



Truth or Dare

By Merris Hawk

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Chapter One

Cameo tugged her hem down as she looked at herself in the full-length mirror. The halter dress was made of soft red silk, held up by one small button at the back of her neck. The short hem showed off her legs and the front was daringly low-cut. Her back was completely bare, and she knew the thin silk jacket wasn't going to provide any warmth. Even the matching red shoes were impractical. Looking herself over again, she frowned at her reflection. She looked like a sex toy and it made her want to change.

Why was she even doing this?

The answer being she owed him. He'd saved her from his own kind once, nearly losing his life in the process. They'd been almost certain they were going to die that night, waiting in the dark for a chance to escape. Cameo had played his game of questions and answers with him like truth or dare. It was the only time she'd ever seen him drop his "asshole" facade and be himself. They'd shared some of the intimate details of their lives and found a question that neither of them could answer. In an impulsive act of lunacy, she'd given him her number and got his promise to call if he ever discovered the answer.

He hadn't called until tonight.

She'd answered her phone and recognized his voice immediately.

"Can Cameo come out to play?"

"Play what?" She'd known better than to just agree with him.

"Meet me at Murphy Park. Play arm candy for a couple of hours. Think you can handle that?"

She didn't like being rushed and he knew it. He was usually a pain in the ass and she knew it.

"Where's the party?" Would he tell her what his plans were?

"Sundown."

The Ash-Born dance club? She thought it over. He needed her help for something, but it wasn't going to be quite the picnic he made it sound like. She knew enough about him to figure that out.

"Tick tock, Cameo. Ten...nine...eight--"

"Okay, I'll meet you there in...two hours." Cameo had ignored the ripple of anticipation; there couldn't be anything too dangerous about wearing a dress for a couple hours.

"One." He disconnected. Some people just had to have the last word. Cameo had kept her sarcasm to herself and went to dig through her closet for something to wear that would fit the 'arm candy' description.

* * *

"Cami, your cab's here!" Lexi's yell carried all the way to Cameo's room.

Lexi was excited for her. Cameo hadn't gone on a date in months -- never mind anything else -- and this was the best excuse she could come up with for

tonight's escapade. She sure as hell wasn't going to offer any other information. She'd told Lexi to mind her own business and maybe this time things would work out.

Yeah, right.

How do you tell a potential boyfriend that he can't come to your place because you live in a secret underground fortress with a bunch of Freaks...or that your best friend turns to stone at dawn every day? Cameo accepted the fact that she couldn't have a normal relationship with a guy and tried not to think about what that meant for her future.

Slipping on the silk jacket, she made her way to the door.

Lexi waited for her and nodded her approval of the outfit, then held up a circle of blue foil.

"Oh, uhh, Lexi, I don't think I'll need that." Cameo side-stepped her friend to avoid the condom.

"Just in case." Lexi tucked it into her coat pocket as Cameo opened the door.

Sex wasn't going to be an issue tonight, but she couldn't tell Lexi the truth. She hustled down the steps and into the cab.

Lexi waved and called after her, "Have a good time, Cami! See you in the morning."

Cameo rolled her eyes and gave her friend a weak smile as the cab pulled away from the house.

Chapter Two

Cameo paid the driver and stood on the sidewalk until the cab was out of

sight. Walking down to the end of the block, she then turned right, heading into the park. She didn't want anyone to know what she was up to tonight, especially her friends. They thought she was going on a date, which wasn't entirely a lie. She'd just didn't tell them that her destination was an Ash-Born club and the date was...Kezred.

Lexi would have a fit if she found out. Damien would be worse, much worse. He might be Lexi's boyfriend in private but everyone else knew him as the leader of the Warders in the area. As a Warder, it was his job to protect the oblivious human population from the vampires that stalked them. Cameo didn't know if he hated Kezred personally--they did know each other--or because he was a vampire and Damien was a Warder. Maybe Damien didn't care which, and she wasn't going to ask anytime soon.

Cameo's knowledge of Warders came from living with Lexi and Damien and from working with the Cry of Souls--a secret underground facility that allowed the Warders to keep watch on the city. Cameo had spent her fair share of time in the hot seat, watching for danger while Damien and Lexi got to go out and kick vampire butt. Being human, she didn't have the strength or durability of her two friends, so it made sense that she stay behind. Truth was, most times she didn't mind, but lately she'd had an itch to get out and do something, even a small something, just to prove to herself that she was still in the land of the living.

That thought made her roll her eyes. She was standing in the park waiting for a vampire, not what she considered 'living', but it promised a little adventure.

Cameo paced slowly across the front of the park, keeping her eyes on her surroundings. What was taking that vampire so long?

Ash-Born. The vampires called themselves Ash-Born, though only they knew why. Cameo made a mental note to avoid saying vampire tonight, or any of the other descriptive words Damien liked to use for them. She'd memorized a few of Damien's favorites while he'd taught her some of what he knew. Their main goal, it seemed, was to rule the planet and everything on it, to have an endless supply of food and entertainment under their control without the restrictions of secrecy.

Cameo didn't doubt Damien's claim that there were thousands of them scattered all over the globe. What she did doubt was the Warders ability to stop them from sinking their fangs into positions of power and making their plan a reality. There were simply too few Warders to get the job done.

The Ash-Born were Mother Nature's dirty little secret. Battle lines had been drawn centuries before Cameo had been born, and conflicts were won or lost in the dark of night with no human alive to witness save a very special few. Only one vampire walked the edge of the blade between the two enemies: Kezred.

Cameo snorted. Danced is more like it.

Kezred enjoyed himself too much to call it walking.

The Warders despised him, the other vampires left him alone, and none of them really knew which side he was on. She'd come to the conclusion that he was on his own side and just liked to piss off everyone who tried to control him.

Young for an Ash-Born--barely a hundred years he'd told her--and yet most other vampires accorded him strange versions of fear and respect. A few months

ago, Kezred had helped her find the key to the Cry of Souls. Tonight, Cameo was paying her debt as arm candy in Murphy Park. There was more to it, she knew. But she didn't dare think about it too much, or she'd turn right around and leave him to it. Whatever 'it' was.

A movement in the shadows made her breath pause and set her heart pounding. She hadn't brought any weapon other than her suruchin, and it was triple-wrapped around her waist like a long silver belt, the weighted ends swinging next to her thigh as she walked. It was nearly useless now. She wouldn't have time to unwrap it before the vampire was on her. A man-sized shadow stepped away from a tree and came toward her.

Cameo knew Ash-Born on sight, they were graceful, predatory and soulless. The figure coming toward her was all of that, but it wasn't Kezred.

Cameo stopped where she was, weighing her options. She could run, but without the vampire's preternatural speed she would be too slow. She reached into her jacket for her cell phone. The approaching figure stopped. Did he think she had a gun?

"Piss off, Fucktard, this one's mine."

Kezred's voice behind her made her jump, and Cameo realized that it was his presence that had given her a reprieve.

The other vampire stared for a few seconds before he turned and walked away. She rounded on Kezred, giving him a disgusted look.

"That was charming."

"Yeah, so I'm a poster boy for the socially deficient. Let's go."

He started walking back toward the street, and Cameo had to take a couple of quick steps to catch up.

"You said arm candy on the phone. I'm assuming that means the dumb blond routine?"

"You're perfect for it."

She pulled up short. "Are you calling me a bimbo?"

"No, bimbos are nice and warm; any man you touched would get frostbite." Kez stopped and looked back. He wore his jackass smile, the one that said; I know this is bullshit, but I make it look good.

"You're such an asshole." Cameo started walking again.

"I try."

She would have gone right past him, but he kept up with her easily.

They moved down the street side-by-side, never touching. Cameo was pissed. First off, because from the moment she'd agreed to help, she'd felt like the word 'sucker' was printed on her forehead. Secondly, because the pissier she got, the happier Kezred seemed to be. She'd known he was a sarcastic pain in the ass, but she'd agreed to help anyway. He'd stuck his neck out for her so she owed him. And owing him meant that tonight she was walking down the street in three-inch heels and a dress that barely covered her assets.

Why had she put the thing on? Because it was the only dress in the closet that didn't look like it was for a funeral, that's why. The frivolous result of giving in to Lexi's peer pressure.

Kez didn't seem to notice. He'd ditched his usual outfit of jeans, boots and t-

shirt, and replaced them with a charcoal grey suit and silk shirt. His long cinnamon hair was tied back with a silver clip. The boots had been replaced with shiny black shoes. Even the ever-present leather trench coat was nowhere in sight. So they were both playing dress-up tonight.

Chapter Three

Kezred stopped so suddenly that Cameo wobbled a bit on the heels.
“What is it?”

"We're here. Don't talk, don't look, and don't smile. Just stick your Ice Princess nose in the air and ignore everything but me." Kezred placed himself at her side and gave her his elbow; it took a second for Cameo to realize what he was doing and curl her hand around his forearm. He whispered something, and she felt the hair on her arms stand up as a ripple of power washed over them.

"What was that?" The sensation passed over her and faded.

"Our disguise. Unfortunately, it will only cover your appearance, not your voice or your scent." Kezred reached into an inside pocket and came out with a perfume bottle. "Here, it's the same thing she wears. It'll keep you from smelling like a free buffet."

"*Who* wears it?" Cameo sniffed the cap; it had a slight musk smell and reminded her of sweetgrass. She sprayed her dress with the stuff and offered it back.

"Keep it, I don't smell like food." He didn't bother to answer her question.

"Gee, thanks, I feel so much better now." Cameo stuffed the bottle in her pocket.

He led her down a set of steps to a grey metal door with a peephole and knocked twice. Cameo felt suddenly nervous. She knew someone watched them through that tiny circle of glass. The door opened wide after a few moments. A tall, lean man stood just inside, and he waved a hand to usher them into a short hallway, closing the door behind them.

She could hear muffled thumping and remembered they were going to a nightclub, meaning lots of sound. Kezred opened the inner door and she knew the door, the walls, probably the entire lower floor of the building was soundproof.

The faint sound she'd heard from the hall was actually a pounding beat of techno music that thundered through her bones. Kezred walked right into the press of bodies with her along for the ride. The people moved enough to let them through to the other side of the dance floor. Small tables and chairs crowded close together and beyond them were seven curtained alcoves. Five of them had the curtains closed; the middle two were open and occupied. Circular bench seats upholstered in black vinyl held men and women sporting designer clothing and expensive jewelry.

Every pair of eyes at those two alcove tables watched them approach. Cameo thought she could tell the difference between patron and enforcer. One type seemed to project a bored indifference, and the other had that tense, menacing posture common to bodyguards and bouncers.

They stopped a good ten feet away from the tables and Kezred flexed the muscles in his arm, telling her it was time to play. He didn't bow his head so much as he nodded to those at the tables. Cameo copied him and they waited while the spoiled Elite of the Ash-Born studied them. What if they saw through the disguise? She recognized a few of the faces; though she wasn't technically a Warder, she'd helped the Warders fight them off before.

She would be recognized easily if they tested the illusion. Her white-blond hair would be a dead giveaway, really dead. Kezred wasn't powerful; still, he seemed fearless. As if nothing could touch him or he truly didn't care what

happened tonight as long as something *did* happen. He was reckless and unpredictable. Cold, uncertain fear made her eyes widen and her breath quicken. Had she put her life in the hands of a madman who valued nothing?

"State your business." A black haired man at the back of the closest table raised one thick eyebrow.

"We have come to try the Dawning Stone." Kezred's voice was lower, raspy and quiet like his vocal chords were damaged.

Cameo recognized the voice and realized exactly who they were supposed to be! She nearly said the names out loud. Squeezing his forearm, she let him know she had figured it out and just how much the knowledge disturbed her. Was he insane?

"Wait over there until you are summoned." The black haired man looked away and flicked a ring-laden hand at them in dismissal.

Kezred stayed in character, smoothly turning his body into hers so that Cameo's face was blocked from their view, hiding her shocked expression.

"Come. We will entertain ourselves." He maintained that raspy voice as he lifted a hand to the small of her back and urged her to turn and walk into the crowded dance floor.

They moved forward into the crush of bodies and Kezred's hand slipped to her waist. Cameo's brain was still spinning about their disguise when the subject came back into focus...the Dawning Stone.

Holy batshit! She'd heard of the thing, and she wasn't even a vampire--Ash-Born--whatever. It was rumored to be powerful and dangerous. Why was there always a 'dangerous' when there was a 'powerful'? If the rumors were half true, the Stone could give vampires the power to withstand sunlight and to stay awake during the daylight hours. There had to be some sort of drawback or the city would be crowded with Ash-Born all day, and all night, too. Why was it here tonight? Was something special going on? Warlords were the guards and enforcers of the Elites. Were they disguised as Tanderious and Silka for a special occasion?

Cameo leaned toward Kezred to speak, and he turned quickly to face her. His silver-smoke eyes warned her not to say the words out loud. He laid one finger across his lips, then hers. The light touch distracted her long enough for him to give her a push to get them moving again.

He never touched anyone. Not if he could avoid it. She'd noticed that particular trait when she'd first run into him. He was slick enough about his aversion that you had to pay attention to notice it. His hands would be in his pockets, or holding something, or he was too far away for any sort of casual contact. Now he'd actually touched her three times in less than a minute. Was this part of the role he played tonight? It was unsettling, and so rare, that Cameo couldn't help but focus on the feel of his hand pressing against her back.

They made their way through the crowd to another hallway that led to a private corner. With his back to the wall he stroked a hand over her cheek, sliding fingers into the hair at her nape to pull her towards him. He widened his stance so that she could stand between his knees. He tilted his head sideways to whisper in her ear. Anyone looking their way would assume they were doing

more than talking. "You need to stay close for the illusion to work."

"This is crazy." She whispered the words into his ear and was glad the Ash-Born were behind her. This was the fourth time he'd touched her, and she was still a little stunned at Kezred's idea of a disguise. He'd covered them with the illusion of Tanderious and Silka, the Ash-Born Warlords of the western cities. The Elites at the table hadn't dared to probe the minor illusion they wore; such an action could be considered an attack. No one wanted to die over something as simple as an illusion of appearance. They would perceive it as Silka's vanity and leave it alone. Only Kezred had big enough balls to try and pull this off.

"If you'd told me this earlier I would never have come." Cameo's hands lay flat on his chest as she whispered in his ear. The muscles under her palms were hard under the soft silk. It bothered her that she noticed.

"I know." He smiled.

As she felt the movement of his lips on her ear, goose bumps spread down her arms and she stiffened. Anyone else would have let it go. Kezred's quiet chuckle sent color racing up her face.

"Well, well, the Ice Princess has a soft spot." He breathed the words across her skin, getting the same involuntary response.

"So do you." Cameo shifted her weight to one foot so she could raise her knee in front of Kezred's crotch.

He drew back enough to sniff the air. "I smell fear."

"Have you noticed where we are? You should be afraid, too." Cameo let her leg drop; she wasn't going to knee him in the nuts here. She'd save it for later.

"That's not who you're afraid of." He lifted his head to look into her face.

"Who? I'm not afraid of you." At the moment she wanted to sock him.

"No, not me. Yourself." A half smile turned up the corners of his mouth.

"You don't know a da--" Kezred laid two fingers across her lips, startling her into silence.

"I know *you*. Always in control, always closed off behind your walls." He let her move his fingers away from her mouth as he laced their fingers together. "You're scared shitless to let anyone in, afraid to care, because if you do it's a weapon."

"That's not true." Cameo denied it even as her mind searched for any reason to make it a lie. How much did he know, or guess?

Kezred's silver-smoke eyes flashed at her, the irises brightening for a second, a sign of strong emotion. He was being serious, giving up a little bit of himself at the same time he took a little bit of her. "Keep hidden behind your walls, Cameo. Eventually you'll suffocate in the dark and no one will know."

She realized when his eyes met hers that he knew, because he lived with that same closed in, lost darkness. She knew the familiar sense of being alone in a crowd, unwilling to risk another blow to an already damaged heart. A rush of painful sympathy went through her.

"What happens if you take a chance?" He dipped his head so that they shared a breath between them. "What happens if you let yourself feel for just a while?"

Kezred's face was so close she had to move the last inch to touch his mouth

with her own, to show that she understood. He froze against her mouth for a half a second before he kissed her back. His tongue pressed into her mouth, tasting her. He lifted his head after a few moments to see her face, to search her expression while his own was so guarded, as if he wore a mask.

Cameo gave him the same jackass smile he'd used before. "Now who's afraid?" She wasn't sure if she meant it as a question or a statement. Kezred took it as an invitation.

His lips touched hers and stayed there, sharing her breath. His hands kneaded her hips and pulled her forward to press against his body.

She felt his erection through the silk of his slacks. The beat of the music pulsed through their bodies. She didn't pull away--no blushes this time. As wrong as it would be in the light of day, she had found comfort with the enemy. A need they both felt--to let down the barricades and be a creature of the moment. To be able to show need without any risk of censure or damage. They didn't know each other well enough to throw emotional stones.

Cameo's hand rubbed a path to his neck, where his skin was exposed and warm. She ran the pads of her fingers up his throat, catching his chin to change the angle and get a better taste. A low rumble of sound, almost a purr, vibrated through his chest and into her mouth, causing an answering rush of heat that spread outward from her navel. Cameo felt muscles contract low in her body, and her mouth let go of his to pull in air.

His lips touched the corner of her mouth. "I can smell you."

A shiver started at her spine and came out her mouth. She licked the soft skin of his bottom lip and drew it into her mouth. Her fingers explored beneath the jacket, and she felt a thrill of satisfaction when he sucked in air as her fingers traced his abdomen, making the muscles clench. He returned the feeling, sliding his palms over her backside and kneading his fingers into her flesh. She could feel the heat of his hands through her dress. He pulled her hips into his and raised her up just enough to get the hem of the short dress out of the way.

"You are summoned." One of the vampires stopped a few feet away.

Cameo's eyes went wide for just a moment before she pressed her flaming face to Kezred's shirt and tried to regain her usual cool composure. She'd forgotten where they were, the danger they were in. She'd been completely distracted.

Kezred's hands shifted from her ass to tug her hem back into place. It made her look up at him; he was usually anything but helpful. He licked his lips and Cameo couldn't help but watch.

"We come." Kezred's words were for the servant, his eyes were on Cameo.

She caught the double meaning easily enough.

Chapter Four

They followed the vampire to the back of the hallway and up a flight of stairs. The stairs led to a corridor with several doors and an elevator. All three of them

got in and the vamp hit the down button. Curious, Cameo looked at Kezred, but he only patted her rear. Did the real Silka put up with this much crap from Tanderious?

The elevator bumped to a stop and they walked into a cavernous room. Every eye turned toward them, except two. They belonged to a male figure curled on the floor, holding his hands over his bloody face and keening. The Ash-Born from the elevator walked up to the injured vampire, knelt down to pick him up, and carried him back the way they had come. The few other Elites present ignored the man and spoke quietly to each other. They were just far enough away from the elevator to be considered in the room.

A sneer and a jut of a chin by one of the Elites waved them forward to a wrought-iron stand at the other end of the egg-shaped room. Apparently even the Elites didn't want to stand too close to the Stone. The elevator doors closed on the only exit to be seen, and Cameo realized just how much trouble she was in. She finally noticed the pulsing energy in the room that made the air feel thick. Kezred's muscles tightened under her hand. He seemed to be straining to move smoothly, to keep up with her.

Was it because of the Dawning Stone? There was a list of scary 'I don't knows' that scrolled across her brain. There was nothing else in the room that she could see. The Stone had to be the reason.

She tried to be unobtrusive as she pulled him along with her. They made it to the stand as evenly as they could and stood there.

Cameo tried to whisper as quietly as she could. "What do--?"

Kezred's eyebrow went up and she stopped talking. The Elites couldn't see their faces, but they could still hear them. A wicked smirk slid across his face as she waited for him to show her what came next. He had no fear of death, punishment or pain, she was certain. He cared nothing for the rules of the Ash-Born or the Warders. Everything he did was for his own reasons, and everyone else be damned. Cameo wished she had even a little of that courage. To be so strong as to tell the whole world to go to hell once in a while. To do as she wanted no matter how wild it might be.

Kezred was like a taste of that power. He exuded the self-confidence and strength to stand alone and not care about consequences.

As she looked down at the Dawning Stone's clear amber color, she wondered if she could borrow enough of Kezred's power to make it through the next fifteen minutes.

"Together." He whispered to her.

He placed his palm over the back of her hand and lifted their hands to hover just above the Stone. Cameo resisted as her fingers neared the Stone. This thing was supposedly dangerous.

"It can't hurt you, you're human."

She barely heard the words. Her hand touched it. Nothing. She let out the breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. The Stone was just barely warm to the touch. Not what she'd expected. Truth, she'd expected burning heat or electricity or some other horrible effect that would leave her in the same state as the man with the bloody face.

Kezred's quick grin let her know that he could tell how she felt. Slowly, he wrapped their fingers around the Stone, his own never quite touching it. He carefully turned their hands over, lifting the stone and tipping his sleeve forward while flexing the muscles in his arm.

A rounded, perfect copy of the stone rolled into the holder and Kezred used the ruse of a kiss to move their joined hands to his coat. Cameo stood speechless and horrified. They were stealing one of the objects of power right in front of the Elites! Kezred's lips touched hers and she wanted to draw back, tell him the game was over and she didn't want to play. It was too late to back out now, she knew, but the stakes were so high!

Kezred saw everything written plainly on her face and his kiss brought her out of her state of shock and into a whole new area of embarrassment. He moved the stone to a pocket of his coat but he kept their hands joined, pressing her fingers into the silk slacks over his groin.

She felt his hardness and tipped her head back to glare up at him. She was going to be tortured and killed because Kezred got his jollies by stealing from the Elites! All they needed now was to have the real Warlords pop in for a visit. Cameo curled her nails into his flesh. Better to be angry than petrified by fear.

Kez pulled her hand away. His low chuckle rolled through the room as he kept his eyes fixed on her. One eyebrow lifted in question. Was she going to give them away now...or play the game to the end?

Cameo's answer was a smile that showed her teeth without being the least bit friendly. Her eyes promised dire retribution if they made it out alive.

Kezred's smirk turned into a big, happy grin. He tucked her hand into his elbow again and faced the gathered Elites. "The Stone has accepted us, we will return to the hunt." He used that same raspy voice that gave Cameo shivers. The Elites only nodded and went back to their talk. Warlords were beneath the notice of the Elites unless they wanted action.

Cameo thought the Elites were making a mistake, but she wasn't about to correct them. If the Warlords turned on their snooty masters it was all good for the Warders. A fight among the Ash-Born would keep them too busy to cause trouble for anyone else, right? Now that they'd "passed" whatever test was expected it was time to get out.

They walked back across the chamber with Cameo doing most of the work and Kezred keeping up as best he could. The elevator seemed miles away, and by the time they finally got in, Cameo was nearly gasping with the effort to breathe normally. She hit the button and leaned on the wall next to Kez. Her mouth felt dry and her hands were sweaty. His skin was paler than usual, and a faint sheen of sweat beaded his forehead.

The Dawning Stone had to be the reason; it was draining his strength just being close to it.

The elevator stopped and the doors slid open. Three of the enforcers stood ready to enter, and Cameo tensed as Kezred made eye contact with each of them, daring them to do something. They stepped aside and waited for Cameo and Kezred to leave the elevator so they could get on.

She held her breath when one of the Ash-Born behind her sniffed the air and

said, "Human."

They were so close to escaping! Cameo forced her features into a feral smile and looked over her shoulder at the three vampires. They watched as she licked her lips like she'd just had a taste of something savory. One of them smiled back as another hit the button and the doors closed again. Cameo let out a sigh of relief and tried to make everything look normal and casual as she helped Kezred through the crowd and out the door to the street. The doorman let them out and Cameo felt the tingle of fading power as they made their way up the steps and down the sidewalk.

"Stop, wait." Kezred stilled his feet, and Cameo had to stop or drop him.

"What?" Cameo looked around. They were alone at the edge of the park.

"There's a pouch in there." He pointed at a trash can chained to a bench. "It will hide the stone from them."

She didn't have to ask who *they* were. As soon as the stone was discovered missing, the Elites would tear the club apart and then go hunting for their own Warlords.

Cameo slowly worked Kezred to the nearest tree, leaning him against the trunk. The trash can was not her idea of a perfect hiding place, but she couldn't see much of anything beyond her nose in the semi-dark. She lifted the lid and carefully reached inside.

The feel of newspaper came first, then something leathery and soft. "Please be the pouch. Digging in garbage is so not on my list of fun things to do." The muttered words were almost a prayer. The glow from the streetlight was just enough to make out the shape of the bag. Cameo put the lid back on the trash can and returned to Kezred.

His head was back, resting against the trunk and his eyes were closed. Darkness moved over his face as the leaves swayed in a light breeze. Cameo stared, fascinated by the play of shadow on that too-handsome face.

His eyes opened slowly, like he was coming awake. One side of his mouth turned up in a half smile.

"Something I can do for you?"

She didn't even want to think about what he could do for her--to her--if she let him.

Cameo held up the pouch and ignored the blush spreading across her skin.

"Where's the stone?"

Chapter Five

"You'll have to search me."

His sideways grin had her rolling her eyes. He looked down to open his jacket and started to tip over.

Cameo caught him and had to fight to get him upright. His greater height and weight didn't make it easy to hold him and search at the same time. She pushed his hands aside and ran her hands over his pockets. She felt the lump that was the Stone on his right side. Using her left shoulder to hold him against the tree, she stuffed her hand in his pocket and found it empty.

"What the hell?" She moved her fingers around and found a slit in the back of the pocket that the Stone had slipped through. She unbuttoned his jacket and reached inside to find the Stone through the thin silk of the lining and push it back to where she could get to it.

"I've got it, just hold on one more minute." Cameo worked the stone back into the pocket. Kezred slid sideways and fell, taking her with him. Her hand was trapped in his pocket, pulling her down across him so that she landed with her elbow in his gut and her knees in the wet grass.

"Dammit, Kez! Don't you dare pass out on me." The stone rolled into her palm and she pushed off his chest to drop it into the pouch.

"Kezred." Cameo watched the frown form on his face but his eyes stayed shut.

"Kez!" She shook his shoulder and he frowned some more, finally cracking his eyes open. She held up the pouch so he could see it before stuffing it into her own pocket.

"Beautiful." He whispered as his hand came up to feel the back of his head.

Cameo pulled him into a sitting position and then stood up, offering him a hand.

He lifted an eyebrow in the faint light, "Nice undies."

She took a step back and glared at him. "Can you try not to be an asshole for five minutes?"

"Sure, which five?" Even half dead, he had to have the last word.

She stayed where she was as he got to his feet, only moving forward to steady him when it looked like he was going to fall over again. Cameo growled under her breath as she draped his arm over her shoulders.

"Where are we going now?" That wasn't what she'd meant to say. Their little adventure was over. They'd made it out alive. And the damn 'arm candy' shoes were killing her arches. Why didn't she just leave?

He pointed across the dark expanse of the park to the apartments on the other side. "In there, number one-fourteen."

Cameo helped him across the park; his strength was returning at the same rate it had left now that the stone was safely cocooned in the pouch in her pocket. By the time they reached the apartment he was back to normal. Kezred opened the door and walked in under his own power, leaving Cameo to make up her own mind. She knew if she stepped in it was her own decision. The curiosity was too much. She had to have a look around.

Inside the small space everything looked absurdly average.

Kezred walked into the bedroom and started pulling off his clothes. The jacket hit the floor first, then the tie.

Cameo saw his usual clothing lying over the back of a kitchen chair, except for his trench coat; it hung neatly from a hook on the closet door.

"What are you going to do with it?" She could just see into the bedroom from where she stood.

His fingers worked their way down the silk shirt, opening buttons as he scuffed his shoes off. He pulled the shirt off and shrugged, "Nothing, you can have it if you want it."

Cameo stared at him as he pulled the silver clip out of his hair. He was giving it up? Just like that? After everything they'd just done to get it...and he didn't want it? Kezred's hands went to his belt and paused. He looked at her.

She realized she'd been watching him undress while she was thinking over what he'd said. His fingers caressed the metal buckle and her imagination supplied the mental image of those fingers caressing her skin instead. Her heartbeat increased. *It's only a physical reaction*, she told herself. The logical response to staring at a half-naked man after surviving a dangerous encounter. She didn't need to consider adrenaline-induced fantasies.

Shit! Was she going to do this every time something intimate or emotional came up? Ignore everything she felt and reduce it to simple physics, cold logic, and sterile reason? When had it become so hard to live in the moment? Why was she denying herself the need to feel, to do what her body urged her to do? Was she going to hold everyone at arms length forever just so she didn't get hurt? Was she going to put everything else first forever? What about what she really wanted?

"I thought you'd be gone by now." The sound of his voice brought her mind back to what her eyes were watching. He slid the leather out of the buckle. His eyes were wary, his movements slow and precise.

She could almost hear him thinking, wondering if she was up to something.

"So did I." She watched the belt slide free and drop to the carpet. Heat swirled under her skin, gathering in her center. Common sense said that she should go, she didn't need this. She could survive just fine on her own.

"Are you going to stay, Cameo?"

The sound of his voice as he said her name gave her goose bumps. The words he'd spoken earlier came back to her. She knew with sudden clarity that she could survive alone behind her walls, but she couldn't *live*.

Walking through the doorway into his bedroom felt like jumping off the high dive. The decision was made, no more objections tonight. She wanted the intimacy back. Tomorrow might have its own consequences, but she was taking this for herself.

"I'm not going anywhere."

She reached out slowly, brushing the tips of her fingers over the smooth skin of his shoulder, up to his neck to tangle in the thick fall of his cinnamon hair. His hands stilled at his sides, face blank except for his eyes, there was a need there that matched her own and just a hint of fear.

Cameo rubbed her lips across his, sharing his breath. "I smell fear." She said his words back to him, feeling him reach up to slide the jacket off her shoulders.

He moved, drawing back from her mouth, repeating *her* words back to her, wearing a cocky smirk that curved his lips. "I'm not afraid of you." He stepped sideways and walked a slow half circle to stand behind her as his fingers opened

the clip that held her suruchin in place. The silver chain fell on the carpet. Kezred stayed at her back, and she could feel the heated length of his body so near her own.

"Not of me, of yourself," she managed. Her voice sounded breathless to her own ears. Cameo held still as his hands touched her shoulders and moved her hair aside. His breath was warm on the back of her neck and she couldn't help the shiver that ran up her spine.

"You don't know what I'm afraid of." Kezred's voice was a near whisper.

His hands tensed for a moment, making Cameo wonder if he was going to try and feed from her. Instead she felt the pressure around her neck from the collar of the dress as his mouth closed around the button.

"I know *you*," she said. She felt him bite down and heard his teeth snap off the button. She had to swallow before she could talk. "Hiding behind your walls, always in control." The dress started to slide and her hands came up to catch it.

He leaned into her, flush with her curves. His hands covered hers on the thin silk. "What happens if you take a chance? What happens if you let yourself feel for just a little while?"

She couldn't remember if there were any more words; she didn't care.

Cameo let him lift her hands, allowing the silk sheath to slide off her body. She started to turn, but he pressed her hands back to her chest, his teeth biting down carefully on the back of her neck.

Stay.

Her entire body tensed; she didn't want him to feed. She wasn't here for that. He let go and ran his tongue over the bite, tasting his way down to her shoulder. Her eyes closed to focus on the tingles of electricity that shot through her as his teeth nipped at her skin and his tongue followed, laving the sensitized areas as he explored. Cameo could feel the length of his erection through her panties and his slacks. She ground backward with her hips, smiling when a growl rumbled through his chest. The length of his erection prodded against her panties through his slacks, and she didn't hide her triumphant purr.

He let go of her hands to slide his fingers into the waistband of her lacy underwear. She drew in a gasp of air as his thumbs brushed the inside of her hips in a feathery caress. The tickling sensations made her hold her breath and she felt his smile against her flesh. Kezred's mouth left her shoulder to trail down her back. His hands stroked their way down her legs, taking her panties to the floor. She jumped as he bit down on the swell of her ass, then he let go and licked the pain away.

The little bit of pain eased into a warm burn when he ran his tongue over the spot. The difference between the heat of his mouth and the cool air made her shiver once, all over. How far did he think he was going to go with those teeth? She'd never let anyone explore her body like he did, with his hands and his mouth. What did he see? Could he hear her breath pause when his hand slipped between her thighs to touch her?

Everything else faded into the background as the pads of his fingers traced over her flesh. Quick strokes of his fingers teased her hips into rocking forward to match the movement of his hand. Her eyes were half shut, her legs were

shaking. She reached to find some part of him to hold on to, she didn't want to go the rest of the way alone.

Cameo had to twist around to get a handful of his hair, pulling his head back to look up and meet her eyes.

"My turn." The meaning was clear enough that he understood she wasn't going to let him take over; they would share this as much as they were able. Kezred stood up slowly and Cameo used the upward motion to run her fingertips over his neck and down his chest. The skin there was as smooth as her own until she neared the short, dark hairs that made a faint path down into his pants. She didn't see a button on the slacks so she avoided having to deal with it. Curling her fingers in the waistband, she made the request sound like an order. "Get them off."

He tipped his head down to kiss her as he freed the button and pulled down the zipper. Cameo tugged the silk away from his body, releasing his mouth to press her lips to his chin, jaw, neck and collarbone. Her eyes rolled downward to watch what her hands could feel. There was nothing underneath but skin. She hid a snort. She should have known he'd go commando. Now she could see what she'd only felt before, and the urge to touch was strong and immediate. She lightly wrapped her fingers around his upright erection. Feeling his body tense up against the back of her hands, she looked up to see his eyes half shut, totally immersed in the feel of her hands on him.

The knowledge that she put that look on his face made her blood hot; she carefully touched her lips to his, the barest brush of an offering. Kezred's lips were soft under hers, and the tip of her tongue slipped out to taste his full lower lip. He smoothed one hand around her hip to tug her in closer, effectively trapping her hands between their bodies and giving him control. His other hand traced up her side as he accepted the kiss she offered.

Cameo's nails dug in lightly along his shaft, giving fair warning of what she could do to him. Kezred's skin jumped under her touch, and his breath came out in a quiet laugh. Taking a step back, he captured her hands and raised them to his shoulders. In an almost effortless motion, he lifted her up so she could wrap her legs around his hips. Three steps to the bed, and she felt every one as their hips ground together. He sank to his knees on the mattress and leaned forward until she was lying under his body.

His mouth dipped to hover over hers, barely making contact before he moved lower. Her eyes closed as his mouth found the sensitive spot just under her collarbone. He teased the spot for a moment before his lips traveled down and touched the swell of her breast. Cameo drew in a shallow breath and let it out as a sigh. She waited, anticipating his next action. When he simply let his forehead rest on her chest, her eyes opened in surprise. She tilted his chin upward, and found his eyes were dark, steel grey and his breathing was harsh.

He watched her with a predator's gaze; Cameo had to will herself to hold still.

She slid her fingers into his hair, smoothing the long strands away from his face, hoping the slow movement would distract him. He let his eyelids drift shut as her fingers massaged his scalp. When he looked up, the silver-smoke color of his eyes was back. He shifted his body forward; she felt his sex brush the dark

blond curls at her center. Impatient, Cameo lifted her hips, trying to make him move, but he refused to be rushed.

Kezred's arms bent so he could reach her mouth, "Do you trust me?"

She gave him the only honest answer she had, "As much as you trust me."

One cinnamon eyebrow lifted at her answer and a smile flirted with the corners of his mouth before he kissed her. She kissed him back, letting him feel how frustrated she felt with his teasing. He gave in to her urging, moving so slowly she wanted to scream. Her nails dug into his shoulders as she growled her irritation at him. He pushed one last time and buried himself inside her. Cameo could feel every inch as her muscles contracted around him. If he didn't move she knew she would lose her mind!

He lifted his hips, nearly leaving her before he plunged in again, Cameo's soft moan caressing his cheek. Her legs cradled his hips to keep him from going too far. He moved again, setting a rhythm of slow strokes that built in speed till she was squirming under him. Then he slowed down again. Cameo was so close, her entire body tensed, but every time she was ready to go, he could feel it and would slow his pace.

"Kez...dammit!" Cameo burned with her need, and her heart pounded in time with his.

His hips stilled, making her groan, "You think you can do better?" Kezred lowered his full weight on her and rolled them both so that he was under her.

She could swear he felt bigger from this position, like he could penetrate deeper. She rolled her hips forward and back, watching his face. His breathing quickened and she repeated the motion just to see the heat build in his eyes.

Now she knew the same wicked pleasure he'd felt with his teasing. His fingertips traced her ribs until his palms could cup her breasts. She wanted to take her time, enjoy her new sense of control, but her body wasn't listening. Kezred's hips lifted to meet hers and his hands gripped her hips as she rode him. She braced her palms on his chest, feeling the pounding beat of his heart as he matched her pace and drove her over the top in shuddering ripples of release. His entire body went rigid under her as he came in one last thrust.

Cameo stretched her body over his, trying to catch her breath, still feeling the spasms pulse through them both. Kezred's arms held her there, one hand idly stroking down her spine. She felt tired, satisfied and a little self-conscious now. Shifting slightly, she felt him move inside her. His hands drifted down to the small of her back, holding her where she lay. Cameo barely heard the whispered word.

"Stay."

She wanted to look at his face badly; the only thing that kept her cheek resting on his shoulder was the knowledge that he would be able to read her expression too. They shared a need to be accepted and understood, but anything beyond that implied a relationship. That wasn't possible for them. They were on two different sides of a preternatural war that wasn't going to end anytime soon...but just for tonight...

Cameo snuggled into his body heat, closing her eyes when his arms wrapped around her again. Without meaning to, she drifted into sleep.

Chapter Six

She woke slowly to the feel of smooth muscle under her cheek and the scent of warm skin. It took a moment for her to realize her cell phone was ringing. Kezred lay totally still beneath her. His heartbeat was faint and slow under her ear and his breaths were shallow. Cameo knew through friends that vampires

were torpid during the day. She reached for her jacket on the floor and felt Kezred's arms slip to the mattress as she sat up. He'd held her while she slept. A part of her heart was touched by that gesture; the part that didn't see him as a danger to everyone, including himself.

She managed to answer before the message service picked up. "Hello?"

"Cameo, this is Damian."

Oh! She carefully got off of Kez and padded into the bathroom to talk to him. She couldn't sit on Kezred and talk to Lexi's fiancé at the same time, she just couldn't.

"Alexzina asked me to call you if you didn't return before dawn."

Embarrassed heat rushed up her face as she realized he thought she'd gone on a date last night, and he'd guessed why she hadn't come home. He'd said Alexzina, not Lexi; he was pissed. She looked at herself in the mirror, her hair was a mess, the white-blonde strands hung around her shoulders and there was something... She moved her hair aside and saw the red mark just under her collarbone. He'd given her a hickey!

"Cameo?"

"I'm here. I'm just getting ready to head home."

"Do you need a ride?"

"No! No, I'm fine, really. I'll be back soon, don't worry about me."

"All right, I'll see you soon." Damian disconnected and Cameo was left with the impression that he would come looking for her if she didn't return soon. Damian treated her as family and took his duty to his family very seriously. She went searching for her clothes.

Her dress was only useful as a skirt now; without the button the top wouldn't stay up. Kezred's black shirt solved the problem. She slipped it on and tied the ends in a knot to hold up the skirt. With her jacket on top, it almost looked like she planned the outfit.

The odd weight in her pocket reminded her that she still had the Dawning Stone. She knew she wasn't going to leave it for Kezred to play with. What *would* he do with it? He hadn't actually touched it when they'd taken it. Could it do worse things than sapping his strength? What if it made him more powerful?

As peaceful and innocent as he looked lying on the bed, she knew he was just the opposite. She would have to find a way to explain the Stone without mentioning Kezred. She could deal with Damian chewing her out for having a one night stand, but she couldn't deal with him finding out it was with Kez. Damian would go hunting for him, and that was something she didn't want to think about. Standing over him now, Cameo was jolted with the realization that she cared what happened to him. She didn't want him to get hurt because she'd taken advantage of what he'd offered.

"Kez." She nudged his shoulder. Nothing. She used both hands to shake him, "Kez!" Still nothing. He was completely out. She could do anything to him now and he would never know; or would he? Cameo thought over the options and finally decided that if she wouldn't appreciate someone messing with her, he wouldn't either. She pulled the bedspread up and tucked it around his shoulders. It was time to go. She walked to the door and paused with her hand on the knob.

If this was the only time she ever got to come out from behind her walls...?

She walked back to the bed and leaned over, laying a gentle kiss on his lips. "Thanks." She locked the door as she left and called for a cab from the other side of the park. She never got to see Kezred's eyes open or hear his reply, "Anytime."

His fingers searched next to the bed until he found what he was after. He held the button up. A wicked smile changed his features from handsome to sinful.

"Beautiful." Everything was going just as planned.