

WILLA OKATI

The Brotherhood 3:
The Dragon's Tongue

Loose Id

Praise for the writing of Willa Okati

The Brotherhood: Amour Magique

What an intriguing story to start a series with! Ms. Okati has come up with a novel idea of an incubus who needs friends and wants to help them. But I'm not surprised, her stories are always creative and unique. I can't wait for the next book.

-- *Joyfully Reviewed*

With a unique plot and a host of sexy characters, *The Brotherhood: Amour Magique* is a winner... From humor to intrigue, to sexual sophistication, this is a first-class read.

-- Nancy Jackson, *Coffee Time Romance*

The Finest Line 1: The Sighting

Cleverly written, with plenty of witty charm, readers will enjoy the first installment of *The Finest Line* series, *The Sighting*.

-- Patricia Green, *Romance Reviews Today*

Steamy and soul-stirring, *The Sighting* chronicles the ebb and flow of the relationships of at least two couples and takes readers along on their struggles. Betrayal and malice also make an appearance, making *The Sighting* a suspenseful read.

-- Michelle, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

Amour Magique and *The Sighting* are now available from Loose Id.

THE BROTHERHOOD 3: THE DRAGON'S TONGUE

Willa Okati

LooseId
www.loose-id.com

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * * * *

This book is rated:



For substantial explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (homoerotic sex).

The Brotherhood 3: The Dragon's Tongue

Willa Okati

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-29
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

Copyright © January 2006 by Willa Okati

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared in any form, including, but not limited to printing, photocopying, faxing, or emailing without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC.

ISBN 1-59632-220-9

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Olivia Wong
Cover Artist: Sinamin

Dedication

To A.D., now and forever my Muse.

Prologue

Dreams are strange and frightening creatures. Far more alive than one might think. The night mare is a true beast, thundering through the heads of those who have never lived, those unable to ever die, and everyone caught in between.

Not a horse -- or not *just* a horse. The night mare takes the shape which pleases it best. She can be a he, a they, a we, an it, a legion. A stallion or a dragon or a snake. The form chosen always reflects her prey's darkest fears.

She is a true predator, knowing exactly where to strike. Never a killing blow, of course, but a scratch infused with poison. Toxins designed to linger and haunt even in the waking world.

And contrary to common lore, the dream beast also has particular favorites, one of whom was Collin, by day a stockbroker and by night, in secret, a member of the idiot incubus Liam's "Brotherhood." The night mare despised Liam. He continued to steal all her best toys, and she could do nothing to stop him.

Therefore, while it lasted, she would enjoy what time she had remaining.

Collin, alone in his bed, was her target of the moment. He hated dreams. Beneath his carefully polished surface, the wreckage of his mind was more to the night mare's taste than a field of charred wheat stalks.

Such a host of bad memories to draw from!

The night mare keened into the chilly night as she touched his mind.

Think back, Collin. Far back as you can. Remember being happy.

Yes. There.

"Tell me, if you can. Is there anything better than lying here, together, on a day like this?"

Toss. Turn. Shift. Remember ...

"Not all businessmen are born with sticks up their asses, Collin."

"Mmm." Collin rolled to his left, nuzzling a messy kiss into his lover's sweat-damp ribs. "Fortunately, the men I think worth getting to know like having other things inserted there." He trailed the tip of his tongue across the length of a long bone. "Deeply, wetly, forcefully inserted."

He ran a hand down his own chest, imagining that the broad swathe of sunlight they lay in soaked into his muscles. Feeding the fire that burned inside him. The fire he shared with the ones he chose to fuck. A lust for life, a taste for sex, and power to reach out and take whatever he wanted. Whoever he desired.

Once upon a time.

Moan. Cry out. Whimper in your sleep, little man.

Collin made a point of several things when it came to his love life.

Play hard to get so they come running.

Be a mystery no one can resist trying to figure out.

Decide who and what he wanted in his own time, and run his prey to ground.

Drink deep of all his chosen partners had to offer, then leave them dry while they still loved him. Still wanted more.

Never go back. Never walk into a trap. Never get tied down.

He lived his life by those rules.

Not anymore.

Turn. Thrash.

Another memory ...

Collin stretched, basking in the light and heat.

"Prick," his lover grumbled. "Here I am perishing from the heat, and you? You're like a lizard basking on a rock."

"Lizard? I'd say a snake. A python. How about a dragon? I could do a dragon." Collin raised his hips and ran a hand down his own body, loosely circling his cock. He'd been erect and ready for a while now, but felt lazy in the warmth of the day.

Anticipation always made arousal sweeter.

"Maybe I just want to play by myself. I know what gets me off better than you do."

"Yeah, right, Collin. Which would be why you brought me out here, to watch you jack off in a sunbeam?"

“Could be.” Collin’s lips curved. He pumped his cock once, squeezing the bulbous tip.
“I know what I like best.”

“I don’t?”

“Did I say so?”

His partner flopped down in mock despair, a damp mane of cropped curls tumbling over Collin’s thigh. “You’ll drive me crazy. You know it, don’t you? It’s what you want.”

“Now you’re getting the idea.”

The man grabbed Collin by the waist and burrowed his mouth into Collin’s taut belly, nipping and licking away the beads of sweat gathered there. Together, they wrestled, lazy and playful at once.

Toss. Twist. Writhe.

“I’m a man of discriminating taste.” Collin’s partner-of-the-moment wiggled closer still.
“Now, will you lie still and let me do what I’ve come for?”

“Maybe.” Collin ran his hand through the man’s hair. “Let me think about your offer.”
Idly, he stroked his own cock, flush and hard against his stomach. It spasmed under his touch, wanting more attention than a mere lazy brush of fingers.

“You’re fooling no one, you know.”

“No? Then suck me off already.” Collin gave his partner’s head a careless shove and laughed to see him pout.

Roll. Curl into a ball. Try to hide.

Fail.

Have another taste.

Collin's hips bucked up as his lover bit at the underside of his cock. The man took it all in stride, moving with Collin's body to knead his hips with his hands.

"Yeah. Yeah, just like that," Collin mumbled. "Quick, before we get caught. C'mon, hurry, hurry, hurry -- God!"

"God isn't part of this," his lover said in a voice like crunching gravel. "Are you?"

Now for the best part: memory given a twist, a taste of the night mare's teeth ...

"What?"

Collin's lover crawled off him and unfolded upright, standing tall. Taller than his inches. Stretching, growing thinner, until his head hit the sky and blocked out the sun. The world went dark around them, black and cold, while the man -- man? -- cackled.

An icy finger reached down to cut a scratch across Collin's chest, nipple to nipple. Collin couldn't see how badly he'd been wounded, not in the pitch black, but he could feel abundant pain. He screamed despite himself.

"Idiot," his lover's strange new voice rasped. "You let yourself trust me. Let yourself believe in love."

Collin struggled upright, cock forgotten, erection shriveling. They no longer mattered. The darkness and cold did. "Give me back the sun!"

"No. It's mine." The monster giggled, utterly insane. "Now, what do we do with you?"

Collin scrambled backwards. The ground gave way beneath him, soft as jelly. His feet stuck, leaving him trapped. "Don't!"

"I already have. And I think I know what I'd like to do next ..."

Collin began to shake, terror and bitter cold snaking into his bones. He stared at the utter blackness that had been a blue sky, frantic for any sign of his lover left in the beast.

“This will teach you to trust.”

A brief second -- a whoosh of frigid air as the monster struck -- and Collin screamed again, rough and ragged, while sharp teeth tore into the meat of his belly. Over and over again, his voice a high wail as the monster devoured his guts, his heart, his cock -- and laughed all the while.

Laughed ...

An echo of the night mare’s laugh. She arched her neck, aiming for another, deeper bite --

And went tumbling through what passed for air, legs splaying wildly as a newborn filly. She caught a single glimpse of twinned, snakelike eyes. Eyes made of fire.

Heard a warning hissed that even she could not ignore:

Leave him be.

He is to be ours. We have chosen him.

We. Us. His body and soul are our territory to claim.

The night mare shook her mane. *Who dares?!*

Wings of thinnest leather lashed about the night mare’s head, beating her softly, driving her far and away.

Dragons, one of her enemies said, the word simple and final as death.

Death to her favorite pastime. Her enjoyment of this man, this Collin.

He belongs to us, the second being added. *Be on your way, little monster.*

Four fangs flashed bright in the darkness.

Run away.

The night mare, gathering hooves beneath her, ran.

Is he well? the first dragon asked of the second.

He will be, in time. Better still when he comes to us. Tonight. Now wake, Collin, wake. Today is the first day of the rest of your life. A far better life than you have ever known ...

Beep!

Beep!

Beep!

Beep!

Collin's eyes snapped open as he took a ragged breath. The dark cool of predawn filled his bedroom. No sound but the alarm clock's insistent shrilling and, underneath its noise, the whoosh of the central air set on fifty degrees. His body was covered with cold sweat, drying on his skin underneath the thin sheet he used in lieu of a duvet.

No one lay in the bed with him. No one had in years, definitely not in this bed. The best money could buy. Collin didn't get much sleep, but when he did, he wanted it to be worth his while. Scotch, tranquilizers, and a mattress so soft it had to be a sin. Everything designed to keep him too doped to dream.

Unfortunately, none of it had ever worked.

He always woke like that, having to remind himself that nightmares weren't real. Manifestations of the subconscious. Old doubts and fears playing bogeyman in the mental killing fields. All they could do was lurk in the backs of men's minds and slip out to taunt them when they tried to rest.

They were weak. All it took to banish the visions was an alarm clock and the light of day.

Cold light.

Casual sex and sunny days were both long buried in Collin's past, where they belonged. They'd taught him one thing, though, the most important lesson he'd ever learned: *there is no such thing as trust or love.*

He lived by just the one rule, now.

Collin blinked once, twice, and again. Ran a palm over his cheeks and chin, then with precise movements calmly turned off the alarm clock. He reached up to switch on a dim lamp.

He sat up, gazing across the stark bedroom to where his chosen suit of the day waited for him, neatly laid out on a special rack. Gray as winter ice, thin as silk, cut to cold perfection.

Time to begin another day in paradise. To spend the day in an iceberg of an office counting other men's money, gloating over his own fat portfolio of riches, and turning down the rabble who begged for appeals he'd already denied once and would deny again.

To them that had, more would be given. To them that had not, even more would be taken away. Such was the way of the world.

It was the life he had chosen. His chance at power, grabbed up without regret or a single look behind.

A day in a life where he never smiled or laughed, not at all.

A life in the cold and the dark.

Chapter One

I'm a powerful man.

People know better than to challenge me. Maybe it's in my eyes. The way I dress. How I walk. A cold smirk when they want to be patted like puppies. I don't put up with any bull. No flattery. No circular logic. I know what I want. I get it. Simple.

No one stands in my way -- for long. If they know me, they know better.

So, no one screws with me. Not anymore.

Except Liam. Irritating little girly man.

How did he get me to agree to this?

I don't do dance clubs. Especially gay dance clubs. I can just imagine what this Amour Magique looks like inside. Another noisy, sweaty, stinking warehouse. Bare walls, ugly floors. Glaring lights. Blinking strobes. Packed full of half-naked pretty boys just above jailbait age. Maybe. Everyone looking for boner inspiration and an easy lay.

Some of them still naive enough to be here looking for love.

Idiots.

Whoever came up with the concept of "romance" should be shot. Repeatedly. If they've got any inner strength at all, people don't need this thing they call love. Gay or

straight, love is an unnecessary complication. Lust -- that's better, more true to life, but it should be controlled all the same. If you let yourself be led around by the cock, you end up pussy-whipped.

So to speak.

Not me. Not now. Not ever.

No matter what Liam says.

The night air of Charleston was sticky with damp heat and the promise of a thunderstorm. Weathermen said no way, but Collin knew better. He could always smell a storm on the wind. Any kind of storm.

Glancing up at the pollution-clouded sky, he made a face. Something about being outdoors gave him the creeps. Give him four walls and a door he could shut. Then, he knew where he was. Safe.

Anything could happen when you left your cave.

He knew.

Collin looked at the outer walls of Amour Magique once again. His lip curled. *What a dump. Sooner I can get this over with, the better. Speaking of which ...*

Are you almost done?" he snapped at the shorter man who'd taken it into his head to wreck Collin's life.

"I am -- now. There!" Liam finished tugging at Collin's shirt. "Delicious! So much better than the suit you had planned to wear. To think you arrived dressed in work attire -- ugh!"

Collin glared at him. "I came from the office," he said. "At your insistence. You didn't mention anything about stopping long enough to tart myself up."

"Tsk, ts, ts, Collin. Honestly. You are being treated to a night at Amour Magique! Drinking, dancing, making merry. How could you accomplish any of this in a three-piece suit of dull gray? So boring."

"I like boring."

"I'm sure." Liam pursed his lips. "Attractive, available men generally think otherwise."

Collin resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. "Liam, we've been over this. I'm not here to get drunk, get jiggy, or get laid. I'm here because you put my nuts in a vise with corporate. Period."

"Well, I would not have had to twist the screws if you had cooperated. You did give your word you would come tonight, Collin. I take a man's oath quite seriously. Attempting to back out because of a supposed 'crunch' at work? Really, now. As if I do not know very well you have every memo and spreadsheet under absolute control. Do you think me a fool?"

Collin scowled. He shrugged his shoulders, trying to adjust the fit of the too-tight silk shirt he wore, a tacky-ass autumn-orange button-down. Liam's choice. Liam's insistence. He'd brought it with him and all but stood over Collin with a whip in hand until he'd given in and changed.

"This doesn't fit. Neither do the ..." His lip curled. "... jeans. Give me a break, Liam. Worn-out blue jeans? They look like you found them in a dumpster. And besides, they're much too tight."

"Exactly. Why hide the results of your daily workout in your company's oh-so-luxurious private gymnasium?" Liam fussed with one of Collin's lapels. He tapped his chin in thought, then dived for and popped open two buttons below the collar. "Much better. Now you show a bit of chest."

"What, you want me to flash cleavage?"

"Of course not. If you had actual breasts, we would cover them up. But you ..." Liam's eyes drooped to half-mast as he brushed his fingers over Collin's skin. "Wonderful muscles. Glorious skin. Smooth. Tight. Sexy as hell."

Collin jerked back. "Yeah. Sure. Hands off. Ground rules, Liam. I'm not letting anyone paw me. Not you. Not any clubbie. No dancers. Understand? I'm here long enough for one drink. Then I'm gone."

"Spoilsport."

"Look, you professional playboy, I have to get up and work in the morning. You have to put in years upon years and prove you're worth it before Marrakesh Investments gives you paid overtime, especially Saturday nights. *Paid*. Do you hear my emphasis on the money words? I should be there right now. Do you know how far back this 'adventure' is going to set me?"

"Oh, Lilith forbid you should work less than twenty hours a day, seven days a week." Liam rolled his eyes. His smile slid into cunning slyness. "However, as you point out, the corporate powers that be at your company have been made aware of your ulcers, your blood pressure, your migraines, and your malnutrition. I find it bad enough you do not fuck, dance, laugh, or make merry. But Collin -- forgetting to *eat*? No man can work so hard without fuel to stoke the inner flames."

Liam raised an eyebrow. "But you have no inner fire, do you? I sometimes wonder if there is a Popsicle instead of a cock tucked inside those so-distasteful jeans. Frozen through and through, you are. I wonder what happened to you once upon a time to transmute you into frost. Surely you were not born this way."

"What do you know about who I am? Who I was?" Collin glared. "Keep your nose out of my life, Liam. How many times do I have to warn you?"

"A pointless exercise. I go where I like and do as I please." As if to prove it, Liam ducked forward to sniff at a patch of bare skin below Collin's collarbone. He shook his head. "You smell of coals long banked," he mused. "Snuffed-out candles and cooling wax. Most peculiar."

"I'm the peculiar one?" Collin took a deep breath. Easy. Liam's just a nut bar. Let him have his play, and he'll leave you alone. Sooner or later.

He looked away. "So? What does it matter? I am what I am. Who I am. All I want is to be left alone."

"Ah, but there is the Brotherhood, throwing a greasy monkey wrench into your monkish existence, yes?" Liam chuckled. "I shall never cease to be amazed at how little you trust us. We are your brothers in spirit, Collin. Gay, Charlestonian, single. Why hold yourself so far apart? Join us. Come inside with the group when they arrive. Drink. Dance. Fuck. Let go. Just once, let go."

Liam's voice had dropped to a seductive, teasing whisper. Wheedling with the wispiness of a high-priced sex kitten. Collin felt his cock stir in response to the sound of pure sex in each liquid syllable.

He shut his eyes as Liam's voice tickled at the long-dormant nerve endings in his groin. Held back a groan that would have shamed him half to death. He couldn't stand the pity and mockery others would dish out if they knew he hadn't ... hadn't gotten a hard-on outside of wet dreams in ... years. Felt good, too good; it made him dizzy. Blood flowed downward, swelling his cock; a pulse-beat began a tom-tom thump in his balls ...

He seriously needed to get laid.

But -- no. No! *Get a grip.* He didn't need this kind of complication in his life. Didn't want it, traitorous genitalia notwithstanding. He'd carved out his niche in life, and if he wasn't all too happy, he made up for it by being rich. Money couldn't buy happiness, but it could surely rent enough luxury to take your mind off being alone. He liked things the way they were. Wore his public face with pride. Collin the Corporate Leviathan. Successful. Uncomplicated.

Blast Liam for his insistence on making things confusing!

Collin shook his head. "Back off," he said flatly. "Nice try, but put the rent-boy act away. No cigars in my box."

"So I see." Liam glanced at Collin's groin, shook his head, and sighed. "Be it on your head, then. Oh!" He perked up. "Others are arriving. I must go and greet them. But Collin -- if you dare try to sneak away, rest assured I *will* know. More, I will report directly to your superiors in the morning. I doubt they will be pleased to hear such news."

"You little --" Collin's blood flared to a sudden boil. Not only had Liam caught him out, but he had the nerve to threaten him again? Biting back angry words that would only cause a scene, he shot Liam a death glare.

Liam smiled back, absolutely angelic. Innocent as a baby lamb.

Maddening.

Collin ran a hand over his face. "One day," he muttered. "One day I'm going to get my hands around your neck and make you tell me just how you got in good with the brass at my company. What kind of power you have to make *them* ask 'how high?' when you say 'jump.'" He gave a bitter laugh. "Or is it just natural talent? Same trick you pull with everyone?"

Liam grinned and winked. "Wouldn't you love to know?" Without warning, the smaller man raised himself on tiptoe and pressed a hard kiss to Collin's lips. He tasted of exotic spices. Sweet. Intoxicating. Possibly addictive.

Collin startled away, wiping his mouth. Liam's kiss burned like raw cinnamon rubbed into the skin. "What are you -- How did you -- What's the idea?"

"Only warming up your engines. I believe such is the vernacular? Oh, do not fret. You will not turn into a toad. But ... you might find your Prince Charming, now. Yes, I think you will." Liam laughed. "Stay there. Right there. No moving. Are we in agreement?"

Collin struggled with the urge to turn and stalk away, corporate orders be damned. It wasn't a question of nerve or will. It was just knowledge. Hard, cold corporate intelligencia.

The big boys of Marrakesh loved a hard worker and especially adored Collin, their golden child, but they also took protecting their investments seriously. If you worked hard, you had to play hard.

They frowned on Collin's total obsession with work. If he cracked up, he'd be no good to them. Something they'd made clear time and time again. If he pushed them once more, maybe this time of all times, it'd be the inch too far.

He wouldn't -- couldn't -- lose his job. His power. His salary. His life.

Liam knew all of the above was at stake, and he didn't hesitate one second when it came to using the laws of Collin's world against him.

Scowling again, Collin leaned back against the outer wall of Amour Magique. He rolled his eyes. What a name. In his considered opinion, their sign should be rainbow neon, decorated in pink sequins and picked out with lavender feathers. Probably a dash of glitter just to get the point across, as if anyone could miss it. And they called this place Homo Heaven? Damned if he knew why, or even really wanted to find out.

More than anything, he wanted to go. Not home. Back to work. The place where he could be a king, not just another lonely, po-faced commoner.

He gave in and rubbed his face, pinching his nose to stave off an impending migraine. Flashing lights and blaring techno would do wonders for his head, oh, yeah. Some of the Brotherhood, the younger guys, might go for a warehouse of pumped-up steroid princesses. They'd have no problem with Liam's orders to get happy, get drunk, and get laid if they were lucky.

Collin ... no. He shook his head. He was at least ten years too old for this crap. Since he'd been forced into an evening out, he wished he could have chosen a different venue. A quiet restaurant. Savory food cooked to order. Things he hadn't been able to eat for years -- garlic beef, Cajun shrimp, nan bread, flaming curry ...

Maybe, just maybe, his waiter would have smiled at him. A smile just for Collin alone. A tilt of the head, a silent question. Collin would have assessed him, from neat hair to gleaming shoes. Nodded his head, regal as a prince. Followed him, after a discreet interval, through the “staff only” swinging doors to the restaurant’s walk-in freezer, where he’d be waiting, not minding the cold one bit, and ...

Smooth white chest. Small, nubby nipples. Slender waist. Bubble butt. Long, musky-salty cock, ready for action. The waiter, waiting, eager to take his cue from the important executive who’d lowered himself to notice his charms ...

Collin twitched back to reality. Of all the --! Hard again. Once a novelty, twice an annoyance.

He scowled down at the embarrassing camel toe in his skin-tight jeans. “Fine time you picked,” he muttered. The Brotherhood would tease seven kinds of hell out of him. Worse, Liam might think Collin was getting into the spirit of things.

Speaking of whom, the little man was standing with a group of the Brotherhood. He all but bounced up and down with excitement. “Collin is here, too,” he babbled. “Collin, Collin, come join us!”

Collin gave in to his urge and pinched the bridge of his nose. The last thing he wanted was to walk out in front of the Brotherhood, cock at the ready like a perverse divining rod. If they only made Hard-on-B-Gone. But what choice did he have? None, but to walk over sporting an embarrassingly eager erection. No time to think of algebra. Algebra teachers. The stock market. Profit projections. Spreadsheets. Anything to quiet his libido.

Yes, he decided. Well and truly screwed without so much as an orgasm for my pains.

Better just to get the humiliation over with. Collin drew in a deep breath, which didn’t help at all, and ambled forward, drawing his face blank and cold.

Pretending he couldn’t care less at all. Because that? That was what he did best.

Chapter Two

Great. More waiting. I hate waiting.

Liam had a hornet in his bonnet about not setting foot inside Amour Magique until they could make a “grand entrance.” All twelve of the Brotherhood stepping in and stepping high en masse. Penii on parade.

Penii? Penises? A gaggle of geese, a bone of cocks? What was the proper plural, anyway?

And why exactly was he pondering the question?

Boredom. Has to be boredom. I'm not exactly accustomed to standing around twiddling my thumbs, and the walking works of pretty-boy art aren't catching my eye -- or anything else, for that matter.

Collin rolled his eyes in disgust at the whole drama he'd been dragged into. That would be Liam for you, always having to put on a show. As if it mattered. As if anyone would notice the Brotherhood's public debut at all. If anything, they'd think, *jeez, who are those morons?* In his opinion, if they walked in crowded together, they'd look exactly like a cluster of teenaged girls, giggling nervously with excitement over going to their first big sock-hop.

Ooh, boys!

Collin doubted himself to be the only Brother who wanted to get this farce over with as quickly and quietly as possible. Liam, though? A bulldozer wouldn't back him down. All for one, one for all, blah, blah, blah. He said wait, so they waited. And waited. Bree, true to form, was running later than manners or fashion dictated.

More than likely, Bree had blown them off for greener pastures. All the same, Liam insisted he'd be there soon.

Hence, more waiting.

My brain's going to melt, I know it. What do they say? It's not the heat -- it's the stupidity. In this case, lucky me, it's both.

Collin leaned back and let the walls of Amour Magique bear his weight. They might as well be of some use. The solid coolness of old brickwork felt good. Soothing. He closed his eyes and tuned out the incessant chatter, escaping bursts of sugary, inane techno, and Liam's excited babble. He wondered -- if he pretended to nod off, would they leave him alone?

Doubtful.

Collin shifted, grumbled under his breath, and worked himself around until his cheek rested comfortably against Amour Magique's rough, soothingly chilly wall. He let out a small sigh.

Standing there in his own pool of silence and shadows felt ... nice. Good, even. Peaceful.

It surprised Collin to find himself growing sleepy. He yawned. "Can't doze off here, big guy," he muttered to himself. "Can't ... not outside ..."

They were the last words he remembered before he dropped into a sudden, heavy doze.

Slept, and dreamed.

* * * * *

Collin hated dreams.

Usually fate was kind enough to keep him unaware he was dreaming. Not this time. He knew damn well he'd nodded off and what he saw wasn't real in any way.

Although if there were any justice in the world, he should at least have enjoyed the sheer amount of acid it would have taken to cause a hallucination quite as intense as this.

Collin stood in the middle of a bonfire. Naked. For some reason, though, the flames were only pleasantly warm. He didn't ignite. Toasted a little, turning darkly tanned, like bread on a stick, but no more.

No ... more.

Blood began to heat in his veins. His pulse throbbed at every juncture, neck to knees to groin. Light sweat broke out over his very naked body, covering him in a salty sheen. He could smell it. Smelled good. Musky. Sexy.

Sexy?

Yeah ... *Oh*,, but it was sexy. He smelled like an erotic banquet waiting to be devoured. Salt, musk, semen, each odor sharp in his nose. A bouquet he hadn't smelled in years.

Staring down the length of his body, Collin saw his cock had risen to full hardness. Almost flush against his belly, it burned with the need for attention. A suck, a roll between sheets, or up against a wall. Even a hand job. His erection felt too urgent to be overly choosy, but it did demand seeing to. *Immediately*.

Yes, a foreign voice hissed. The unexpected sound made Collin jump in his dream. *Yes ... almost ripe*.

Such a beautiful fire, another voice said, soft and low. Whispy, raspy, not quite ... human. *Look how he burns. Deep inside, where no human eyes can spy it out*.

Does he know he has a heart of flame?

In a way, and not at all, just yet, said the second voice. *He ripens. Fire berries on the vine. Taste and see -- he is good*.

You offer me first suckle?

A gift.

Ahhhhh ...

Collin twisted to the left and right, searching for the source of the voices. “Who’s there?” he demanded. “Who are you?”

Laughter.

You don’t know us yet.

But you’ve always sensed us there.

Turned us aside.

No more.

Haven’t met us.

Known us forever.

All and nothing at once.

Paradox.

Yes, paradox.

“No. No, no, no! This stops, and it stops *now*.” Collin squared off, hands on his hips. “I don’t have time for riddles, rhymes, or games. Who are you? Show yourselves.”

More laughter.

Not yet.

Not yet, yet, yet.

Soon.

Yes. Soon.

A glimpse, now?

Yes? Yes. A peek. A taste.

Look how he wants it.

Wants us.

Does he know?

Yes, and no.

Soon he'll see it all.

And feel it.

For now, let him feel this. Join me.

Join us three. A braided cord.

And the circle shall be unbroken.

So mote it be.

Collin felt his heart thumping alarmingly fast. He'd been warned about stress-related heart attacks time and time again. Was this dream the bullet with his name carved in the casing?

"Who are you?" he yelled once more into the heart of the dream void. "Do this face to face, if you have the nerve!"

We cannot, said the first voice. Not yet.

You aren't ready.

But here. Have a taste.

Let us have a taste.

Collin began to speak -- then stopped, sucking in a gasp of fire-heated air. Thick, it choked his lungs. Filled his nose with the scent of cinnamon, cloves, and myrrh. He struggled for air and found none.

Out of nowhere, two flickering forms, insubstantial as billows of smoke, had shaped themselves into being. One second men, the next second clouds of flame, they surrounded Collin. Wound themselves around him, lizard-like.

Not cold-blooded beings, though, for all their shape. Hot. Hot enough to scorch. Burn. Leave blisters and scars.

Yet Collin felt no pain. None.

Ecstasy, on the other hand, *yes*.

Pleasure soaring out of his iron fist before he could get a solid grip on it. Soaring past his walls of control.

Dangerous.

Collin struggled, desperate for air to breathe, to make a noise as the men made of fire writhed around him. They were everywhere. Sucking his cock. Swallowing it down. Licking flame trails up his chest and down his legs. Tracing the seam of his ass. Cupping his balls, heavy and full. Dancing across his parted lips, twining with his tongue.

The creatures laughed. *Do you want to know a secret?* one asked.

Secret, secret, secret?

Yes. He does. Look. Look here, look.

Pain stabbed into Collin's arms. He screamed, insofar as he could with only gasps of air in his lungs. He stared down, unable to believe what he saw, even in this strangest of dreamscapes.

Tongues of flame danced over his forearms, etching characters into his flesh. Sizzling burns, like brands. Chinese characters. Gorgeous. Elegant masterwork. But he didn't read Chinese. What were they ...?

The symbols blurred. For a split-second, they became scrolling English calligraphy.

Chosen One.

Ours.

You belong to us.

You will come to us tonight.

This was written in the stars.

You hid for so long, but now we have found you.

No more running. No more hiding.

Become what you were born to be.

Become one with the fire.

Dragon.

Collin shook his head, hard, trying to clear it. He heard the fire-whisperers laughing, mocking his efforts with kindly humor. The branded burns on his skin sank in, burrowing beneath the flesh, and disappeared.

Then, the bonfire exploded to fill the world.

Fire! Everywhere, he was on fire. The fire was the men, and the men were the fire. They engulfed him. Inflamed his senses. Lit a fuse and made ready for an explosion.

Collin knew he'd crumble into ash when he climaxed. It wouldn't take long. He could feel his limbs trembling, heaving, shaking. It had been too long since his last orgasm to hold off the inevitable.

His cock pulsed fiercely. He could feel the tidal waves of scorching heat rolling in to shore.

Almost there ... almost ...

Suddenly, the men of flame stopped. Just ... stopped. Drew back, away from him. Collin heard the first voice whisper-hiss, the second joining it in eerie chorus:

The spark is struck.

Electric blue.

We meet again soon.

Know us when you see us.

Come to us. No fear.

No fear.

No fear.

No fear.

"They're here. Collin? Collin, are you awake? Everyone's here. *Collin ...*"

Collin jerked awake with a gasp. Coughing, he bent double, sucking in deep lungfuls of clean air. He gagged on a charred taste in his mouth and almost vomited up the sour coffee that was all he'd had for dinner.

Liam's face hovered into his field of vision. Concerned. "Are you well?"

Collin spared him a glare. "Fuck ... you," he rasped, forgetting himself so far as to curse Liam as he'd yearned to for months.

Liam smiled and shook his head. "You will be fine," he said. "Take deep breaths. Relax your muscles."

Collin narrowed his eyes.

"Bree is approaching on his motorcycle. He is the last of us. Collect yourself, Collin. Stand strong. Stand tall. Stand ready."

Collin shook his head. "What kind of place is this?" he asked, voice raw.

Liam's eyes all but glowed. "The place where your dreams come true," he said. "Now come. Follow me. Tonight, we enter the heart of magic and love."

He danced off, leaving Collin alone. Collin snarled, resisting the urge to check himself for burns. That dream ... too real. Collin didn't have those kinds of dreams. No sane person did.

What was going on? There had to be a rational explanation. The world had *rules*. Had Liam slipped him some PCP or rubbed it on his shirt collar, where he'd have breathed it in?

The only other explanation sat poorly with Collin: he'd finally snapped. Regardless of how little he liked it, though, he had the uneasy feeling that was the right answer.

He couldn't be sane. Not while staring at the walls of the club and all but hearing a low chuckling coming from the foundations. Not and feel the strangest of certainties that the club had somehow *given* him his dream.

A gift? A preview?

So real. He fought the urge to look down and see if there really were kanji burned into his flesh.

What stopped him was a very real doubt as to what he'd see.

The idea of something, someone -- Liam -- tangling with his mind made Collin's spine crawl -- and then raised his hackles. Did Liam think he, Collin, would back down, tail between his legs, after a bit of hocus-pocus? No way, no how.

He straightened his shoulders, dealing the irritating pest in question a black look. "Think you can beat me?" he muttered. "We'll see who comes out on top. We'll just see.

"Bring it on."

Chapter Three

Collin kept his face carefully schooled into expressionless lines and his gait casual, still bored, as he joined the Brotherhood. They'd gathered together in a tight-knit cluster on the sidewalk, giggling and whispering. Even the guys he'd hoped would be solid had apparently lost a Y and gained an X. Even straight-laced, Sunday-School Simon kept straightening his tie and smoothing back his hair. Guess he wanted to look appealing.

Collin rolled his eyes. *Hail, Caesar. We who are about to die from embarrassment salute you ...*

"Ah, you join us at last!" Liam gave Collin a horrible, limp-wristed wave. *Such* a princess! "Come, join us, come! We have much to discuss before entering the bright lights and secret shadows of Amour Magique."

"Uh-huh." Collin stepped up to the group without quite joining it. He crossed his arms over his chest and gave the men a dry, flat once-over. "I'm assuming you all broke out your prettiest prom dresses for the occasion?"

"Hey!" Micah -- who, frankly, didn't have to make an effort to play the queen, as it came one-hundred percent naturally -- was the one to bristle at Collin's remark. "So we dressed up. This is supposed to be fun, or did you forget?"

Collin gave him another dose of blank-face. Micah sneered. "Right. Fun. I forgot you don't know what the word means."

"Micah --" Liam warned.

Micah ignored him. "Loosely translated, Mr. Butch, it indicates the intent to have what's known as a 'good time.' You must have tried it once or twice in your wild and crazy youth. Or were you born with a corporate stick jammed up your ass?"

Collin bit his tongue and kept quiet. *Don't rise to him.*

"I can see it now," Micah went on. He put his hands on his hips and struck a pose that Collin guessed was meant to be sexy. Micah tried too hard. Always did.

"Congratulations, Mrs. Trophy Wife, it's a boy. No, wait, it's a man! A full-grown man! No wonder you wanted more spinal block. Alert the presses! He developed in utero complete with a three-piece suit! Designer, even -- look at those creases! Oh, and yeah, there's a rebar lodged up his anus. Sorry, but we can't do anything about it. He'll grow up stiff as a flagpole."

"Micah --"

"Also, he'll probably be gay. Not like anyone could tell, since he never ... has ... sex." Micah leaned in close to Collin. Too close. Collin could smell the pantywaist queer's cologne. French. Obscenely expensive. It stank.

In the face of Collin's calm, Micah decided to push his luck a few more inches. "Have you, Collin? Ever gotten laid, I mean?" he asked, smirking. "Ross Palm and his five sons don't count, if you even go that far."

"Boy," Collin said evenly, "I think you should walk away from me. Now. Far away."

Micah laughed as Liam laid a firm hand on his arm, trying to defuse the tension. Not so dumb as he looked, then, eh? "Silence speaks a thousand words, Collie," Micah babbled on, digging himself deeper with each and every word. "Tell us, are you a virgin? Is this little visit going to pop your frozen cherry?"

Collin's teeth gritted. Hard. Tight. He thought he heard a molar crack. "I've had more sex than you'll ever get, no matter how long you live," he said, deadly quiet. "Done things you can't imagine. Been places a fairy queen like you wouldn't go. Do us both a favor and shut up before you humiliate yourself beyond the point of no return. Are we clear?"

"You want to go?" Micah shook off Liam's restraining hand. "Come on, Collie-boy. You and me."

"I'm not completely desperate yet."

"Bastard!" Micah snarled, lunging at Collin. Luckily -- for Micah -- as he leapt, Liam caught him in midair before his flailing fists made contact. Despite being several inches shorter and forty pounds lighter, Liam managed to hang on to the man's sculpted arms, dragging them back down.

Collin shook his head, bored again. "Micah, you only wish you had a chance with someone like me."

Micah's pretty face twisted into ugliness. Liam, ready this time, aborted his lunge before it gained momentum.

"Enough, do you hear me? Enough!" Liam barked, shaking Micah like a kitten. "Calm down."

Collin grunted and turned his head. Oh, yeah. The night was off to a killer start.

"Get your hands off me. I'm fine."

"You look a goodly ways from 'fine' to me."

"I won't hit him. Okay? I promise." Micah shrugged Liam off. He adjusted his collar and shook his arms, loosening them up. "No fighting. I'm calm."

Collin glanced at him sideways. For some reason, he couldn't resist a tiny gibe. "Naturally, no fighting. You might break a nail."

Micah's temper flared back up like a delayed burst from a Roman candle. All the same, he kept his hands by his sides, even if they were clenched into fists. "Asshole!" he hissed.

"With a rebar jammed inside. Don't forget. It's crucial. Appearances, you know." The rest of the Brotherhood laughed. Micah's eyes darkened with rage. Collin had no idea why the prom queen was taking this so personally. Then again, he didn't really care, did he?

"Tell us," Micah challenged. "Liam, down. I'm not going to start a fistfight. But you, Collin. Go on. When's the last time you got laid? Five years ago? Ten? Maybe a sweaty grope behind the gym in high school? Come on. Give us your best shot. Tell a story."

"Micah ..." Liam warned, clearly not seeing the pointlessness of the gesture.

Collin ignored Liam. He stared at Micah through hooded eyes. "Let's see. How about today? A pretty young thing with cross-cut hair and sixteen separate tattoos. I counted. Muscles you've never seen in the flesh. Cobblestone chest. Nine-inch cock, uncut. Oh, and yes -- a sweet, sweet mouth."

Micah's lips parted. He stared.

"See, there's one thing about being as high as I am in the corporate world. No one cares if you enjoy a nooner in your office with the door closed. Not if you turn in the daily reports on time.

"I have a black book and a good reputation with the highest-class escort services in town. They know what I like. One call does it all. You probably had a hamburger for lunch. I had a sweet piece of well-trained ass." He let himself grin, white and bright. "Beat that, Miss Priss."

"Hookers?" one of the Brotherhood asked. He sounded slightly horrified. Collin couldn't remember his name. The pudgy one. Baby-faced, boy-next-door type. David? "You pay for sex?"

"Not by the hour." Collin shrugged. "I have an account and a running tab. We settle up once a month. But," he said, "I do tip. Very well. Rinako earns a goodly sufficiency of cash to flash. Earns it very well. Did I mention his mouth? If he put his mind to it, I've no doubt he could suck the chrome off an exhaust pipe. Just imagine how good it feels when he's plying

his trade. Plying me. Imagine it, David. Sex. Pure sex. Have you ever, ever had anyone look up at you like you're their own personal god? I have. I do. Whenever. I. Feel. Like. It."

Micah seemed to have forgotten to breathe. His eyes had grown round. "You," he said. "You --"

"Me." Collin twitched the lapels of his idiotic shirt, smoothing them down, wishing he could dampen the vivid color somehow. "Speaking of which -- Liam? After tonight, kindly don't pester me again about R and R. I have plenty available on the job."

Liam eyed Collin. After a moment, he nodded.

A tiny bit of tightness eased in Collin's chest. He knew Liam hadn't bought the bald-faced set of lies, but it looked as if he wouldn't make an issue in front of the Brothers. Black book? Escorts? Hookers? Please. Who had time for sex when you worked against the clock? Besides which, who would possibly be stupid enough to walk a whore through headquarters?

Not him, not that it mattered. The Brotherhood believed his story, and it shut them up. A satisfying enough conclusion for Collin.

He felt no flush of pleasure at his victory, yet ... somehow ... better. Almost good.

At some point during the Mexican stand-off, Bree had swaggered up to join the Brotherhood. Collin stared at him. Outrageous at the best of times, Bree appeared to have gone for broke. Punked himself out like a two-dollar tramp. Mesh shirt, eyeliner, blusher -- lip gloss? His jewelry boggled the mind. Enough hoops, studs, and chains to make his face look spider-webbed.

Disgusting.

Bree glanced down at Collin's jeans. He grinned, predatory. "Collin. I didn't know you cared. You like your meat rough?"

What the --? Oh, for Pete's sake. He still had a hard-on. Persistent little devil -- or not so little, to pinpoint the problem. "You dare to --" Collin stopped himself. One argument was quite enough for the present hour, thanks. "In your dreams. Your wet dreams."

Bree threw back his head and laughed. "Please. You know you want a piece of this. You man enough to take me on?" As Simon sputtered in the background, Collin wondered vaguely what Gothic Gayboy had gotten high on.

Whatever it was, he idly wished he could have a hit, himself.

Liam clapped his hands. "Good! We are gathered. I must explain a few things before we enter."

Collin zoned out during a long-winded explanation regarding why they wouldn't have to wait in line. They were VIPs or something similar. His honored guests. Right.

Collin resigned himself to a few hours behind the ropes, avoiding grabby hands and tolerating the Brotherhood's monkeyshines.

But to his surprise, sure enough, one word from Liam to the bouncers and the whole Brotherhood did get an open invitation to bypass the miles of waiting muscle queens and frilly fairies.

Liam bounced toward the entrance. Bounced, at least, until Collin reached out and grabbed him by the shoulder. The small man turned, expression mildly curious. "What may I do for you?"

"Listen," Collin said, voice low. Threatening. "Don't play with me. Don't *fuck* with me. Don't get me mixed up in your games. Never again. Understand? I'm going to have one drink, and then I'm going home. No dancing. No flirting. No hooking up. You and the Brotherhood leave me alone once we're inside. Leave me the *hell* alone. Do you understand?"

Liam laughed. Laughed! "Ah, Collin, Collin! You truly have no idea what you are about to experience tonight, do you?"

"And I don't suppose you'd care to enlighten me, would you?"

"I could. Yes, perhaps I could." Liam tilted his head and smiled winningly. "I think you had a dream just now, yes? Men of fire and of flame, dancing blazing patterns around your

body. Scorching you hot, so hot, bringing your heart and cock pulsing back to life. You thought of them as lizard-like, but if you think back, you may see them as they truly are: dragon men. Yes?”

The breath caught in Collin’s throat. He stared. His lips worked, unable to form words.

Liam looked suddenly older than his years. Much older. Ancient. Terrifying. Serious as death. “This is a night you will never forget. A night to change your life forever. An alteration far too long in coming. You will be born anew. I have seen it, and I mean to see this through. Angry, are you? Don’t be. Liam knows best. I see more than you think, and Collin ...”

He laid a slender hand on Collin’s chest. It flared with unexpected warmth. “I see *you*.”

Collin stared. He shivered. Liam had lost his fey, almost girlish beauty. He looked like an avenging angel. Something Collin’s grandmother would have read about from her worn old Bible. All he needed was a fiery sword.

“What are you?” Collin whispered.

“Me? Nothing special.”

Snap! The image vanished. Liam was young, annoying, and lovely once again.

“Sugar and spice, pretty and witty, and, best of all, gay,” he chirped. “Come, Collin. After me. Go where I guide you, and have fun. Fun, I say! Enter, for Amour Magique awaits!”

He danced on ahead. Bouncy as a bunny rabbit in mating season.

Collin stared after him. He swallowed down a lump in his throat. *Great. This is just ... great.*

What have I gotten myself into?

Chapter Four

Okay. Now this? Not what I had been led to expect. Did I just fall down the rabbit hole?

A hell hole?

I wouldn't be surprised. I do have to wonder, though -- at just what point did the world go Poseidon Adventure on me?

Collin stood still, statue-still, trying to assess his current situation and the options at hand. Years of practice kept his features expressionless. Without the experience? He'd be hiding in a corner. Trembling, with his face to a wall.

Amour Magique was no ordinary club. Looked like one on the outside, but when you went in ... Collin couldn't hold back a shudder.

First, the bizarre, spine-crawling tingles of walking into a haunted house. Not some entertain-the-kiddies affair gotten up for Halloween, but a genuine stomping ground for spooks. A nightmare chamber designed by someone who knew all his worst fears, his dreaming terrors, and had brought them to life. Laughing at him, hidden somewhere he would never be able to find.

Calm. Stay calm. Collin inhaled a slow, deep breath and tried once more to regain control. Analyze what had happened.

The doors to Amour Magique had looked like regular doors. Square. Crash bar handle. A beefy bouncer swinging it open for the Brotherhood to enter. Normal. Check.

The Brotherhood had swarmed in ahead of him. Laughing, giggling, shoving each other. Idiots. Check.

Liam twittered in, merry as a sprite. Nutty little fag. Check.

Collin had entered last. Check.

Yes, he decided. Right about then was when everything had gone bananas.

He remembered looking around himself, curling his lip in distaste. Amour Magique, a place of magic? Of course. And he was King Kong. Frankly, the vaunted club looked, to Collin, just like any other trendy, gay fuck-fest club available in most major modern cities.

A gutted warehouse vibrating with deafening techno, garish strobe lights flashing fit to give one epileptic seizures. Half-naked ab-doll bottom-boys shaking pencil dicks. Rancid whiffs of cologne, aftershave, cheap beer, flop sweat, and sour come.

The effluvia almost made him gag. Had Liam actually thought Collin would *enjoy* himself in a place like this dive?

But then ... then ...

Oh.

Voices. Voices echoing from nowhere, chiming inside his pounding head.

Ready?

Is he ready, ready, ready?

The whispers, tenor and bass, cut straight through the blaring thumpa-thumpa music and made a double beeline for Collin's chest and cock. His blood began to sprint through his veins, running hot, fast, quick, pulse pounding.

He stopped in his tracks, reaching out to snag Liam by the upper arm. "Wait, wait! Do you hear them now?"

"Hear whom?"

"Quiet!" Collin frowned hard in concentration.

Not yet, spoke the first.

No. Not just yet, his fellow answered. Back and forth they went, each one's speech bleeding into the sound of the other's words.

A pity.

Shame. Pity. Yes.

Soon?

Very soon.

How?

Alteration. Change in the state of being.

In him?

Not him, Collin, him, no. Alteration of this place.

Ah, yes. Change the seeming, alteration of this place.

Not just the seeming. Change in the state of being. The reality.

Shifting sands, sands, sands?

Desert tides.

Draw in your breath. Fire breath. With me.

Yes. Yes, yes. Blow, now. Blow.

Blow it all away.

Scour clean the soul.

Uncover hidden fires.

Stoke up well-banked coals.

Burn.

Yes. Spark, ignite, burn.

Blaze.

Now?

Almost.

Collin clamped his hands to his ears, trying to shut out the soft, whisper-licking voices teasing around his skull. Tendrils of burring male voices twining inside his brain. Invasive vines of sound and fury.

Dignity and corporate polish be hanged!

“Stop it,” he shouted. “Stop!”

He felt a small hand on his arm and slitted his eyes open to see Liam staring up at him, every inch deeply concerned. “Collin, what ails you?”

“Can’t -- you -- hear -- them?” Collin gritted. “They’re everywhere!”

“What? What is everywhere?”

“The voices! Whispers. They’re rolling around in my mind!”

“Ahh.” Liam nodded. He looked sad. “I warned them you would not fall so easily as a leaf from a branch. Cautioned them to be careful. I suppose, in their way, they are taking great care. You have not seen them yet, have you?”

“Seen? Seen who? I’m warning you, Liam, I am far past being patient. I really suggest you tell me before I decorate your face with my fist. What is going on?”

Liam patted Collin’s hand. “It will be well. Patience. I know what I am doing. I brought most of the Brotherhood here to take their chances, but you? You are special, Collin, as is David, and another one or two among our numbers.

"For you, I laid plans and mapped out groundwork. I see you for what you are. I sought out who you needed. What you crave, even if you do not know as much. I think you do not."

Collin heard the whisper-voices chuckling. Tongues of fire licked against the inner walls of his mind. He groaned. "Shut them up. Please."

"No."

"Liam. Make them be quiet. Do it. Now."

"I cannot. They were given a key; they have used this key; it is in the lock and cannot be withdrawn."

"Key?"

"You will understand in time. Poor Collin. You cannot believe in anything that is not cold and solid as ice and before your very eyes, can you? Yet you hear these voices and cannot deny their reality. It confuses you, yes? Badly so."

Collin glared.

"I thought as much." Liam reached up to lay a finger over Collin's lips. "Let them speak their piece, and they will leave you alone for the time being."

"But --"

"Hush, now. Hush."

Collin clenched his fists. "No."

Liam sighed. "Stubborn to the end ..." He stretched up on tip-toe, pressing five fingertips to each of Collin's temples. Tingles sparked through the larger man's brain, little fireworks exploding in fiery blazes of color.

Light ... and sound.

He is better now?

Better, better, better. Hss.

Hss. Our words cause him pain?

Yes. Much pain.

I did not realize. How to remedy the malady?

Silence, brother-lover.

No words?

None, none, none.

How to teach him, then? How to tell him?

By showing him. No voices. Hands. Lips. Eyes. Cocks. Warmth.

Gentle fires.

Warming hearths.

Ignite a slow-burning blaze.

Yes. Yes, yes.

So long. More difficult. It must be this way?

No choice. Would you have him run?

Nay, nay, nay. He must stay. He is ours.

Gifted.

Chosen.

Ours.

He will be led. Guided.

Good enough. We wait. We make ready.

Yes. We wait. And not for long ...

Collin yelled aloud -- rough, hoarse, wordless. He jerked away from the scorching pressure of Liam's fingers. "What did you do?"

Liam regarded him calmly. "I believe you know. The fire-whisperers came to you again, yes? You heard them speaking with your mind. I can see them in your eyes," he said, wondering. "Little sparks, dancing all about. So merry and bright!"

"How did you know that they were ... there? Talking to me."

Liam shrugged. "A guess. I know these creatures of old. Dragons that walk as men ... an amusing conceit," he added, almost beneath his breath.

"Repeat that?"

"No, I think not. You must needs see to believe. What matter my own words?" Liam's smile turned sunny. "The methods this type of being uses are not unfamiliar to me. I know how they hunt their chosen prey." He giggled. "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to yourself."

Collin shook his head. "Liam ..."

"Trust me. You will love what is to come. Do not dread the fire. It burns away only dross, and leaves behind pure golden treasure."

Cold chills crept down Collin's spine. He backed away slowly. "Liam? You're insane."

"So I have been told. However, I enjoy myself tremendously."

"All right. Fine." *You can do this. Cope. Deal. Move on.* Collin folded his arms over his chest. "I understand perfectly, all by myself. You slipped me some sort of drug to try and make the monkey dance, but you miscalculated your dosage. I can still see the forest for the trees. There are no such things as 'fire-whisperers,' and they are not playing in my brain. These voices? Hallucinations. It's all just a joke. Ha, ha, Liam. Very funny. All the same -- you lose."

"No."

"What?"

"No, I said. I have already won. Though it is hardly a competition." Liam rubbed Collin's forearm. "Go and have a drink, eh? There is a lovely bar just across the way. Not here, in the main dance floor. Go to your left, to the far wall, and find the wooden door. Open it. Go inside. There is a quiet pub for men such as you, who need a moment's stability."

A small bark of a laugh escaped Collin's lips. "Liam, honestly! Do you think I'd go anywhere else on your say-so?"

Liam shrugged. "As you wish. You did say you would have one drink, though, and as I recall this pub serves a most excellent Scotch. I suggest you try a glass." He had the balls to give Collin a gentle shove. "Go on, now. Scoot. The voices will not come to you again until you are ready. This much I promise."

Collin hesitated. Everything he knew, everything he was, screamed at him to beat feet. Get out of there while he still could. Before he lost enough control to so much as call a taxi.

But ... Scotch. Good Scotch?

Collin wavered. He wanted a drink. *Really* wanted a drink. Something strong, alcoholic, and cold. His throat was dry as if it had been sand-blasted. He swallowed around a huge lump. *Thirsty*.

Liam watched him, still smiling. The urge to wipe the smirk off his face was overrun by the need for liquid refreshment. Collin scowled at him, saying, "Fine. One drink. The Scotch had better be as good as advertised. Then? I'm leaving. Do you understand?"

Liam bowed. "As you wish, of course."

Collin snarled under his breath, wished Liam a painful death, turned, and stalked away. Pretending he didn't hear Liam's amused parting shot.

"However, I am sure you will soon change your mind, and be very glad of it indeed ..."

Chapter Five

Once again, Collin entered a part of Amour Magique and found himself rooted stock-still, no more able to move than he might have been to spread his arms and fly.

This club ... it's a chameleon. It changes when you least expect it. It sees inside your head, and breathes life into your dreams.

No. No, I'm not thinking these things. It's the drugs. Liam's club-night cocktail, however he got the junk in my system. Random spasms of brain chemistry.

But to be fair, this is much more like it.

It's ... rich in here. Mahogany has never been this sexy before. No blaring music. No pool tables. No jukebox. No yeasty reek of beer.

Peaceful. Civilized. Normal. Wonderfully normal.

About time, too.

Collin stepped into the pub. He inhaled deeply. Cold air. Good, cold air. The silk of his shirt was thin enough that goose bumps rippled up on his arms. He looked down at them and grinned. Much better than firebrands.

You knew where you stood with the cold. Chilly? Layer up. Shield yourself. Build a fort. Survive.

If you were too hot? Bad, bad, bad. A man could only be just so naked before he ran out of layers to shed, and helplessly roasted. First sunburn. Pink, peeling skin. Freckles. Then blisters. Blackening muscles. The stink of burning fat. Charring down to the bone.

A man could survive being frozen. He couldn't face down a bonfire.

Collin was made of ice, and he liked it that way. Liam could go play in Hell if he wanted to change Collin's mind.

Satisfied, Collin shook his shoulders back, standing tall and proud, the way he did at work. Letting people know here -- here was somebody who *was* somebody.

Don't tread on me. This dog bites. Give me what I want, and get out of my way.

Not that anyone looked up to notice him in the least. The pub wasn't crowded. Its few patrons were sunk eyeball-deep in short glasses of amber whiskey. Some had newspapers, some had PDAs, and one older type played idly with a metal puzzle like a cat's cradle. Everyone minded their own business.

Collin decided he would like it there.

He managed to hold back a self-satisfied grin as he made his way to the nearby bar. Small, but well-stocked. Old-looking bottles. *Just what I like to see.* Nothing but quality as far as the eye could see. Alcoholic riches. Strong, smooth treasure that would slide down his throat smooth as silk.

As he approached, a slender Asian man of indeterminate age stationed behind the bar raised his head. Hair cut short, face clean, white shirt spotless. The picture of genteel servitude. "Good evening," he said. His English was flawless, no accent. "May I be of service to you, sir?"

Collin exhaled, deeply contented. The world was slowly returning to the way it should be. "Scotch," he said, savoring the word as it rolled over his tongue. "The oldest bottle you have. A double shot. Lots of ice. Don't forget the ice. It's important."

"Sir." The bartender nodded briefly and turned, military-precise, going straight for the very bottle Collin had pegged as liquid gold. Collin's grin slipped sideways into a nasty smirk. Oh, yes, this was the ticket.

Scotch flowed into a sparkling short glass. No drips or spills. The bartender presented it to Collin with a clean linen napkin. "Our best, as you requested. The matter of payment is, of course, distasteful, but may I inquire as to how sir intends to settle his bill when comes the time?"

Collin rolled his ice thoughtfully. His smirk grew. "Tell me, do you know a man named Liam?"

The bartender's face told no tales, but he did nod again. Briefly. "I do, sir. Liam is a popular creature in this establishment."

Should he? Oh, who could resist? Besides, to his mind, Liam owed him considerably more than a glass of expensive whiskey.

"Put it on his tab."

"As sir wishes."

Score. Collin couldn't help chuckling. He knew how much Scotch this good cost. He only wished he could see Liam's face when the little pansy got his bill. It'd be a hefty total Collin planned to rack up. Sure, he'd said one drink. But with Scotch this fine, and a night like the one he'd had so far, he thought he might just drink his way through the bottle. Every drop of fluid gold. On Liam's dime. It would serve him right.

"Thanks." Collin raised the glass to his nose, inhaling the drink's rich, peaty vapors. The tinkling ice was music to his ears. "Keep an account open, will you?"

Nod. "Sir." Pause. "Will there be anything else, sir?"

Collin took a first, curious sip -- and almost orgasmed in his obscene jeans from the taste alone. *Merciful ...* They *sold* this stuff in a *dance club*?

"Sir?"

“I’m ... fine,” Collin managed. “Just ... the tab. Keep it open. Wide open.”

The bartender nodded with no hint of a smile. “Yes, sir. Should you need me when I am otherwise occupied, I am called Li Hsien. Speak my name, and I will come.”

“You’re going somewhere?” Collin took another sip, struggling not to close his eyes in bliss.

“Perhaps.” Li Hsien looked thoughtful. “Customers call, patrons need assistance, and I go where I am needed. Perhaps not always behind this bar. But, ah, forgive my presumption, sir. You seem familiar to me by description. Are you Collin, perhaps?”

Collin frowned. “I beg your pardon? Description? Who described me?”

“Why, the Liam we spoke of earlier, sir. He informed the full staff of *Amour Magique* regarding all pertinent details relating to his group known by the sobriquet of ‘Brotherhood,’” Li Hsien said smoothly. Lying through his teeth. Collin could tell. Didn’t know how he could tell, but the toady was fibbing like a mother.

“Really.”

“Please forgive me if I have offended. Your next drink will be complimentary, sir. Now, may I suggest you enjoy one of our excellent seats? Perhaps one close to the hearth?”

Collin flinched. “Hearth?”

“Yes, sir. It is to be lit shortly. This room is too cold for many patrons who arrive around this time.”

“No! I mean -- no. Just no.”

“Sir does not enjoy a good fire?”

“Sir does *not*. Point me as far away from the thing as you can.”

“Just so.” Li Hsien gestured to a shadowy corner. “Please, do sit. Make yourself comfortable and enjoy your Scotch. I will be at hand if you need me.”

At hand, huh? Collin eyed Li Hsien. Coming from any other club-bunny, those words would ring with an undertone of invitation. But somehow, he doubted this bartender served more than drinks. For all that, or perhaps because of it, there was something ... appealing ... about him. Some sort of ... aura.

Aura? What the --

Collin blinked, baffled. Between one sip of booze and the next, Li Hsien had grown a halo. A golden glow of the sort one saw in old paintings of saints and angels.

"You're ... glowing," he said stupidly.

Li Hsien didn't blink. "Yes, sir."

"Why're you ...?"

"Please, sir, be seated. You need not concern yourself with this." Li Hsien gestured to his halo. "It comes, it goes. A harmless thing. Often seen when one has drunk a bit too much."

"I only had a few sips."

"It is a powerful vintage you hold."

Collin blinked owlishly at his glass. Powerful? To be sure. "A seat," he said. His tongue felt thick. "Yeah. Yes. A seat. That'd be good. Really good."

"Be careful you do not fall, sir."

"Sure. Not fall," Collin mumbled. He staggered away from the bar. His feet didn't exactly know how to walk a straight line. Weird. He kept a good tight hold on his glass, though. Not losing a precious drop of his drink.

He peered at the glass. Scotch. Good Scotch. Made out of rice. *Rice?* Wait. No. He'd ordered ... hadn't he?

Tipping his head back, Collin took a curious sip. Heated sake scorched its way down his throat. He choked. "Rice wine? What kind of trick are they playing here?"

About to turn around, march back, and demand to know what Li Hsien had done to his Scotch, Collin licked his lips -- and paused. Licked them again.

Oh, hey. The sake was good. Extra good. Better than the Scotch.

Neat.

"Magic drinks," Collin giggled. "Like Kool-Aid. Changes colors. Just add alcohol. Shaken, not stirred. Good stuff." He took another long swallow. The sake scorched him from the inside out. *Mmmm, yes.*

Still laughing, Collin found a chair and sat down with a solid thump. This was the life. It got no better.

Almost.

Feeling footloose, free, and lazy as the sake warmed his insides, Collin realized he could actually think of one more thing he'd like.

Closing his eyes, he let himself drift away into a waking dream. A fantasy. He hadn't allowed himself the luxury in years, and it felt so very, very good as he simply let go and set his mind free. The sake made it way too easy. He knew what he wanted, what he craved, and decided to let himself have a taste in the sudden seeming safety of passing fancies.

He allowed himself to imagine ... a man. Not a boy. He didn't care for jailbait or raw meat. Definitely a man, close to his own age. A few miles on the speedometer. Curly hair? Yes. He liked curls. Good fun to mess up and twine around his fingers. Cute when they woke up after a hard night's sex work. Yeah. Curls.

Eyes? Dark eyes. Deep brown. Doe eyes. Only, not innocent. Wicked. Sly. Knowing. Sexy. Promising everything he'd ever wanted and more.

His mouth? Generous, wide, full. White teeth. Broad, foxy grin. A pink tongue tracing his lips. Already tasting him, Collin, right where he wanted him. Waiting for Collin to give the word.

Collin let out a tremendous sigh. He took another gulp of sake. The scorching tingle shot down to his balls, warming them. They felt heavy and full. *Oh, yes.* His cock liked the sake, too. Made it want to play. All by itself, with no help from his hand, the organ swelled and rose, eager for action.

Another swallow of sake, and Collin decided he didn't care if anyone happened to be looking. He chortled. Let Li Hsien get an eyeful if he glanced in Collin's direction. Let everyone take in the show. Collin's gears were greased. Time to party.

He unzipped his fly and pulled out his erection.

His dream man gazed at it. Hungry. "Want," he whispered. "Mine. May I? Please?"

Collin grinned lazily. He squeezed the solid weight of his prick in one hand. "Are you man enough?"

"Maybe." Dream Trick's tongue snaked out to flick at the tip of Collin's cock. "I can handle you."

"Can you?"

"Oh, yes. But there's just one problem."

Collin rolled his eyes, annoyed. "And what would that be?"

Dream Trick looked up.

Shimmered into sudden reality.

There in the flesh. Seriously solid, scary flesh. His pupils had shaped into ovoid slits. His skin, once smooth, was covered in hundreds of tiny, glittering scales.

He flickered his pink tongue out again. It was forked. "I'm not a man," he said.

Then hissed.

And dove for Collin's cock, fangs bared to strike.

Chapter Six

Know how you can tell it just isn't going to be your night, no matter what? When an imaginary pick-up comes to life, turns into a scaly ... thing ... and almost takes off your family jewels with one bite. Meanwhile, no one notices, looks up, or even seems to care. There's your clue.

Of course, in the plus column, this also means no one sees you scream and run like a little boy, dick flapping in the wind, either.

Lying on the bar's warm floor, gasping for breath, Collin stared at where he'd been moments before. Where the fantasy creature had appeared, then disappeared after Collin had yelled and flung himself automatically away from its fangs. A flicker of the eye, a wicked grin, and poof -- gone. Oddly, Collin could still feel his presence. As if he'd really been there, whatever he -- it? -- was. A tickle from the brush of curly hair on his inner thighs. A damp streak where the forked tongue had licked his erection.

Speaking of which, it appeared to be set in a stubborn mood. Still full and throbbing, he'd swear the traitorous thing had liked being attacked! His cock all but pouted up at him for bringing the fun to a screeching halt halfway through.

Blow-job, good. Stop, why? More, please. Now!

"Fangs. Do you remember fangs?" Collin snapped. He glared at his swollen cock and heavy-hanging balls. "No more playtime. Not here. You don't lead me. I show you where to go. Am I clear?"

Please?

It occurred to Collin he was in the middle of a conversation with his penis. He shook his head, groaning. *Yes. You truly are losing your mind, big guy.*

As if to confirm the supposition, or mock the remains of his sanity, images flashed through Collin's mind. Visuals of the curly-haired man sucking him down. Lips pursed tight. Licking. Cheeks puffing, hollowing. Tongue flickering up and over. Forked tongue, yes, but still hotter than the fires of hell. Ovoid-pupiled eyes glittering into his own. Hypnotic.

Magical.

Collin squeezed his eyes shut, but couldn't stop his hand. The traitorous appendage strayed down to grip his cock and roll his balls. Squeezing, enjoying the pain. He imagined fangs tickling the sac and spasmed with an alarming thrill of anticipation. He couldn't believe his own twisted desires, but he found he *wanted it*. Craved the rough tongue, the flickering flame, the scaly hands kneading his thighs.

Damnation! He burned to have that dark freak sucking him off, real or imaginary.

Needed it. Badly.

But it had been a dream. A boozy fantasy. Wasn't real. Couldn't be. What kind of idiot got hot and bothered over a hallucination? Collin snorted. *Be realistic.* He'd probably have just as much of a hard-on if he'd seen pink elephants waltzing instead of enchanted men with sparkling dark eyes.

Eyes that swallowed him whole from the soul on out.

Collin's cock twitched rebelliously. An unwanted thrill shot up his spine. Insistent.

"Not tonight, I said!" he growled, no longer caring what anyone thought of the crazy man talking, literally, to himself.

How did the old song go? *Know when to hold 'em; know when to fold 'em; know when to walk away; know when to run?* Well, in Collin's opinion, it was definitely time to run. Either Li Hsien mixed heavy doses of opium in his drinks, or Liam's little treat had taken some nasty turns as it worked a path through his body. Whichever. He wasn't sticking around for any lizard-man figment to try another lunge.

Time to get out while the getting was good.

Collin glanced up. Amazing. Again, still, no one had bothered looking away from their papers or glasses. Not a soul reacted to his nervous breakdown playing out in center stage. He felt like he wasn't there at all, at least not to their eyes.

Was he?

All right, mark that down on the list of "things I don't need to think about." Not yet. Maybe never. My first priority: running. Now, for preference ...

Collin scrambled to his feet, stuffing his erect cock back into his jeans with some difficulty and doing up the zipper with fingers that shook and trembled. They didn't matter. Nothing mattered but the escape.

Tucked up safe and sound, Collin half ran, half stumbled out of his dark corner. He didn't know where he was going. Anywhere would do. Just ... away.

As he passed the bar, he shot Li Hsien a suspicious look. Wait -- was he *smiling*? *Prick*. He was! A tiny smirk, a smug "you should have taken my advice" grin.

Collin growled low in his throat. He did an about-face and slammed his palms down on the bar. "You!"

"Sir?" No expression in the dark eyes.

"What's in those drinks?"

"Nothing but the best quality vintages, sir."

"No drugs? LSD? Ecstasy?"

"Sir!" Li Hsien looked offended. "We do not use such things here at Amour Magique. Synthetic chemicals are an insult to the body temple."

"Yeah. Sure," Collin muttered. He rubbed his forehead. "Did you see ..."

"No, sir," Li said smoothly.

"I didn't finish."

"I saw nothing, sir." Li Hsien picked up a spotless glass to polish. "It is not my job to see anything besides that which I am told to look for."

Collin ground his teeth. He'd just bet. Lizard men, living dreams, who cared? Li Hsien had his own set of orders. He'd follow them, letter perfect, and happily ignore the rest.

"Fine," he said, gritting the word out between clenched teeth. "Is there another bar in this club?"

"Amour Magique has many bars. I do not recommend your visiting another."

"Why not?"

"You are expected here, sir."

"I'm what, now?"

"Expected, sir. Here, or close by. I recommend another glass of something warm while you wait for your party."

"I. Have. No. Party." Collin felt his blood pressure ratchet up. "I want to be left alone. A-l-o-n-e. Got it?"

"Of course, sir."

"Of course, of course," Collin mimicked. "You're going to do whatever you feel like no matter what I say, aren't you?"

"I would not presume to put words in sir's mouth." Li Hsien looked down. Obedient, servile. But not before Collin caught a twinkle in his eye.

He shook his head. Half-wondering, half-impressed at the bartender's nerve, plus a touch of the creeps. "Fine," he said, letting his inner bastard show. "Fuck you, too. I'm out of here."

Li Hsien nodded. "Yes, sir."

"I'll be followed, won't I?"

"I suggest you draw your own conclusions, sir."

"Right. Followed." Collin dropped his expensive crystal glass on the floor, disgusted when it bounced instead of shattered. Figured. "Good luck. But by the bye, if anyone comes after me, tell them to wear a sports cup and bring a lawyer. I've had enough fun and games."

"Sir."

"Sir, sir, sir," Collin mocked. He stalked away, mumbling angrily under his breath. "Going crazy ... Liam's fault ... shouldn't have come ..."

In fact, he should leave. Really should.

He paused at the door to the pub. A sudden dizziness swam over him, leaving him dazed and wobbling.

What ...?

"I did advise you otherwise," he heard Li Hsien murmur.

Collin shook his head, trying and failing to clear it. Uncertain as to whether or not he'd actually gotten so far as an assault on these particular gates, he tried to grasp the knob and turn it.

Huh.

He ran down a checklist. Feet itching to make tracks. Heart pounding. Mind chanting, *run, run, run*. Blood pressure boiling. Skin hot. Sweating. Ridiculous orange silk shirt soaked beneath the armpits and at the collar.

He shuddered with disgust. He hated getting too warm. Didn't he? The bar had been cold; now it was hot. Furnace-heat hot.

So, go, moron. Scram!

The problem seemed to be Collin's body turning against him, refusing to obey any directives coming from his brain. The green lights said "go," but internally, something had stalled at red.

"Wrong," Collin muttered. "Really, really wrong."

"Sir?" Li Hsien volunteered, polite and expressionless as ever. "If you seek relief, may I suggest you take the door to your left instead of the main exit?"

Collin barked a laugh. "Of course. What's in there? A lake of fire?"

"Of course not, sir. I believe, though, you will find what you seek within. That which seeks you, too."

"Right. And how, exactly, do you know anything about me not covered in a basic dossier?"

Li Hsien tilted his head. "You have drunk from my bottles," he said. "I see inside you. Take the left-hand door, sir. This is my advice."

"And always remember, no matter what you do, don't get mogwai wet. Sure."

"Cultural slurs are not necessary, sir."

Collin sneered. He reached for the doorknob to open the portal and let him back into the noisy safety of the club's rainbow heart.

And his hand froze. Again.

No matter what, he couldn't make himself touch the knob. And he tried. Man, did he try. Felt like repelling magnets. A half-inch separated his hand from the metal and sent his fingers sliding over, under, around, sideways, but above all, unable to make contact.

He swore under his breath.

“Sir? I do advise the left-hand door.”

Collin shot a glare back at Li Hsien. “I’m sure you do.”

Fine. Fine! Collin knew a good part of strategy was choosing your battles and making sure they were ones you could win. So he couldn’t go out the way he came, eh? He’d been left with no choice but to go on. One more turn into the labyrinth.

Game, set, but not the match. Not yet.

Collin stalked to the small door Li Hsien kept pointing out. Looked just the same as the main entrance, only made of rosewood, not mahogany. Glossy finish, silver knob.

Struggling to hide his anger, Collin reached out. He cursed his hand for shaking, but to his partial amazement, he managed to grip the doorknob.

It turned, smooth as silk. The door swung open on soundless hinges.

Collin counted to ten under his breath. Then, out loud: “Are you satisfied?”

“Sir.”

Collin sighed and rubbed his temples. When this night was over, his foot had a date with Liam’s ass. As in kicking it. Hard. Repeatedly. Hopefully leaving bruises. Big ones. In the meantime, though ... He took a deep breath and walked through the left-hand door.

Into another world.

Chapter Seven

Am I dreaming? Have to be. Places like this room don't exist. Maybe in fantasies. Crazy, purple-pen, sci-fi novels. Fantasy epics. Tolkien's discarded rough drafts. Not here on Earth. Can't be real.

Maybe it's bottle hallucinations from the Scotch -- no, the sake? I don't care what Li Hsien says; he must have slipped me a few tabs' worth of disco pharmacology. A man like him most likely figures delivering a sure-fire buzz is part and parcel of showing the customers a good time. As for the synthetic chemical crap? Even I know there are dozens of purely natural herbs capable of sending a man drooling his way down Stoner Lane.

I know I'm caught in a dream. So why can't I wake up? Why don't I want to? I should, but I don't, not deep down where the rubber meets the road. I'm stalled in neutral, motor turning over, but wheels at rest.

I don't understand any of this. What kind of place is Amour Magique?

Standing in the room adjoining Li Hsien's bar -- a room only by loose definition, given how the chamber had walls, a floor, and a ceiling -- Collin couldn't believe his eyes. He shook his head hard, rubbing his temples to clear his vision. No good. The landscape he'd

stumbled into didn't change, didn't disappear, and didn't vanish into an alcohol- and drug-induced haze.

It looked ... real.

Once more down the rabbit hole, then, because there's just no way any of this can exist. This is Charleston, not the Ivory Coast! It's the club playing tricks again. I'd bet my life. Even thinking the words sounds insane.

But, as folk say, when in Rome ...

Collin inhaled slowly, settling his expression into comfortably familiar, blank lines, while he tried to force the world around him to make sense. Any kind of sense. Which it didn't.

First off, the antechamber was cavernous. Tilting his head back, Collin tried to get a measure of how high the ceiling stretched. Ninety, a hundred feet? Higher? Yet Amour Magique wasn't more than three stories high as seen from the outside.

The club wasn't half as *big*, either, not even close to a fraction of this bizarre inner section. Impossible, illogical, yet his eyes insisted in believing what he saw as real. Three of the main dance club could have fit in this one room.

He'd thought at first it was a cavern, but as he glanced around, Collin wasn't sure about the comparison's accuracy. The walls were definitely hand-crafted -- smooth stone bricks, perfectly aligned in diamondback patterns reminiscent of the ridges on a rattlesnake's hide. Made a man dizzy if he looked at them for too long. His eyes wanted to follow the interlinking zigzags up, down, and around, never stopping before zooming on to the next set. Collin suspected if someone let themselves get drawn in, they could stand in one spot for years, hypnotized, swaying like a drunkard.

Better not to risk testing his theory. Collin looked away hastily, taking in the rest of the place. Well worth looking at, he had to confess, especially if one enjoyed his creature comforts. Thick carpets of intricate Oriental design, blazing with rich jewel colors, padded

the floor. Underneath, it felt hard. Stone, packed earth, or more bricks? Collin would have believed anything by then.

While he saw no lounge chairs, no couches, no bar, and no TV, he did spy abundant blocks of granite and marble scattered around, smothered in fat pillows. Possibly arranged in a pattern. Collin wasn't sure what sort of design and didn't care about looking close enough to discern the scheme.

The air bothered him. Damp as fog, it felt thick and sticky. Polluted. What had this sort of atmosphere been called, a century or so before? A pea-souper?

Disgusting.

Collin tugged at the neck of his stupid orange shirt with a sudden urge to rip the thing off and throw it away. Maybe toss it into the fire and let it burn ... burn ... fire ...

He took a step forward, swaying drunkenly. How had he missed the ...? He stood within singeing distance of a massive hearth, a huge fire roaring inside. The blaze put off enough heat to warm three city blocks, devouring logs the size of redwood trunks and crumbling their red-hot coals into clouds of ash. Smoke snaked out in hypnotizing coils mimicking the pattern emblazoned on the cavern walls.

Ten times out of ten, there was nothing Collin hated more than fires. Loathed them with the quashing depth of a thousand oceans. He'd do anything to avoid getting overheated.

But this blaze ... he couldn't look away. The sparks pulled at him. He could hear them singing.

Singing? Yes ... a crackling melody. Hissing, popping, almost chortling.

Come here, little boy. Come and warm up. You know you want to. Want me. Come, come, come ...

A hand landed on Collin's arm. "Hey, wake up!" a man's voice said, pitch squeaking up and down the scale like an insane clown. "It's a good fire, but it likes to play tricks on newbies. C'mon, now, snap out of it!"

It wasn't quite a slap of cold water, but it worked just as well. The hypnotic doze Collin had been floating in snapped like a soap bubble. Surrealism vanished, replaced by something not much better, but at least not the product of an opium dream. Still in the cavern, yes, but no longer alone. Men surrounded him, every age and build, milling in small crowds and chattering with voices kept too low to overhear.

"Come on, buddy," the man who'd woken him encouraged. "Step away from the dreams, huh?"

Collin dragged in a sharp breath and coughed, his lungs full of chokingly humid air. "What ..." he wheezed. "What happened?"

"Take it easy." The stranger thumped Collin's back. "Hey, you really are new around here, aren't you?"

Collin stared at his rescuer. Just an ordinary guy. He looked like an accountant. Short, mousy brown hair. Wire-rimmed glasses. Weak chin. A satisfy-the-customer smile. Creepy Uriah Heep voice. No clammy hands, though. Warm palms. Warm and dry.

"Who ... what ...?"

The man peered at him over his glasses. He blinked. "Oh, wow. It's *you*. Collin, right? I heard you'd be coming tonight. Didn't think I'd get to meet you, though. Gosh, what an honor!"

"Honor ...?"

"Oh, yeah. *They* don't choose one of us too often. Maybe once or twice every couple of millennia, if that. I've been waiting two hundred and sixty years, myself. Not too long, or so I'm told. You must be really special if they picked you out of the crowd outside and wanted you right away. Wow, wow, wow!" Proto-Accountant babbled, staring reverently at Collin.

Mystery piled upon mystery, and Collin didn't like a one of them. Who were the "they" Proto kept raving over? What did it mean to be "picked out"?

He almost didn't want to know.

"How'd you get them to notice you? Can you tell me? No matter what I do, none of *them* have ever noticed me. Li Hsien says my finding this place was a mistake, and I wasn't supposed to get here until after a few more turns of the wheel, karma or whatever, but I did find my way in, so what does he know? But you? You walk right in, and boom!"

Collin struggled to follow Proto's stream of chatter. "Boom?"

"Boom!" Proto clapped his hands together. "You're Collin. We've all heard about you. Li Hsien told us everything, but not what really matters. Oh, hey, win a bet for me, will you? What did he give you to drink?"

Collin frowned. He put a hand to his throat, raw and scratchy as he swallowed. The moist heat in the air had swelled his membranes and made it hard to breathe, much less talk.

"Scotch," he said. No point in not being honest. Proto talked too much for Collin's taste, but it might mean he had answers on tap with his other babbling. "At first. Then it turned into rice wine. Sake. Heated sake."

"Ohh." Proto sighed. His eyes grew damp. "I was right. That is the key. One of them. You are so lucky. Did you see him? Them? One of them? Did he visit you when you drank? I've heard guys, other chosen ones, tell stories about visions, visits, whatever. Little peeks into the future. I bet you saw something. Come on, spill. What did you see?"

Collin stared at the mousy little man. Proto all but panted with his lust for details, and suddenly, his helping hands felt sticky and grasping. Leech-like. Collin's stomach rolled as he shuddered away. "Get off of me!"

Proto cringed. "Hey, hey, don't mean to offend, buddy. I just wanted to know what being so special feels like, right?"

Special? Chosen? I still don't like the sound of those words, but -- later. I'll think about them later. Right now ...

"Get. Off!" Collin barked, giving Proto a rough shove back and away. The man stumbled and almost fell, righting himself in the nick of time.

Collin glared at him. "Don't you touch me. Never again. Are we clear?"

"But --" The man wavered, then sighed, deflating balloon-style. "Sorry," he muttered. "I get too excited. Li says that's another reason why I haven't been chosen. Won't be chosen for a long, long time. Gotta learn to keep things cool. Or warm." Proto giggled, a crazy-sounding snicker. "I'll get the sake some day. Just have to wait. It'll be my turn. You'll see. They'll all see. I'll be chosen. I'll be honored. Special. Right? Right? Tell me I'm right."

Collin stared as he shook his head. Nuts. Proto was so far around the bend he'd need a periscope to look back at where he'd come from. Collin had had enough lunatics for one night, thanks. "Just stay away from me. All right? Far, far away."

"Sure. Sure thing. No problem. Hey, but when you meet them, could you put in a good word, or --"

Enough was enough! Collin closed his ears to Proto's babbling as he would a buzzing horsefly. Glancing down, he caught sight of an abandoned clay mug. He glanced from side to side, picked it up, and sniffed. No smell at all. A taste-test proved it to be water. Heavy on the minerals -- *cavern water* -- but non-alcoholic. He suspected staying away from intoxicants would be the smart move, but he desperately needed something to dampen his throat.

He took a sip, half-closing his eyes as the coolness washed down his throat. Plain water had never tasted quite as good as this, and hey! Not only did the liquid wet Collin's whistle, it cleared out his windpipe. He could breathe again. Smell again. He looked up, delighted enough to share the news with anyone who happened to be passing --

And blinked.

Even as he watched, the room shimmered with a sudden wave of scorching summer warmth. The air waved and bent before his eyes in heat ripples. When it settled, it had changed. The cavern had changed. Subtle variations, but very real. Warmer, wetter. Thicker air. Still stone, stone, stone everywhere, but veined marble instead of brick-work.

The madding crowd had vanished, leaving him alone once more.

Alone and feeling pitifully small in a space too high and broad to see any ceiling, walls, or boundaries. An impossible hole in the world that stretched on forever.

So when am I going to learn not to take candy from strangers?

"Nice trick," Collin said after a long pause to reset his bearings yet again. He assessed himself quickly. Blank-face, flat tone of voice, steady hands: check. He wouldn't let Amour Magique know its chameleonic squirming had gotten to him. Not again.

Would it help if he approached his situation as he would a living, breathing person? A difficult client, maybe? Might work. It was worth a try, and he knew how to play his own games.

First order of business, then -- find out where he stood. Let whoever was trying to play him puppet-style know that no one could tug his strings without permission. A touch of dominance, a pinch of condescension, and a taste of defiance. Let whoever ran this particular show learn exactly what he thought about the performance to date.

He put his hands on his hips. "Five out of five for originality," he drawled, his voice deliberately lazy and bored. The sound echoed, yet was muted. "Tell me, what do you do for an encore? Do you make the Statue of Liberty disappear?"

Silence.

A waiting silence.

Collin bared his teeth in the parody of a smile. "I'm well aware someone is out there, watching me. I can feel you staring. Would you like to tell me who you are?"

Silence.

Interesting. Perhaps try goading? A taunt or two might grease the deus ex machina's gears. "So now you've got nothing to say. Odd, considering you couldn't stop babbling earlier." Collin turned in a slow circle. "Here, kitty, kitty," he said, deliberately smiling as

smugly as he could. "Come on out. We're all friends here, aren't we? I won't hurt you if you don't hurt me. Do we have a deal?"

Silence.

Then, abruptly enough to make Collin flinch, he heard a fire-whisper --

Flames burn higher, higher.

Cry for us.

Crystal tears.

Pearls.

A flicker of flame burst from thin air and tickled over Collin's groin. He yelped and stumbled back, unable to help the cry.

The fire-voice chuckled. *Dance.*

Collin blinked. "What?"

We would see you dance, Collin.

Here. Perhaps this will help.

The curl of flame darted arrow-swift into Collin's groin, and his body all but exploded with the fire that suddenly raged within, barely contained inside his skin.

Heat. Fear. *Lust.* Insane, insensate lust. Taking over his nervous system and tweaking each one just so, driving him mad with a burst of need for sex stronger than his urge to breathe, swallow, or stand.

His cock swelled hard, fast, and solid, a rock between his legs. Pulsing rock. Pulse beating with a mighty *thump, thump, thump!* Rolling waves of pleasure blasting through his lower belly.

He doubled over with a groan. The arousal transcended pleasure fast, moving into pain. Blue balls was too mild a descriptor. If he didn't climax, he would lose his mind as well as his genitals, as he suspected they would surely explode.

He knew what the puppet-master wanted him to do, wanted to watch. "I don't perform on command," he warned as he licked trickles of sweat away from where they'd dribbled down to his mouth. "I don't care who you are. I am my own man."

No. You are ours. Dance, Collin. One dance, for us.

Collin squeezed his eyes shut, grinding his teeth shut against a groan. How much sexual torture could a man reasonably stand?

Please, Collin. For me. Us. There is no one else around to see. Do as we ask. Obey us.

The voice chuckled. *It is not as if you have a choice, you understand.*

Collin wiped his face with one shaking hand. "Fine," he said, voice low and threatening as he could muster. "But then, I want answers."

Perhaps if you please us, we will give them. Now, our patience grows thin. Dance!

And Collin, for the first time in a very long time, gave up the fight. Gave in to his baser nature, the one he'd tamped down and hidden well out of sight, and let his hormones win out over his common sense.

One thing, though -- if it was a show they wanted, he'd see they got one to remember. A sight to haunt their eyes when they tried to sleep at night.

When Collin did a thing, he did it *right* -- and he took pride in being better than anyone at everything he turned his hand to.

Game on.

Collin tore at his jeans, the bizarre frenzy he felt increasing his strength so much that he ripped the denim when it didn't cooperate. He shoved the tatters off his hips, tore the shirt off his back, and, blissfully naked, arched his erect cock high into the air. Fucking the baking air around him. Offering the hard-on of a lifetime to the fire in the hearth.

His hidden audience approved. Tongues of flame flicked out of nowhere, dancing around Collin's cock. He let out a hoarse, primal yell. Felt like the fire was doing him in return, sucking him into tight, moist heat, better than the best ever. His pulse beat like a

drum, his erection pounded, and he thought, semi-crazily, that he might just blast a hole through the cavern wall when he climaxed.

When. Let it be soon. Please, let it be soon. This is too good, too much, too fast. I'm not going to beg for pity, but I need a dose of mercy. Come on, come on, come on!

No dice. Shockwaves of ecstasy continued rolling in, one hard on the heels of another, each riding a higher, hotter blaze of arousal. His skin felt stretched tight enough to split. His balls ached, squeezing, contracting.

Explosion suddenly seemed alarmingly probable.

Oh, no, you don't. I'm not going down until I say so. Collin reached for his cock. Defiant to the last, with a sneer and a leer, he began masturbating like a man possessed by a lust devil. The pleasure doubled, tripled, and more. Better than any past sex he vaguely half-remembered.

But ... not enough. His own hand alone couldn't push him over the edge. Pain, pleasure, pulse, throb, ache, squeeze. Too much, too much! He'd die. He'd burst.

Low chimes of laughter filled the room as Collin writhed, caught in the paradoxical grip of nightmarish bliss. A tendril of fire snaked out and wrapped around the length of his cock. It hovered, teasing.

A stream of sparks dug into Collin's swollen flesh, burning deep.

Collin screamed. Screamed his throat raw -- but came. Climaxed hard enough to knock him to his knees and onto his back. Flat on his shoulder-blades, thrusting his cock into the steaming air. Again and again and again.

The fire pounced. It ate at him, slurping up the gouts of come splattered thick and hot over his belly, and didn't stop. Wave after wave of orgasm. Engulfing him. Devouring his mind from the testicles up.

Too much. No man could handle something so intense.

As his cock gave another mighty spasm, squeezing out the last drops of agonizing joy, and Collin heard the fire-whisper-laugh, his eyes rolled back into his head and he passed out.

Chapter Eight

Floating. I'm floating on clouds of fire.

I'm burning from the inside out, and it's unbelievable. I'm roasting in a bonfire. I'm a log in the flames. I'm turning to ashes.

Maybe I'll become a phoenix.

It's all going up from here. Mind you, I don't know how I know.

I just know.

Collin opened his eyes, boneless as a cat lying in the sunlight. He could feel his cock flush against his belly. Still hard, still full, still pulsing, aching, burning. Not desperate. Yet. Eager for a second round. Embarrassingly eager.

Just ... not for a few minutes. The pain felt good. Better than good. Gleaming. Glowing. Red-hot.

Now I know I must be dreaming, Collin thought languidly. *As I recall, afterglow was never so good or so literal in real life.*

"Hey." His voice slurred. "Thanks. Good one." He laughed to himself. "I owe you. Whatever, whoever you are."

He expected no answer. When a chuckle echoed back, Collin almost jumped out of his skin. He winced when his cock bumped his stomach. The organ felt weightier than usual, and tender as a fresh bruise. He stared around himself, but still saw nothing except an empty cavern. "Hello?"

Someone was out there. He *knew* it. Maybe more than one someone. Watching him. Waiting to see what he'd do. He could all but see their smiles. Snaky, eager, hungry.

Collin grinned, lewdly as he possibly could. *Let's see what value shock can offer.* He grabbed his cock in one hand. "Do you want some more of this? Show yourself. Yourselves. I like to see what I'm fucking."

He heard soft, clashing-cymbal sounds of laughter. Metallic, yet at the same time crackling like a log ablaze. The air warmed hotter yet. A gentle waft of scorching air blew over Collin, ruffling up his hair.

Two men appeared in front of the fireplace.

Men who weren't men. Not exactly.

More than human.

Amazingly more.

One of them was the fantastical creature who'd come to Collin earlier in Li Hsien's bar. His dark curls danced in the heat, his multitude of pale scales sparkled, and his grin stretched wide over sharp teeth and wicked fangs. Ovoid pupils in inhuman eyes glittered at Collin.

Strangely enough, he found he wasn't frightened. Not one bit.

What did alarm Collin was the realization that the sight turned him on.

"Who are you?" he said, attempting a strong tone but only managing a hoarse whisper.

The being laughed soundlessly. He turned to his partner, and each wrapped both arms around the other. As for the second entity ... if Collin's "friend" was breathtaking, this fellow had him beat by a Carolina mile.

Taller, bulkier. Muscles rippling with every tiny move, sinuously alive beneath his skin of darker scales. His hair hung tangled and thick, the same rich, dark rose-brown as Li Hsien's door. The Tarzan look.

Unbelievably arousing.

He turned his slitted blue gaze on Collin, eyeing him up and down. Collin frowned. The man appeared to be weighing him in a balance. Somehow, oddly, it seemed more than important he pass the test. He felt he had to measure up, no matter what. But why?

The man grinned, flashing fangs. He nodded once, regally as a king. His message came through loud and clear: *You will do.*

"Thanks, I think," Collin ventured, keeping a careful distance between himself and the inhuman, supernaturally sensual beings sizing him up. "Someone told me I've been chosen. I'm not saying I believe this is really happening, or that even if it were, I would be first on anyone's to-do list, but here we are, and I'd truly like to know why. Did you two bring me here for sex? To tease me until I lose my mind? Trust me, I'm halfway there." He glanced at his erection, stubbornly persistent. "You can see I'm ready, and I'm sure you know everything about what you've done to me. Me, who hasn't -- not in a -- well."

Swallowing down a lump of uncertainty, he reached to stroke himself. "Fine. You can't rape the willing, and insane as it might be, I'm willing enough. Let's do this."

The men tilted their chins back and laughed. They turned dazzling twin smiles on Collin and, as one, shook their heads.

He blinked, baffled. "No?"

His opponents' eyes gleamed. Mischievous. Teasing. Loki eyes. Loki the trickster god. Collin remembered him from some required history course in college, years and years ago. But no, not Loki. They weren't ... cold, or Nordic, or blond. They were living heat. Scorching. Mutable as licking flames. Even as Collin stared, trying to track their movements, they flashed back and forth between fire and flesh.

Dragons?

Dragons.

He knew he'd pinned them down. Couldn't have figured out how he knew, just that he did. No room for doubt, no chance of error. *Dragons.*

They shouldn't exist. Couldn't exist. Life wasn't a fairy tale. Peculiarities like their breed belonged in old legends. Collin knew he had to be dreaming, drunk, high, or all of the above. He clung to that belief, hoping he was just drooling under some table with his tongue hanging out. Happily hallucinating away like a seasoned junkie.

Yet it felt so real, especially where nothing else had managed to affect him in ages. His cock, an old favorite toy, had suddenly regained every bit of interest Collin had lost in its doings. Insistent, his erection pulsed with a steady beat. It wanted to *play*, play with these ... What were they? Gods, or men?

Knowing he should be far more startled than he was at his abrupt shift from passive to aggressive libido, Collin realized he didn't care so long as the dragons quit playing around and fucked him into the ground already.

Liam wasn't joking when he said tonight would be one to remember. Hello, testosterone. I've missed you. I suggest you continue making up for lost time. Deal?

As if reading Collin's thought, which he suspected they very well could, the dragon men grinned together. Lazy. Teasing. Tempting. The taller one put a finger to his lips, neatly between his fangs. The smaller held up his hand, palm out, fingers beckoning, a sort of "watch this" gesture.

Collin frowned. "Watch what?"

This.

The fire ceased its arrhythmic crackling and began to play a tune. Tinkling music that chimed and crashed with soft gongs. An Asian song. Something older than Western

civilization. Perhaps even older than all the dynasties. This was real music, not the pale imitations men attempted to play.

Listening, Collin heard the heart that beat inside every song ever written. The rhythmic magic that had created the first melodies. Awed, he almost forgot about the men. His hard-on. His need.

Until, with a lush sway of their hips, the two dragon men turned to one another, keeping their arms twined around each other's waists, and began to dance. Not a slow, sissy, semi-ballroom dance, either. No gentle, fairy-foppish swaying around.

This dance? Pure sex in motion. These dragons flowed around each other as if each was starving and the other a banquet. Strong, solid hands, nails sharp as claws, raked up arms and down long, lean backs. Chests pressed hard enough together to melt and become one. Collin could see both had erections as rampant as his own, obscenely thick and swollen tight. They were worth a second, third, fourth and more look, as they appeared to be somehow ... different. Pointed. Sharp?

Logically, the sight should have re-awoken Collin's sense of self-preservation, well and truly honed from use. He should have run out as fast as possible, getting as far away as he could, his own hard-on shrinking down to limp meat.

Not so. Collin felt his stomach twist with a spear of wanting. It didn't matter who these creatures were, or if he believed them to be real. He only knew he wanted them. Immediately.

The dancing dragons, however, didn't seem inclined to share. Yet. Still far too wrapped up in one another. Grinding their dagger dicks into thighs and groins, thrusting and jerking. Their faces went slack with lust even as they lit up with fire and passion.

Their hands grew rougher. Nails tore through fabric and left bloody trails on skin. They laughed at the sight. The smaller, paler dragon man bent to lap up crimson trails -- drops that glowed like fire berries on his tongue before he swallowed.

Coals began to burn in Collin's gut. He choked back the urge to get up. Run to them. Join in. But not yet, he knew; again, just somehow knew. He had to see it all first. Understand what he was getting into. The tiny bit of his mind still able to think agreed.

The men glanced at him once, warning him off, underscoring his thoughts.

It isn't time yet.

Soon, though. Soon.

Collin held back a groan of pure, aching *need* and waited. Watched. As eager for the dance as a dying man for one more chance at life. He drank deeply of everything he could see as they put on their show. Jerking together, losing their rhythm just enough to let him know they'd lost control, as well. Deliberate sweeps of fingers turning into frantic digs and scratches.

They kissed, fangs scoring lips. The blood that trickled out burst ablaze, curling around their mouths and spreading fiery tendrils over their cheeks. Dancing up into their hair. Forever flickering among the shapes of men, dragons, and plumes of flame.

They thrust one last time, hard as stones crashing together. Threw back their heads and howled in perfect silence.

Bloody, fiery fangs glittered.

Their semen sparkled like Chinese fireworks.

Then, not even close to winded, they kissed again. An afterglow kiss. Hard. Passionate. Eager for more, more, more, as soon as possible.

And they turned to Collin, inviting him in at last.

Collin drew in a rough gulp of the cavern's humid air. He swallowed hard. "Who are you?"

The men smiled. Beckoned. The tentacles of flame born from their kiss weaved out, beckoning with slender fingers. They stretched across the empty space to Collin. Twined

around his arms, his legs, his throat, his stubborn erection. Tingling and burning. Pleasure and pain. Agony and ecstasy.

His pulse began to hammer in a now-familiar tattoo as Collin felt the frantic urge to rut rushing back in on him. *Need to dance. Need to fuck. Need to climax.*

Too much.

Just right.

Perfect.

I want some more.

“Tell me.” Collin got to his feet. “Come on. Tell me. Who are you? *What* are you?”

The dragon men’s tendrils tugged at Collin. Their message was clear: *Come and find out.*

It would be a stupid move. Tremendously stupid.

All the same, Collin would be damned if he could have said no.

Instead, he let go, allowed the aching pull of his cock to lead him straight into the dragon men’s arms.

Whether he was burned alive or fornicated until he lost his mind, his life, or his soul -- Collin didn’t care.

He knew, no matter how unbelievable, he had finally found the place where he was meant to be.

Chapter Nine

Incineration. Combustion.

*These beings -- so hot to touch. I should already be burned to ashes ... but I'm whole.
How can I be walking through this fire unharmed while letting it burn?*

Why aren't I dead?

Why do I feel so alive?

The journey of a lifetime began with a single step -- or so dictated conventional wisdom. Ergo, ready and willing, Collin stepped. One foot at a time.

Still not afraid.

He wondered if the dragon men had burned down his defensive shields. They gave forth the impression that nothing could hide from them. No trick would work. Not masks, not disguises, not defiance. They took it all, and all they left was lust. Pure lust. Wanting. Needing. An offer freely given. His to have, if he dared.

He did.

Step by step, Collin approached the two amorphous, blazing dragons. Were they the voices he'd heard chanting in his head before, when he'd arrived at Amour Magique? He

suspected as much. He hoped so. Believed they were one and the same. That they'd meant him good, not harm.

Step. Step. Step.

The curly-haired male grinned, licking his fangs. His eyes glowed. *Come, Collin. Come.*

He went.

Inch. By. Inch. With each move, Collin felt his legs shaking. Too many orgasms. Arousal overdose. Yet he still wanted more. The ache in his cock wouldn't ease up. These men were his cure. Men of fire and what they could give him. An offer he couldn't refuse.

Even had he wanted to.

The taller being laughed, approving. He extended one hand and gestured, beckoning Collin closer still. *Good. You learn at last. Now come. Be rewarded.*

Collin stopped, struggling against the urge to obey, and stubbornly shook his head. "No. Ask politely. I'm not a dog. I don't do tricks for treats."

The dragons rippled. Mirth?

No?

Then will you dance again, for sex?

Come join us.

Fire dance.

Make love with us.

Bathe in flame.

Fuck with us.

But first -- first -- dance.

Dance.

If you are bold enough to try.

Are you?

We think so.

Collin regarded them as levelly as he could. "Watch me and find out."

The dragons arched human eyebrows. Collin scowled. He took in a deep breath of the scorching air, flinching as it singed his lungs. He couldn't help but imagine the organs turning toasty brown for a split second before he shook off the distraction. He had his mind set. Heart and hard-on, too. He *wasn't* afraid, and he'd prove it.

Step by step by step. Faster, his legs growing steady. When he crossed the last stone that separated him from the dragons, he stood straight and tall, head held high.

"Well?" he challenged. "What do you think about me now?"

We think you are delicious.

We want to devour you.

Alive.

Whole.

Flesh to meat to muscle to bone.

Lips to cock.

May we?

Say yes.

Yes, Collin, say yes.

Tendrils of fire swirled around the three men, Collin and the dragons, tying them together. They tickled his hair, his ears, his lips. Twined about his cock, setting it alight with mind-numbing lust.

You want what we offer.

Want us.

We know.

We chose you.

You should be ours.

We claim you tonight.

Do you come willingly, Collin?

Speak. Say yes, say no.

Speak.

Collin glanced from one dragon man to another. From tall, dark, and charcoal-smudged to small, solid Hephaestus fresh from the forge that never saw daylight. He felt their arms surrounding him, hot as melted iron, solid as welded steel; he drew a sharp, lusty breath when they prodded his thighs and the crease of his ass with their strangely enticing cocks. Arched him forward and backward, teasing without pity or mercy. They had neither to give, but they did have him, and Collin was aware that both the dragons knew it.

“Yes,” Collin said, voice raw, knowing males like these two would have to hear the words before they would act. “I give. You win. Stop the games, and do what you brought me here to do. Hard, fast, now.”

The darker man shook his head. He put a searing finger to Collin’s lips. *No. First we dance. You dance. Prove yourself. Perhaps then ...*

Another test? Collin eyed the dragons. A small part of him wondered how he’d come around to accepting every ounce of surrealism with such calm. He’d decided to have three-way sex with *dragons*, for Pete’s sake!

And dance? He hadn’t danced in years. He hated the typical, idiotic, cock-of-the-walk, dance-floor, gay aerobics. This -- this could be different. He thought, if he tried, he could move the way the dragons had moved. Slip-slide, silky, tentacles of fire spinning and twining together.

Yes ... this might be a dance worth trying. No. It *would* be. It’d be the best of his life. He *knew*.

Collin grinned. His smile felt as wicked and curved as the dragons' own. He would have sworn he'd grown his own sharp fangs. Glittery white, filled with sweet poison. One bite to deliver death by orgasm. He had the power. It rolled through his veins. Rich, hot mightiness.

When he danced, he'd become a god. They knew it. It was why they had insisted he join them. What he'd done to earn this, he wasn't sure he'd ever know. He suspected the dragons were well capable of keeping their secrets hidden.

Should they ever want to confess, they would. Until then, he could only exercise his patience, accept the dance for what it was, and savor it as he hadn't anything of life in what suddenly felt far too long.

Collin raised his arms and put one hand on each man's hip. "Let's dance," he said, low and rough. "Dance me to death."

The dragons' eyes glittered. *Yes, yes, yes*, they chimed. Even "in person," their voices echoed inside Collin's head instead of bouncing off his eardrums. He decided they didn't need verbal speech. Were beyond it. Transcended the limits of spoken language.

Bizarre. Unreal. Amazing.

Erotic as the brush of old leather and raw silk.

Dance, Collin, dance! they urged.

Music echoed from the fireplace. Asian harps. The haunting sounds of demons and angels singing in harmony.

Collin -- each hand wrapped around a dragon's waist -- danced.

The first step overwhelmed him and swallowed his mind, dissolving any rational thought processes. He lost visual. Sound. Smell. Taste. Only touch remained -- pure, primal stimulation. He felt himself rock and sway, twine and curl, hissing as scales rasped over his human flesh. Cried out without sound when forked tongues rough as a cat's scraped his cheeks, eyelids, throat, and collarbone.

Screamed silently when fangs teased, then pierced his nipples with the sharp sting and fluid ease of a surgeon's suturing needles.

Arched and groaned when twin cocks pushed at his flanks, hips, and ass cheeks. Bucked forward when fingers of fire eased between his cleft and probed at the tight hole. Unfucked for years. Like a virgin again. But better. Best of all. This time, with these dragons, would be his first sexual venture done over with style.

A hidden flame sparked to life and unfurled inside Collin's once-cold heart. Tendrils flooded out through his veins, flowing to every nerve ending. Stroking. Probing. Pushing.

Collin writhed as fireworks exploded inside his mind. He could feel howl after howl pouring from his mouth, but couldn't hear a thing. Would anyone notice? Come to check it out?

He decided, giddy as a drunkard, that it didn't matter. Nothing mattered, so long as the dragons kept ... dancing ... all ... night ... long.

Vaguely, he realized one of his partners was dropping to his knees in front of Collin. Collin shook his head. "What are you --" his mouth tried to shape. "*Oh!*"

He let out a scream -- felt, not heard -- as the shorter dragon's forked fire-tongue wrapped around his twitching erection and licked it from top to bottom. Scraped the skin raw. The sensation hurt like heaven and hell mixed together.

"More." He moved his lips to soundlessly demand. "Again!"

Collin felt the dragon man chuckle against his cock. He obeyed. Sucked Collin's cock deep into a mouth so hot Collin thought his genitalia might melt clean off. For the time being, he almost didn't care if it did. The dragons knew their limits, and if the worst happened? They'd know a way to fix the problem, or think of something better still. More, Collin felt beyond sure he'd enjoy every tongue-flicker and flaming lick involved.

His blood boiled. The desperate need to orgasm he'd felt before, now growing familiar, had begun to build high, higher, highest yet as his heart beat in frantic flurry.

"So much," he rasped. "I need ... please ..."

He thrust forward into the dragon's mouth. Greedy, the dragon took it all in until Collin touched the back of his throat.

Then, he swallowed around Collin.

Collin shrieked, jerking his hips. He'd never survive this unspeakable high. His testicles had become twin sacs of fire, hard as stone. They'd rupture. Too much building up inside. Pressure. Pushing. Tight. Tight. Tight. He had to climax. Had to. Had --

The dragons laughed, ripples against his skin.

So easy.

Too easy?

No. His pleasure is my own.

And mine.

More, then?

Yes. More.

Can he cope?

We shall see.

Then -- oh, oh, oh, finally -- Collin felt the surprisingly velvet-feeling, pointed tip of a dragon cock snaking between his ass cheeks. Drawing rings around his tightly drawn-up muscles.

"Wait. Wait! Lube," he struggled to convey, still unable to hear himself speak. Hoping they could. "Condoms?"

A laugh rolled against the back of Collin's neck as the questing dragon behind him pulled Collin close and tight into a strongly muscled chest. Collin arched into the creature's solidness, dipping his head back into a pool of fire. Molten kisses pitted his neck. Fangs scraped his skin as the taller dragon spoke mind to mind.

We make our own oil.

Thick, slick wetness filled the crevice between Collin's ass cheeks and melted inside him. He choked back a shudder of lust and ecstasy even as his body betrayed him, bucking and arching like a sex junkie with his fix in sight. The movement would have snapped his spine if the dragons hadn't been holding on so tight.

"What are you ... how ..."

You'll learn. In time. Now, I want you. Will you take me?

"Yes." Collin blew out ragged streams of breath, heated and ashy as cigarette smoke to the taste. "Yes!"

Good.

The standing dragon pressed forward. Collin tensed for one moment at the intrusion -- so many years had gone by since he'd needed to know how to relax -- until the dragon on his knees gave him another long, urgent suck. His body spasmed, loose for a moment -- long enough. The dragon behind Collin slipped inside him slick as melted butter, gentle, although the moment had passed for taking things slow. The oil the dragon had mentioned made unbelievably high-quality lube, getting everything that needed it slippery enough to allow for a single hard thrust balls-deep inside him.

Filled with one cock while his own prick was being over-stimulated in turn pushed the desperate ache one final inch too far. Collin felt himself scream. The shriek of a man pushed beyond pain, beyond pleasure.

The howl of a newborn.

A man changing, reborn through sex.

Death, sex, and life.

For the second time that night, the world spun into darkness and Collin passed into unconsciousness -- and heat.

Chapter Ten

I remember the first time I read The Arabian Nights. I was only, what, nine or ten years old? Snuck it out of my Dad's nightstand drawer. Took Mom's copy of Everything You Always Needed to Know About Pleasing Your Man, too, but saved it for later. They were both cherries. Forbidden fruit. Kids weren't supposed to take an interest in s-e-x. Right?

Should have taken Mom's hidden stash of beefcake rags instead.

The Arabian Nights -- not what I'd expected or hoped for. Dad had bragged to his friends about how he'd found the dirty version, so I'd been dreaming what kind of wonders might hide between those old leather covers. I thought reading the stories, not to mention looking at the illustrations, would change my life.

I can still taste the bitterness of that particular disappointment. Dad's prize turned out to be convoluted storytelling that I couldn't begin to understand, and the drawings just a bunch of weird men in what I thought were dresses slipping bizarrely shaped penises into women, who bent up like pretzels.

Even then my first and last thoughts were "Yuck."

One thing I did like ... do remember ... a fleeting sense of luxury. Only lasted for a moment. But in that magical moment, just one second's worth of time, I thought I smelled ancient perfumes, tasted saffron, and felt both skin and silk sliding beneath my hands.

It was the first time I understood how much power lust could have. So I was precocious.

But then, also being young and stupid, I shrugged off the enchantment and went to steal Mom's musclemen tabloids after all.

I wonder why I'd forgotten that magic Arabian moment for so long?

It feels like I'm reliving the experience ... right ... now ...

Collin blinked his eyes open. Everything faded into a dull, hazy gray focus, like seeing the world through billows of smoke. His mouth tasted of burning leather. His stomach twisting, he gagged and spat up bile.

"There's a new spin on the classic morning-after concept," Collin mumbled. He put a hand to his forehead, feeling his skull for dents and bruises. His brain pounded against its bone casing like an African drum.

Hot. His skin had crisped in the beyond human-tolerable heat, burning and running with sweat. The salty stuff stung where it dripped over dozens of raw, sore spots. He groaned.

"Hell. I'm in Hell."

Two voices chuckled.

Not yet, Collin. Not for thousands of years, if then.

"What?"

Hush. Rest. Quiet. Peace.

A hand, hot as living coals, dry as lizard skin, came to rest on Collin's chest. Sharp nails tapped gently on his collarbone.

Too much, too fast, we think. You are still mostly human. We had forgotten how fragile mortals can be. It has been so long for many of our kind, and never for us. Do you know you are the first mortal chosen since the glorious days of Emperor Ming?

A second hand stroked Collin's sweaty, tangled hair. *Forgive us?*

"Forgive what? I don't ... oh. Oh." Memories rushed back in. Collin couldn't help chuckling. "Forgive you? Are you truly insane? I've just had a sexual experience jaded nymphomaniacs would pay good money for." He thumbed his chin, briefly thoughtful. "You brought me back to life," he murmured. "Forgive you? Gentlemen, I'm going to *thank* you. I just hate that I passed out right at the best part."

Brought you back to life?

An ... interesting choice of words.

Collin, our fires all but burned you to death. Living death. Permanent death.

Well, *that* he hadn't been expecting to hear. "Excuse me?"

We almost killed you.

"You're serious?" Collin considered the concept. "Did you push that far on purpose?"

Absolutely not!

Collin, Collin, Collin ... we chose you when Liam told us of your existence. He saw your fire heart, frozen cold as a shield against the deeds of those who were wholly heartless.

We had not intended to search for a third, a mate, but now that we have found you ... We mean to keep you for many years.

Decades.

Centuries.

Burning you to ashes now would be more than a waste.

It would be a crime.

Unforgivable by gods or men.

I ask you again: can you forgive us?

Collin bit his lip. "Give me a moment."

His head tumbled and jangled with way too many thoughts crowding in. Sex. Death. Life. Rebirth. What they'd almost done. What they had accomplished. He'd forgotten how good sex could be, when there was trust. What it was like to hunger for something very intensely. He'd never been so desperate before, so incredibly ... horny. He'd have burst like an overripe grape if they hadn't done the job for him. The ... dragons. Oh, yes. Oddly enough, their species had entirely slipped his mind for a moment.

Dragons. Creatures of fire. Of myth. Immortal. Apparently, they enjoyed playing games with the rare human or so. He hadn't known they had a taste for sex, and frankly, the thought of a homosexual sub-deity made him want to snicker.

"Ashes, ashes, we all fall down, eh?"

We do not understand.

"No. I don't suppose you would." Collin gave the dragons a half-smile.

You are ... amused? Why?

He shrugged. "After a long dry spell like mine, turning on two creatures probably older than time, to the point where they lose control? No small feat." His smile broadened into a grin. "I told you that you'd brought me back to life. Almost better, you let me know I still have what it takes. Not too shabby."

You confuse us, Collin. Explain yourself.

"Maybe later." Collin arched, stretching his muscles. Odd. He seemed to have more of them than usual, plus a longer spine and new joints in his arms and legs. It would have been disturbing if he'd let himself care, or felt any cause for alarm, instead of this calm ... acceptance. No more snap, crackle, and pop that meant he was getting too old for comfort. He felt young again. No, better. He felt superhuman *and* young. Like a cat. No -- a dragon. Almost. More half dragon, half man.

He felt a brief, crazy urge to look down and see if he'd started growing scales.

"Forgive you?" he repeated. "After what you did for me, you could have turned me into London broil and I wouldn't have complained."

But the danger to you --

"Gentlemen, do you *hear* any kind of complaints from this quarter?" Collin stretched again. Such a wonderful sensation. "Sometimes," he said, popping his shoulders, "the risk is worth the reward."

Silence. Two hands, equipped with sharp claw-nails, tapped Collin's collarbone. The dragon men had come in close to examine him, looking absolutely baffled by his reaction.

Amusement growing, Collin glanced from one to the other. There was no way of telling what they were thinking from their expressions, but he felt sure they were talking on some higher level he was too human to hear. Too mortal to be worthy of listening in.

He laughed again. The dragon men looked at him curiously. *You are exceedingly strange, Collin.*

"No. Just queer."

Dark-curly shook his head. *We have known men to run screaming as fast as their legs would carry them before we got half so far as introductions. We have seen other chosen mates, in times long gone. Each dragon spent an age deliberating its choice. Each time, they were disappointed. But you? You surprise us and accept us at every turn.*

Collin found himself feeling cheeky enough to wink. "What can I say? I'm just good."

And conceited. The taller dragon man smirked. *I think you are drunk.*

"After tasting what Li Hsien has on draft? I wouldn't be surprised. Speaking of which, could I ask for some more of that special sake? My compliments to the brewmaster, by the way."

Sake? Surely. We would ask that you wait a little while first, though. You need to rest. To -- how do they say it, these days? -- recharge your batteries.

We *would say* “*rekindle your inner flame.*” Dark-curls stroked Collin’s skin. Claws left light scratch trails.

Yes. This is necessary. After a climax like yours, your flame has ebbed to banked coals. Still burning, but at low heat.

Collin considered. “I’m theorizing that sex starts the home fires cooking again?”

The dragon men cocked their heads. *Yes. Such is our nature. Our way. Our own magic. Sex magic.*

“I thought so, and yet here I am, still not griping one bit.” Boldly, Collin slipped his hand down his torso to grasp his own cock. Still hard. Not aching. Not yet.

Time to strike a match.

He arched his hips, stroking himself. Lingering sweeps of fingers and thumb. Lust blazed to life in the both sets of dragon eyes. Collin grinned. “Come on,” he coaxed. “The night isn’t over already, is it? Are we?”

The taller dragon man shook his head in amazement. *Are all mortals so sensually impatient in this modern age?*

“From what I hear, yes. I know I am, thanks to you. What do you plan to do about it?” Collin licked his lips and lowered his eyelids to half-mast. “I know you want to play again. You want some more of me.”

Badly, and too much for good sense. But -- no. Not yet. The dragon’s face turned stubborn. *First, you must heal.*

“Spoilsport.”

You dare to pout? Dark-curls grinned, all sharp teeth and fangs. *Rest assured, what we have in mind for the interim will be something you enjoy a great deal. Trust us.*

Collin lifted an eyebrow. “Do I have a choice?”

No.

“Fine. But if you want to stop me from imagining you on me, in me, doing everything ever conceived under the sun to me, you’re going to have to knock me out again.”

The dragon men laughed. *As you please. Go ahead. Do be aware, though, you cannot climax here without our assistance.*

“I call foul!” Collin objected, indignant at the law they’d thrown down so casually. “It’s been a while, but you just don’t work someone up to such a fever pitch and then back down. Are you familiar with the term ‘cock tease’?”

In no way are we teasing you. We fully intend to deliver. Eventually.

“Wonderful. Well, it’s better than nothing, you --” A thought occurred to Collin. “Do you have names?”

The taller dragon frowned. *You could never wrap your tongue around our true, given titles. The language is long since dead, and human mouths cannot reproduce the necessary sounds. But names. Yes. Something to call us.*

“That would be the point.”

The two dragons engaged in another silent conference. *Call me Pax*, the taller offered after a moment. *Call him Tiego.*

“Pax and Tiego?” Collin had to laugh. “Where in the blue blazes did you come up with those handles?”

Pax glared. Collin raised his hands. “Easy, easy, calm down. They’re good names. I’m only curious.”

We like they way they sound. Now. Enough talking. As you would say, shut up, lie back, and let us get to work. Yes? Pax asked -- no, ordered.

Collin didn’t mind the sound of that demand. He spread out, quadruple-jointed, bonelessly lazy. “Are you going to work me over again?” He licked his lower lip, swollen from earlier kisses. “Be my guest.”

Pax and Tiego shook their heads. All the same, they did bend to their work -- and if Collin had enjoyed what came before, he thought he might die of the sheer blast of lustiness now.

They licked him. All. Over. Head to toe. Face to arch of foot. Definitely not forgetting the best parts, which was to say his cock and balls. Their forked tongues, rough and raspy, tickled his newly awoken libido up to Fahrenheit 451. Everywhere their mouths traveled, magic sparked to life. Healing magic. A fiery burning, as if he'd lain too long exposed in strong sunlight. He felt a sharp sting, then warm relief spreading through every muscle.

Slowly going numb ...

Collin moved his head sluggishly back and forth. "What are you ..."

Only what we promised. Fear not. We were too rough. Your body is made up of flesh, not scales. It cannot withstand our stings and barbs, not yet. You have many sore spots that need tending to.

"Oh ... right. Keep up the good work." Collin paused in thought, then offered a wicked, if sluggish wink. "No need to stop when you've got all the love bites taken care of, now."

Pax grinned. *You like this?*

"I'll give you three guesses, and the first two don't count."

What if you looked down and saw we are using our fangs to inject you with healing serum? What would you say then?

Collin shrugged. "I was never was one to shoot up, but I'm feeling experimental. Continue at will."

You are incorrigible!

"I do believe I am. More, I think I like it. Lick harder."

I told you he would prove to be a handful, Tiego said to his companion. *More than.*

Of course. Why did you think I wanted him in particular?

A valid point. Notice I don't say I mind his one-track train of thought.

But before we take him all the way ...

Yes. I know too well what must be done.

Humans cannot withstand a dragon mating.

Not fully, no. We should have known better. Now, we do. And now we must act. I think ...

Tiego paused, tongue tickling a spot on Collin's thigh. Collin wriggled, hoping for more, but preferably just a little higher. *Yes*, he said at last. *Changeover.*

When?

Now. He's relaxed. It will be easier.

You're sure?

Tiego nodded firmly. *Now. There will be no better time.*

Given. Pax chuckled. *Look at him. He is aroused enough to agree to anything.*

Are you? Tiego glanced up at Collin. Eyes bright, curious. *Will you do what we ask, whatever we ask?*

"Mmm." Collin stretched and sighed out, a long humming sound. His body, filled with dragon anti-venom, started reminding him of his roaring testosterone. Seriously remind him. Sex. Yes, he decided, he wanted sex. Immediately.

Their words sank in. He paused. "Wait -- changeover. What does that mean?"
Hopefully: "Can we fuck again if I say yes?"

Collin ... you haven't truly experienced sex with us yet. Only penetration, and even that, not as it could be, as we prefer. Tiego fell sober. *You would incinerate. I do not lie.*

"That'd be an orgasm to write home about."

Be serious. If you, a mere human, mated with us, you would die. We almost killed you with little more than foreplay such as mortals enjoy. Sexual congress with dragons goes far

beyond genitals and semen. It is a thing conceived in the soul and birthed in fire. Do you think we are joking? Tiego's face, an odd mix of reptile and human features, turned vicious and earnest. He meant every word he said.

Collin took a moment to think. To accept the reality that he had almost died. Oddly enough, he didn't have a problem with the notion. He'd been on the verge of going tachycardiac from high blood pressure, anyway. An inglorious end, slumped over a cooling mug of office coffee.

Death by sex, however ... that would be the best way ever to shuffle off the mortal coil.

But then again, there was this "changeover" concept to deal with. Not an innocent-sounding word. Collin fought to think clearly, to ignore his rampant hard-on long enough to get the point Pax and Tiego were trying to make.

"What do you mean?" he asked, dragging the words out of his hazy mind. They passed as slow as molten honey over his tongue. "Change into what?"

Tiego's eyes flared bright. Fire-red. *A dragon*, he said. *One of us.*

Almost, Pax added. *You would have two forms.*

Collin suspected his lack of fear should frighten him. He assessed himself briefly, then shrugged. All he felt was a simple acceptance. Too easily come by for a man accustomed to clawing out his own path, but inarguably there. "How's that?"

You are a rare breed, Collin. Born with the heart and soul of a dragon in the body of a human.

You were so cold when we first touched you. The icy core inside you stung. We melted it away.

You were living as a frozen man. Denying your nature. Never walking inside the fire. You lied about yourself for so long, you had no chance of knowing what you were. Are.

What you could be.

What we can make you.

"Stronger, faster, better. They have the tools and the technology." Collin half-chuckled. "By the bye, dragons aren't real. You do know this, right?"

Tiego gave Collin a look that would have sent lesser men screaming for the hills. *Very amusing.*

Collin sighed and ran his hands down his chest, playing fingers over his ribs like a xylophone. He decided it would be better to be serious, no matter how good he felt in the body. These creatures *were* dragons -- granted, he was possibly out of his mind for believing this scenario to be reality, and not a dream, but he'd pushed aside his inner Doubting Thomas right about when their mouths had first touched him.

Nothing dreams had to offer could compare with this reality, no matter how, well, surreal.

They said he could be like them.

He could become a dragon.

Did he want to? Could he? Turn his back on everything he was used to? Give up the cold he'd loved so much?

He pondered the question for approximately one hot minute, then rolled his eyes. He might have lost his mind. He was not, however, a moron. As if he'd turn down any further chances at enjoying sex again, especially sex with two scorching men with amazing hands, prodigiously sized cocks, and tongues of rasping fire?

To be offered a chance at staying with Tiego and Pax was the chance of a lifetime. He'd live forever, enjoy unlimited orgasms, and get to thumb his nose at humanity's sorry limitations.

So the process sounded as if it involved a retooling of his DNA. Collin had turned himself into an icicle executive without supernatural assistance. He believed he could cope with what the dragons offered. In fact, for a shot at another few rounds with Pax and Tiego, Collin thought he could sprout wings and not complain.

Oh, good, Tiego said. He sat back on his heels. *I am glad to hear as much.*

Uh-oh.

“What now?” Collin tried to sit up. “Wait a second. Do you mean actual *wing* wings? Geared for flight?”

Pax and Tiego nodded gravely. They flexed their shoulders in unison. Leathery bat-wings threaded with veins of fire unfurled from their backs and spread in terrifying arches over their heads. Pax’s were crimson red, Tiego’s cobalt blue.

Wings, Pax said helpfully. *I believe yours will be green, to match your eyes.*

“Won’t that be something.” Collin tried not to gape at the dragons’ new accessories. Startlingly erotic. Startling and erotic. Just plain startling. But also erotic.

He shook his head to clear the mental loop he’d gotten stuck on. Wings. Fine. He wouldn’t let the power of flight stop him, of all things, but ... er ... where would his wings come from?

Collin had a bad feeling he’d find out in an unusually painful fashion.

Still. No backing out. No. He’d decided on a course of action, and be damned if he wouldn’t follow through. Looking up at his dragons, Collin nodded his head.

“Do it.”

Pax and Tiego dove at him and bit down hard on both Collin’s shoulders. He felt a blast of fresh venom rushing into his veins. Pure fire. Magic soup.

Unbelievable agony.

He doubled in half and shrieked. Oh, yeah. This looked to be more fun than a barrel full of monkeys. Stephen King-brand monkeys.

The payoff had better be worth his gamble ...

Chapter Eleven

Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck!

Pax and Tiego said "changeover." They didn't say "mind-blowing pain." Didn't specify turning inside-out, organs dangling about like party favors.

That should definitely be inside my skin, where spleens belong.

Neither one of those scaly players mentioned my bursting into flame. That would have been good to know, too. If I live through this, I'll be sorely tempted to kill them both. Maybe after I toss them up against the nearest wall, then nail them through the floor. I don't believe this, but they've still got me where it counts most. I'm thinking with my cock first, fists second, and brain trailing in the rear.

Oh, fuck!

Easy, Collin, easy, Tiego said as if from a distance. Breathe. Can you breathe for me? In, out. In, out.

Collin felt his body twist and writhe, and not in a good way, either. Things were happening to him he didn't want to open his eyes and see. The flood of pain made him think of the way hot dogs cooked in a microwave. Swell, swell, swell -- split! Right down the middle. Meaty center fully exposed. Possibly crisped.

He choked, struggling for air. No luck. His lungs weren't working as they should.

Breathe, Tiego insisted.

Collin would have stabbed Tiego with a glare if he'd been capable. Breathe? The dragon sounded for all the world like a Lamaze coach. He wasn't a woman giving birth!

No. But you are being reborn.

Think of phoenixes, Pax offered. *They die in fire and emerge young, healthy, immortal.*

It only hurts a little while.

"Yeah?" Collin's voice rasped. "How about you use those fangs to cook up some spinal block, then? Stat."

Tiego sighed. Through the agony, Collin vaguely felt a taloned finger scratch a light trail down the bridge of his morphing nose. *I fear modern drugs are far beyond us. We cannot help you with the pain. Not this time. You made your choice; now, you will simply have to cope.*

"Cope?" Collin blurted, disbelieving. He would have said more, except he was suddenly engaged in gagging up blood. A hoarse yell burst from his throat as *something* unspeakable happened to his balls. He'd swear they were being torn off paper-towel style. Possibly opening up to be promptly filled with molten lead.

"Dead," he managed to threaten with all the inherent danger of a baby bull calf. "You're both one-hundred-percent dead for this."

You cannot kill the immortals. Tiego patted Collin's arm. Again, he felt a million miles away. *Besides, even once reborn, you will be far weaker than us at first. We are centuries old. You shall be as an infant next to us.*

You could offer a fair fight in a couple of hundred years, Pax offered.

"Great. Very comforting."

Collin's tongue split down the middle. He vomited crimson, splatters spilling down his chest. Cursing the two dragons sounded like a great idea. Trouble was, Collin didn't know if he'd be able to talk again for a long, long time.

Bastards! I trusted them, and ...

You are a tough one, Tiego said. He sounded admiring. Trust me when I say this. I have seen the rare attempts at changeover before. Men have made far greater fusses than you. By comparison you show yourself a very Spartan.

Big comfort there. Thanks.

Pax tsked. *Oh, come now, calm down. Your temper is already running quite hot enough. There are other ways to forget about the pain besides impotent swearing. For a fine example ...* His mental voice dropped. *Sex. Think about sex ... and how you enjoyed the bare preliminaries so very much with us. Think of what is yet to come when you can match us on the bedding fields.*

Collin's twisting body stilled for a moment.

Oh, yes, sex, Pax continued. His voice rasped in Collin's mind. It actually numbed the agony a bit. Collin concentrated hard. Anything in a pinch. And now he'd rediscovered pleasure in the act, thinking about sex didn't seem such a bad way to pass the time.

You could have us both at once. To reward you for your decision to join us, we will let you take the lead. Would you like that? Tiego's voice teased. Enticed. *What would you like best? To use your dragon cock and split me open? To suck Pax's fine prick?*

Or perhaps the three of us can tangle together -- arms and legs and wings twining until we lose track of what belongs to whom.

Thrusting.

Throbbing.

Pulsing.

Coming.

Flying.

Flying like the wind.

You have never known how good sex can be until you taste it as one of the forever-living.

As I have heard younger men say, you will come your brains out, Pax added helpfully. What is the other expression? Blow a hole through the wall when you shoot? He paused. Is that right? What would be the point in either conclusion? I would far rather feel you explode inside me. Oh, yes. I want you to fuck me when you're made anew. I want to be your first.

Tiego jerked up in protest. Here. I am the elder. I claim first fuck.

I spoke before you did.

Are you challenging me?

I do not have to. I asked first. I win; no argument. The prize is mine.

Tiego sulked. I wanted his fire cherry.

If he'd been able to do more than curl up and groan, his voice too gone to scream, Collin would have thrown something at their heads. Preferably something very heavy.

Some attention, please? Aren't you forgetting something? As in, this whole changeover business you wax so poetical about? Why don't you look down? Mine is seriously in progress. Progressing unbelievably fast now.

Hey! Help!

Collin sensed both dragons wincing. He felt the hot weight of their eyes bearing down on his ripping skin.

If you apologize, I'll tear your throats out. Just ... keep your minds on the game in progress.

Yes, Collin.

We are here for you. We will not be distracted again.

Good. And I'll decide who to fuck first. Are we clear?

The dragons chuckled. Their laughter sounded odd -- rippling fire-water, chiming brass. Collin felt four hands come to rest on his stomach and thighs. *As you wish*, they said. *Almost done now. One thing left. The most important part.*

Collin flinched. He could just guess --

Shit! Shitshitshitshitshitshiiiiiiiiii--

He'd been right. Wings. Wings were the final step. Leathery bat-wings bursting from his shoulder blades, tearing through flesh easily as wet paper. The mutation hurt like a mother. A mother's mother.

Collin heard himself howl one last time before his voice died completely.

There, he heard Tiego say. He sounded happy as a new father ready to pass out cigars. *It is done. Pax? Give him speech.*

Mmmm, Pax hummed. *With great pleasure.*

Collin's eyes stayed all but welded shut. Just the same, he recognized Pax's spicy scent as the dragon bent to him. Startled, he realized he could tell Tiego and Pax apart by their unique body fragrances. Then he decided he'd care about heightened senses later, as Pax was suddenly busy kissing him as if he'd like to eat Collin alive.

Now that's what I'm talking about, guys.

He hadn't the strength to kiss back, but weakness didn't stop Collin from enjoying Pax's talents. The tall dragon man's mouth proved dangerous in more ways than one. A man could lose himself forever in a kiss like the one Pax delivered. Tongues, teeth, fangs, blood, and cardamom-flavored lips.

Oh, yes. Yes, yes, yes.

Swallow this. Pax's tongue flicked against Collin's mouth.

What?

Pax's fangs pierced Collin's lower lip, then nicked his own. Drops of blood hot as lava dripped together on Collin's tongue and welled up into a fat bead. Strangely heavy. Solid rather than liquid, like blood should be.

A dragon ruby, Pax whispered. *Seed of the sun*. He gave the droplet a light nudge with the fork of his tongue so that it fell deeper into Collin's mouth. At the same time, Collin felt - - smelled -- Tiego nuzzling at his throat. Teasing him with raspy licks and sharp pricks of fang.

Swallow, both dragon men urged. *Drink of this and live forever*.

The blood tasted like sunshine and coal, hot as a summertime berry picked from a bush in a brightly blazing field. Collin rolled it around his tongue. Wondering. Amazed.

Swallow, the dragons, his lovers, crooned. They nuzzled and licked at Collin's lips and neck. He felt their hands kneading his arms and hips like kittens, sharp claws no longer able to pierce a new skin made up of scales. All the same, the pain was a brilliant, burning pleasure.

Swallow.

Collin worked his throat. The bead of blood slid down his gullet. He felt it travel fast as a comet down into his belly, where it burst open and filled him from the inside out with fire.

Fire that would never die.

Strength flooded back into him. Every muscle, every last bit of bone and sinew bulged with vitality. His cock sprang back to eager readiness, throbbing with a burning ache to bury itself in deep, wet heat.

Collin sat up and opened his eyes.

He grinned, running the forks of his tongue over his viciously sharp new fangs. Unfurled his hard-won wings and felt the damp, heated winds of the cavern catch them open like sails in the wind.

He laughed aloud. Laughed in surprise and disbelief at the looks of wonder and, oh, yes, utter *hunger* on Pax and Tiego's faces. At himself, too. *To think, I didn't want to visit Amour Magique tonight.*

I have never been so glad to be proven so incredibly stupid.

"Pax," Collin said, his voice a low hiss. "Tiego."

They gazed at him in lustful wonder. *Dragon*, they said. *Dragon.*

Brother.

Mate.

Lover.

Ours.

"Yours." Collin bared his fangs again. "And *you* are *mine*."

He held out a hand and crooked a talon. "Come here, dragons of mine. Show me how to do it with scales."

Chapter Twelve

That's it. Oh, yes. Yes. Come to Collin. Good dragons. If I have anything to say about it, we're revving up to celebrate the love-in of the century.

Collin shifted his weight from foot to foot, hunched in a crouch with his new wings arched overhead. He kept his arm out, pausing to assess and approve of his new, sandy-pale scales, urging the dragons on with his beckoning finger.

Come on. Closer ... closer ...

Both dragons had gone feral. Collin could see the wildness filling their eyes. No measured thoughts, no ancient Asian wisdom, no draconic ah-so. Nothing but pure, raw sexuality -- fucking -- glittered in their hunters' expressions. He planned to oblige by playing the role of prey, but prey that gave as good as it got.

Slowly, slowly, Pax and Tiego inched toward Collin, moving in a slithering crawl. Their mercurial shapes shifted with each inhale and exhale. Dragon, man, fire, dragon, man, fire, and again. Massive lizards sliding over rocks. Men balancing atop boulders, hands out for balance. Fire billowing in eager curls. All of them heading for ground zero.

For Collin.

"Do you think you can take me now?" Collin taunted, purely to see how Pax and Tiego would react. He blew out a puff of clove-scented breath. They raised their noses and sniffed, tongues flickering out for a taste.

"Do I smell good now? Do I smell like gay spirit? Come on, men. Show me what you've got. Or do you plan to keep me waiting -- again? I spent a good third of my life playing the monk, and I believe things have well and truly changed." He flashed his fangs. "Care for a taste?"

Do not bait us unless you mean to make good on your promises, Pax growled as he dragged one set of talons across the floor.

The question is, Tiego added, *are you ready for us?*

Collin grinned, faux lazy. He shrugged to feel his wings bounce and canted his hips as if he were eighteen again, admiring the way his amazingly reshaped cock jutted out before him. "What do you think? Tick-tock, boys. I'm an executive, and I live by the clock. Do you want me? Come and take me. Or should I go find some fresh meat of my own?"

Tiego snarled. *No. Ours!*

Ours! Pax growled.

Together, they pounced.

About time, Collin thought as the dragon men knocked him to the floor and swarmed his body. *Now, let's party like it's 1066. Only better.*

Tiego didn't waste any time. He went right for the gold, sweeping his scorching mouth over Collin's nipples. Flicking each nub with broad, sizzling swipes of his tongue.

Collin arched up, groaning. "You. Are way too good. At that."

Silence! Tiego snarled. Again.

Collin grinned and fell quiet. He had better things to focus on at the moment, anyway. Less talking equaled more sex, and he was beginning to realize he truly couldn't get enough.

A definite improvement over the older model.

A scrap of song shot through Collin's brain. A particularly awful song he'd been forced to listen to when carpooling Bree to a winter Brotherhood meeting. Something about wanting to "fuck you like an animal." At the time, the lyrics had made him cringe. Now, he reveled in their power. Whoever wrote those words and put them to music had had the right idea. No human, from porn star to ten-inch gym bunny, could compare with making love to a dragon. Melting from ice to flame.

Rutting with Pax and Tiego was truly a gay Nirvana -- Bodhisattva style. Seattle still had a lot to learn.

As both dragon men swarmed Collin's body with their hot mouths, he wriggled and purred beneath them. Skin on skin on skin. Perfectly naked. Nothing in the way. No inhibitions.

Collin yelped, then whooped in glee when Tiego dove for his feet. The dragon twined his tongue around each toe, tickling, then let his lips travel a branding-iron path up Collin's bare leg.

He approved. So did his cock, which demonstrated its pleasure by rising up like a Roman candle, fuse lit, ready to explode. Collin reached out to touch the pointed tip, a sort of foreskin, as he'd suspected. The notion made him want to bubble over with laughter. Forget transformation into an immortal -- he knew men who'd trade their souls for a new cock hood alone.

What would it feel like, plunging his new equipment into a hot, tight hole? Collin couldn't wait to find out. He hoped to have his chance before long. The sooner, the better.

The dragons made little rumbling sounds. They glanced at each other -- silent question, silent answer. Maybe they were thinking about getting on with things?

As it turned out, no. Not yet. But Collin didn't mind. Mostly.

Freeing one hand from the tangle of Collin's hair, Tiego fumbled under one of the cushions on the floor. He swore a blue streak in some language that sounded vaguely like

Chinese as he hunted, looking just like an overeager, horny top hunting down rogue condoms to please his pushy bottom boy. Collin couldn't help it anymore -- he laughed until Tiego glared at him, but all the same couldn't stop grinning afterwards.

Finally Tiego found what he'd been looking for and raised it to the light with a shout. Collin tilted his head and peered at the thing, curious. A small, blue glass bottle with a cork stopper. *What the ...*

Oh.

Oh.

Oh, yes. Great idea, wonderful, fantastic. Go for it!

Tiego uncorked the bottle and, grinning like a devil, poured a thin stream of oil onto Collin's jerking belly. A burst of burning cinnamon smell filled the air as the puddle scorched his skin. It couldn't really burn through his new scales, but the blast of fire felt far, far too good.

Collin groaned in pleasure, arching up. Tiego leered, fangs glinting, and began rubbing the oil down a slick path into Collin's groin.

Collin almost shed his first serpentine skin on the spot. "Again!"

Shut. Up.

Collin obeyed, albeit muffling a groan as Tiego's hands worked in the simmering oil. Pax decided to play as well, snatching up the vial to pour out his own portion of potion on Collin's legs, stroking up and down. Jacking them like twin cocks. The sensation felt almost - almost -- as good.

Speaking of cocks, though, if Collin's had a voice, it would have been whining, *Me, me, me, my turn! Pay some attention to me, men!*

Tiego writhed up and over until almost all his weight lay draped over Collin's body. Cock to cock, not a moment too soon, they thrust and rocked together until their rhythms

clicked and caught. Collin keened aloud at the sensation. He'd known it would feel good, but not that the top of his head might threaten to come flying off.

Ohhh, yes. So good. Bring it home.

Tiego chuckled and scratched at the hands that grabbed at his back and dug deep. Pax probably wished he were in his partner's place, but made do with admirable efficiency. He switched from leg worship to scattering heated, open-mouthed kisses over Collin's throat. Hot, sharp licks and bites, both of which Collin returned with interest.

If memory served, before his life had gone sour, Collin knew he'd been a talented lay. With his two dragons to please, plus his new shape and abilities, he planned on showing them things even they hadn't seen before. He'd do everything it took to drag them screaming into white-hot climaxes.

Tiego's hand wandered lower and grabbed Collin's cock. He squeezed. Jacked. Tugged. Tortured seven kinds of delicious hell out of Collin, each one better than the last.

Pax bumped hands with Tiego over Collin's groin. They twined their talons around his cock, a column of scorching, swollen flesh. Both laughed, low rumbles, as Collin yelled and swore. Tiego dragged his sharp claw over the tip of Collin's fancy new sheath and peeled it back.

Pax dove in for a double-forked lick of fire.

Collin bellowed and spasmed.

Do you like what he is doing? Tiego teased, eyes heavy-lidded.

Collin sprayed a delicate arc of sparks that sizzled on Tiego's cheek. "What do you think?"

Tit for tat, fair play with no losers, and time to get it on.

Collin shoved his hips up, jabbing Tiego with his cock. Oh, good angle. Had to remember that one.

So, are you going to make me wait all day?

Not at all, Tiego murmured as he took a fresh grip on Collin's erection. A fantastic, strong grasp. Ruthless, cruel to be kind, he stripped it up and down, both hard and fast.

Collin spasmed in ecstasy. "Good ... good work," he managed.

Pax gave Collin a wicked smirk. He maneuvered up, balancing on his forearms, breathing a cloud of steam over Collin's throbbing cock. His aching need doubled. Fuck or die. Had to happen. Fast.

Not to worry, though; Collin's dragons understood. Better still, they were all for it and then some. Judging by how both draconic cocks twitched and bobbed like angry snakes, they were more than ready to splatter the walls themselves. Or Collin, deep inside.

One brief wrestling match, and Pax won by a handful of claws to the nose. He dove for Collin's cock, sucking hard. Dragon tongues lent a whole new level of pleasure to the art of fellatio.

We have to try rimming. Next time. I can't wait much longer now.

Not to be outdone, Tiego made his move. He burrowed under Collin's aching testicles, teasing them with fangs and tongue. Both dragon men knew exactly how to push him right to the edge, then pull back just in time to make the fun go on, and on, and on ...

Well, maybe they'd built up stamina over a few centuries. Not Collin. He snapped at the air with his sharp teeth. "Get on with it."

A glance at each other, and the dragon men separated briefly, only long enough to turn Collin on his side and support his head. Done, Pax went right back to the money spot, sucking for all he was worth.

Tiego, though ... Tiego lay down behind Collin, balancing on one hip and inserting a long leg between Collin's. His cock jabbed at Collin's ass, teasing him with the promise of things to come.

Fine by him.

They rocked together. Hovered on the cusp. Almost perfect. Almost there.

Sealing a bond with sex and blood and come.

Three becoming one.

Collin, alive again, better than ever before, couldn't think of anything he'd have liked more.

His life had fallen together like puzzle pieces. Triple cherries in a slot machine, lucky sevens, and the jackpot was his to claim. Their being together meant more than a future filled with great sex. It meant Collin *had* a future. One he could look forward to.

One he'd never want to look back from.

And he was ready to seal the deal. Arching his neck, he pushed back with his hips. "Do it," he ordered, voice thick. "Make this forever."

He felt a fiery kiss brush between his wings. A gentle suckle on the tip of his cock. Then, at last, Tiego pushed Collin's legs open, bending one knee up in the air. The dragon slid his hand under Collin's joint, holding him up and ready. Collin felt his muscles relax, ready without any preparation to take every inch Tiego had to give.

The wet, pointed tip of Tiego's cock probed Collin's hole. He felt the warm gush of their natural lubricant and smelled the richness of sex and lust sharp in his nose. *Now!* he shouted inside his head. *Do it! Do it now, now, now --*

Tiego's cock pushed forward. Slid in to the root. Filled Collin with solid fire. Pax continued to swallow his cock. Collin yelled and bucked, the three of them locked on and joined as one in blazing lust.

Collin's mind chose that moment to say good bye to what little rational thought he was still capable of, then lost it. Completely. Who could blame him? Tiego's cock felt good enough to drive anyone insane with pleasure. Filled up on one side and swallowed on the other, he writhed and thrashed, shouted and bucked, humped and jerked.

Caught between his two dragon men, stabbing forward and surging back, Collin felt his pulse rise and pound fast as beating wings. He panted out things that might have been words, but probably weren't. No problem. He knew his lovers comprehended.

Love. Lust. Mine. Yours. Forever.

Also, Oh, God, coming, coming, coming now.

* * * * *

"So. I owe you, like I said." Collin folded his arms. Pax and Tiego weren't just good at fucking. He'd learned how to hide his scales, fangs, and wings with glamour. Although they didn't bother inside the walls of Amour Magique, or their cavernous home, they did know how to pass for ordinary humans and had promised to teach Collin all he needed to know.

Surprisingly, for someone who'd always *been* mortal, Collin had found he didn't know as much as he'd thought.

Ah, well, He'd figure things out as he went along.

"A debt," Collin went on. "Karma. Pay it forward, etcetera, ad nauseam."

Liam's eyes twinkled. "You know, I had thought it most peculiar," he said. "Two beings of such grace and might as Pax and Tiego desiring you as a mate."

"You didn't think I'd work out?"

"Well, no," Liam admitted. He shrugged. "You can be rough as fresh-hewn wood, Collin, for all you danced in corporate waltzes before this night, and you were so solidly frozen I doubted even they could melt your ice."

"There's a pretty speech. Kind of makes me even happier to prove you were wrong."

"Fine words, yes, but with deep, deep meaning. Pay attention, Collin. I will say this once, and only once. You have been given a gift only a handful of men ever receive -- past, present, and future. Cherish it. Be worthy of your immortality. Use your gifts wisely."

Collin gave Liam a long, level look. Long and dry enough that Liam sighed and backed off. "Fine, then. Have at it as you wish. But know this, Collin -- if you betray these dragon men, two of my oldest friends, you will wish you were still mortal."

Collin frowned. "Why?"

Liam's scary face came out to play. Dark, dangerous, definitely not human. "Because," he said, "if you were mortal, you would be able to die."

Okay. I'm not going let on that I'm impressed. I'm not, truly. Though he probably knows if I weren't too worn out from paranormally powerful orgasm after orgasm to care, I'd be wetting my pants right about now.

Come to think of it ... I'm not human anymore. All the evidence tells me that neither is he. I don't know what he is, exactly, but doesn't that make us -- more or less -- equal?

Collin grinned, letting his fangs peek through for a second. "Deal," he said. "Take it easy. I don't plan to scratch this deal."

"Good." Liam straightened the sleeves of his shirt, brushed off imaginary lint, and turned without another word to walk away, humming a soft tune Collin didn't recognize.

"That's all?" Collin called after him.

Liam lifted one shoulder. "For now, yes. You are settled. Me? I have other matters to attend to."

"Such as?"

Liam turned to glance back, his frightful mask once again in place. "The rest of the Brotherhood," he said. Then he laughed, turned, walked forward, and disappeared into thin air.

Collin blinked. "Well ... damn." He might have gone on, but for Pax and Tiego coming up behind him. One on either side, arms wrapping tight around his waist.

"Liam," Pax murmured, speaking aloud in a human's voice for the first time in Collin's hearing.

"Liam, son of Lilith," Tiego said, using his own voice. They sounded the same as they had in Collin's head. Spicy. Purple. Rich. Sex in syllables.

"So you do know him." Collin shook his head. "Who is he? What is he? And while we're on the subject, who is Lilith, anyway? He uses her name as if she's a goddess." He frowned. "Is she?"

Pax chuckled. "Later," he said. "We'll tell you later. It's a long story, and we have much to do."

"We do?" Collin cheered up, forgetting Liam in a heartbeat. "Things like more sex, maybe? I could go for thirds ... fourths ... or would it be fifths?" He winked. "Actually, I stopped counting somewhere in there, so I'm making an educated guess. Either way, I'm ready and willing."

"There is nothing quite like a mortal making up for lost time," Pax murmured, shaking his head. "I have something else in mind for the rest of this night, Collin. Tiego agrees my plan is a good one."

Tiego bit Collin's ear. "Not to worry," he whispered. "We'll find time for more sex soon enough."

"Fair deal." Collin turned to his lovers, his mates, his dragons, and held out his hands like a child, ready to be led. "Tell me. What's on the agenda?"

Pax glowed. His glamour fell away. Leathery wings, flaming bright, spread high above his back. "The roof," he said. "We're going to the roof. And then? We teach you how to fly."

Collin stared at Pax, then Tiego. They were serious.

Flight!

And later, sex.

Life got no better. It couldn't possibly.

Collin laughed for sheer joy, hot blood surging through his veins. The patterns on his scales rippled. "Come on," he urged. "Take me with you. Wherever you go. Let's fly."

And so they did.

Meanwhile, elsewhere, yet still within Amour Magique, Liam, son of Lilith, went about his business seeing to the rest of the Brotherhood.

But that, again, is another story ...

 THE END 

Willa Okati

Although a relative newcomer to the field of e-publishing, Willa Okati has been writing since before she was old enough to pick up a pen. She thinks she knows where those dictated stories are hidden, but she'll never tell.

Willa is also very interested in the paranormal: magery, Wicca, New Age philosophy, transgender studies, and of course, writing. You can drag her away from the computer if you really fight, but you'd better be prepared for a battle.

Just so she doesn't sound entirely dull, Willa has her fun: she is a practicing member of the SCA (Society for Creative Anachronism) and is involved in her community. She is owned by far too many cats, all of which have serious attitudes, and addicted to anything made out of chocolate or involving coffee. She is quiet, but has a very wicked sense of humor that springs out when you least expect it.

A secretary for eight years, she now writes full-time -- and wouldn't trade it for the world.

She loves to hear from readers, and always responds. You can contact her at willsheornillshe@gmail.com or visit her website to check out her work at <http://www.willsheornillshe.com>.