways. But the air shimmered, and he was gone.

She stared at the empty space where Duse had just been, a living, breathing entity. It must have been several minutes later that she heard a quick knock at her door and Jax entered. Skylar had been going over what had happened again and again in her mind. What if something should happen to Duse? What if she never had a chance to explain that she was feeling self-recrimination? She blamed him for absolutely nothing.

Jax's face was pale. "Hurry, Skylar. Ockley is allowing you to leave. Quickly. Before it's too late."

Skylar moved like a zombie, knowing it was what she had promised to do. Once she was in the speedboat with Jax, she stared behind her. The few lights on the yacht became dimmer and blurrier until they finally disappeared from her tear-filled eyes.

Chapter Fifteen

Duse remained watchful and preternaturally still within the magician's triangle. He could have answered Skylar's earlier question. Ockley definitely did use a wand. He was pointing it warily at Duse. They were waiting for a phone call via cell phone from Bale, saying that Skylar and Jax were safely with him. Everyone else was still blocked from communicating with the boat. Fortunately, the human police wouldn't be blocked in such a manner when Sherry provided them with description of the yacht as soon as they knew Skylar and Jax were safe. Duse didn't want to move out of the triangle or do anything that might make Ockley realize that he was there of his own free will and by Roland's own power.

A cell phone on the brass and mahogany bar next to Rolland began to ring. He answered it while his eyes and wand stayed on Duse Ammadon. Rolland had the uncomfortable feeling of being locked in the room with a dangerous, ruthless wild animal with only a small stick as his defense. He kept trying to buoy his spirits, reminding himself how much power he had within his grasp. But then he would register the sight of Duse Ammadon just feet away from him. He was a wall of nude solid muscle and sinew. His expression was as hard and relentless as granite, and his eyes glowed eerily with banked power.

Rolland supposed that many human men might feel uncomfortable about being forced to stand nude like that. But Duse was the epitome of dignity, well aware that nakedness was his normal, rightful state. It took a great deal of Rolland Ockley's reputed willpower to even stay in the same room for a half-hour with such a creature. He'd tried to converse with Duse earlier, flaunting his knowledge and power. But Duse had merely stared at him, his eyes flaring occasionally with distant irritation. Rolland had finally stopped, feeling like he was gibbering desperately in a language that Duse Ammadon wouldn't even condescend to understand.

Rolland lowered the phone to his side. "It's for you," he said stupidly. He hesitated, not sure how to do something so mundane as to transfer the phone through his magical circle and triangle.

Duse had to force himself not to roll his eyes in exasperation. This guy was so idiotic. No wonder Jax had considered suicide versus being under his control anymore. "Just throw it," he growled out.

Rolland tossed the phone into the air before he could think. Duse caught it without moving and held it to his ear in a smooth, swift gesture.

"Bale?"

"Yes, Duse. Skylar and Jax are both here with me, safe and sound."

Duse lowered the phone and pinned the magician with his gaze. "Release Shax."

Uncertainty assailed Rolland at the brisk order. "And you will do as you promised? You will do my bidding?"

"I said it."

Rolland relaxed a little. He reached for a drawing with a *sigil* that Duse recognized as Shax's. Rolland closed his eyes and entered a state of deep concentration. He began to chant Shax's name. When he felt he maintained the correct vibrational frequencies between his own being's and Shax's, he murmured, "Go in peace and return to me nevermore, Spirit Shax. The secrets that you and I have shared in regards to my whereabouts and plans will be forever shielded from others. By the authority of whatever God or Law that rules your kind, I command you to harm none as you depart, least of all me or mine."

Duse watched in fascination as Rolland Ockley severed the two vibrational streams. *I'll be damned,* he thought in wonderment. Ockley had just done a neat bit of magic, human or not. Perhaps most importantly, it was a piece of magic that at which no Watcher could have possibly succeeded. "Order Jax to do something," he said gruffly when Rolland seemed to come back to full awareness.

Rolland opened his mouth to protest, but hesitated when Duse's expression hardened. "I order you to appear before me now, Spirit Shax," Rolland ordered.

Duse put the phone to his ear. Bale had apparently heard the exchange. "Jax is still here, Duse. What's more, he says confidently that he felt his connection to Ockley sever. I felt it, too," Bale assured quietly.

"Good. Send the police to search for the boat."

Rolland looked aghast. "Cancel that order, Ammdusias," he yelled. He pointed his wand at Duse. "I command that from now on, you will only act at my specific order. I also command that you never attempt to take my life or harm me," Rolland added quickly. He swallowed and lowered his wand, obviously relieved that was out of the way. "I learned I had to do that pretty quickly when your brother tried to kill me," he muttered by way of explanation. He became alert again when he saw Duse Ammadon click the end button and lower the phone.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked incredulously. Rolland Ockley, fearless, disciplined magician, world-renowned scientist and one of the most powerful men on the face of the earth—at least in his own mind—screamed when he realized that he couldn't move. Invisible bonds of air encircled his body entirely. His wand fell to the carpeted floor silently. He let out another high-pitched scream when he tipped over to the floor like a felled tree. "But what about the covenant? You agreed!" Rolland accused, his eyes wild with crazed disbelief.

Duse shrugged slightly as he stepped over the magical triangle and kicked aside Rolland's wand. "I said that I agreed that you could try and summon me. You tried, Magician," Duse said quietly. His eyes gleamed eerily when they met Rolland's. "You failed."

Rolland stuttered in disbelief. "I couldn't have failed! There is no way that I could have failed!" he shouted suddenly, as if just saying it would change everything.

Duse just shook his head. "Didn't anyone ever tell you that you shouldn't mess around with conjuring spirits, Ockley? You just might get more than you bargained for."

Rolland twisted around on the floor so that he could see the towering form of Duse Ammadon. The sight of him staring down at him, in full control and obviously dangerous caused his heartbeat to quicken with fear.

"What...what are you going to do with me?"

"I told you on the phone I would kill you," Duse replied in a matter-of-fact, bored manner. He ignored the glaze of fear and panic that crossed Rolland's expression, just as he ignored his pleas. He turned away so that he could concentrate while he did his own bit of conjuration, which required immense concentration out here in the water. When he turned back around, he held two good-sized clear bags of a white powdery substance in his hands. He tossed them on the bar in front of him, where they fell with a thud. "You really shouldn't do drugs, Ockley. They mess with your mind," Duse reprimanded casually.

"Drugs...what the...what are you talking about?" Rolland asked with rising confusion and obvious fear. He tried to stretch up to see what Duse had just placed on the bar, but he couldn't make it out.

Duse ignored him while he considered. "Humans allow criminals a lot of leniency with their laws," he said thoughtfully. "If there's one thing that I've noticed, though, they don't respond well when people have drugs. The defenses for it are much less effective than for rape or murder, or at least it seems that way, sometimes," Duse mused to himself. The amount of chemical compound he'd produced seemed like an awful lot to him, but he couldn't be sure if human beings would think so. He hesitated, then added another two bags on the counter. What else did human beings really seem to prosecute hard in the courts? Oh, right. Rolland let out a little cry of disbelief a minute when Duse dropped two impossibly large handguns on the table at the side of the room. He ignored Ockley's cries of protests while he concentrated, putting slight, but significant flaws in the firing mechanism of one and the muzzle of the other. He wouldn't want anyone to actually get hurt from something he'd created.

Drugs and guns together. Surely, that was pretty bad according to humans. They would press charges against Ockley for Skylar's abduction, but Duse wanted to make sure there was something that some human lawyer wouldn't get Ockley out of. He'd done his conjurations completely from elements that were available either in the air or on the boat. The cocaine had been easy, the guns a great deal more taxing. They were solid, independent entities, now, unlike Ockley's bonds, which he'd created from his own spirit. Duse wanted nothing more than to be gone from here, but he needed to stick around until the police arrived so that he could dissipate Ockley's bonds.

He glanced around the room, realizing there was nothing further he needed to do here. He'd prefer to wait somewhere away from the temptation of killing Rolland Ockley.

"Where are you going?" Rolland Ockley asked in disbelief when Duse Ammadon began to walk out of the room.

When Duse turned around, Rolland realized he was suddenly wearing a pair of faded jeans and a white sports shirt. "I'm getting away from your whining. Got a problem with that?"

"You mean you're not going to...kill me?"

Duse paused as though considering. "No," he finally said. "But I'll tell you a little something, Ockley. I'm going to stick around until the police get here, and then I'll untie your bonds. If I hear you start to make crazy accusations about the Ammadons, either while I'm here, invisible and listening, or at any time in the future, I will kill you. You're only alive now because my wife is a good and decent human being, and she made a point of asking me to spare you." Duse raised his dark eyebrows to bring his point home when Ockley's mouth fell open in disbelief. "Yeah, that's right. All the foul things you did to her...were planning to do her. Your puny mind can't even begin to comprehend what she actually is."

"I wouldn't have..."

Rolland paused, feeling his bladder uncontrollably spasm and release when Duse Ammadon was suddenly towering over him, eyes blazing with a white, wrathful fire.

"Shut up! Don't you dare say another word! Damn you, human! You don't even know when you're digging your own grave, do you?" His rage blazed forth, momentarily uncontrolled. Rolland couldn't help but recall how he'd felt in the midst of Jax's grief after Duse had placed his *sigil* on Skylar. Then, like now, Rolland quaked as though in the midst of a terrible storm. He would have put up his hands and cowered, but his restraints held him tightly. Instead, he closed his eyes and prayed silently for deliverance as he listened to his loud heartbeats and wondered if each one would be his last.

"And another thing, Ockley. If I learn that you somehow slime your way out of at least fifteen years of imprisonment, the deal is off. My agreement with Skylar was that I wouldn't kill you if I found a way for you to be duly punished. All deals are off if your sentence isn't commensurate with your crime. If human law won't do it, then Watcher law will."

When Rolland finally got up the nerve to open his eyes, he saw that he was blessedly alone.

Skylar's hand shook slightly as she knocked on the mahogany doors of Duse's office. She heard Bale's deep voice bid her entrance.

When she opened the doors, she paused. The room surged upwards as the men went to their feet at the sight of her. So many pairs of eyes watched her entrance intently. Skylar recognized Bale, Eli, Dante, Jax, Zep, Che, Os and Paim. There was another man, striking-looking, with dark hair with distinguished-looking white wings at the temple that Skylar had never before met. She searched their faces intently, then the rooms, but Duse wasn't there. Skylar knew she had been interrupting some proceeding, but she didn't care.

"He's not here, yet?" Skylar asked Bale, knowing she was stating the obvious. She forced her voice to sound calm. She'd been waiting for hours. Bale had assured her that Duse would be there as soon as he had taken care of things with Rolland Ockley. Didn't that signify something, since he hadn't shown up yet? And why were they all meeting like this, if something dire hadn't happened to Duse?

The man with the white wings in his hair beckoned Skylar into the room. For the first time, Skylar's eyes fully met his. Skylar felt strangely comforted by what she saw there. He only looked ten or fifteen years older than Skylar, but she knew better. "Please, Skylar. Come in. It's rather remiss of us to leave you out. This should concern you the most." The tall, handsome man came and waved for her to enter farther. "I know we haven't yet met, at least recently. I'm Batos."

Skylar's smile waveringly acknowledged him. "Please, sit down all of you. Are you all here because you're worried that something has happened to Duse?" she asked Batos first, then her eyes moved on to Bale.

"No, Skylar. I don't know what has delayed him, but we aren't meeting because of that," Bale assured her. Skylar's eyes searched the room until they found Jax. He was sitting quietly between Che and Eli. His light blue eyes hadn't left her since she'd entered the room.

Are you all right? Skylar surprised herself by asking Jax directly through telepathy. She'd been inadvertently worried about him ever since Bale and Ainge had met them at the docks. In the car ride on the way home, Jax had sat in the front seat while Bale drove. No one had spoken. Skylar had seen the way Ainge sadly avoided Jax's eyes, and the way Jax had accepted it without question.

When they'd exited the elevators, Sherry had greeted her with a hearty hug. Skylar noticed with half attention that Ainge gave Sherry a smile that reached all the way to his dark eyes, chasing away some of the sadness about Jax. Ainge had stroked Sherry quickly on the shoulder with what appeared to be a very corporeal caress.

Well, here was a bit of news since she'd been gone.

She couldn't help but be reminded of Duse presently as Jax's eyes held hers steadily from across the room. I'm all right, Skylar. Don't worry. I don't think they're going to kill me, which is what you seem most concerned about.

Skylar's focus intensified on Jax. She scowled. Did she actually sense a note of gentle amusement in her brother-in-law's voice? How could he be joking in these circumstances? Her eyes flicked uncertainly around the group of men who watched her. Skylar took a step backwards. Suddenly, the terrifying feeling that she'd had when she realized Duse was coldly going to kill Rolland Ockley hit her awareness. These men

were so beautiful, so kind. But Skylar clearly felt their inhumanity at that moment. She would have called it alien-like if Duse hadn't clearly corrected her once. She was not a weak woman, but she was suddenly frightened down to the marrow in her bones by their eerie, watchful presence. Still, she forced herself to hold her ground.

She glanced at Bale. "I assume that you'll take my testimony into account about Jax," she said determinedly.

"Of course, Skylar. We'll definitely ask you about what happened. How couldn't we? But now, you should rest. You look exhausted. Jax has told us about your illness on the boat."

Bale noticed Zep's, Os' and Paim's alertness leap up in magnitude at Skylar's behavior. Every Watcher present had been apprised of the information that Jax was as likely a candidate for Skylar as a mate as Duse. Bale knew that Skylar's concern for Jax was nothing more than that of a sister's for a brother. But her timing as they discussed matters seemed highly unfortunate. His normal powers of diplomacy seemed strangely absent in his anxiety for his brothers.

And by the Fathers, had Skylar and Jax just been having a telepathic shielded conversation? Bale wondered. He prayed that no one present had caught wind of that besides himself.

Batos sensed the discomfort of the situation and Bale's temporary loss of royal manners. "Skylar, when King Ammadon told you that you were one of the most revered members of our number at your Second Change Ceremony, he spoke only the truth. Please believe me that we would grant no sentence at these proceedings without your involvement."

The room was silent as they listened respectfully to Batos. Before Skylar had a chance to fully absorb them, Jax spoke. "You miss the point, Batos." To Skylar's surprise, Jax stood to face her. He still seemed young in comparison to the rest of them. But an obvious change had been wrought deeply into his spirit. He seemed calm, graceful, almost haloed in his suffering and a newfound acceptance of his fate. "Skylar, I'll be the first to inform Duse how urgently you need him if he should attend us before he comes to you. Having been the only one to experience your pain during his absence, I would be the first, even if I be the one to argue most heartily against Bale, to say that you are his priority when he returns." Jax gave a small smile into her eyes. "Trust me, it will be so."

The rest of Jax's communication was private. But I also know that you haven't slept or eaten for the past forty-eight hours, and that you've thrown up almost every thimble of water that you've drunk in as much time. You should be concerned for your child, Skylar. Not me. Or Rolland Ockley, either, Jax stated dryly. And Skylar, please rest comfortably. Duse is okay. I can sense him better than anyone here, due to the circumstances. He's just seeing to Ockley, that's all.

Skylar breathed in raggedly. Her eyes skittered uncomfortably away from Jax. Nobody else seemed aware of the personal communication.

Her voice sounded vulnerable and shaky before she turned to open the mahogany doors. "Just tell Duse I'm waiting for him," Skylar told Bale before she left the room.

Skylar met Sherry and Ainge in the kitchen. Sherry took one look at Skylar Ammadon's pallor and got up to put on water for tea. Skylar sat at the kitchen island with Ainge while Sherry and he filled her in on how their search for her had finally panned out when they reached the Monroe Street Harbor. "Yeah, we talked to this woman and her husband who were getting ready to take out a dinghy to their boat. And I'll be damned if Sherry wasn't right about the shoes!" Ainge said with a proud look at Sherry.

"Ah, well. They probably would have noticed Skylar and Rolland anyway," Sherry said modestly as she got down a cup for Skylar. "The woman said you were pretty unsteady on your feet. They just thought you'd had too much to drink, or something, the way Ockley was practically holding you up as you went down the dock."

"Yeah, Sher, but we couldn't have been sure it was her without the lady giving a hundred percent positive identification of the shoes. They said your head was down, Skylar, and that your face was covered by your hair. And Sherry, you were right about Ockley trying to hide her dress, too," Ainge reminded her. He turned back to Skylar. "He'd put his suit jacket around you."

"Why do you keep talking about my shoes?" Skylar asked, mystified.

Between the two of them, Ainge and Sherry filled her in about Sherry's theory. Skylar listened, smiling for the first time since she'd come home. She sipped at her tea and watched them. They were a cute couple. How much had Ainge told Sherry about being a Watcher? How much was he even allowed to reveal, according to the laws, or perhaps more importantly, Duse's preferences?

Skylar did a double take when the kitchen door swung open and Duse walked in almost casually. "Somebody told me that my wife was looking for me," he said.

Skylar called out his name and launched herself into his waiting arms. A moment of silence ensued as Duse and Skylar hugged, touched and kissed, unconsciously attempting to reestablish the severed links between them. Finally, Duse looked up and acknowledged Sherry and Ainge. His hand delved into Skylar's hair in his characteristic gesture, as much a habit as a means of reassurance for him of his mate's safety at that moment.

"So I guess Sherry was telling you about how she figured out which harbor Ockley took you out of, which led to the police's eventual identification of Ockley's yacht?"

"Did they get Ockley, Duse?" Sherry asked intently.

Duse nodded. "Yep. He's locked up tight, at least for tonight." His hand slid across Skylar's waist and hip. The police would want to talk with her in the morning. In the meantime, Duse figured that the cocaine and the guns were enough to keep Ockley from roaming free for a while. Duse didn't know how long his forced cooperation would last for, but Ockley had been pretty quiet and sullen when the police finally boarded the yacht. Briefly, he pressed Skylar close to him again and put his cheek

against her soft hair. She must have showered when she got home. He could smell the fragrant shampoo that she used. Duse had sensed none of Skylar's earlier fear in regard to him. He'd only felt her intense relief and love when he entered the kitchen. Still, the way that she'd responded when he told her about having been the one responsible for her husband's death so long ago clung indelibly in his memory.

"You're going to get a really big raise, Sherry. I shouldn't have snapped at you the way I did when you were asking questions earlier," Duse said over Skylar's head.

Sherry just waved her hand. "Oh, come on, Duse. You would have found Skylar here, with my help or not. But it does just go to show you," she said earnestly to first Skylar and then Ainge. "You can never underestimate the power of a pair of Manolo Blahniks on the awareness of a woman. I'm glad you have such great taste in shoes, Skylar."

Skylar leaned back and looked into Duse's amused eyes. "And you were worried about the price of them," Duse admonished quietly. Skylar laughed, much of the anxiety of the last few days falling off her like a discarded weight. Duse reached down and captured her mirth with his mouth. Her smiles and laughter always intoxicated him. After a moment, he spoke next to her lips. "I wanted to come and tell you that everything was okay, but I should go and talk to Bale and the others for a while. Will you be all right?"

Skylar assured him that she was. Laughter still sparkled in her agate eyes, but so did something else. "I'll wait up for you, Duse."

Duse's voice lowered to a growl of a whisper, meant only for her ears. "We still have a honeymoon to celebrate, Skylar Ammadon."

Chapter Sixteen

Despite what she'd said about waiting up for him, Skylar was sound asleep by the time Duse came into the bedroom. Lack of sleep, dehydration and stress had taken its toll on her, Duse realized as he looked down at her an hour later. He'd briefly sensed, and Jax had corroborated, how sick she'd been while they were in the boat.

He softly caressed her hair while she slept, moving it away from her body. A slight smile curved his full lips. She was naked beneath the sheet that covered her. She lay on her back. One of her arms bent above her head. Her hand was uncurled in relaxation. Her posture seemed soft, inherently vulnerable. What would he have done if he'd lost her? He experienced a vague but terrifying void at the other end of that question. Maybe as a way to avoid thinking about it, or maybe just because he wanted to more than anything, he gently moved the sheet down over her breasts, careful not to wake her.

He instantly became erect at the sight of her exposed beauty. Her deep sleep and open posture reminded him of the first time that he'd seduced her while she'd slept over a thousand years ago. The strength of her sexual response had shattered him, forcing him to redefine his perception what he was...who he was.

His hand looked dark against her pale breast. She felt like silk beneath his gliding fingertips. Even in sleep she responded to him. As his finger skimmed her nipple, it puckered tight and hard, practically begging him to come back and give it more attention. Duse didn't want to waken her, but his need for her suddenly flooded past the gates of his control. His mind sought her out while she slept, gently touching and tracing the subtleties of her nervous system. He spoke to her.

Skylar, babe? Do you mind?

Her sleep was profound as her system naturally worked to restore the delicate balance of health. Duse sensed her smile.

God, I'd mind if you didn't. You can wake me up, though, Duse. It's okay.

No, Skylar, sleep. You need it.

We've never done it like this, not that I can ever remember, anyway—with me completely asleep. What will it be like? she asked curiously.

Pretty nice, I would imagine, Duse told her wryly. He got rid of his clothing and laid down next to her on the bed. He went straight for her tender breasts, making love to her gently with his mouth, careful not to draw on her too hard and awaken her. He groaned in gratification at the way her nipples peaked beneath his tongue so responsively. Even as he made love to her physical body, he ever so gently stimulated the pleasure centers of her brain.

Oh, my God, Duse. That feels exceptionally good, Skylar told him. *Is it too much?*

No way. Not if your goal is to make me come...really soon. She moaned softly in her sleep. Duse knew that if he reached down and touched between her legs right now, she would be warm and creamy with arousal. He knew it from thousands of years of pleasuring human women in this way, but he also knew it from his powerful sense of smell. He inhaled deeply of her sustaining scent, imagining how Skylar looked when she was swollen and glossy with desire. The image was too much for him to resist. He slowly peeled back the sheet. He didn't want to stimulate her physical body too much, knowing it would pull her out of her deep sleep. But looking couldn't hurt, could it?

He straddled her knees and spread her thighs for his hungry gaze. He made a strangled sound of arousal in his throat. Her sex cream glistened on her flushed, swollen lips. Her clit thrust forth, eager to be pleasured. The blonde pubic hair around her pussy was darkened with moisture. His nostrils flared in arousal, drawing her subtle essences deeply into his being. He imagined what it would be like to lap up all that cream, to stretch high with his tongue, seeking out more sweetness from her honeyed channel. His cock surged in anticipation, knowing he would do just that when Skylar awoke. He caressed her flat belly. Soon she'd be swelling with their growing child. His fingers detailed the curve of her hips. She was so feminine, so perfectly shaped to carry a child, so ideally formed to accommodate his body inside her farthest depths.

The thought made him groan with increasing arousal. He stroked his unbearably tight erection. He felt like he was going to burst right through his skin.

Skylar, when you wake up, I'm going to ride your little pussy so hard.

His erotic words combined his increased stimulation on the subtle mechanisms of her brain made Skylar quicken even more. His message magically created the vivid sensation of Duse doing just what he said he would do when she awoke. She felt his cock in her, straining all the way to the back of her womb, the way her pussy clung to him eagerly with each surging stroke. Strangely, though, she also could picture Duse as he was in the waking world. She saw him stretched out next to her sleeping form, gloriously naked. The way he was eating her up with his gaze while his fist pumped his huge, completely primed cock made her clit sting with an acute pleasurable pain. But in the dream, she looked into his light, exotic eyes and saw his face tense with arousal. She supposed he saw the exact same expression on her face.

"I like watching you touch yourself like that," Skylar whispered to the dream Duse who wasn't touching himself at all, but thrusting powerfully into her again and again. But the dream Duse didn't seem to mind the inconsistency. He merely smiled, causing her pussy to clutch around him desperately at the sight of his gorgeous dimples. He lowered his head to trace his *sigil* on her breast with his tongue, and then to slip her nipple between his lips. The gentleness with which he did it created such an erotic contrast with the way he forcefully pounded into her body. The moment stretched as he finessed her breast hungrily, saving the stabbing, deep draw on her nipple that he knew

would send her over the edge until last. Skylar cried out sharply, convulsing with an orgasm that seemed to quake her entire being instead of just her sex. For a brief moment, she saw Duse's dark head rise from her breast in tormented ecstasy, saw his true form flare as he let go with her, allowing their subtle energies to mix and merge together.

It was this Duse, the true one that lay next to her while she slept, that Skylar addressed once the violent spasms of pleasure that racked her body began to lessen.

Don't let me sleep very much longer, Duse. I need you so much.

Duse smiled into her throat. Being corporeal while stimulating Skylar with his mind had certainly been a lot more rewarding than he'd imagined.

As soon as I sense that your body has replenished itself, I'll wake you up, babe. And then, they'll have to break down the doors if anybody wants us. The official honeymoon begins right here, right now.

When Skylar awoke much later, it was to the exquisite sensation of Duse inside her. "I figured we could do without the foreplay for once, given the circumstances," Duse murmured against her mouth with a devilish grin as he began to move. Skylar couldn't have agreed more. She needed this from him as much as he seemed to require it from her, needed to feel his flesh, so hard and solid and immediately present.

Afterwards, Duse held her tightly within the circle of his arms. "Skylar, there's something I need to tell you," Duse said eventually after he'd caught his breath. He was dreading telling her about Asmoday. He was afraid of seeing the same fear in her eyes that he had last evening on the yacht.

Skylar sensed his heavy mood with foreboding. By the time he was halfway through telling her about Asmoday, she had sat up and was staring at him worriedly. "Is he dead?"

Duse shrugged. He avoided her eyes. "Yes. I don't see how it's possible for him to have survived that."

Skylar gently placed her fingers on his chin and forced him to look into her eyes. "You don't feel guilty about it, do you? He was trying to kill Che. He would have killed Che if you didn't do what you did."

"No, I don't regret it for a second! A quick death is more than that traitor deserved as far as I'm concerned." He exhaled slowly to calm himself. "The sadness that you're sensing isn't for Asmoday, Skylar. It's for us. The Watchers. You realize that it's the first time in our history that one Watcher has killed another?"

Skylar didn't know what to say. She reached down and held him tightly.

"Everything has changed for us. Nothing will ever be the same again," he whispered huskily.

Skylar just nodded, sensing his sadness. After a few moments, she sat up and met his gaze. "Duse, I wanted to explain to you about earlier..."

The soft pads of first two fingers touched her lips. "It's okay, Skylar. You don't have to explain. I know how different I seem to you at times, how...alien. But I know how much you care, too. I feel that always."

Skylar shook her head. "No, Duse, you don't understand. It's true. I do feel a little overwhelmed by our differences, at times. But I love everything about you. Even those differences—especially those differences. Duse, do you remember the night when all those images and emotions of you crashed down on me, and I was in so much pain?" She waited while he nodded his head. "When I woke up the next day, one of the things that struck me the most was the way that you had been the one throughout my lifetimes who had borne the full brunt of the pain and the loss. It didn't seem fair to me, Duse. It still doesn't. Do you know I have a clear memory of one of my deaths? I remember your eyes. There was so much love in them, Duse. And you were telling me to let go, and that we would be together soon enough."

Duse's eyes burned as he met her soulful gaze. It was strange, how much it touched him, how much less alone he felt when she shared that memory with him.

"I told myself after that night that I wasn't going to force you to be the only one to bear the pain of our relationship, Duse. Last evening, when I realized what you were saying about the man I was married to so long ago, it came to me that I'd known back then. I'm sorry, Duse. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

Duse looked confused. "I don't understand, Skylar. What have you got to be sorry about?"

"I've always let you take the burden. I think part of me knew what you'd done to stop him from abusing me...as punishment for abusing me. But I didn't want to acknowledge it. I just let your spirit carry the responsibility and the blame. I don't want to do that anymore, Duse. I want to share with you. You've always given me so much pleasure and joy. I've been so selfish." Tears fell freely down her cheeks.

Duse watched her with genuine concern. Skylar just shook her head resolutely, knowing what he was thinking. "No, Duse, I can take it. I'm not going to break. I want to tell you this. I had no right to blame you for what you'd done, or even for considering killing Rolland Ockley. I had no right to condemn you for your ways."

"Skylar, selfish is the last thing in existence that you are." He reached for her, holding her fast. Emotion pulled at his usually rigid features. "I would do much, much more for you than I ever have, and still consider myself to be the luckiest being on the face of the earth for having the privilege of spending time with you, no matter how short. Don't you know that?"

"I know it because I feel the same thing about you, Duse. Things may get difficult for you and for your people in the future."

Duse's expression turned grim as he looked down at her. "Our entire consciousness is changing, Skylar. Bale feels it, too. We have to make a concerted effort to fight it, or this darkness will overwhelm us."

He wasn't ready to broach that uncomfortable topic of Jax with her yet. But several Watchers seemed to be of the opinion that Jax's punishment and sentence should involve him taking an active role in enforcing their laws. They seemed to feel that since Jax had felt the compulsion to break their laws, he may be the ideal one to be forced to take a pledge to uphold them. Twisted logic, perhaps. Giving credit where credit was due to his younger brother, though, Duse had to admit it might not be a bad idea. Jax needed a chance for redemption, and he sensed that he would work hard to try and make up for his mistakes.

But he wasn't going to be telling Jax that for a long, long time.

Skylar saw his unrest and reached up to touch her lips to his in a heartfelt kiss. "I want to share things with you, Duse. I even want to take care of you at times, protect you, just like you've always done with me." Skylar looked into his eyes steadily. "I know how powerful you are, Duse. But there are times when you'll need me."

His dark brow rose in an expression of genuine surprise. Fierceness shone from his magnificent eyes.

"Skylar, you'll never get an argument from me about that."

About the Author

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