

# Apocalypse Dance

*An romantic erotica novel by*

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**ADVANCE REVIEW COPY**



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*Dedication*

Miki S, the best romance beta reader anyone could have.

And to WizRat who's been with me since the start.

Your help is appreciated more than you can ever know and I  
thank you both.

## *Prologue*

The heavy motorcycle sped down the cracked highway, weaving between cars that were either abandoned or had passengers he didn't want to study too closely.

No point. They were all dead anyway.

And he'd seen enough dead people to last a lifetime.

Several dozen lifetimes in fact.

He slowed the bike. He was coming to an exit and he was getting tired. Hours of endless driving, looking for survivors and finding no one had made for a seriously depressing day. But then, most days were like that.

So many dead, and he carried a gun on his hip in case a few more wanted to join the majority of humanity in the silence of the grave.

Welcome to the Apocalypse, six billion served, no waiting.

The unknown disease had spread so fast, killing so many people that there weren't enough living left to bury the dead.

It had been worst in the cities. People getting sick so fast and not enough hospital beds. Not enough doctors or nurses, and they'd died like everyone else, making the situation even more critical.

Death had walked the streets, arms spread wide, welcoming humanity in their millions.

There really weren't enough people to even keep civilization, the old World As We Knew It, from crumbling to ash.

Now the cities were full of nothing but ghosts.

Lost hopes, lost dreams.

Lost lives.

And he was tired. Tired of being alone. Tired of waking up.  
Tired of being alive.

And that was the real bitch, because he couldn't die.

He rode the bike down the ramp and came to a stop at the traffic light. It was dead, like everything else. Strip malls stretched out to either side. Windows smashed, shops looted.

The man wondered how many people had taken TVs from the Hal's TV and Video store he could see in the nearest shopping center. Lot of good that would have done. There wasn't even a working power grid. But if you had a generator you could watch DVDs. Movies. TV shows.

The good old days.

Gone like a puff of smoke on the wind.

"God..." the man whispered to himself, his voice like audible velvet, smooth, deep toned. It was a bedroom voice, but there wasn't anyone alive to hear it.

Not here.

Not anymore.

A super strain of SARS had seen to that.

Pulling his helmet off caused a Medusa's tangle of cornsilk pale braids to fall from inside. The bells at their ends ringing softly, grey feathers fluttering in the light breeze, glass beads catching the light, cobalt glass, their color blue as the man's eyes as he scanned the empty main street of yet another dead town. Two days worth of beard stubble glinted gold on his jaw, but there was grey showing in places, just as there was some grey streaking his hair.

Old. He was getting old in a world now as dead and empty as his own soul.

He turned his head and the silver bells in his hair rang.

It was the way he remembered his name. Bells. It was the only name he'd had in so long; most days he couldn't even recall his real name. It had been Jason once, a very long time ago. Jason Whittier. His nickname...Well his friends had called him 'Billy-badass,' and he remembered that name more often than he remembered Jason.

He'd forgotten the names of his friends. Forgotten their faces.

Forgotten too damned much, and not enough.

"Well Billy-badass, what now?" he asked himself. Bad habit, talking to himself. But there wasn't anyone else to talk to other than himself. Not that talking to himself was good company. But it was either that, or talk to the bike, and it never answered anyway.

He dropped the kickstand and got off the bike to stretch aching thighs.

Not a tall man really, under six feet in height, he moved with the grace of someone able to handle himself in a fight. Someone used to guns and violence.

Using a bungee cord, he fastened the helmet to the back of the bike over the small duffel bag of his gear, folded himself in half, the palms of his hands touching the pavement to work the kinks out of his back before he mounted up on the bike, slammed the kickstand up, and took a left down main street. The sign said that way led to a back county road, which could be a good thing.

There was more chance of meeting people away from the towns, and he was at the point where he was ready to go and look for someone, just to hear another voice. Even if it was just a shout before they started shooting at him.

He drove down the street, his bike making the only sound

other than the soft sighing of the wind through the scattered trees.

Most of the birds were even dead. So were the dogs and cats, or he'd have gotten one for company.

He gunned the engine and the bike flew down the street; the man was weaving between any and all obstructions, mostly more cars with their dead passengers. He reached the outskirts of the town and took the bike faster, wanting away from the reminders of what had been, what he'd lost.

The sun set, stars came out, and still the bike sped over the rolling highway. Like its rider, it wasn't exactly what it appeared to be.

He looked like a man.

He wasn't.

It looked like any other motorcycle.

It wasn't.

Looks could be quite deceiving.

So was the fabric of time.

The bike hit 100mph and the world dissolved in a rippling maelstrom of screaming light and echoing darkness, a nimbus of cobalt and aqua light swirling around him, taking on the shape of a dragon with cobalt eyes and gold scales.

He had time for a shouted, "FUCK!" before torn reality healed and he found himself flying across a field full of tall grass, a tree looming up out of the fading ripples of the time shift.

## Chapter One

Bells came awake hours later, head aching, vision blurred, unable to stand, barely able to move. Too lost in the pain to realize the sticky wetness drying on his face was blood, too deep in the post-shift confusion to realize he had a fractured skull. He fought the pain, flashes of another wreck, another time flitting across his shattered memory.

He tried opening his eyes, but the noon brilliance of the sunlight burned like lasers in his retinas, and then he did wretch, stomach heaving but bringing nothing up.

When was the last time he'd eaten anything?

Unable to remember even who he was, being able to remember his last meal was a secondary consideration.

He lay there, breathing raggedly, a metallic taste in his mouth, a badly wounded man dropped down to the same level of awareness as a dying animal.

The sun slipped lower in the sky, the leafy cover of the tree he was so near blocking the harsh sunlight, making the pain in his skull almost bearable now that his eyes no longer felt like they were being assaulted by an arc welder.

How long had he been laying there now?

Help. He needed help.

And he could only think of one person able to help him.

"Kimi..." he groaned, searching for a face, for warm brown eyes and milk and honey skin. But he couldn't see. Couldn't move. "Kimiko...*doko desu ka...*" he murmured in Japanese.

*Kimi...where are you?* his mind echoed in English.  
"*Kimiko...doko...desu ka...?*"

The disorientation he was experiencing seemed familiar somehow, but he couldn't have said why, nor could he remember where he was, or what he'd been doing. He still couldn't remember *who* he was either. But he remembered her. When he was hurting he always wanted Kimiko. His Kimiko. She could make the pain go away. Soothe his hurts with hands that glowed with soft golden light. The touch of her soul merging with his, wiping away the agony, making everything better.

His heart ached with wanting her, his soul cried out for her touch.

"Kimi?"

He groaned. The agony behind his eyes was like a red-hot band of steel compressing his brain, thumping with each beat of his heart. Any attempt to move caused such intense nausea he had to clamp his jaw closed and swallow incessantly to keep from going into another bout of the dry heaves.

But he had to move. Had to find Kimi. She was there somewhere nearby. It was just a matter of making himself crawl to where she was. He'd done it before. He could damned well manage it this time, too.

He rolled to his hands and knees, but his right arm wouldn't support him, and even through his blurred eyes he could see his hand was covered in blood. Regardless of his dazed state, he could tell the shape of his arm under the heavy jacket appeared odd. He blinked, making an effort to clear his doubled vision, trying to understand what he was looking at. Dully he saw blood dripping to the grass from somewhere, and realized it was running off his chin, falling from the ends of the braids framing his face. It was important, that blood. Why, he couldn't remember. There was just something nagging at his conscious

off in the fog that was his mind, a warning that told him everything wasn't right with his world.

*"Kimi...boku no sakura no...kanoujo...doko...desu ka....?"*  
*Kimi...my cherry blossom girl...where are you...?* his damaged brain echoed.

Somewhere under the blinding headache and the sickness he realized he was badly hurt. But whatever might be broken or damaged took a back seat to the other problems.

Like not knowing where his pregnant wife was.

*"Kimiko...doko desu ka?"*

But he was calling for a woman who had been dead and gone almost four centuries and ten realities in his past.

Giving up, he sank back into the deep grass and lay there. Helpless in the aftermath of the dimensional shift that had caught him and dropped him through the fabric of reality to slam head-on into a tree, he lost what little grip he had on consciousness. He was in an empty field about ten yards from a shattered asphalt road, bike laying on its side, little worse for having hit a tree. The tree on the other hand couldn't say the same thing. Having a five-hundred-pound armored motorcycle hit it doing almost 110mph hadn't done much for it and the trunk was as cracked as the blond's skull.

Unlike the blond, the tree was going to die from its injuries.

\* \* \*

The engine of the truck was making the same cough-sputter noise it had been making the last time it died. Nikki, seated on a pile of pillows in the back, frowned, fervently wishing the stupid truck would just get them to town. It was only another sixty-two miles. Turning back certainly wasn't an option. Sugarsprings was almost one hundred and twenty unsafe miles through the no man's land that lay in their wake. Either way, without the truck it was going to be a long walk to Horton. There was no reason for

them to try going back to Sugarsprings. Not with the men there so intent on either buying or stealing her and Anya from their friends.

"Come on, baby," Hawk muttered to the truck from where he was standing behind the thin armor of the vehicle's side panels. His dark eyes were scanning the area, watching for trouble.

"It ain't gonna quit on us is it, Hawk?" Chet asked, his pale hazel eyes looking up at the taller man, worry twisting his face.

"We're screwed if it does," Anya remarked sourly. Nikki saw her glowering at something out of the passenger's side window of the truck. The other woman had been in a crappy mood since they'd left Sugarsprings three days ago and it was getting on everyone's nerves.

"It's got to get us there," Dal said from the driver's seat.

Their wishes fell on deaf cylinders and the machine gave a last rasping cough and died, the vehicle continuing to roll forward for a few feet until the last bit of momentum was gone.

Nikki sighed. This problem with the truck was going to be their death yet. Every break down left them without transport, and with no way to run. And fighting it out with the people chasing them, because of Anya and her, was not something she wanted to see occur. The Rangers would kill the men without a hint of mercy. They'd probably crucify Hawk for the role he'd played in her escape, or come up with even worse ways to punish him. She and Anya would wind up chained to some man's bed like last time.

Not a fate she intended to suffer again. Not ever. She'd kill herself before she accepted that kind of subjugation.

"Now what?" Dal asked as he shoved at the door of the driver's side, hitting it with his shoulder. On the second try the latch finally let go, almost tumbling him out onto the cracked,

weed spangled pavement.

Anya shook her head in aggravation, deep auburn curls bouncing limply in the humid air as she pushed open her own door. "If it can't be fixed, my guess would be we walk."

"Shitcrackers," Chet grouched.

Nikki got out of the back, Hawk and Chet following her. The two men headed for the front of the vehicle, Hawk carrying the toolbox. Nikki stood there watching them, and considering whether she wanted to try and help them or scout out the immediate area.

The trio of men were all big, strong, and very capable of using the guns they carried. If they hadn't been they'd have been dead better than a year ago, right after the Pandemic swept the world, killing people in their billions with a mutated form of Ebola that had spread like wildfire, the lethal virus carried by two passengers on an airliner who'd been the biggest plague carriers since Typhoid Mary.

With too few people left, things had fallen apart worldwide, leaving a confused and disorganized populace to pick up whatever pieces they could and go on.

Unfortunately the pieces that had been picked up the quickest had been things used to subdue and kill others.

Warlords of various power now ruled the vast areas of what had been the North American Continent from the wilds of Alaska to the center of Mexico. Warlords were men, and even a few women, who had carved out a little piece of empire all their own with the wealth of military and civilian weaponry left after the governments—particularly that of the United States—had collapsed for lack of people alive to run things.

But not everyone wanted to be part of the new armies battling it out for supremacy across the silent desolation of the North American continent.

Nikki and her friends certainly weren't interested. They liked their freedom.

And the women liked the ability to choose whom they had sex with, rather than being forced into it simply because they were healthy and female. It was a freedom that the three men respected and defended, even if Chet did make inept passes at them from time to time.

The fact that both women could also draw their guns faster than Chet also had a bit to do with his respect. Since Hawk was the one who'd rescued her and Anya, Nikki knew the respect the man held them in. After all, he'd been head of the Rangers when he'd helped them—and about fifty other women—get free from the Lone Star Empire.

While the men cursed at the truck, Anya hauled out some canned goods and their cooking gear. "Might as well eat," she remarked to Nikki as the younger woman went for a bit of privacy for a much-needed pee.

"Might as well," Nikki agreed.

Spotting a likely looking place by a tree not too far off the road, she stepped into the tall grass and started walking, watching for snakes and hidden barbed wire. They'd already had to cut Chet out of some barbed wire a few weeks ago, and she wasn't about to make the same stupid mistake he'd made by not taking care where she walked.

What she found instead of barbed wire was a battered midnight blue motorcycle laying in the grass against a tree that was very apparently damaged from the impact of the bike. There were pieces of bark and some of the inner cambium scattered through the grass. Oddly, the bike didn't look damaged by the tree.

There was a spatter of rusty looking matter on the tree that her mind instantly identified as blood. Not far past the bike, well

hidden by the grass, lay a man dressed in black leather and blood. Lots and lots of drying blood.

"Oh, crap. Anya! There's a guy over here, and he's hurt. Bring the first aid kit!" she called and hurried to see if he was even alive.

She hadn't taken three steps in his direction when he sat up, turning a gore-streaked face to her, a pair of eyes the brilliance of a summer sky locked on her along with a single eye of gunmetal grey. The barrel of the revolver clasped in his left fist was staring cold death at her, but the gun wasn't steady. The man's hand dropping and rising as if the weight of the revolver was too much for him to lift. Even from this distance she could see his pupils were unevenly dilated. With so much blood painting his face he had to be badly concussed, if not sporting a serious skull fracture.

Even under the patina of gore he was handsome. Movie star handsome with a firm jaw, straight nose, and high cheekbones. Masculine, but with a certain fineness to his features that lent an ageless boyish charm. And he looked young. Late teens, early twenties, was Nikki's guess.

Anya approached, carrying her shotgun, but not the first aid kit Nikki had asked for. To Nikki's dismay, she was aiming the gun at the blond, her expression one of menace. "Put it down or I'll blow your head clear off your shoulders," she warned.

Nikki put her hand out and forced down the barrel of the shotgun. "Anya, he's hurt. He doesn't know us. I'm not even certain he can really see us clearly. Just take it easy, he's not going to shoot unless we make a move on him."

"You don't know that, Nikki," Anya retorted harshly as she tried to raise the shotgun to cover the man.

"Anya, please, he's badly hurt, he doesn't need aggression from us, he needs help." Nikki turned imploring eyes on Hawk

as the trio of men joined them. "Hawk, please. He's probably afraid of us."

"Anya, that will be enough," their dark-haired leader ordered.

Giving the man a thankful smile, Nikki let go of the shotgun and turned back to face the injured man, "We aren't going to hurt you. I'm a doctor," she told him, keeping her voice pitched to a non-threatening, conversational tone the way she'd done with injured people when she'd worked in the ER. People as badly hurt as this man appeared to be could react violently to anyone getting near them, she'd seen it happen before.

"Sheeit, is he fucked up. When he dies can we take his stuff?" Chet asked in his usual highly intellectual and humane way.

"Shut up, Chet," Dal said quietly, taking a step closer to the injured man. "Hey, take it easy there, mister," he urged, speaking to the wounded gunman the same way he'd once spoken to injured dairy cattle. Soft and gentle. It sent a warmth of appreciation through Nikki. She could always count on Dal and Hawk to help, rather than hinder, her efforts to assist people. They'd even managed to save a couple of lives in the process over the last year.

"We aren't going to hurt you," Dal added as he crept just a bit closer.

The business end of the revolver swung to point at Dal.

"He's a goner anyway, just look at him," Chet argued.

"Shut. Up. Chet," Hawk ground out through clenched teeth. "Make yourself useful and get the first aid kit."

"Hawk, why waste our good stuff on *him*?" Chet argued plaintively.

"Because he's a human fucking being and he's hurt, that's why!" the man snapped as he crouched down to eye level with

the blond. He was a lot smaller than Hawk's impressive 6' 8" height, but then most men were, even Dal who, at six-three, was hardly short.

With the two larger men so close, the injured man seemed even younger, and Nikki could see under the leather he was built on leaner, sleeker lines than her heavily muscled friends. He couldn't have contrasted with them any more sharply if he'd been a leopard and Dal and Hawk had been a pair of lumbering bears.

"Anya, Dal, back off. Nikki and I can take care of this ourselves," Hawk ordered. The man was astute enough to realize their size and numbers might be making the injured blond edgy.

Nikki gave Hawk a grateful smile.

"Sure Hawk," Dal replied, "I'll see if I can get the truck going."

"Yeah, do that. Have Chet help you after he brings us that first aid kit. Thanks," the larger man replied. His dark eyes were watching the blond with as much intensity as the blond was watching him, but with far more comprehension.

Muttering, Chet went to find the first aid kit as Dal put his arm around Anya and steered her away. The woman jerked herself out of his embrace and stalked off, muttering about how Nikki was going to get her head blown off one of these days.

The blond's eyes were watching them, but Nikki wasn't sure if they were actually what he was seeing. His eyes were glazed, unfocused. She crept a bit closer and reached out to the man, trying to move some of the hair aside so she could see face. It was very long, braided with a barbaric display of beads, feathers and bells fastened in, mostly toward the ends. "We're not going to hurt you."

Staring at the pair of them, the man blinked, his gaze locking on Nikki. There was recognition in his eyes for a brief instant. The faint glimmer of a smile that made Nikki's heart go

out to him even more. He was seeing things, a loved one she suspected.

"Kimi?" he asked softly and wilted to the grass.

Nikki was at his side instantly, Hawk right beside her. The man checked for a pulse with one hand while he divested the blond of the revolver clutched in his lax fingers with the other.

"He's got a pulse. Weak and a bit erratic," he reported.

Skilled hands searched the man's skull for the source of the blood. She frowned when she discovered a good sized gash that showed the bone beneath it. "Scalp wound, and it's pretty nasty. He's definitely got a bad concussion, maybe a skull fracture."

Hawk's dark eyes met hers, "He going to make it?"

She shrugged, worry filling her gaze. "Too soon to tell, and without more equipment than that slap dash first aid kit we've got, there's no way to find out how bad he is."

She saw the blood on his right hand and opened up the heavy leather of the man's jacket trying to assess any injuries hidden under his clothing. Hawk assisted by lifting the blond enough for her to get the jacket off of him. She pushed up the tight fitting T-shirt and was rewarded with the sight of some impressive abs. Abs black with bruising that made the narrow trail of golden hair along his belly seem like spun gold over storm clouds. She frowned. "I'd say he's got massive internal injuries."

The man sighed, "Well, I guess Chet's right then. Not much to do but put him where the pain can't touch him anymore."

"Let me finish triage before we condemn him, okay?" she asked a bit harshly. So many people had died, and she'd be damned if she'd just give up while this one was still breathing.

"Wouldn't dream of making a diagnosis, Doc," he replied.

Nikki shook her head, "I'm sorry, Hawk."

"Yeah, Nikki. I know," the man smiled at her. "You're a

damn good doctor. If he can be saved you'll manage it."

"Thanks."

Keeping her touch gentle she probed at his abdomen, seeking any obvious trauma, all too aware of the solidity of the muscle beneath her hands, of the visible bulge beneath the buttons that closed the fly of his leather pants.

She'd been doing her internship in the ER at County General when everything had gone to hell. With so many people dead, she was—just by dint of her knowledge—a valuable commodity in any Warlord's point of view. And she'd been the only actual doctor the self-proclaimed King of the Lone Star Empire had at his disposal.

She'd also been a slave in his harem until the night Hawk helped the captive women escape.

The others had all gone their separate ways, leaving Nikki and Anya with Hawk, who'd promised to always look out for them if that was what they wanted.

It had suited the pair of women just fine.

They'd met up with Chet and Dal three months later, the pair of men running away from the Knights of the Eastern Lands because they didn't like the idea of being drafted into service as soldiers in someone else's war. Dal had been shot, weak and fevered from his wound, but Chet hadn't abandoned him, instead doing everything he could to keep his friend from dying.

Nikki had saved Dal's life, but if it hadn't been for Chet the man would have died before they even met him. It was one of the reasons they continued to put up with Chet's less-than-stunning social skills. He was, at heart, a decent guy. And there were far too few decent people left in this old world of theirs to quibble over someone's lack of social finesse.

"Well?" Hawk prompted.

"I can't feel anything, but," she shrugged, "the bruising is

indicative of internal damage."

Dal came back with the first aid kit. "He looks bad."

"Yeah," Hawk agreed. "But we're not going to abandon him if Nikki thinks he's got any chance of living." He smiled, "And so long as he keeps breathing, we stay here. Truck's busted anyway. Set up the tent. We'll get to work on the damned engine as soon as I'm done helping Nikki."

Dal gave Nikki a reassuring smile, nodded to Hawk, and went to do as he'd been told.

Hawk finished a search of the blond's jacket. "No ID, but that's not odd anymore. A few bullets for that revolver of his. He got any tattoos?"

Nikki shook her head, "None that I've seen." She knew what Hawk was looking for. Most of the men working for Roderik were tattooed to identify them to one another. A palm sized green dragon at the small of their back or on their biceps. "I haven't seen one on this side."

They turned the man and found nothing on his back either, which was reassuring to the young woman.

Hawk, however, wasn't satisfied and he quickly stripped the blond, making sure there were no tattoos hidden anywhere.

Nikki stared. The blond was one of the most gorgeous men she'd ever seen, not just his face but the rest of him, too. Lean and sleek like she'd suspected, with a cock to match and well hung, besides.

There were no tattoos anywhere, and they'd looked, Hawk turning the man over and giving Nikki a good view of a firm male butt. She felt the heat between her thighs and had to make an effort to focus on what they were doing as they slid his pants back up long muscular legs.

Hawk winked and she found herself blushing. "It's okay, Nikki, I know to you young ladies he's an eyeful."

She blushed worse. "Hawk, I'm sorry."

The dark-haired man laughed. "For what darlin'? It's a natural reaction." He caressed her cheek, "I understand, Nikki. About Roderik and what he did to you. You know I'm not him, and I'd never hurt you."

"I know, it's just..."

"The association. I know," the big man's smile faded. "If I could, I swear I'd kill him for you, Nikki."

She nodded, knowing he meant it.

"Do what you can for him," Hawk said.

"I intend to, but keep Anya busy for me, you know how she gets with strangers sometimes, and she's been acting bizarre for the last few days. I don't want her putting a bullet into him just because she's afraid."

"Sure. She'll be busy right now getting a meal together for us." He patted her shoulder, dark gaze going to the man in the grass. "I've got a good feeling about him."

Nikki glanced up at Hawk. The last person she'd said that about had been Dal. She looked at the man who was now putting up the tent. "You think he's like Dal?"

"Might be. Hard to say. But there's a feeling I get from him. Not much, but it's there. He might not have tapped it yet like Dal and I have, but the sense of power is there just the same."

She nodded, "I'm going to do my best to save him, Hawk."

The hand resting on her shoulder gave a gentle squeeze, "I know you will, Nikki."

Hawk left her alone with the blond, going to work on the truck. Whether the guy lived or died wasn't nearly as pressing an issue as getting the vehicle running again. Without that they didn't stand a chance of escaping anyone that came for them, and there were too many people who wanted a piece of them, Hawk's own brother, the self proclaimed King of the Lone Star Empire,

not the least of them.

Nikki finished her examination of the blond, frowning at some of the confusing things she found. At first it had looked as if his right arm had suffered a compound fracture, the kind of break that left bone sticking up through the skin. A closer inspection turned up a lot of drying blood inside the sleeve of his jacket and covering his arm, but no break to explain it.

"That's weird," she murmured, looking over the blond's arm again and finding a pale pink scar midway down his forearm. It didn't make any sense. The blood was still faintly sticky, but the wound looked months old. Shaking her head, she started to examine his head wound again and sat there staring. Instead of the oozing flesh she'd seen less than ten minutes ago, the ragged and bloody gash in his skull was scabbing over, the wound looking hours older.

"Hawk..." she whispered, knowing he would hear her. Dal might even pick up on her quiet whisper. He had good hearing, too, for a similar reason.

Both men turned from what they were doing, Dal setting up the tent, Hawk working on the truck to look at her.

"What is it, Nikki?" Hawk asked, loudly enough for her to hear. The others also heard, but Chet was intently digging through the canned goods while Anya was busy building a cooking fire.

"Can you come here a sec?" she asked, making sure he understood from her tone that she wanted to speak privately.

The man's dark eyes registered surprise at her request, but he put down the tools in his hands and came over to kneel beside the blond. His gaze locked with Nikki's. "What is it?"

"I think he's like you."

"Why?" he asked her in a barely audible whisper.

She pointed at the scalp wound.

He stared. He frowned.

"Don't say anything to the others, not even to Dal. Not until we know for sure," he warned.

"But if he is?"

"If he is, and he poses a danger to us, I'll kill him."

"Can you? I mean, if he's like you..."

"Well, maybe not, but we can tie him up good enough to keep him out of our hair."

"And if he isn't a danger to us?"

The man gave her an easy smile, "Then we see if he wants some friends."

\* \* \*

Stars filled the sky, a billion points of light glittering with the brilliance of crystal shards across black satin. The entirety of the Milky Way drawn out in a band of luminous beauty across the night.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd been able to see them, but a vague memory of holding someone against him, someone smaller and very dear to him drifted through his mind like a ghost.

That's all most of his memories were. Phantoms. Bits and pieces of remembrances that came and went like mist across a river.

He lived. He drew breath.

But he couldn't remember...anything. Not a single, damned thing.

There was a blanket over him. Musty and smelling faintly of both motor and gun oil, sweat and other less definable things. He pulled it closer to himself and tried to ignore the damp chill that crept in every time he shifted position. Cold. A dimly felt frisson of electrified ice. He shivered.

As he moved the small silver bells in his hair trembled and

chimed on the ends of his tangled braids. He could smell blood. Old and dried. It was his own according to his sense of smell. And the fact he knew by smell that it was his own blood gave him the curiously puzzling knowledge that only some sort of inhuman thing would know its own blood from that of another person by smell alone. Oddly that concept didn't bother him nearly as much as the loss of his memory did.

He turned his head and the bells in his hair spoke softly to him, eliciting a vague sense of familiarity that became sure knowledge. The bells were some of the things that seemed to be with him in every one of his hazy recollections. The bells in his hair and the ever-present gun on his hip. A gun he knew by feel was not there now. It made him uneasy. Why he couldn't say, except that he always had the revolver.

The word *gunslinger* whispered through his mind.

He wondered where he'd left his motorcycle, then wondered how he knew for certain he had one that should be nearby. From somewhere in the haze filling his head the image of a blue roan horse rose in his mind. But, like the other phantom memories in his head, it too faded away.

Regardless of the twists and turns of his existence the bells in his hair, the motorcycle and the gun at his hip were something constant, even more than the stars overhead because he knew there had been times where they were gone from the sky. Obscured by the lights of big cities: or smog.

Sitting up he gritted his teeth against the groan threatening to slip free. He hurt as if he'd spent the night in an operating cement mixer filled with rocks. Lots of big, hard rocks. Just the fact that he could move struck him as an accomplishment, a feeling in the back of his head telling him he'd failed to manage even that much not so long ago.

He found himself wanting a cigarette, and also discovered

that he didn't have any.

But the gun was there at least, lying in easy reach on flattened grass. There was shoulder high grass all around him, some of it trampled, most of it standing tall, screening him from the people he knew were nearby. Five of them. Four asleep, one awake.

He couldn't see them, but he knew they were there all the same, heightened awareness pointing them out by their soft breathing, the sensation of life they gave off.

"You're awake," a deep rumbling voice said, and a man moved within his field of vision, coming through the tall fescue with the same predatory stride of a lion walking across the veldt.

But the man was no lion. There was something about him that spoke of fire and feathers, a sharp beak and rending talons.

"Yeah," he answered, looking up at a very tall, dark-haired man who had a few streaks of grey showing in his hair. As he tilted his head up the bells in his hair rang softly.

"Name's Hawk."

"I'm..." he closed his eyes, trying to remember, there was a soft ringing sound as one of his braids slipped over his shoulder. "Bells." It seemed right, that name.

"Bells, huh? Okay then," Hawk said as he crouched down.

The blond opened his eyes. "Okay then, what?"

"That's your name. Now who are you?"

Bells stared blankly at the older man.

"You had a bad wreck, smashed up against the tree over there. You were a bloody mess when we found you. Now, other than the blood, it's hard to tell you were nearly dead. So I'm going to ask you again, who are you? Or maybe, I should ask what are you?"

"What?" He shook his head, "I don't know what you mean. I..." a stricken look crossed the man's face, "I don't know."

Hands came for him, but he wasn't where they were grabbing. He'd moved fast, grabbing his gun and rising to his feet. His legs shook and the gun in his fist wavered unsteadily.

Weak. Heart hammering, reality spinning wildly in his sight.

No danger. Not from the big man. The ice and flame of impending threat was absent, and he let the gun drop to his side.

The bigger man stood slowly, hands empty. Bells watched him, the pair regarding one another with new found respect.

"Yeah, Nikki was right. You are like me." A ruddy nimbus of light limned the man's form, a bird composed of brilliant yellows and ruddy orange superimposed over his body, the wings a spread of red and orange fire.

"I won't hurt you," he was saying as Bells rubbed his face with his free hand, trying to make the strange vision go away. "But I sure would like to know what you are."

"Myself," Bells answered, watching the dark-haired man and the strange whirling fire around him. There wasn't any heat, but a nagging voice at the back of his mind told him there easily could be a blast furnace's fury unleashed on him if the bigger man desired to do him any harm.

"Yeah, maybe you're still too scrambled to remember much. You hit your head really hard."

The blond nodded, but didn't say anything.

"You hungry?" Hawk wanted to know. The fiery nimbus around him faded.

The blond shook his head, the bells ringing softly.

"There's a creek that way, about fifty yards. I'd suggest taking a bath before the blood starts to stink. There's soap and shampoo in a milk crate in the back of the truck, and some towels, too. Go easy on the shampoo if you can."

"Sure. Thanks," Bells replied.

The image around the man had gone, but he remembered what he'd seen.

*Fenyx*, his mind whispered.

*Immortal.*

Just like he was himself.

## *Chapter Two*

Still asleep, Nikki heard a sound like wind chimes, the gentle ringing tones soothing her as they'd done when she was a child living with her parents. A faint smile curled her full lips, and she started to dream about better times, childhood, playing with her sister, and their ginger-colored cocker spaniel.

A crash of noise, metal on metal, brought her awake, snapping her back from the joyful memories of the past to the brutal reality of the present.

"Dammit, Chet, what the hell are you doing!" Dal demanded angrily.

Sighing, Nikki checked her shoes for unpleasant life forms, spiders mostly, which she hated. Sometimes there were scorpions, though, and none of them took chances. The bedroll beside her was empty, Anya gone, probably to start breakfast. Outside she could hear Chet whining about trying to fix the truck despite the fact it was still too dark to see well enough for that kind of work.

Chet wasn't really a bad guy, just insensitive, occasionally childish and socially challenged—especially around women. But some days she wondered why in hell they kept the walking poster child for social ineptitude with them and couldn't think of one good reason. Today was, from the sound of it, going to be one of those days when they all wondered why they hadn't abandoned the idiot, other than the fact that Hawk wouldn't leave anyone to the dubious mercies of his brother, King

Roderik.

Really, though, Chet wasn't a bad guy to have around. He even managed to do something sweet or funny from time to time.

Anya stuck her head inside the tent, "I see you're finally awake."

Nikki gave the woman a little smile, "Yeah. And I wish I wasn't."

The woman stepped into the tent, "I know, Nikki, life sucks, but when we get to Horton it'll be better, you'll see."

"Yeah." She didn't point out that they'd thought things would be good at Sugarsprings. They'd encountered the same male chauvinistic crap there that they'd been getting since the Collapse. There were so few people left that every jot of progress the human race had made toward equality between the sexes—much less the races—had gone the way of the dodo. Probably the result of there being so few women of childbearing age left that they were treated more like expensive cattle than human beings. Bought, sold, and traded like prime stock: breeding stock to be precise. She'd been on the way to a wonderful career as a doctor. So much time spent studying at college, working hard to make the grade, striving to become the best doctor she could become...for what? The whole world had gone down the toilet.

People had blamed the medical profession for the world's woes. Doctors were murdered by panicked idiots, her own best friend gunned down in the street right before her eyes because she'd been unable to save a man's wife and son.

And now here she was in an old dilapidated tent, associating with people she would never have known, traveling across a plague-ravaged countryside, heading for a town that wouldn't be any different than anywhere else.

Men were once again the domineering brutes they'd been in the more primitive feudal times, and women were reduced to being bought and sold, mere chattel.

At least Hawk and the guys weren't like that, not even Chet for all his other social *faux pas*.

"You okay?" Nikki asked Anya.

"Me? Yeah. Yesterday was just..." Anya gave her a wan smile, "bad I guess."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. I'm sure. I didn't know what got into me. I just saw him and, I don't know...freaked I guess." Anya sighed, fidgeting with her own bedroll rather than meet Nikki's stare.

"Anya, you want to tell me what it is about him that so set you off?"

There was a sudden glitter of tears on her the other woman's cheeks, but she shook her head, refusing to answer.

"Anya?" Nikki made her name a question as she scooted closer, putting an arm around her friend's shoulders. "Talk to me. What's got you so bugged? Who does he remind you of?"

"Was it that obvious?" Anya asked, glancing at Nikki.

"A bit, now that I'm thinking about the whole thing. You usually aren't quite that rattled by strangers. Now tell me what's wrong."

"The guy that sold me to Roderik. He had long blond hair and blue eyes." She closed her green eyes, hands clenching the bedroll so hard her knuckles went white. "This guy...looks a lot like him."

"Is it him, though?" Nikki asked, wanting to be sure they weren't harboring trouble.

"No," Anya admitted, but she didn't sound very confident.

"I know you said he kept you drugged."

"The scar across his cheek is missing, his hair was shorter

than Hawk's. I think he was taller, too, but I'm not positive. The height might be right. I don't know, I haven't seen this guy standing."

"Didn't you say he had a tattoo on his back?"

"Yeah. Black wings."

"Well there aren't any tattoos on the blond. Not anywhere."

"Oh." Anya wiped at her face. "Like I said, I was drugged all the time."

Nikki patted her friend's shoulder. "That's okay. We understand. He probably doesn't even remember."

"I just...wish he'd go away."

"Maybe he will."

"You might want to come and check on him, Hawk says he was up and about last night. Unsteady, but able to walk."

"Really?" Nikki got her shoes on and followed the other woman out of the tent.

"Yeah, but he's sleeping now. Hawk talked to him last night. He says he's going to live."

Nikki nodded, "I figured that. There was a lot of blood, but he wasn't hurt that bad," she lied. The man should have died from the head wound alone. The fact that he hadn't only confirmed her suspicions. He *was* like Hawk.

Anya went to get something started for breakfast and Nikki went to check on the blond.

She found him lying wrapped up in the blanket where she'd left him last night and stood there, watching him sleep. Relaxed, asleep, the hard lines of his face had softened making him appear younger, more vulnerable.

She wondered what it would feel like to crawl in beside him. She found herself imagining what it would be like run her hand over his firm flesh, to kiss every inch of his skin and feel the golden hairs spangling his belly tickling her nose as she

kissed her way lower.

Warmth blossomed low in her belly, and she shivered, feeling her cheeks heat at the delicious thought of making love with the sleek blond.

Thoughts of Roland intruded and she snapped out of her reverie to find intensely blue eyes to regarding her calmly. There was no sign of any lingering affects of the head trauma. None visible, at least.

In the light of dawn it took her a second to realize he was clean, the blood gone from his face and hair. He was also wearing a different T-shirt, faded and torn, patches of tanned skin peeking through the cloth. And his hair, which was loose, fell almost to his waist. In the dimness it almost looked white, but she knew it was the pale gold of cornsilk.

"Hawk told me you tried to patch me up."

"I did," she agreed. "How do you feel?"

"Like day-old roadkill."

She listened to his voice, a velvet smooth baritone. He'd have made a great voice actor or telemarketer if things hadn't gone to hell, and she found herself wondering what he'd done before the Collapse. He was good-looking, too; he might have made a great actor.

Then she remembered how fast he'd been with his gun last night, despite being badly injured, and decided that she didn't want to know. No one got that good with a gun in just over a year's time.

"I should probably check you over, just to make sure you're healing cleanly."

He shrugged.

*Well, he's not much of a talker,* she mused.

"What do you guys want for breakfast? We've got ravioli or chili, unless you want me to use the last two cans of spaghetti,"

Anya asked loudly.

Nikki looked at the blond, "Any preference?"

"Not hungry," he replied.

*Yeah, he's like Hawk. He won't eat after he's been hurt that bad either.* She eyed him speculatively, wondering. If he *was* like Hawk, exactly what form had his soul taken? What had Hawk called it? The Heart of a Warrior's Soul. Yes, that was it.

He'd explained to her that every great warrior born had within his soul the spirit of an animal, and that even the lesser beasts, like foxes, falcons, dogs and cats could give a man enough of an edge in battle that he became legendary. The more powerful the beast, the greater the warrior became. He'd also told her that even women could have an animal spirit tied to their souls, and said they usually became great healers or movers and shakers of society, rather than the killers men were prone to become given that ability.

Further, he'd gone on to tell her about the immortal Forms: Unicorn, Fenyx, Winged Serpent and Dragon. They were all quite rare and seldom did one Immortal meet another of the undying, for that was what they were, indestructible once the power within their souls was awakened. If it never was, then, like anyone else, they died.

She sat down and studied him thoughtfully, wondering what his immortal form was. Hawk had told her the Unicorns were easy to spot because they usually had a streak of white in their hair, or oddly colored fingernails. The blond had neither.

Sitting there, watching him staring off at nothing, she wondered how old he really was because he had a face that didn't look a day over eighteen.

Hawk had once told her his age, and she'd had no recourse but to believe him considering she knew his brother, too. They'd been born in the 1940s and it was 2014 now. Neither of them

looked a day over forty though they were both well into their seventies.

"He's like you," Nikki said softly, noticing that the blond was watching Hawk.

"Like me?" He wasn't looking at Nikki, eyes still focused on the taller man.

"Immortal."

"You know about that?"

"A little."

He swiveled his head to regard her then. "Tell me what you know."

"He's a Fenyx and won't die, even if something should kill him. You're like that."

The blond gave a slow nod then glanced back to Hawk. "He's not the only one, is he?"

Nikki blinked. "No, he said there were other animal spirit people. He's met two foxes, a tiger, and a bear." She refrained from mentioning that Dal was the tiger. It wasn't something the stranger needed to know.

"That's not what I mean."

Then it struck her that he was really talking about Hawk's brother, King Roderik, the only other Immortal she knew about. "No, his brother's a Dragon. A nasty one, too. Very powerful. Hawk can't fight him alone." She frowned at the memory. "He tried and...lost."

"Figures," the blond replied. Only one word but there was so much vitriol in it the tone that it came out sounding like the most vile curse. It made her wonder why he'd be upset over something like that.

Why she did it she couldn't have said, but Nikki reached out and put a hand on his shoulder, touching him gently. He felt cold under her hand. "Want to sleep more?"

He nodded.

"You can use my bedroll in the tent. It's warmer."

He picked up his gunbelt, and as he rose slung it around his hips in a maneuver that held the smoothness of something done repeatedly for far too many years. It was all done in one fluid motion that proved, no matter how bad his injuries might have been the night before, he was already well along the road to recovery.

"It's the one on the left as you go in," she told him.

"Thanks."

His back was to her, but even she couldn't miss the sound of gratitude in his voice.

"No problem."

She watched him walk away, wondering what it took to make men like Hawk and the blond unleash the power of their souls. Hawk wouldn't tell her why or how he'd done it.

And, somehow, she didn't think the blond was going to tell her either.

\* \* \*

Bells walked to the tent, his movements smooth, showing none of the pain he still felt. Showing weakness was anathema to him. Weak animals were prey animals and he wasn't anyone's prey.

Not that these people seemed to be a pack of murderers. If they had been he'd have awakened stripped of everything he owned rather than wrapped in a blanket. And there was no icy burn warning him to be wary of their ulterior motives in helping him.

They'd also seen him totally helpless and their only thought, for the most part, had resulted in them trying to help him. But trust wasn't something he gave many people. And he found himself idly wondering about who—and what—he really was.

Why he reacted to things the way he did. But there were no clues surfacing out of the misty haze that was his memory, or rather the lack thereof. That was the most disturbing part about it. He couldn't remember anything prior to waking up in the grass. Nothing. It was as if his brain was a computer hard drive and someone had erased all the data.

He was running on nothing but the operating system of his mind, and it bothered him. He could speak, was sure he knew how to fight, was certain he'd be able to repair the truck when he felt better, and he was equally positive he was going to have a run-in with an Immortal Dragon in the not too distant future. He also knew he *hated* fighting other Immortals, especially Dragons just as surely as he knew, somewhere in those mental system files, Immortals could die. All it took was another Immortal of the same type to accomplish it.

A Fenyx could kill a Fenyx.

It took a Dragon to kill a Dragon. Plain and simple. Hawk couldn't kill his brother, and his brother couldn't kill him. But they could hurt one another. Badly. He also knew with equal certainty that it took far longer for damage caused by an Immortal to heal.

For the time being Bells was just appreciative of the fact there hadn't been any questions about why he'd lived, much less about why he'd healed so fast. Normal folks just couldn't accept that type of thing readily, and he'd had to run from people who'd tried to kill him for that very reason on more than one occasion. Just another of the things he knew had occurred without any remembrance of the actual event itself.

At least with Hawk in their company there wouldn't be any of those questions. The man knew exactly what he was. Damned shame he didn't know what he was, too, because it would have been nice to know something about his past, or himself in

general.

He found the bedroll and unbuckled his heavy boots, setting them aside with a sigh. It felt odd to have them off, just as it had felt odd when he'd removed them to take a bath in the creek. From that fact he surmised he stayed clothed most of the time. Ready for...what?

Bells lay down and closed his eyes, the scent of a woman in his nostrils mixed with the faint smell of motor oil. He was starting to associate that with everything they owned and he wondered if a bottle had been spilled among their possessions.

They didn't have much from what he could tell. Neither did he for that matter. But they were willingly sharing what little they did have, and he couldn't help but wonder *why* they would do that. In his experience people didn't help unless they wanted something in return. And that thought made him wonder exactly what experiences had occurred in his life to make him so damned unrelentingly cynical.

With his mind one big blank slate he didn't expect he was going to find out, at least not any time soon. Then again, considering the freakish way he'd healed—and how and why exactly was he Immortal, if indeed he was, and that was weird too, wasn't it? Maybe he'd have his memory back by that evening.

He closed his eyes, seeking the sleep his body needed to make a full recovery from nearly dying. Not that he could really die, unless of course he *was* dying and his brain was simply entertaining him until the Grim Reaper could make the appointment to pick him up.

A quirky smile curled his lips and he drifted off into the land of dreams where a really beautiful Asian girl frowned at all his mental melodramatics and scolded him for not wearing a helmet.

\* \* \*

"Where's Blondie?" Anya asked Nikki as she scooped chili into a bowl and passed it to Dal.

As usual the cooking fire was set up well away from the tent. They didn't want any more accidents like the one that cost them their gear because the wind blew sparks into the tent and burned their sleeping bags. Before that was the time Chet got curious and poured kerosene in the fire to see what it would do. Two tents had gone up, along with some things that had been irreplaceable like Dal's picture of his mom, his solar powered CD player, most of their CDs, and the last canister of hazelnut cream cookies they'd been hoarding.

"He's in the tent. He's tired, so I let him use my sleeping bag."

"Oh. That was generous of you, letting him sleep in there," Anya remarked. She didn't sound too pleased from the way she'd said it, and Nikki sighed as she accepted a bowl of chili from the other woman.

"What if he's got lice or some shit?" Chet asked as he crammed some chili into his mouth. "You could wind up with a case of the crabs or something really nasty."

Hawk's dark eyes met those of the younger man and Chet went silent for a full five seconds.

"I was just, you know, concerned about Nikki getting nasty stuff. Wouldn't want her sick or nothing," Chet muttered around a mouthful of chili.

"I had him wash with that soap we've got for the bugs," Hawk lied.

Nikki knew he was lying, too. They'd run out of the lice soap weeks ago. But there was no sense trying to explain that Immortals didn't get lice or die from diseases. They couldn't pass them on to others either. She knew Hawk had gotten sick when

the Ebola thing came around, he'd told her so, but it hadn't been any worse than a normal person catching a cold. And some people had turned out, for whatever unknown reason, to be immune to the disease. She and Anya had both been totally immune. Dal, from what little he'd said about the Time of Death hadn't been any more sick than could be accounted for by a bad case of the flu. And Chet, well...God watched over little children and fools, and the man hadn't so much as gotten a sniffle or a case of poison ivy since she'd met him.

He had managed to cut the tip of a finger off with one of Hawk's knives. But that was typical Chet in action. Klutz extraordinaire, until it came to shooting people. Oddly, in a fight he never had accidents or made mistakes.

"Well, that bug soap won't kill stuff like them STDs..."

"Which you don't get by using someone else's sleeping bag," Hawk countered, holding his empty bowl out to Anya for another spoonful of chili.

The dark-haired woman frowned. "Not much left, Hawk. Should I save some for Blondie?"

"He won't eat yet," Hawk replied with absolute certainty.

"Well, it still ain't right, him being in her bed," Chet mumbled, swallowing and shoveling in another heaping spoonful.

"It's not like she's in it with him, Chet," Anya said sharply. "You're acting like you've got some say in what she does, when you know you don't!"

"But we don't even know his name!"

"Bells," Hawk replied. "He told me last night."

"Oh." Chet shoveled more chili into his mouth. "Maybe he's gonna try and take the girls away from us, Hawk."

Nikki and everyone else saw the glare Hawk leveled on the younger man.

"Chet..." the older man began, taking a deep breath.

Nikki could have hugged Dal when he forced a change of the conversation. "We going to try and get the truck working, or do we just abandon it and walk, Hawk?"

Dark eyes met Dal's gaze, and Hawk smiled, for which Nikki and Anya both breathed a sigh of relief. There was one thing that none of them dared with Hawk, and that was to interrupt him when he was speaking. But he'd understood what Dal was doing, getting Chet off the subject of their erstwhile guest.

That was one of the many things Nikki admired about Hawk. His intelligence. That and a body that looked as if God had personally sculpted it. If only she'd never met Roderik—but she had.

"Fix it if we can. But if it's not running by..." Hawk paused to look at the tent, a frown on his face that worried Nikki. Was he already regretting helping the other Immortal, or was something else troubling him?

"Hawk?" Dal asked, puzzled because the man had stopped speaking in mid-sentence and that was uncharacteristic of their leader.

The man blinked. "If it's not running by day after tomorrow," he said as if he'd never stopped speaking, "then we walk."

Even Chet had noticed something was wrong with the big man, and he looked at Nikki in a way she'd come to understand meant *What gives?*

She shrugged. Mentally she wondered what was bothering the man; he still seemed distracted and he refused the chili Anya was about to put in his bowl even though he'd just asked for it.

"Finish up, guys. We've got work to do," Hawk told Dal and Chet.

Anya looked at Nikki and mouthed, *Something's wrong*.

Nikki frowned. If Hawk wasn't saying what was wrong, then it probably wasn't anything for them to worry about. At least not yet. But she'd noticed that look on his face once before, and a few hours later they'd been running for their lives trying to escape the Knights of the East. It had been the day they'd met Dal and Chet.

"Let's clean up and get stuff back onto the truck, just in case," she suggested to Anya as the three men headed for the hood of the truck to work on the broken vehicle.

"Sure, Nikki."

\* \* \*

Bells woke up to the sound of men cursing, and the sputtering sound of a gasoline engine refusing to catch. He sat up, pulled on his boots, buckled on his gunbelt, and stepped out of the tent to see what was going on. The man called Chet sat behind the wheel of the truck, and the other pair of dark-haired men peered under the hood. The taller man, Hawk, looked angry. The smaller one—did he know the man's name?—looked perplexed.

Absently running his fingers through his hair, trying to work out a tangle, he wandered over.

Ice flowed down his spine and he dove aside into a combat roll, left hand gripping the revolver and directing the deadly business end of it at the person who'd drawn down on him. But he didn't pull the trigger.

It was the woman with auburn hair, holding a .45 which was no longer aimed at him; it was still aimed at where he'd been.

"Holy shit..." she breathed, staring at him and the gun clutched in his hand.

"Is it that you really want to shoot me, or are you just

testing me to see if I'll blow your head off?" he asked her, voice hard-edged.

"Anya, what the fuck are you doing?" the man who'd said his name was Hawk demanded of the woman. "Do you want that man to shoot you?"

The gun was lowered, "No, I just..."

"Are you suffering from stupid germs?" Hawk asked as he left the front of the truck. "I swear to saints you've been acting like a nut since we stopped here. Leave the man alone!"

"Sorry, Hawk. I just...he was..." she shook her head and stuck the pistol back into her shoulder rig.

Bells holstered his revolver and turned around, looking for his motorcycle. It was where he'd last seen it, by the tree.

"Sorry about that," the big man began.

Waving off the apology, he walked to the bike.

"He's not very friendly," Chet complained.

"Leave him be," Hawk order, his tone gruff and no-nonsense.

"Damn fast," the man whose name he wasn't sure of said. There was genuine admiration in his voice.

Faintly he could hear Nikki asking Anya why in hell she'd drawn on him. He just blocked out their conversation, too tired and sore to deal with an edgy woman bent on putting lead into him for no reason he could fathom.

His stuff was exactly where he'd left it. He'd done his best to get the blood out of his jacket, but he could still smell it. Short of a dry cleaner—as if he'd find one of those—there would be no getting the stains out.

That was something else that suddenly struck him. They were all carrying guns, and his mind accepted that as perfectly normal on one hand, while on the other hand he knew it was anything but part of 'normal' civilized behavior. He rubbed his

temple and tried not to think about it too much. His memory would come back. Or not.

Until then, he'd take everything in stride and try not to analyze it too much. After all, the first four letters of *analyze* were *anal*, and he wasn't going down that road.

Picking up the duffel, he pulled out a brush and started working at the tangles in his hair. It was time to get the braids back in so his hair would stop falling in his face.

While he worked on his hair he wondered what his next move should be. Stay with these people, or move on—alone. Somehow that last idea didn't appeal to him, but at the same time he knew it was probably the best thing for him to do. Not buying into any problems by associating with them. On the other hand, he'd be buying into a host of other problems, like being alone in an unknown area with unknown hazards.

It was one of those situations that had no neat and simple solution.

He was deftly binding a strand of thread into the end of a braid using a needle to work it back and forth into the hair to hold the end tight, preparatory to fastening a bell there, when he heard a twig snap.

He didn't bother turning around. He knew who it was.

"Hey," she said. "Do you want any help or, should I leave you alone?"

"Hey. I've got it," he replied.

She walked around to face him. He didn't look up; he was busy knotting one of the silver bells into the end now, making sure it was secure.

"Why do you wear your hair like that?"

His hands stilled. A face swam up out of the fog in his head. A black girl with beads and cornrow braids, laughing as she plaited his blond hair. Her voice whispered across his mind,

"Kimi's going to laugh at you when she sees it, you know that, don't you?"

Just as fast as the face and voice had surfaced, they were gone.

But he'd known that girl. She'd been...what? A friend? Lover?

The memory was gone.

But she'd said a name that was hovering just at the edge of his awareness.

Kimi. Kimiko. His cherry-blossom girl. Dark brown eyes. A sweet heart-shaped face.

Thinking about her caused a sharp ache deep inside him. A tearing that felt like his soul was on fire. Burning. Being consumed from within.

There was a hand on his arm, a worried look in the sable brown eyes. "Hey, you okay?"

Bells blinked.

For a moment he didn't know where he was again, then it came back to him, what little there was of it at any rate.

"Bells?"

"Nikki?"

"Yes. Are you okay?" She gripped his arm a bit tighter. "Hey, you there?"

"Yeah." He moved his arm, breaking the contact, taking his gaze away from her face, her sable brown eyes. They were so like...

What? What were they like? He shook himself. "I'm fine," he murmured, using a comb to separate another lock of hair. He divided it into three sections and started braiding quickly to hide the fact that his hands were shaking.

What had happened? There had been a memory. But it was gone. Completely gone, leaving him feeling drained and

confused.

"Well if you want to eat, just say something. We've got lots of canned goods."

"Sure."

But it wasn't food he wanted. He wanted something—no—someone else.

Someone with dark brown eyes who could look into his very soul and see the good in him.

Someone who loved him, unconditionally.

Someone whom he could love in return.

But he knew in his heart that the someone he wanted was dead and a piece of him had died with her.

Kimiko had been the light in his soul.

Without her, there was only darkness.

## *Chapter Three*

Nikki sighed and headed back to the truck.

The man was downright anti-social.

Or maybe just exercising a lot of caution, considering the fact Anya kept aiming guns at him as though he were about to attack them at any moment. It left Nikki wondering just how much actual resemblance there was between Bells and the man who'd sold Anya to Roderik. Too much if he was making Anya this edgy.

She glanced back at him, sitting alone under the tree, braiding his hair.

He looked...lonely. And the look in his eyes...for a moment they had been full of such grief that she had just wanted to put her arms around him and hold him.

Considering his reaction at being touched, she was glad she hadn't tried. It was all too apparent he wasn't the type to look for human contact, or compassion. Watching him, she wondered exactly what type he was.

"He doesn't belong with us," Anya muttered irritably as she poured canned spaghetti into a pot.

"Why do you resent him so much if he isn't that guy who gave you to Roderik?" Nikki asked, regarding the woman and wondering why she was favoring the man with so much undeserved hostility.

"Have you forgotten what happened last time?"

Nikki stared. "Last time? What last time?"

The woman rolled her green eyes at Nikki. "That guy who joined us last spring. You know, George. You *do* remember George, don't you?" The woman's mouth twisted into a sour expression as she added, "George the tit grabber."

"Oh, come on, Anya. All George did was grab your boob. It's not like he tried to rape you or anything. Chet's done it too and he's still with us. You even made a joke of that. You act like that was some kind of big dangerous event. He didn't shoot you or stab you, he wasn't even trying to rape you, he was just testing the waters. He even apologized.

"You sure you aren't just overreacting because he looks like the guy who brought you to Roderik?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. And he isn't the same guy. I know that. I just still don't like Hawk letting people into our family. It never works out."

"He's hardly part of our family," Nikki argued softly, "and if you keep it up I can tell you he's going to leave. But then that's what you want, isn't it?"

"Yeah, actually it is. We worked hard for what we've got and I'm not sharing it with any worthless biker scum."

Chet waved at Anya from where he was seated inside the truck, waiting for the signal to try and crank it. "I don't like it neither," he agreed, his voice even louder than Anya's had been.

"Will you two stop it?" Nikki snapped. "He's probably a decent guy."

"Sure. Right. Real decent," Anya snapped back. "That's why he used up most of that bottle of shampoo."

Nikki saw Hawk coming toward them out of the corner of her eye and she frowned, knowing the argument that had been simmering for several hours was about to boil over.

"All right, listen up!" Hawk snapped, pinning Anya and Chet with his dark, angry stare. "I'm only going to say this one

more time. Leave the man alone, stop bitching about him, and shut the fuck up!"

Anya opened her mouth to say something, and Hawk nailed her with a furious stare that had the woman taking a step backward.

"For the record, I spilled the damned shampoo myself this morning. He didn't use anything but a towel because he has his own soap and crap. And the next time you get your panties in a bunch over us helping or even talking to someone outside this little family of ours, Anya, you're going to be looking for another family, get me?"

She nodded and shot a worried look at Nikki as if asking *Is he really serious?*

Giving the woman a slight nod, Nikki saw something large and deep blue moving in the corner of her vision.

Bells rolling his bike across the field toward the cracked roadway. He had his jacket and helmet on, the visor of his helmet hiding his face.

"Well shit," Dal muttered and gestured to the man as he swung onto the bike. "Hey, don't go!"

"I hope you're fucking happy now, Anya," Hawk snarled, and the way he'd said her name made it sound more as if he'd said 'bitch.' He stalked away, heading for the blond before he could leave.

Nikki hurried after him, Dal on her heels.

"Well to hell with you, Hawk!" Anya snapped. "I'm tired of you bossing me and treating me like shit!"

Hawk spun around, eyes flashing like black lightning. He'd turned so quickly Nikki almost ran into his chest. "Then start walking! See how long you last without the rest of us, Anya! You'll be back under Roderik within the week and you fucking know it!"

The bike started up with a soft rumbling growl.

"HEY! WAIT!" Dal shouted, taking off after the blond. The man accelerated, going from a walk to a dead run in four strides.

Hawk spun around and took three running steps, his motion going from human norm to an Immortal's burst of speed as he closed the distance. Nikki was left watching, unable to even come near the speed Dal could manage much less anything Hawk could achieve.

The bike's rear wheel screamed, the front one lifting off the ground for an instant before it hit pavement, the heavy two-wheeler roaring away from them, accelerating more like a racing cycle than the heavy thing they'd been looking at for the last few hours.

Fast as they both were, neither of the men could catch the blond on that bike.

Nikki saw them slow down, the bike vanishing over a dip in the roadway.

"Thanks a lot, Anya," she said flatly. "You just ran someone off that Hawk really wanted to enlist on our side."

"Why? We don't need anyone like him, not when we've got Hawk and Dal."

"He's *like* Hawk and Dal, Anya."

While she'd spoken to Anya, the pair of men had come striding back.

Hawk glared at Anya. "Don't talk to me, don't come near me!" he told her and stalked to the front of the dead vehicle.

Dal stopped and stared off into the trees at the side of the road, saying nothing, jaw muscles working.

Nikki climbed into the bed of the truck and covered her face with her hands. She was ready to cry, the tension between everyone working on her nerves along with the stress of the broken truck.

Roderik's Rangers were out there, following them. Without the truck they were screwed. Completely screwed.

Dal hopped in the back with Nikki and wrapped his arms around her. "It's okay. Don't worry we'll be okay."

Shaking her head, Nikki said, "Yeah, I know we will be. It's Bells I'm really worried about. He's got no food in his stuff. Hawk told me he searched it last night. He's only got twenty bullets for that old gun. Other than that he's got a sword and some knives."

"If he's like Hawk he won't be easy to take down, or capture. Don't worry about him. He's not our problem anymore," Dal said, stroking Nikki's hair.

"No one told me he was like Hawk," Anya muttered. "Nobody tells me *anything* and then *I* get blamed for shit."

Nikki could tell Anya was crying by the quaver in her voice.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," the auburn haired woman told no one in particular. "I just didn't want any strangers around. I just didn't want anybody with us now."

"You never want anyone with us!" Hawk snarled and stalked away from all of them, heading into the trees.

"She's been acting weird for the last few days," Dal whispered to Nikki. "She on the rag or something?"

"No," Nikki replied softly, relaxing in Dal's arms. He was comfortable, easy to get along with, reasonably good looking. And he was too damned big. Scary big. Not as bad as Roderik, but big enough that she knew what her reaction would be if they tried having sex. But he was a good guy, too. Nice, gentle.

She was idly thinking about what kissing him might be like when a revelation hit her like a ton of bricks. "Oh God," she whispered. "I think I know what's wrong with Anya."

"She's gone psycho on us?" Dal asked, a grin on his face.

"Not exactly. Just hormonal."

He blinked at her. "PMS? She's never been this bad before."

"No. Pregnant."

Dal stared. "Pregnant? By whom? She wouldn't do Chet, Hawk wouldn't with her cause he knows I like her, and I didn't. Not that I don't want to, but...well...no condoms or pills."

"Probably the mechanic back in Junction City. I'd bet that's how she got the truck fixed for us. She screwed the guy for the work."

"Aw, hell..." Dal muttered, shaking his head. "She'd be about three months gone then, and Hawk's being mean as a snake to her, and we're not much better."

She pulled out of Dal's arms and hopped out of the truck.

"I'll tell Hawk," Dal said.

Nodding, Nikki headed toward the tent intending to comfort Anya. Now it all made sense. Anya was going to have a baby and she was getting scared. The last thing she'd want around them was a stranger, a potential threat to the new life growing inside her, especially one who bore any resemblance to the man who'd given her to Roderik.

She found Anya sitting off in the tent, a towel gripped between her teeth to prevent any of her sobs from being heard.

Nikki felt like a total idiot for not seeing it before. She'd just thought Anya had picked up a couple of pounds. All the canned food they ate could account for it, at least she'd put it down to that. Now she realized what a blind and complete moron she was because their supply of tampons wasn't running out as fast as it should have. And, if she knew Hawk, he'd beat himself up over what he'd said to Anya.

"Some doctor you are," she berated herself.

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Alone on the road, he quickly discovered he didn't like the

silence. There was the nagging feeling at the back of his mind that said he'd been alone too much and was thoroughly sick of it.

On the other hand, he didn't want to stay were he wasn't really welcome, either.

It was certainly a dilemma, and he wasn't sure what the solution should be. He really didn't have anything he could contribute to the group. No food, or usable goods anyway.

*But with a wire brush and a few minutes I could get the truck going.*

Yeah, he could because, from the sound of it, the spark plugs were dirty. The truck burning oil because of bad seals.

*How do I know that?*

He braked hard, the bike going into a skid that he easily controlled. Coming to a stop, his vision blurring, a dull ache creeping through his skull.

*National Division C Champion. Blackcard Player,* whispered through his thoughts, images dancing in his mind's eye. Motorcycles, an arena, gunshots, blood. The word *GameNet* in big letters on the arena wall...and Kimiko. Big, dark eyes in a heart-shaped face, delicate as a china doll, smiling brightly as she gave him a thumbs up from the pit before he went out to fight.

*Player. Motorcycle riding gladiator. It had been sport. A bloody, miserable, well paying sport.*

The urge for a cigarette and a shot of strong whiskey hit him along with the memories. He'd been a hard drinker then. And he'd smoked. More than just tobacco too, his mind supplied.

*But you quit, Daddy,* a girl's alto voice reminded him. That was his daughter's voice. He knew her name. He knew it, why couldn't he tear it out of the fog? *What was her name?*

Pain spiked behind his eyes and the images winked out of existence. But they'd left bits of knowledge behind. Knowledge

he wasn't sure he really wanted.

His head was aching as if someone had hit him with a hammer.

Or a tree.

Nikki had helped him. That meant something. He knew it did. Something beyond a simple act of human kindness. But what?

He sat there on the idling bike, undecided on his course of action. Go off alone, or turn around. Taking off his helmet he rubbed his temples and waited for the spike of pain to ease. *Microstroke*, his thoughts supplied. *Aftershock of hitting the tree*. He was still healing, not completely recovered. He needed a couple of days to rest.

Something told him he wouldn't get those days. But maybe that was just his cynicism and paranoia talking. Was he paranoid? *Is it really paranoia when people are out to get you?* But this wasn't his world.

Now what did that mean?

Bells shook his head and heard the soft chiming of the ornaments in his hair. The motion made the world go into a slow spin and he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and tried to will the pain and dizziness away. A few slow, deep breaths seemed to help, his thoughts telling him that he just needed to find his center and regain control of himself, both body and mind. Fat chance of the second part of that. He didn't have much of a mind at the moment.

There was a group of people back there. People that were—at least in part—willing to help him.

He'd heard them talking, and without the truck they were stuck there. And he could fix the truck. That was a fact.

He put his helmet on, turned the bike around, and sped along the road, slowing down when he was close enough to see

the truck. Bells sat there, waiting to see what kind of reception he was going to get.

Nikki came out of the tent and stood in the center of the road, looking in his direction.

Remembering the concern in her eyes when he'd zoned out, he suddenly recalled their color.

A deep, rich brown.

Like *her* eyes had been.

They said the eyes are the mirror of the soul.

And he'd liked what he'd seen in those mirrors of hers. Probably liked what he'd seen there too much. Human warmth and genuine concern. Soft woman's mouth, fair skin, strong cheekbones. Very pretty.

Too pretty.

He'd keep his distance from her. Fix the truck and see where things went from there. Maybe stay with them if the auburn-haired woman didn't actually put a bullet into him. He hated being shot, and that came with the knowledge that he should have died many times over from gunshot wounds alone. But he hadn't, and he wouldn't because he *was* Immortal. Undying.

But it still hurt like a motherfucker.

The big man, Hawk, was walking his way along the side of the truck, hand shading his eyes.

Decision made, Bells rolled the bike along slowly, stopping when he reached Nikki.

"You came back," she said, eyeing him curiously.

"Yeah." He pulled the helmet off and the braids spilled free, the bells at the ends ringing.

The sound made her smile, and he found himself giving her a faint answering smile.

"Why?"

"Thought you might want me to fix the truck."

"Can you?"

He nodded.

"We'd really appreciate it if you could."

"Okay."

The auburn-haired woman, eyes swollen from crying, came out of the tent, a guilty expression on her face. "Hey, I'm sorry. I'll fix something for everyone to eat. You hungry?"

He nodded at her question. "Not a problem," he replied to her apology.

A wide smile of welcome on his face, Hawk stopped walking a few feet from the blond man. "Change your mind about leaving?"

"He's come back to fix the truck," Nikki informed. She was smiling at him, too.

"Well if you think you can help, that'd be great. Frankly, I'm no mechanic and we can't figure out what's wrong."

Bells rolled the bike slowly to the side of the road and parked it. Going around to the front of the truck he found an open toolbox, half the tools scattered around it on the ground. He quickly located a spark plug puller and the wire brush.

Discarding his jacket, he pulled out the first spark plug like someone who knew exactly what he was doing. Despite having no knowledge of where he'd learned to be a mechanic, he knew how to fix the truck.

"The truck's burning oil. It's gumming up the spark plugs so they can't spark, which means the gas isn't igniting in the cylinders."

Hawk grinned. "Sounds like you know what you're talking about."

Chet stared gape-mouthed at the blond. "You can fix the truck?"

Bells pulled out the first spark plug and looked at the end. It was black with carbon buildup and oil residue. "Yep. But I'd suggest changing these out for new ones, if you can find any. Get the whole engine rebuilt if you can."

"Need a machine shop for that, or someone with one who's willing to do it. That costs," Dal explained. Bells noticed he was looking at Anya when he said it.

Now that she wasn't trying to shoot him, he had a moment to appreciate the fact she was a pretty lady. She was also, he noted, pregnant.

*How do I know that?* he wondered. *Her scent*, was the answer his mind came up with, and that only added to his own growing sense of puzzlement. The answer did float up out of the muddle in his head. *Immortal senses are more acute than human senses. And those senses are more developed in older Immortals.*

*So why didn't I catch it before?* And the answer came to him just as readily: *You weren't close enough and the wind was blowing the wrong way.*

*Too weird.* He shook himself, and the braids jingled.

Sable-brown eyes were watching him, a slight smile on a sweetly curved mouth. He fought the smile that tugged at his own mouth and got to work.

Nikki was gorgeous, though, with her deep brown eyes and chestnut hair that had a golden glow when the sun hit it just right. She was tanned and her clothes hugged curves that were strategically designed by genetics to catch a man's gaze and hold it for a long time. Nikki was also almost exactly his height, which make her a tall for a woman. Not that there was anything wrong with that. Nope, not at all. A tiny flare of desire prickled along his nerves, making something south of his gunbelt twitch restlessly.

*Not today, Billy boy.*

He brushed off the second of the spark plugs and replaced it, before pulling the next one.

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Fascinated, Nikki watched the blond repair their truck with quick professional efficiency. He was smiling slightly, and this time it reached his eyes, turning the already beautiful blue to a richer, more intense shade.

"You know," Chet said to her from where he was sitting in the cab, "he fixes it, he's earned his keep."

"Yes, Chet. I'd say you're right."

Dal chuckled.

"We're going to need to start searching for places we can find more food. What we've got won't last forever, and with six of us to feed now, it's only going to go faster," Anya remarked. She had the spaghetti in the pan and was stirring it, but her eyes kept going to the blond. She seemed nervous, probably worried about having the belled man with them.

"That's for sure," Chet agreed. "And I'm really hungry. Bet Mr. Jingle is, too."

"His name is Bells," Dal reminded Chet.

"Yeah, I forgot. Sorry," Chet offered to the smaller man.

"S'okay," was the truncated reply he got from their anti-social mechanic.

Now that the blond was proving useful, Chet was all for having him stay. Nikki shook her head. That was typical Chet.

"Nikki, could you find an extra plate or a bowl and a spoon or something for him to eat with?"

"Sure, Anya," she replied, jumping into the back of the truck. She started rummaging around, searching for the milk crate that held their camp dishes. She'd just found them when she heard Bells tell Chet to crank the engine.

After a few sputters, it caught and kept running.

"WOOOHOO!" Chet caterwauled.

Picking up the plate and spoon, Nikki hopped out in time to see Hawk patting Bells on the shoulder.

"Good job, thanks."

"That stuff hot yet?" Dal asked as he strolled toward Anya.

"Getting there," Anya replied as Nikki handed her the dish and utensil.

Glancing over to where the braid-decked man was wiping his hands clean with some grease remover and a much stained shop towel, Nikki caught his cobalt blue eyes watching her. She smiled.

He returned the smile with just a faint quirk of his lips, but there was no change in the man's eyes. Nothing. And maybe that was what alarmed Anya so much. His cold stare. He was, and at the same time, wasn't like Hawk, she realized. Hawk was still very much human, his emotions showing in his eyes.

Bells wasn't like that. There was a hardness, like armor on the surface. Like a layer of ice that wasn't going to melt and let anyone in if he could help it. She'd known men like that before.

Roderik, for one. Cold, calculating, and downright unpleasant, the man was a ruthless killer. But even that bastard wasn't as hard as the blond. Roderik took too much pleasure in hurting and being cruel, and he always smiled when others were screaming in pain and fear, glorying in their misery.

Nikki turned away, finally seeing what Anya had noticed. It made her feel even more an idiot than she already did for not realizing Anya was pregnant.

All the clues had been there for her to see from the outset. The way he'd held the gun on them even as badly hurt as he was when they found him. The way he'd swung the gunbelt on, reacted to Anya drawing down on him, rolling and coming up with the gun in his hand.

He was a professional killer, and had been for much longer than the year since the Collapse. No one got that good in just a year. Even Hawk had been in the military a long time ago, and that was where he and Roderik had learned all the things they'd needed in order for Roderik to found the Lone Star Empire.

Hawk had probably noticed how the man moved. He never missed anything like that. But if the man was a hardened killer, why would Hawk accept him into their numbers so readily?

Roderik.

That was the only reasonable answer. He wanted help fighting Roderik.

She watched Bells walk toward the campfire with the easy grace of a predator, a killer. Even Dal under the influence of his Tiger Spirit didn't have the same strange fluidity of motion. It was inhuman. Chillingly so because his easy stride drew her gaze like a magnet.

When she looked away from him, Nikki realized Hawk was watching her, not their guest. He smiled, glanced at the blond, and tapped his nose. He was saying *bingo* to her.

For a second she was puzzled, staring at Hawk, not comprehending what he meant.

Then it hit her.

It took a Dragon to kill a Dragon.

Her dark eyes widened. *You mean...?* she mouthed.

Hawk gave her a single very deliberate nod of the head, his smile as coldly calculating as anything she'd ever seen on Roderik's face.

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Bells passed his empty plate to Chet and got to his feet.

"When I've got the dishes washed we're gonna go, right?" Chet asked, glancing to their leader for confirmation.

"That's the plan," Hawk confirmed as he shoved the toolbox

into the back of the battered pickup.

Dal and Anya were taking down the tent, and Nikki was piling milk crates into neat rows in the back, getting their gear organized.

Grinning, Chet grabbed the crate with the dirty dishes, took two steps toward the stream and came to a stop, looking at the blond, "You're going with us, right?"

Nodding, Bells pulled on his heavy jacket, buckling it closed.

"Cool! Now we got our own mechanic," Chet replied and hurried off to the stream.

Hawk sighed. "He's really not a bad kid."

Bells just shrugged noncommittally.

"You want to stick with us, help us out like today, or leave? It's up to you."

"I'll stick. For now."

"Glad to have you," Hawk held his hand out to seal the offer.

Bells studied the offered hand for a moment, then took it and they shook hands, Hawk's grip firm, but not exerting any more strength than was needed for the friendly business-like gesture. Their eyes were locked, and Bells could see a flickering in the depths of older man's deep brown eyes.

"You'll do," Hawk said and let his hand go.

"Yeah, I thought so," he replied flatly. He'd been right. The man wanted his help to fight someone else.

A Dragon to be specific.

He hated fighting Dragons.

"Ack, this damn tent," Dal swore as he struggled to get it to collapse evenly so it could be folded.

With nothing else to do, Bells helped the struggling man get the tent under control and ready to be slipped back into its

storage sleeve.

The last few things were piled into the truck and Hawk looked around, puzzled. "Where's Chet?"

"He's not back from washing dishes," Bells heard Nikki say from the other side of the truck. "And it shouldn't have taken him this long."

"Want me to go get him?" Dal asked.

Bells was already walking for the stream, pausing by his bike to grab the curved Japanese katana he had strapped under the duffel bag.

"Nikki, go with him." Hawk told the woman as he climbed into the back for the vantage point the height of the truck gave him.

"She stays here," Bells shot back as he kept walking.

"You see him?" he heard Dal ask.

"Nope. Too many trees between here and the creek," Hawk replied.

Bells started walking a bit faster. He didn't know Chet, but if the others thought he'd taken too long then maybe there was something wrong.

Reaching the end of the field, he ghosted silently between the trees. Even though he was wearing heavy armored boots he made no more sound than the sighing of the wind through the trees. His left hand gripped the scabbard of the katana, his right rested on the hilt of the blade.

It was quiet. A bit too quiet.

He found the dishes in their crate, dripping water, balanced on a rock by the edge of the creek.

He scanned the ground, analyzing a myriad of tracks. His own from last night. Two sets of much larger tracks. Hawk and Chet. The footprints of a woman. Nikki. She was in hiking boots. Anya had sneakers.

He followed Chet's tracks to the edge of the water. Focusing his gaze to the far side, about twenty-five feet from where he stood, he could see where water had sprayed as Chet climbed out.

Frowning because he was going to have to wade across, Bells paused.

Twenty-five feet.

He went back up the bank, walked away from the edge of the water and paused. Gauging the distance, he took off running.

Blue and aqua mist swirled around him as he jumped. He came down at the edge of the far bank, his right heel making a muted splash in the water. Climbing up the bank he followed the drops of water and the well-marked prints of the other man. While a small part of his mind wondered how he'd just made that kind of a jump, the rest of him took it for granted. It was just something he could do. Like fixing a truck, or breathing. Nothing remarkable.

The real questions were a bit more immediate in nature. Where had Chet gone? And, more importantly, why?

Bells stopped at the edge of the tree cover. There was an old farmhouse, the place showing no sign of recent use. Probably either abandoned during or right after the plague.

Plague? Just another of those random bits of knowledge that rose up out of the fog in his mind. How did he know there'd been a plague here? It could easily have been some kind of war. But there weren't any bomb craters. No itch of slow radiation or burn of chemicals. Biological war? He didn't think so.

Just the fact that he found himself selecting one form of Apocalypse over another told him things about himself that, once again, he would rather not have known.

The tracks led to a farmhouse. Faded blue paint peeling from the walls. Dirt dulled yellow paint framing the windows.

Bells followed. He was cautious, yet he felt nothing here that pointed to any immediate danger. He was also beginning to get the impression that Chet wasn't the brightest light in the string. Well meaning, he probably had the best intentions. But the road to hell was paved with the good intentions of well meaning people. He knew that for a fact because he'd added a few of those paving stones himself on the way down that good old road.

He decided to risk making a bit of noise. "Chet?"

Chet came out of the house. "The folks here died. But there's lots of clothes and stuff we could take," he said around a mouthful of fruit he was eating right out of the can.

"I'll tell Hawk," he replied, watching with narrowed eyes as the young man stuffed the food into his mouth. It wasn't any of his business, but the young fool was risking food poisoning, and quite probably an unhealthy dose of anger from his friends if he was any judge of things.

"I'm gonna stay here and look around more." Chet grinned as a bit of heavy syrup ran down his chin.

"Okay," he replied and spun around, intending to return where the others were. By now they'd be getting anxious over how long he'd been gone. He jumped the stream, picked up the dishes, and headed back. He hadn't even reached the far side of the trees before he heard someone coming his way. Nikki was carrying a shotgun.

"You find him?" She looked worried.

"Yeah. There's a farmhouse that way," he gestured behind him. "Chet's there."

"Any way to reach it?"

"Might be." He held out the dishes to her. "I'll look for the bridge."

She offered him the shotgun.

"I'm good," he told her and turned away.

"Watch out for barbed wire."

He waved his hand in acknowledgment of her warning and kept walking.

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Nikki sighed. No, he definitely wasn't a talker, that was certain.

Taking the dishes, she tramped back through the screen of trees and crossed the field.

"You found them, I take it," Hawk said as she put the crate into the back.

"Chet found a farmhouse, Bells is looking for a way we can get the truck to it across the creek."

"I wish Chet had something resembling a brain in that skull of his," Anya muttered. "Going off and not telling us where he is could get us all killed one of these days."

"You know what he's like," Dal replied.

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean I have to like it," she retorted.

"No, I guess not." He was giving the auburn haired woman a smile.

Nikki saw Anya give Dal an answering smile.

"Everyone in the truck and let's see if we can find this bridge," Hawk ordered.

"It might be behind us," Dal pointed out.

"That was the way Bells went," Nikki confirmed.

Anya jumped into the cab, Dal climbing into the driver's seat. Hawk took the lookout post behind the cab. "Take it slow. Driving through those weeds will make it all too easy to run off the road into a ditch or hit a deep hole."

"Will do, Hawk," Dal told the other man. He started up the truck and carefully turned it around, while Nikki clung to the side rail to keep from getting banged around too much.

"Chet must have found something worth salvaging or he'd have come back sooner," Anya remarked.

"Probably," Dal agreed. "Maybe some food if we're lucky."

"I won't ever forgive him for finding those packs of beef jerky and eating all of them back at that convenience store," Anya said loudly to be heard over the rattle and crash of the stuff in the bed of the truck as they bumped off of the road into the grass.

"Me, either," Hawk stated firmly. "He knows the rules. Food belongs to everyone, not just whoever found it."

"Yeah, but you know Chet," Nikki said as she stood up beside Hawk. "He acts before he thinks."

"One of these days he's going to get himself a case of food poisoning he won't forget," Anya shouted as the truck rattled its way back onto the pavement.

Dal pushed the accelerator and the truck sped up, gears grinding as he shifted to second.

"Try not to wreck the tranny," Hawk requested.

"It's getting stiff again."

"Probably needs fluid. We'll check it out at the house," Hawk told him.

"Geeze, Dal, take it slower, you're rattling my fillings loose," Anya yelled as they bumped over a shallow washout across the road.

Nikki smiled, relieved that they hadn't had to go far before they saw Bells standing by the road. There was a lot of damage to the pavement that appeared to have come from localized flooding.

Dal slowed the truck. "Heard Chet found a farmhouse."

The man nodded. "The road's there, under the grass and weeds. The bridge is about two feet wider than the truck, but it's good and solid."

"Shouldn't be a problem, I'm used to bridges like that. Had a farm of my own before the Collapse." He grinned at the blond, "Want a lift?"

"I'm going back for my bike," he said. "See you at the house."

"Sure," Dal told him.

He turned, the chiming from his hair nearly drowned out by the noise of the truck.

Nikki watched the blond as he walked away, head up, relaxed but alert, the sword still clutched in his hand. The way he held it showed he was perfectly confident in his ability with the weapon. Hawk walked like that when he was carrying an assault rifle.

"Not very friendly, is he?" Anya remarked.

"His kind don't trust easily. But then, in these days, who does?" Hawk remarked. He was watching the blond as intently as Nikki.

"Odd guy," Dal commented. "Carrying a sword and an antique gun when everyone else uses automatic weapons."

Nikki saw the man vanish into the brush just off the road. "Real lone wolf," she said.

"Yeah, well that's his business. Let's just give him time. Like I said, he doesn't know us," Hawk urged, giving Nikki's shoulder a little squeeze.

"I'm getting the impression he doesn't want to know us," Nikki muttered.

A motion in the corner of her eye made her look up to see Hawk looking down, a smile lighting his eyes.

"They don't warm up to people very fast, but once they do..." he grinned, "well, you'll see."

"You think he'll 'warm up' to us?" Anya asked.

"Just treat him decently, Anya, the same way you treat us."

"Yeah, but isn't he like Roderik?" Nikki asked.

Hawk frowned. "Yes and no. There are two kinds of Dragons. Roderik is a ravager. He takes what he wants and destroys what he can't use."

"And Bells?" Nikki questioned. She couldn't have said why, but she wanted a reason to trust the blond. Wanted him to be someone they could rely on the way she could rely on Hawk and Dal.

The man's grin returned, "I'm not sure what he is, understand. He might *not* be a Dragon. It's just a suspicion, something in the way he moves makes me expect to see wings. What I can say definitively is he's about as different from Roderik as a man is from a worm."

Anya didn't seem completely reassured by Hawk's words.

Dal nodded thoughtfully. "There's something special about him," he remarked, "more than I'd feel from someone like me. He's got the same—I don't know—aura of power that Hawk has, I guess."

Hawk grinned. "Go on, finish your thought," the Fenyx urged.

"You feel it too, don't you?" Dal asked.

Nikki was looking from one man to the other, Anya was watching Dal.

"Yeah. I feel it. Like a coiled spring, just waiting."

"What the hell are you two zen gurus yammering about?" Anya asked.

Hawk laughed. "Zen is a type of Buddhist, they don't have gurus, Anya."

"Whatever," the woman retorted shortly.

"He was trying to say that Bells has a lot of power," Nikki told her.

"Oh." Anya glanced back at Nikki. "Enough to kick

Roderik's ass?"

"Maybe," Hawk remarked, a grim smile curling his lips.

"Maybe hell," Dal muttered as he eased the truck forward, being cautious. They couldn't afford to lose the truck.

They bumped across the dirt road and rolled slowly over the bridge, which creaked a bit at the weight of the truck, but held just as the blond said it would.

The farmhouse wasn't in great repair, but it wasn't a ruin either.

Chet was sitting in a rocking chair on the porch, stuffing his face with canned fruit. There were two empty cans at his feet.

"I'm going to kill that lousy bum!" Anya snarled as she jumped out of the truck before it had even stopped moving.

Nikki sighed. "Here we go again."

"No kidding," Dal muttered and he cut off the engine.

Chet howled in outrage as Anya slapped him repeatedly with her open hands, flailing at his shoulders and head like a little girl scolding a younger brother.

"Bad Chet! Bad! Chet doesn't eat food without mommy's permission. Bad boy!"

"Hey! Stop it!" Chet shouted as she took the can from him.

"Naughty Chet!"

"What am I, a dog?" he asked in annoyance at her scolding tone. "I ain't found no beef jerky! It's just some fruit!"

"Damn right, you're a dog! A selfish dog! And you aren't getting any dinner since you ate three cans of fruit." She smacked him again. "Bad boy!"

She knew Chet wouldn't hit a woman, not even if she was smacking him. And Nikki knew what Anya was doing to him only stung a bit. She'd been on the receiving end of a few similar slaps herself. Besides, Anya would never hurt Chet. Not really. But Nikki knew the man had to be mortified from the way his

face flushed. They all knew how Chet hated being treated like a child, or a pet who'd done wrong.

"Hawk, make her stop it!" Chet said, a bit of a whine in his request for aid as he got out of the chair in a bid to escape the woman's repeated slaps.

"Hell no!" the big man replied. "You earned what you're getting, Chet. You act like a selfish dog, you get punished like one. I explained this before. You don't eat food that you find, you share it."

"Bad boy!" Anya repeated, swatting him on the shoulder.

Chet frowned and looked at the empty cans at his feet. "Aw, hell...I forgot." His expression full of contrition over how thoughtlessly he'd acted by eating the fruit, Chet gave a soft bark and tried to lick Anya's face, wiggling his butt as he did so, looking for all the world like a dog with a docked tail as he squirmed and licked at Anya.

It was too much.

Nikki started to giggle at the picture the big man made as he imitated a dog in an effort to get Anya to see he was really sorry for being a dolt and that was it, they all broke out into peals of mirth.

## *Chapter Four*

Bells didn't join the others in their search of the house, he headed instead for the barn. There were no signs that of any animals had been left inside to die. The stall doors were open, as was the barn door which led to freedom. There were signs that there'd been some chickens, a bin marked *chicken feed* written with laundry marker on the plastic lid, but he didn't see any live chickens. Cats and foxes would have put an end to them.

As he made his way toward the ladder to the loft he spotted a cat that ran from him; either a barn cat gone totally feral or one born that way.

He could see signs that there had been other animals here at one time. A saddle for a pony hung on one wall beside a sled, and there were the remains of a bag from dog food. Where the animals had gone were anyone's guess. He climbed the ladder to the loft and found an assortment of old junk. Bits and pieces of old tractors, hand saws, the kind people had used before there'd been any electricity. They were badly rusted and their handles had rotted. Inside a trunk he found old photo albums, some warped vinyl records, and a broken record player. A pair of cobweb draped bicycles hung on one beam, the hooks holding them as rusted as the bikes themselves were. There weren't any tires left, time had eaten them away.

Nothing up there they could use.

He went down the ladder and continued his search of the barn, finding a generator under a tarp in a stall that had been

used for storage rather than livestock. There was a wealth of farming tools, the kind used in a kitchen garden. Shovels, rakes, hoes, and a hand cultivator. There was even a gas powered rototiller.

There were also several metal gerry cans of gas, and three of them were full. He tapped the cans. They could use them for the truck. On a shelf above his head were bottles of kerosene and lamp oil.

Leaving the barn, he wandered over to another out building, pulling the doors open to the accompaniment of screaming hinges. There was a newer car parked inside, a patina of dust dulling the bright blue of the sedan to a dulled, listless shade. The keys weren't in the shed, but it wouldn't take much effort to find them. They'd be somewhere in the house where one of the others could locate them. Whether the car would start or not was another story. After sitting for a year, it was a fifty-fifty proposition whether the battery would even recharge.

He found a the remains of a dog curled up in its house behind the garage, its chain and collar lying in the dirt. It had been set free.

Bells stood there for a few moments, staring at the animal.

More death.

Sighing, he went back into the barn.

It only took him a few minutes to find a shovel and part of an old quilt. He found a likely spot under a tree near the dog house and started digging. It didn't take long. Even wrapped in the old quilt there wasn't much left to bury.

Done with the first grave, he started digging another not far from the dog's, putting it near a big spreading oak. The remains of a wading pool under the spreading branches sat there in mute testimony to the death of at least one child. A few toys partly covered by last fall's decaying leaves sat in the scummy puddle

of water at the bottom. A few weeds choked lawn chairs and a plastic table sat nearby. There was an empty tea glass sitting in the grass, big bright yellow daisies on its sides. A rotting paperback lay in one of the chairs.

It had been summer when the world died. The evidence was plain for him to read.

An ache started deep in his chest. He refused to feel anything and started digging with a will, piling the dirt to one side. Work could hold back any pain. Any pain at all.

He didn't need to go into the house to know what the others had already found. A woman, a man, and their two little girls.

It was all there.

Their lives to be read in the remains they'd left behind. In the frozen tableau of toys in a pool, a book left lying in a chair, a spilled glass of tea. In the panicked taste of a mother's fear that still lingered in the air, ghosts of strong emotion that he could feel sliding along his consciousness the way a distant sound played at the edge of your hearing.

They were long dead, but the family deserved a decent burial since they were going to help themselves to whatever was available. He'd find out what their names were and make some kind of marker because that was the least they could do for them.

He swallowed down the bitterness, pushing emotions that weren't his own aside, blanketing his reaction with indifference. He hadn't know them. They meant nothing to him. The dead couldn't be helped.

But the living could.

And he had five of those now.

It was a good start, but it was hardly more than that. A start.

But what it was the start *of*, he had no clue whatsoever.

\* \* \*

That was where Nikki found him. Digging a single grave for a dead family.

He had his heavy jacket off, and there was a line of sweat down the back of his T-shirt, more under his arms, across his chest.

He didn't even look up from what he was doing.

"They had two little girls," Nikki told him softly.

"Yeah, I know. Between three and six."

Nikki blinked. "How did you know that?"

She saw him gesture at something in the grass. A wading pool with toys suited to younger children. The sun-faded plastic ponies were a dead giveaway.

"It took them fast," she told him. "I think the girls were dead before they even realized they were sick."

The bells in his hair rang as he nodded in acknowledgment of what she'd said.

"Most people died like that," she said quietly, remembering the horror of seeing people, especially children, dying so quickly. "It was...horrible."

"What was it?" his voice was clipped. Controlled.

He sounded upset, even to her, and she wondered whom he'd lost. The soft ring of the bells in his hair reminded her of her parents and the fact she'd never got to say goodbye. Pulling herself together, she answered, "It was a mutated strain of Ebola. At least that's what we all thought. The WHO didn't even get a chance to issue much of a warning before it all started coming apart. They thought it was a new strain of SARS at first." She'd been in the middle of the crisis, watching people die, unable to save more than a handful of the thousands the hospital had attempted to treat. But she had saved a few, which had been more through pure luck than anything else. She still couldn't have said why any of her patients lived. No one she hadn't

personally treated survived.

She saw him tense at the mention of SARS and wondered why. He was digging with mechanical precision, the shovel cracking through tree roots and ripping out rocks as if neither were an impediment to his work.

"Did you know the people who lived here?" She had to ask, even though she was sure he hadn't known them either.

"No."

Nikki watched him for another minute, then went to find a shovel.

There were several in the barn. She grabbed one and joined him in the hole.

Eyes the shade of a summer sky regarded her for a moment.

"It'll go faster with two people," she explained as she set the shovel and stepped on it, driving it into the dirt.

"True."

For a while she just dug, concentrating on what she was doing. But her mind on the man's puzzling behavior. He moved and acted the part of a killer, but there was something hidden beneath the surface that went beyond being a killer. Even beyond being one of the Immortals. Roderik was an Immortal, and he was as simple and easy to understand as a bullet.

What Roderik wanted, Roderik got, or there was hell to pay.

But this man wasn't so easy to read. Like a still pool of water seen by night, the surface hid a lot of what was beneath.

Digging a grave for people he didn't know, the way he'd figured out what they'd found in the house without setting foot inside. Planning to bury the people with or without their help. Not wanting to even go inside the house.

Hawk came out of the house carrying a dark brown comforter bundled around the pitiful remains of the husband.

Nikki stepped out of the hole.

"I've got John here," he said. "Dal's going to bring Carrie, Anya's said she'd bring Lisa and Joanie."

The blond kept digging.

Hawk lay the dead man down and took the shovel from Nikki. "Digging's hot work. Why not get us some water, Nikki? I'll take over for a bit."

Nikki took the gruff dismissal to mean he wanted to talk to Bells alone. "Sure, Hawk."

She ran into Dal, who was carrying a brightly colored quilt, the pattern one she recognized from her days with her family. The wedding ring. Usually made and given to newlyweds. It wasn't even faded. Tears blurred her eyes and she made her way to the truck to get water from the cooler. It wasn't cold, but it was at least clean. She grabbed it and a few of the plastic cups and started back to the gravesite.

Anya was standing on the porch, crying, arms around her stomach, over the baby she was carrying. Chet came outside carrying a brightly colored comforter, ponies in a rainbow of colors on a grass green background.

"Oh, god...Anya," she mumbled knowing what had upset the other woman. Nikki hurried to her, setting her cooler and the cups down on the porch, taking the woman into her arms in a much needed embrace. Nikki didn't say a word, she didn't need to. They simply stood there together and cried, Anya for her lost daughter, Nikki for all the people she hadn't saved.

\* \* \*

"Not very social, are you?" Hawk asked after Dal and Chet had put down the bundles and left.

"Depends," Bells answered as he threw more dirt onto the growing mound.

The dark haired man laughed softly. "We won't push you,

Bells. Take your time getting used to us. Dragons tend to be loners anyway."

"Or egomaniacal tyrants with misplaced delusions of godhood."

Hawk smiled good naturedly. "Or that. I see you've met my brother then."

They dug for a bit, then Bells turned around. "Maybe. I..." he frowned, "...don't remember. Everything before I woke up last night is," he shook his head, the bells ringing softly, "gone."

"Not surprising. If you were anything but an Immortal you'd be dead, and that's a fact."

He resumed digging without replying to Hawk's comment.

"Look, I've got a good reason for what I'm going to say. Don't take it the wrong way, and hear me out."

Bells stopped digging and regarded the man coolly. "Yeah?"

"I want you to go on with the girls and Chet. There's a car, I think you can get it running. Dal and I will take the truck and lead the people following us on a wild snipe hunt." Hawk grinned, a fierce joy lighting his eyes. "We've been thinking about it for a while now, taking them on a chase across the countryside, but we couldn't trust Chet to keep them safe alone."

"And you think you can trust me?"

Hawk stood there, studying him. "Yeah, actually, I got the feeling I can."

For a few heartbeats the pair of men, one tall and dark, the other smaller and blond, just stared at one another.

Bells started digging again. "Why?"

"Because you didn't shoot Anya today. She drew on you, but you didn't shoot her, and she could well have shot you."

Shrugging, the bells chiming, Bells kept digging. "Not much to base your hopes on."

"Isn't it?" Hawk asked. He dropped the shovel and drew his sidearm, his hand a blur of motion. Bells didn't even flinch as he pressed the business end of the barrel to his forehead.

Cobalt met near black in a cool exchange.

"Why didn't you draw on me?" Hawk asked.

"Because you aren't going to shoot me."

"And you know this because?"

Bells gave the man a cool, humorless smile. "Because, I would have felt your intention before you even drew."

Hawk nodded and holstered his weapon. "And that's why you didn't shoot any of us last night, and why you knew not to shoot Anya today."

Bells shook his head. "If I hadn't moved at full kick she'd have shot me."

"Why didn't you shoot her then?"

"Because killing a woman is...abhorrent to me." He shrugged. "And even if she had blown my head off, I wouldn't die, so why hurt her?"

"You're a peculiar guy," Hawk remarked.

"Comes with the territory."

"Yeah, I guess it does," Hawk allowed. "So, can I count on you to take care of the girls? And Chet too? He's our mascot, and I'd hate to lose our poster child for social ineptitude."

"Let me check my day planner and get back to you."

Hawk grinned. "Sure. We can do lunch and discuss it then."

\* \* \*

Hawk was smiling when Nikki finally arrived with the water. Bells even had a slight uplift to the corners of his mouth, the smile faint. She'd already noticed how good looking the blond was. Standing there, sweaty and a bit flushed, the hint of a smile sparkling in his gaze, he was gorgeous. Alive and, for the first time since she'd met him, human.

The appearance was quickly gone as he noticed her. She wondered what he'd look like if he really smiled. Or laughed.

She tried to imagine it. A real smile curving his sensual lips. Tried to construct what his laughter would be like. His mouth were so masculine, sexy. A smile would turn him into an Adonis.

His laugh would be like his voice, deep and mellow, rolling across her awareness like a breath of summer breeze across overheated skin.

Despite the heat she felt a chill, gooseflesh rising on her skin as her imagination conjured up more detail.

What it would be like to feel his hands at the small of her back, drawing her close for a passionate kiss. He'd taste good. Like a cold drink on a hot day. Sweet-tea like they served up cold and wet in Georgia.

Heat bloomed, and another kind of wetness dampened Nikki's panties.

"Thank you, Nikki," Hawk said as he took the cup from her. She smiled and handed the blond his water.

Nikki was startled to notice the way Bells was regarding her. There was an intensity in his gaze that only added to the dampness between her thighs setting off an ache of desire deep inside her.

"Did I hear Anya crying?" Hawk asked.

"Yes."

"Anything in particular that set her off?"

"Seeing those two little girls."

Hawk nodded, "I was worried that was going to be too much for her, especially under the current circumstances."

"We'll be okay," she assured the older man. "It's just...."

"Girl stuff?" he asked, giving her a warm, somewhat fatherly, smile.

"Yeah," Nikki admitted, actually able to respond with a soft laugh. "You'd think after a year we'd both be over it, but sometimes it just jumps up and bites us."

And that was true. Even after a year there were just some things that could make one or both of them cry. Even Chet had broken down when they'd found an elderly couple locked in a final embrace in their home. He hadn't stopped crying for several days, just sitting and blubbering.

He'd later admitted that had been how he found his own parents, locked in one another's arms as the Grim Reaper claimed their lives.

They'd all suffered losses. Even Hawk, who'd lost everyone but his brother. The man had openly—and tearfully—admitted he'd lost both his sons, their wives, and all his grandchildren and his cherished great grandchild, too. Being an Immortal didn't confer the guarantee of Immortality to your children, or theirs.

Hawk held out his cup to Nikki and she refilled it. "Anya wanted to know if anyone has a preference for dinner. There's a lot of canned vegetables and soup."

"She can make whatever she wants. By now she should know I'm easy." Dal stated.

"But never cheap," Nikki replied automatically. It was one of their constant jokes.

"Anything in particular you'd like?" Hawk questioned the blond.

Bells' face returned to the usual blankness she was beginning realize hid the real man. "I wouldn't mind some canned fruit." His reply surprised her because she'd expected one of his monosyllabic answers.

"Fortunately there's a lot of that in the pantry in the basement. Even some home canned, but I'm not sure how safe it might be."

"Best if you let one of the two of us try that before anyone else eats it," Hawk told her.

"Good idea, food poisoning can't kill either of you, can it?"

"Nope," Hawk agreed.

Nikki could see the blond withdrawing emotionally from them bit by bit. The walls going up. It left her wondering what had created them, and why he insisted on distancing himself from everyone around him.

Everyone handled trauma differently, and she couldn't help being curious over what had made such a young man construct a fortress around his emotions. She had far more questions than answers, and she wasn't sure she'd ever get any answers from him.

One of the answers that kept nagging her was the question of his age. Hawk was over seventy and had greying hair because he'd been forty before becoming one of the Immortals. But Bells looked really young. Except for his eyes. *He looks so...tired. As if he's seen too much. How old do you have to be, or what do you have to see to have eyes like that? Or how much pain do you have to endure?* Watching him, she wondered if it wasn't a mixture of all those things. Pain, age, and cynicism combining to make the cold killer named Bells.

"I'll let her know you want fruit. Any preference?"

"Peaches."

And there it was again, the beauty of his voice marred by the ice beneath the velvet. The eyes were dead again. His expression taking on that chilling inhuman appearance she'd seen before. She was starting to think it was there to hide more than his feelings. Like armor, it was there to protect him from incoming damage.

She smiled. "I'm pretty sure I saw a few cans. Peaches it is."

The men went back to digging. "I'll leave the cups and

water here," she informed them, setting the cooler down and putting the cups in the grass beside it.

"Thanks, Nikki," Hawk told her.

\* \* \*

The pair of men finished digging the grave, laying the dead to rest and burying them.

They'd made four crude crosses, Dal writing the names on them in black paint he'd found in the barn. Bells hammered the grave markers into the ground, and Hawk had recited the Lord's Prayer over the graves. Crying again, Nikki laid wildflowers over the mound, and Anya put some stuffed ponies over the place in the common grave where the girls' bodies lay.

So many people dead. A way of life lost, maybe forever, certainly for their lifetimes.

Only Chet proved immune to the mood that had gripped them all, the younger man complaining about wanting some dinner.

Done with the depressing task of interring the dead, Hawk heated water for a bath in a couple of large kettles. There was a fire place and they were using it, Anya doing the cooking there, the warmth welcome during the chill of evening.

Bells gathered up his clothes, some shampoo, soap, and the same towel he'd used that morning from the truck and headed for the creek. He was filthy and wanted nothing more than to wash the grime from his hair and body. But this time he wasn't going to take out the braids. His hair wasn't that dirty, just a bit sweaty, and the shampoo would get that out without taking the whole business down.

Without the least bit of self-consciousness he started to strip, eager to remove clothes and boots, because he wanted to wash the dirt away.

\* \* \*

Nikki had gone to get water from the creek and stopped to stare, her dark eyes going wide at the sight before her.

Bells was stripping off his clothes, his sleek, muscled body being revealed before her stunned eyes. It was the most erotic thing she'd ever seen, the muscles of his tanned back and shoulders sliding under his skin like steel cable. The gunbelt slipped to the ground and he crouched to take off his boots which only made those delicious muscles in his back ripple sinuously under his skin.

And what skin. It was a perfect golden color, without so much as the slightest imperfection she could see. No scarring either.

The boots came off and he stood, sliding his pants off, a nicely angular male butt fully revealed to her sight. His legs were longer than normal for a man, and firmly muscled with a light scattering of golden hair that caught the glimmers of sunlight coming through the trees.

She'd seen him naked before. But this, this was different. He wasn't lying unconscious and being turned and moved during an examination that should have been clinical but hadn't, quite, stayed that way. Motionless, he'd been attractive.

Moving under his own power he was spectacular.

Totally unaware of her presence, the blond stretched his arms over his head, arching his back a bit. Nikki's breath caught. She wanted to walk down there and run her hands across the firm planes of his body.

*He's beautiful. I wish he'd turn around so I could see his chest. I wonder what he'd look like from the front when he stretches like that.*

But if he did turn around he'd see her standing there watching him.

Creeping slowly behind a tree, Nikki crouched down to spy

on him. She felt like an intruder, but was unable to take her eyes off of him as he walked out into the creek. His natural grace and balance held him steady even though she knew the rocks out there were slick with moss.

He lowered himself into the water, disappearing below the surface for a moment. He came up and tossed his head back, the spray of water from his braids arcing through the air in a brief rainbow.

Just watching him, she could see the differences between him and a normal man, the contrast drawn starkly into her mind. He was too graceful. Even when he was alone there was nothing clumsy in his movements, no awkwardness, no hesitancy. She saw him stretch again, arms to full extension over his head. He tensed his body, bringing his arms back down so that the cables of muscle in his back rippled with the isometric exercise he was performing. Seeing what he was doing, Nikki suddenly understood he was testing his body, gauging how well he'd healed from his impact with the scraggly tree. His arms went from harsh tension to smoothly graceful motions as beautiful as those of any dancer, and she recognized the motions as being some type of martial arts when he performed a series of blocks and punches.

He was heart-wrenchingly beautiful in a way only a man could be. Masculine. Powerful. And, she suspected, he was far more deadly than most all men seemed to be in these dire times. Tears burned in her eyes, choking her as the awful things Roderik had done surfaced in her thoughts. He liked to dominate. Hurt. Rule. She fought the fear down, fists clenched, teeth gritted. This was *not* Roderik. Bells wasn't any taller than her own five feet, eight inches. He was beautiful and lacked the much larger man's hulking mass.

Forcing the unpleasantness that was Roderik from her

mind, Nikki went back to her silent observation of Bells. The fluid grace, as he washed, soaping himself down *everywhere*, totally unaware of her skulking behind the tree like some sophomoric peeping Thomasina.

The soap ran over his skin as he rinsed himself, the trail of white foam sliding down his body made her think of sex. She felt her arousal building, sharp and intense.

*Nikki, what are you doing?* she asked herself. *You can't be thinking of sleeping with him, can you?* The stark realization that it was *exactly* what she was thinking about stunned her. Sure she'd had lovers before the Collapse. Other med students. A doctor she'd met at the hospital, but she'd never just hopped into the sack with a relative stranger.

She'd always considered herself as the equal of any man and had excelled as a physician, outstripping the abilities of many of her male classmates. She had a very competitive spirit that hadn't let her fail in anything she tried.

She'd been very naive in believing she had the freedom to do as she pleased.

Before the Collapse she'd considered herself to be sexually open-minded, and she had enjoyed a bit of role playing, donning costumes and having fun. But before the Collapse it had been playing.

She'd found out that there were certain areas in which she couldn't compare to men after the Collapse. Killing and subjugation of others were two of them. And those had led to her capture and enslavement.

Sex, she quickly learned, was another game she couldn't play on an equal field.

Sex became a matter of domination, of who was stronger.

And she hadn't been prepared for that type of fight. Emotionally, psychologically, intellectually, she could have

matched the Dragon toe to toe and probably won.

But that wasn't the way Roderik played the game. He played it with strength and cruelty, brute force and pain. Roderik had been powerful, deadly, and cruel in his systematic abuse, his *training*. The way he'd beaten down her resistances, made her start to believe a woman's place was wherever a man wanted it to be. And he'd wanted her submissive, chained at his feet as a naked slave. During the months of her captivity Roderik had driven one point home: the weak were owned by whomever was strong enough to dominate them.

Nikki was never going to be the one dominated again. Not by anyone.

The blond was drying off, water still dripping down his body.

He was dangerous, she could see that in every movement of his body. But there was something under that icy exterior that she wanted to know better. Wanted to have. Yes, wanted to own.

Not the way Roderik had owned her. No. She wanted the blond killer the way she'd never wanted another man. And watching him made her wonder exactly what kind of man he'd be in bed. Cruel like Roderik, or more like the young men she'd had in her bed before the Collapse?

Nikki could imagine unleashing the golden fall of his hair, then tying him down to the bed, using the his own hair ribbons. Then she'd play wicked games with his helpless body. Games that would have him begging for more. She'd tease him with a tuft of feathers, trailing them down his muscular torso. Then she'd play with his nipples, licking and nipping until he growled in frustration. His cock would be her toy to suck and fondle until she chose the moment and straddled his hips and rode him to their mutual completion.

Would he be willing to play such games?

A silent sigh drifted free of her parted lips. She'd probably never know. He was so aloof, so cold and unresponsive to most of their friendly overtures.

She crept away as silently as she could, going farther upstream for the water where he wouldn't see her. Where he wouldn't know she'd seen him.

\* \* \*

Washed and relaxed from his time in the creek, Bells put on his last change of clean clothes from his duffel. He washed out the shirt and jeans he'd been wearing, with as little of the soap as he could use. Done, he carried them up the bank to hang them over the line behind the farmhouse. It was a cool night with low humidity, so they'd be dry in a few hours.

He had to pass the grave on the way back, and that put a damper on the slightly better frame of mind his time alone in the creek had created.

Well, almost alone, anyway. He wondered why the woman had stood there, watching him. Spying on him while he bathed. What did these people want from him anyway? What did they expect? Why wouldn't they even leave him to a moment of privacy for a bath?

It irked him.

He'd also been aware of her eyes the whole time and found himself getting slightly aroused at the thought of her dark eyes sliding over his body. A feeling he'd crushed mercilessly. He'd help them, but there weren't going to be any entanglements with them. Especially not sexual ones.

Shaking off the mood, he went into the garage and checked the car. Dal had found the keys hanging by the door and they were now the ignition of the car, just where Dal had said he'd leave them. Bells was going to see if he could get the car started.

He slipped in behind the seat and caught a view of himself

in the mirror. Blue eyes stared back at him from an unlined and youthful face. A finger touched his cheek. Hadn't he been older before?

Yeah. Before. Different place. Different time. Different fucking reality.

Shaking himself, silver bells ringing, he sighed, deciding he was too tired to dredge through the murk of his lost memories. It would come back, or not.

One turn of the key gave him the answer he'd expected. The battery was dead. He tried the headlights and not even a dim glow resulted. Left dead so long, the battery probably wouldn't hold a charge, but he'd give it a try in the morning.

He was still sitting there, considering what their options might be, when Anya found him.

"We've got supper ready if you want to eat."

He did, but not in that house. "Put it on the porch."

"Sure." But she didn't leave. "About earlier..."

"Forget it."

"Really, I am sorry."

Bells looked at her. "Okay." He knew he was being insufferable, but he didn't want to talk. Not now. Not to Anya. He didn't want her to start crying because he knew he couldn't stand seeing a woman cry. Young or old didn't matter, it scorched his heart to hear a woman crying. Yet another random bit of self-knowledge from the void that existed where memories should be, but weren't.

Frowning, Anya shook her head and walked away.

A frown he could handle. It didn't threaten the way tears did. Tears made you do things you regretted later. Or made you say things you wished had stayed behind your teeth, locked in your head where no one could hear what a fool you were.

He got out of the car and started searching for anything he

might be able to use against a future breakdown of the truck. If Hawk and Dal ever came back from their game of snipe hunt with the King's Rangers.

There were jumper cables in the trunk of the car. A few roadside flares, a jack, and a first aid kit with unexpired antibiotic cream and bandaids. He could put the jumper cables to use tomorrow. Maybe the battery would hold a charge long enough for them to get where they were going, some place called Horton. He snorted. That he could remember the same way he remembered everything that had happened since he'd opened his eyes to the sight of the Milky Way spilled across the sky. But where he'd been, what he'd been doing before then...that was a total blank.

Considering a few of things that did float up out of that unremembered past, perhaps it was a mercy he didn't recall more.

He scraped out cobwebs and dust from a milk crate, put the stuff he'd found in it, and started gathering up a few tools. A fairly new set of screwdrivers, a metric socket set and a moldy rubber mallet.

Done, he headed toward the house.

As he'd asked, his dinner was sitting on the porch.

So was Nikki. Pretty Nikki with her soulful dark eyes and soft chestnut hair. She smelled of sunshine, faint traces of some floral scent, the soft musky perfume that was purely female.

"I stayed out here to keep the flies away," she told him with a little smile. There was a sparkle in her eyes, and for no apparent reason he could figure out she blushed a bit and turned her attention to a fly that was trying to land on his plate. She didn't seem the shy type.

But the trace of color burning on her cheeks was alluring. His heart stepped up its pace, and something south of his belt

buckle gave a twitch of awareness.

*Not happening*, he told himself. *Not here, not now, and sure as hell not with her.*

"Thanks." Bells picked up the plate and started eating, trying to distract himself from where his thoughts were slowly attempting to lead him.

*We are not taking that road, Billy-boy. Not a fucking chance.*

The food wasn't very hot, but he didn't really care. He'd eaten worse. Hadn't he? Yes, he was pretty sure he had.

"Hawk wants to stay here tonight."

He nodded.

"You going to sleep in the house?"

"No."

"I'll find you a blanket and pillow."

"Thanks, but no." He didn't want to sleep with anything from the people they'd just buried. Why he couldn't have said, but the thought was repugnant. Disturbing. Almost a desecration in his mind.

"I'll get them from the truck."

His gaze went to her face, "All right then."

He ate while she rummaged in the back of the truck, pulling out the same blanket he'd used the night before, dragging a pillow out of a plastic trash bag. He found himself wondering what dead family those things had come from and had to force the thought aside.

"We got these from a looted store. I...thought you'd want to know."

He met her richly brown eyes, nodded. "Thanks."

\* \* \*

Nikki sat down on the porch near the blond. The way he acted regarding the house, and everything connected to the dead

family other than the food, was really odd. Sure it bothered her, but it was a fact of their existence, and she'd gotten practical about things since the Collapse. They were dead, and she liked to think that John and Carrie would have offered them help if they'd been alive the same way she and the rest of them tried to help other survivors, whenever and however they could.

The same way they'd helped Bells.

"If you're still hungry when that's gone there's some left."

"I'm good," he told her as he swallowed another mouthful.

She knew he didn't want her there, it was plain from the way he sat, turned partly away, staring out into the growing darkness.

From the barn Chet gave one of his war whoops. "There's a generator out here! We can watch a DVD!"

Nikki groaned audibly.

The intensely blue eyes turned to regard her without any trace of emotion as Bells said, "Don't be too upset with him. He just misses how it was. If he can watch a DVD he can pretend everything's the way it used to be for a couple of hours. Some people just need a taste of the past so they can keep dealing with the present and not go crazy."

The woman was struck dumb by the quietly spoken revelation.

He got up out of the chair, taking his empty plate.

"Let me. Anya boiled some water and put dish soap in it, but it's in the kitchen." She took the plate from him and he didn't resist her efforts. She didn't know why he wouldn't go into the house, but she wasn't going to make him do it either.

From inside they could hear Hawk talking to Dal about the things they should try and find. Guns, ammunition, any and all food and useful things they could trade. Clothes, shoes...even the toys the children had in their room.

"We're vultures living off the corpse of civilization," the blond murmured. "We can't help ourselves, but that's all we are. We don't build. We don't try and stop the downward spiral. We just exist from day to day." There was a faint self-depreciating smile on his lips, but the eyes were cold as glacial ice. "I'm tired of being a vulture."

Before Nikki could say anything he stepped off the porch, leaving the woman to stare after him in stunned silence.

## *Chapter Five*

They hooked up the generator and watched two movies, neither of them familiar to Bells. He'd heard Nikki's laughter, the sound bright as crystal in his ears. It had strangely awakened something in him, a desire to hear her crying out as he moved inside her.

It was a desire he squelched and firmly shoved aside even as he wondered why he was thinking about her so much. He was also wondering why fucking her would be a bad idea. But the mess that was his mind supplied several answers.

Vague memories of Kimiko floated up from the mists and he understood.

Their eyes were alike. Sable brown. Warm. Expressive.

He shook himself and tried not to think about it anymore, but it wasn't easy. She laughed a lot as they watched the DVD, and he even heard some quiet giggles from Anya. But Anya's laughter didn't spark the same heat in his groin as Nikki's did. Hearing them both happy after the tensions of the past day did make him smile slightly into the darkness.

He loved to hear women laughing. If they were laughing and smiling, all was right with his world.

Screams and tears. Fear. Sadness. Those emotions set him off, brought the Dragon out, and that was something he tried to prevent unless it was absolutely necessary. Once free the Warrior's Fire, the passion within his soul, was difficult to put back under wraps. Like the proverbial genie in the bottle, it was

easier to get it out than it was to cage it afterward.

And for some reason that wouldn't rise up out of the mists of his lost memory, he knew he had to keep the Dragon chained. It was yet another one of those irksome things. Knowing something had to be a certain way, but not knowing the *why* behind that knowledge.

As the first movie ended the women broke into loud peals of laughter that put a broad, pleased smile on his face and let him relax a little more. Chet's deep roar of amusement, Dal's rolling laughter, even Hawk's chuckling all added together, soothing some of the wariness that seemed a permanent fixture of his body. Always on the alert for danger, it was just another facet of his past with no explanation.

He pulled the blanket Nikki'd gotten for him tighter around his lean frame and jammed his head back into the pillow, shifting a little to get more comfortable. He frowned at the bite of something hard behind his skull and rose up enough to flip all his braids over the pillow. A smile twitched his mouth as he heard the soft chiming.

*Sleep*, he told himself.

And that was exactly what he did.

\* \* \*

Nikki peered out of the window.

The house was dark, the second movie at an end. Chet was quietly snoring on the couch, Anya was sprawled out on the floor in front of the TV where she'd fallen asleep. Dal was sleeping in a recliner, one arm thrown over his head, a half smile on his lips.

She could still smell popcorn they'd made in the microwave, running it from the generator along with the TV and DVD player. It had been surreal, the near normality of the situation. Of the popcorn and camaraderie, the easy laughter

they had shared.

But it hadn't felt complete. Not with Bells out on the porch alone.

She sighed, wondering curiously if Hawk was right and they just needed to give the blond a bit of time to get accustomed to them. She certainly hoped so, because she found herself liking the quiet man more with each contact she had with him.

Chet's louder snore brought her out of her reverie and sent her gaze to the stairs, making her wonder if she shouldn't be watching from a room up there. But Hawk was upstairs sleeping in the master bedroom. No one had died there so he hadn't had any reservations about using the big bed. He'd even encouraged her to join him if she wanted to, making an open-ended invitation that she could take however she wanted.

But it was a quiet blond loner she really wanted to curl up beside. She couldn't have said why his presence out on the porch made her feel even safer than she'd ever felt with the Fenyx and Tiger as her protectors, but it did.

Perhaps it was the aura of power that surrounded him like an intangible cloud.

She had searched the chairs on the porch and not seen Bells, so she started scanning along the porch. He was asleep not far from the front door, wrapped in the blanket, moonlight falling across him. Asleep he looked even younger, hardly more than a boy. But she knew better. There was something about him, an indefinable quality she couldn't name that told her, for all his too youthful looks, he was even older than Hawk.

A lot older.

"He's beautiful, isn't he?"

Nikki gave a squeak of startlement at the soft whisper from Anya.

"You noticed too, huh?"

Anya nodded. "I don't think he likes me, not after how I treated him."

Nikki gripped the other woman's arm. "Remember what Hawk said, he just needs time. He's not all that friendly with any of us."

"He likes you, Nikki."

The woman's eyes widened, "Now why would you say that?"

"I've seen him watching you. And he actually talks to you. He hasn't said much of anything to Chet or Dal, and hardly anything to me."

"I didn't notice," she admitted.

Anya looked out the window, "I wonder if all the Immortals are handsome. Hawk is, and Roderik would be if you couldn't see the hate in his eyes."

"I don't know. But even Dal's better looking than most guys."

Anya smiled, "Yeah, he is."

"He likes you, Anya."

"I know."

Nikki smiled. "You going to ask him to marry you when we get to Horton?"

Now it was Anya's turn to look startled. "No. Well..." Her gaze dropped as she thought about what Nikki had said. "It's crossed my mind, but, I'm not sure it's a good idea. Not with me already baking a bun here in the oven." She rubbed her hand over her belly and smiled, her face going soft, warm with the full realization she was going to be a mother. It made Nikki smile, too.

"You be my bridesmaid?"

"Sure!" Nikki replied, giving the auburn haired woman a

hug.

"I mean, if he says yes."

"If you two are going to talk about me you might want to do it in another room. Man needs his rest," Dal mumbled.

Anya's face went beet red. "How much of that did you hear?"

There was a soft chuckle. "I'll let you know when we get to Horton."

"Oh, God..." Anya groaned.

"You sure got pretty tits," Chet said.

Both of the women giggled, Dal snorted.

"Talking in his sleep again," the man remarked. "We better all go back to sleep before we wake the Chet-dog. We start it barking and Hawk's going to skin us all alive."

"Well at least he doesn't pee on the carpet, but Dal's got a point," Anya agreed as she gave Nikki a quick hug. "I don't want to wake Chet up because that will be the end of any sleep for the rest of the night. You know he'll want to watch another DVD."

"Very true," Nikki replied.

Anya returned to where she'd been sleeping.

"Night, guys," Nikki said. "I'm still on watch."

"Yeah," Anya replied, grinning. "And I know exactly what you're watching, too."

The other two quieted down, falling back to sleep.

Cradling the shotgun in her arms, Nikki went out the back door, a flashlight they'd found gripped in her hand. It worked but the light was dim. Between it and the nearly full moon she had enough light for a little stroll out back so she could pee. They'd found some beer in the house and they'd all had a share of the three six-packs.

Well, all of them but Bells. He'd politely declined.

She tramped out into the screen of the trees, just in case

Chet was faking it. He'd spied on both her and Anya, just wanting to catch a glimpse of their 'girl parts' as he said.

\* \* \*

Icy fingers danced down his spine and he snapped awake, searching the area. There was no visible movement, but he knew they were out there. Anyone within sight of Bells might have seen his blue eyes shifting toward grey as he scanned the darkness

He rolled to his feet, the gunbelt that had been on the porch beside him back around his hips, fingers tying the cord around his thigh as he shoved open the door of the house.

"Wake up, we've got company coming."

The lingering miasma of emotion in the house threatened to choke him. The fear of the dark as it closed in on a pair of young girls. A father's helpless rage at God for taking his daughters, a mother's bitter tears, both of them knowing they were also dying, following their precious babies into the embrace of death.

He crushed the flow of emotions, letting the burning ice in his veins override it, using the danger of the moment to help him cope with the lingering ghosts.

"Wake up!" he repeated more urgently, feeling the chill searing through his nerves, galvanizing him as the power of his Warrior's Fire rose to bonfire heat.

Hawk came barreling down the stairs, his shotgun gripped in his hands, face a mask of calm.

Anya was on her feet quickly, her shoulder holster sliding onto her body. "Where's Nikki?"

Dal rolled up out of the recliner and pulled on his gunbelt.

Chet, rubbing sleep from his eyes, stood up. "What's going on?"

The silence was shattered by a roar of gunfire. Chet was knocked sprawling by the smaller man as the windows behind

them erupted into shards of glass.

"I'll find her, deal with our guests!" Bells ordered as he bolted for the back door, bits of glass falling out of his hair and off his jacket as he ran. His cheek was sliced, he didn't feel it. He was in combat mode, nerves and muscles attuned to battle, unaware of minor injuries.

And any wound that didn't trigger what resided at the core of his soul was minor.

He didn't bother with the three steps down from the kitchen porch, hitting the ground at a flat out run, tatters of blue mist sliding from him as he accelerated. In his heightened state, with the Dragon straining at the bonds of its chains, he caught the faint sound of her running through the woods toward the house. He saw her as she reached the edge of the forest and Bells skidded to a stop, both arms around her as he slid, pulling her down to the ground back into the trees.

"We're under attack. I want you to stay right here and don't make any noise.," he whispered.

"What about the others!"

"I'm going back to help them. But I want you to stay right here. I mean it!"

\* \* \*

Nikki glared at him. He had a lot of gall telling her what to do when it was her family in danger. "I'm perfectly capable of defending myself," she hissed.

It was as if she hadn't spoken. He pushed her down flat in the leaves.. "Stay here!" he ordered, pressing her shoulder to emphasize his point.

He was gone in a flash, staying low, running and keeping to the cover of the trees, heading back toward the house. And he was moving faster than either Dal or even Hawk could manage, and without any trace of the Immortal form they believed him to

have.

"*Men*," she muttered angrily and started crawling toward the farmhouse. Her friends were in trouble and they'd need her help.

Screams of pain ripped through the darkness from somewhere at the front of the building. She didn't know the voice, but the following roar of rage she knew.

Dal. He'd unleashed the Tiger at the heart of his soul. Nikki hurried toward the house. If Dal was being the Tiger they were in serious trouble.

There was another burst of gunfire, followed by three sharp reports. A revolver, and she knew it was Bells and his antique handgun.

She left the tree cover at a run, heading for the back of the farmhouse, pressing herself tightly to the wall she peered inside.

The room was empty.

Jamming her pistol back into the holster at her side, she caught hold of the glassless window frame and hauled herself into the house, pausing to listen for any noise once she was inside. There were the sounds of a desperate scuffle somewhere beyond the closed door on the other side of the room and she hurried over to push it open.

Anya was fighting with one of the filthy beasts who'd attacked them. There was no sign of the men.

*Typical*, Nikki told herself silently as she hurried to her friend's assistance.

The man wasn't a Ranger—thank God—but he was a big , and he had Anya's wrists gripped tightly in his fists, keeping the small woman from stabbing him with the Bowie knife in her right hand. Snarling, Anya kned him in the groin and his grip loosened enough for her to pull away.

Taking that as her cue, Nikki shot him at point-blank range.

"Come on, we need to help the guys!" Anya said, turning to run down the hall toward the front of the house, pausing only long enough to grab her pistol from the floor.

"No!" Nikki grabbed her arm, "We go out the back. Into the woods. You can't risk the baby!"

"Nikki, they killed Chet. We've got to get some payback for that!"

"You're sure he's dead? Where is he?"

"The living room."

Nikki didn't wait, she shoved past Anya and ran, coming to an abrupt stop when she saw Chet. His eyes were open, staring, glassy. She couldn't help him, he was already gone, killed by a five round burst of gunfire.

Nikki bit her lip against the tears that tried to form. Chet had been an idiot. But he'd been their lovable idiot. And this was no time to mourn him. Later she could cry. Not now.

Anya ran past her to look out one of the shattered windows. They could hear gunshots, but they were growing more distant. The men leading their attackers away, drawing fire so the girls could escape.

"Let's get out of here," Nikki said to Anya.

There was a hammering exchange of gunfire, assault rifles, and the boom of shotguns, the sharper report of a revolver.

"Hawk and Bells can't be killed, right?" Anya asked.

"No."

"Dal?"

"He's tough and he's fast."

Anya nodded, looking close to tears. "He told me he loves me," she said quietly, her tone sweetly bitter. "I don't want to leave them, Nikki. Let's just wait here."

Nikki gazed out into the darkness. Across the yard somewhere in the trees, the men were fighting a group that

vastly outnumbered them if the exchanges of gunfire were any indication. Even from here she could see muzzle flashes in the darkness.

"Maybe if we get into the truck and make a run for it, we can pick up the guys," she suggested.

Anya shook her head "That old truck won't outrun those Hummers they're driving."

Nikki frowned, then a wicked glitter entered her eyes. "Those are civilian Hummers. I think I can drive one of them. Doctor Keller had a Hummer and he taught me drive it the weekend we went to Daytona Beach."

"We'll need food, though," Anya said. She turned to go back into the kitchen for one of the crates, the front door banging shut behind them both, Nikki hurrying in Anya's wake.

Nikki heard Anya's gasp of surprise as she entered the kitchen, and her hand dropped for the pistol at her side.

Rangers! Nikki's mind supplied as she saw the men.

The gunshot was almost as loud as Anya's scream.

\* \* \*

Bells was pinned down behind the cover of a large boulder. His right leg was bloody, a bullet in his thigh making the leg ache and twitch in spasms as his body reacted to the intrusion of an object in his flesh.

He didn't have the luxury of time to dig it out. The two other men were out there somewhere, probably in as bad, if not a worse situation than he was in at the moment.

If Nikki had just stayed where he left her, she might escape the notice of the men searching for them. They'd carefully led the hunt away from the house, taking the vicious killers on a run into the nighted forest. The three of them could see.

The men were hampered by the need to move slowly and use vision enhancing gear.

There were five of them searching for where he'd gone to ground. Three had night vision goggles, which almost gave them a level playing field with the Immortal.

Almost.

Bells saw the beam of a flashlight in the dark. A feral smile curled his lips. He heard someone order one of the idiots without the night vision goggles to shut it off.

Too late.

He raised the .357 and popped off a casual shot into the dark.

There was the satisfying sound of a scream, followed by a thud and some rather creative cursing.

Now that they had something else to think about, he scrambled back from cover, got to his feet, and ran.

It was too dark beneath the trees for the men to see him.

But he could see them just fine.

Jumping, he caught the bottom branch of a tree and scrambled up, running out along the branch with the same ease a squirrel would have shown, making only a bit more noise than the rodent would have. At the limit of the area that would bear his weight he made the leap, taking him to the next tree. No human could have made such a jump, but the blond made it look easy as walking down a sidewalk. A second jump and he was in the tree directly above the group of men. He caught the limb with a scrape of sound, a jangle of bells, and cursed himself silently for the sloppy landing.

"What was that?" one of them asked, looking up, his night vision goggles giving him a clear image of what was above them.

There was a man in the tree.

It was the last thing he saw.

His trio of companions didn't even see that much.

Bells took off running, whipping his katana back into the scabbard so that the gleam of the blade couldn't give away his position.

A round robin of gunfire sent him veering over to his right, following the noise.

Piercing right to the center of his very soul, Bells heard a scream from back toward the house.

*Any*a, his mind identified, as he came to a skidding stop.

Dal and Hawk could take care of themselves. They had planned to be bait anyway. But there were two women he needed to save. And an inept twenty-year-old who needed his aid.

Bells turned around and ran, the fire of his Warrior's Heart finally igniting into a conflagration closer to the fires of Hell than anything natural.

\* \* \*

Nikki opened her mouth to scream, but a powerful body slammed into her, driving her into the wall. A paw gripped her wrist, immobilizing the hand holding her pistol and driving the breath out of her.

*Any*a did scream. Loud and clear as she kept kicking and trying to bite the man who'd tackled her, the auburn haired woman fighting like a wildcat for her freedom.

"You didn't get far, did you, slut?" the man in the black leather of an Imperial Ranger snarled into her face. He was huge, and Nikki recognized him, her heart sinking.

"Keane!"

"That's right, baby, did you miss my cock?" the man growled, his breath hot and stinking in her face.

"Not as much as you're going to miss your balls!" she snarled, driving her knee into his groin.

The man bellowed, letting Nikki go, staggering back. She

took two steps toward Anya, intending to help her friend, but Keane's hand shot out, grabbing her arm.

"That you pay for, bitch!"

His eyes were burning red, the berserker rage of the Grizzly that lived at the center of his soul coming alive. A hand raised, Keane ready to show the woman the error of her ways.

The front door of the house shattered inward and Nikki saw Bells come up from a combat roll, the katana in his right hand, revolver in his left, a nimbus of pallid bluish light wreathing him.

"Someone wants to die!" There was a deep growl in the blond's voice, a menacing velvet reverberation to the tones. His eyes blazed, their color nearly black, flickers of preternatural fire coming to life and whirling around him.

Keane shoved Nikki aside, and she fell onto the coffee table with a punishing impact that drove her breath away.

Coughing, gasping for air, she struggled to her feet, looking for her pistol or a weapon she could use against Anya's assailant. The pair of them were rolling around on the floor, the woman giving a good accounting of herself, but the man was overpowering her by sheer weight and strength.

Grinning fiercely, madder than a wet bobcat, Nikki picked up part of the broken coffee table and smashed it across the back of the man's skull while the battle between Bells and Keane was joined.

\* \* \*

Bells saw what Nikki had just done and shouted, "Both of you get the hell out of here!"

The women bolted for the back door.

"Fuck you!" Keane snarled, going for the smaller man.

Bells dodged the man's open handed swipe, the hazy outline of a bear's rending claws as clearly visible as the huge phantom

bear that was towering over him. He could see the nimbus of blue light that surrounded him, the Dragon coming close to the surface. It wasn't much, but it would offer him a small amount of protection from the Grizzly he faced. Much as he would have liked to set the Dragon free, even this much was risky.

Bells swept the edge of his sword for the bear-man's body, the large beast moving faster than anyone would have credited as being possible.

Roaring, Keane rushed him, taking Bells off his feet.

Bells's katana spun out of his hand as they hit the railing of the stairs and crashed though it, the blond trapped beneath the Ranger who was even bigger than Hawk and strong as the creature dwelling in the center of his soul.

A hand closed around his left wrist, the other man's fist going for his throat as they battled. Bells didn't even bother trying to keep the hand from his neck, his right hand going for the larger man's unprotected face. He slammed the base of his palm into the man's nose, snapping the bone.

Howling in rage, Keane let go of Bells' neck to slam his fist into the blond's face.

Stars danced in Bells' vision, the glimmerings of blue winking out, the Dragon retreating, sulking because he would not let it free. He could taste blood in his mouth.

It was time to pull out all the stops.

He twisted, legs kicking, a knee impacting the bigger man's stomach as he exerted strength far greater than would have been humanly possible for a man of his size. Muscle tore in his bullet pierced thigh, he didn't care. He'd heal.

A scream from outside added fuel to his anger, and he wrenched away from the Grizzly's grip, driving a knee into the Ranger's side, shattering bones. He tore his left hand free of the bear's paw and shot the man point blank.

He was running before the body hit the floor, scooping up his katana as he went, hitting the back door with such force it exploded off its hinges as matchstick sized bits.

Nikki was on the ground, her expression showing how dazed she was. Anya was battling an assailant three times her size.

The blond hit the man with every ounce of power at his disposal. There was a sharp crack as bone broke and the Ranger collapsed.

"Move!" he shouted at the women, his revolver dropping into the holster, the restraining loop sliding over the hammer. Grabbing Nikki off the ground, he pushed her toward the truck, then saw it had four flat tires. Swearing luridly he spun around, liquid ice burning down his spine as he stepped in front of Nikki. He snarled out another oath as a bullet nailed him, the armored jacket he was wearing stopping it from penetrating, spreading the impact across a broad area directly over his spine. It staggered him, but he reached for Anya, shoving her aside.

The second bullet missed her by scant inches as she fell sprawling in the dirt.

"RUN!" he barked at both women, shoving Nikki toward the tree cover before he hauled Anya bodily from the ground and pushed her after the chestnut-haired woman.

\* \* \*

Nikki didn't argue, not with her ears still ringing from the punishing backhand she'd taken across the face. She could taste blood in her mouth, and her vision was replete with bright points of light like the afterimages of a camera's flash.

But even that couldn't hide what she'd seen as Bells pushed she and Anya toward the trees. His eyes glowed like blacklight, the irises and pupils swallowed by the maelstrom of power seething through him.

Inhuman. Unearthly. And heart-wrenchingly beautiful. Her breath caught in her throat.

Anya threw an arm around Nikki. "Come on! Run!"

They bolted for the trees as a few shots rang out, the bullets screaming past them.

Neither of them glanced back to see what made the man who'd been shooting at them scream. They both knew it was Bells exacting punishment on the Ranger.

"Jesus!" Anya gasped as they reached the tree cover, stumbling in the dark. The moon was going down and they were rapidly losing the faint trace of light that had existed.

Anya tripped and they both fell, Nikki coming up hard against a tree root as they tumbled down the slope. On hands and knees the pair scrambled farther from the house, finding a shallow hollow in the slope and pressing themselves as far in as they could get.

"How did they find us?" Anya gasped, her whisper harsh as she tried to draw breath.

"I don't know. Maybe they saw the tracks the truck left in the weeds," Nikki replied, winded from her fall.

"I'm scared," Anya said, huddling deeper into the hole.

"Me, too," Nikki admitted. She turned around to peer over the rim of their hiding place, watching for any sign they'd been followed. They'd both lost their guns in the last fight, and she didn't even have a knife. Her hand scrabbled around in the dirt looking for a stone or a sturdy piece of branch, anything that might serve as a weapon.

"Do you still have your knife?"

"No. I dropped it somewhere," Anya whispered tensely. She too started searching through the leaves for something to use as a weapon.

There were more gunshots from somewhere off in the

distance. Too far away to be Bells.

A sound came to them, the man's bike at high acceleration, heading their way.

He hadn't turned on the headlight, but she could just make out the shape of the motorcycle coming toward them. An instant later the bike was in the trees, heading down the slope at a speed that was probably going to damage the machine. Street bikes weren't meant to go off road, but she didn't really think it mattered at the moment. Not while they were running for their lives.

Anya grabbed Nikki by the arm, "Is that him or someone who grabbed his bike?"

"I think it's him," Nikki replied as the bike skidded to a stop in a welter of leaves.

"Come on!" the voice was a masculine growl, hard and angry, but she could still hear the velvet underlying it, and the bells in his hair rang softly as he righted the bike.

"There's three of us. We can't all ride that thing," Anya started to argue.

Eyes that glowed like blacklight turned to regard them both. They weren't human eyes. Fear dug sharp claws into Nikki's courage and she heard Anya gasp and step back.

"Move. Now."

Hawk trusted him. That had to be enough. *But how did the Rangers find us?* her paranoia asked. Nikki grabbed Anya's arm and she dragged the other woman toward the bike. *What choice do we have? Besides, he did kill those men, so he can't be a Ranger.*

She felt Bells' hand close on her forearm. "In front of me. Anya, get on behind and hold on to me as tight as you can."

Nikki got on, and realized there was something odd about the bike the instant she touched it. There wasn't any smell of

exhaust, no heat from where the engine must be located. But this really wasn't the time to ask any questions.

She felt Anya's arms wrap around the man's waist as her hands brushed along her back.

"You've got to hold on really tight, Anya. This is going to be a rough ride."

The bike shot forward, entering the cold water of the creek, the wheels slipping on the mossy rocks as the heavy vehicle jolted along the stream bed. They came out on the opposite bank, the motorcycle climbing the steep slope, Bells guiding it between the trees, weaving along faster than Nikki thought was safe. Or sane.

"Dear God, can you even see where we're going?" she heard Anya ask. They weren't going so fast that she couldn't be heard, but the pace was frightening, especially for Nikki who had the front seat on the E-ticket ride they were taking.

"I can see, just hang on," Bells repeated.

\* \* \*

He could smell the fear pouring off both women, and the scent of blood from their injuries sent a seething rage through him that he fought to control. He couldn't let it get away from him. He had to keep a rein on the Dragon, had to fight the urge to go back and kill every last one of the men that hurt them. Not because the act of killing them would be wrong, but because he had a duty to protect the females in his care.

Hawk had wanted them to get away, and he'd promised to see that they did.

They hit the road and the bike sped up, reaching sixty miles an hour as he opened up the throttle.

Behind them headlights danced and wove as a pair of Hummers hit the pavement, the Rangers giving chase.

"They're behind us," Anya warned.

"I see them," Bells told her, giving the bike a bit more throttle. He couldn't go much faster, not because the bike couldn't handle it, but because he was afraid what would happen to them if they hit a pothole or wide crack in the road at that speed.

The women would be badly hurt, or killed, and that was an eventuality he was doing his damndest to prevent.

But they were caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. Either way it was going to be just a matter of time before the Rangers caught up to them, or they came across a bad patch of road and wrecked. He'd heard enough about washouts and cracks formed by winter weather during a brief conversation between Dal and Hawk to know that it was a real hazard.

And it didn't take them long to come across something that forced him to slow down dramatically. A three-foot-deep, ten-foot-wide cut angled across the roadway. He slowed the bike to a crawl, the vehicles following them approaching rapidly as he maneuvered the bike.

"We aren't going to escape," Anya said. "Not all three of us."

"I'll figure something out," Bells told her as he started the bike up the slope to the roadway.

He gunned it, accelerating as fast as he dared.

But the Rangers had caught up.

He could feel the cold burn of warning as it screamed along his nerves and he started weaving the bike, trying to keep them from getting a clear shot at them.

The Rangers were just too good, one of them leaned out a window, taking careful aim with a rifle.

A shot spanged off the bike in a spray of hot sparks.

"Shit!" Anya screamed in his ear. "They're going to try and kill the bike!"

"Don't worry about the bike. They don't have anything capable of really doing it any damage," he shouted to be heard over the wind as they sped along.

"By the order of his Royal Majesty Roderik, King of the Lone Star Empire I demand that you, stop!"

Bells laughed in disbelief. "They've got to be fucking kidding, right?"

"Probably not," Nikki shouted.

He shifted his weight and the bike changed direction slightly. Increasing their speed a little, he gave the little shifting of his body a second time, repeated the dodging motion, trying to keep them from hitting them again.

A second bullet smacked the motorcycle's armor and Anya screamed in alarm as a bit of hot metal burned her calf. "We're not going to get away!" she shouted.

"THAT WAS YOUR FINAL WARNING!" the voice from the leading Hummer roared out over the vehicle's PA system.

"Hang on really tight," Bells warned Anya as he twisted the throttle.

There was a sharp squeak of rubber on road and the bike leapt ahead, moving fast, dangerously so, but he didn't have much choice. He also didn't dare let the bike stay at that speed for long, not on the rough pavement. It was too risky, but it did give them more distance between the bike and the lead Ranger vehicle.

But this time instead of a single shot, the Ranger opened fire with a short burst.

Anya screamed and let go.

"ANYA!" Nikki shrieked. "We have to go back! We can't leave her!"

Bells glanced behind them. A single look was all he needed. There was no use risking capture, Anya was already dead.

Swearing, angry, he twisted the throttle. He didn't have to worry about Anya falling off anymore, and with only Nikki's added weight to worry about he could take a few more risks. The rage burning through him was making his body shake, made him want to kill.

"Oh, God," he heard Nikki over the roar of the wind. "What happened to your eyes? Why are they brighter?"

Bells said nothing. *It* wanted free, and he didn't dare risk letting *It* loose.

The motorcycle gained speed, streaking down the nighted roadway, leaving the Rangers in their heavier Hummers far behind.

## *Chapter Six*

She was crying, hanging tightly to him and sobbing, the grief overwhelming her so completely she couldn't stand, couldn't move.

Everyone was dead. Hawk, Chet, Dal, even Anya. Gone. Most of them probably dead.

Snuffed out like a lit match in a strong wind.

There were strong arms keeping her on the bike, a warm presence behind her. But he wasn't any of the people she wanted most, the people she'd lived with, laughed with and come to love over the past year. He was still a stranger. A hardened killer, not the friends she loved and who had loved her without reservation.

"Anya," she sobbed. Her friend. "She was going to marry Dal. I was going to be her bridesmaid."

She didn't even know if the man was listening to her, sitting silent as the bike roared through the night. And she couldn't stop crying. Couldn't see anything for the tears streaming down her face.

Dal was back there somewhere, maybe alive and wounded. Maybe dead or captured and worse off than dead.

Hawk was back there somewhere, too. Possibly hurt. Captured.

For him that would be worse than death. Roderik was not forgiving, and an Immortal couldn't die. But they could suffer an eternity of pain.

"Oh God...Hawk...Hawk..." she wailed out her sorrow,

crossing a surreal nightmare landscape of a world that had lost the small grain sanity she'd clung to for the last year.

\* \* \*

Nikki's sobs sent jolts of impotent rage through him, burning white hot in his chest. He gritted his teeth struggling with the urge to find somewhere to hide her and go back to serve up some well deserved justice on the bastards who'd destroyed her attempt at a life. Men who'd ruined her happiness and taken away everyone and everything that had come to matter to her.

There was an echo of pain inside his own heart. He'd made a promise to keep Anya safe, and he'd failed that miserably. Her loss hurt. He was a protector. Her guardian. The acid burn of failure etching his heart wasn't something he accepted easily. His soul burned with the anger, the Immortal creature at the core of his Warrior's Fire seethed, tearing at the chains binding it, his control growing more tenuous. He was shaking almost as violently as the woman in his arms, hurting for Nikki, angry because he'd failed to really protect anyone.

Nikki was alive, but her heart was a blasted ruin of sorrow.

Her pain ripped at his heart, tore at his soul, and the Beast raged, seeing freedom from the bindings holding it captive to his will. A will deeply shaken by the night's dire circumstances.

And that was his fault because he hadn't taken control of the situation at the outset. He'd let the others call the shots. No plan, just react and run. They'd all acted the part of fools. Him most of all.

That was not his usual standard operating procedure. He knew better.

And he realized abruptly that he did, indeed, know better. He'd led men before. Held their unwavering loyalty. Faces and names swam up out of the past, disjointed, confusing. It was the know-how that mattered. He could drive a tank, fly a chopper,

use just about any and all weapons man had ever created.

He knew how to kill.

It was love he had a problem getting a handle on.

There was a sign ahead and he slowed the bike as they reached its bullet riddled surface. He could still read what was printed on it.

*Horton: 15 miles.*

*Junction State Road 190: 5 miles.*

He didn't want to go to Horton. It was too obvious a place to go. People in Sugarsprings had known Hawk and his people were going there.

And that alone was a good enough reason *not* to head for Horton. The Rangers would be expecting it.

He sat considering their situation. They had no food, no clothing, nothing to trade, and he was out of ammunition for his .357. He'd also lost his katana during the battle at the house. More than having no bullets that fact bothered him. He hated losing the weapon because a sword made for a quieter kill, and never needed reloading.

But it wasn't time to fight right now.

It was time to go to ground somewhere. Time to hide and gather up what they required to survive.

He listened to Nikki's anguished sobs. She also needed time to heal.

Bells hated being a vulture. But he was good at it.

The bike sped off down the road taking the branching way that was State Road 190, in a bid to evade the men hunting Nikki.

Probably hunting him, too.

\* \* \*

Nikki, sunk in grief, didn't even notice that Bells had stopped the bike until his warmth disappeared. But it wasn't

gone for long. She felt him pick her up as easily as she could have lifted a child, carrying her inside a building she was only aware of in the vaguest sense. Her eyes were swollen from crying, and she desperately wanted a tissue to relieve her clogged nose.

Bleary eyed, she looked around, realizing they were inside a store. Glass crunched under the thick, soled boots he wore.

"Where are we?"

"A department store. I don't know the name of the town."

His voice was velvety, the hardness gone now that he wasn't fighting to save her life. Black as pitch and he was carrying her through the dark, fear nagging at her mind. If they were attacked here she wouldn't even be able to see their attackers.

"It's okay, don't be scared," he murmured, his arms drawing her closer. "I've got you. I won't ever let anyone hurt you, Nikki. I swear."

There was a harder note in his voice, one that promised violence and fast death to anyone who tried to hurt her. "I fucked up. I didn't save Anya. But I won't fuck up with you. You've got my word on that."

At the mention of her friend's name tears started falling from her sore eyes, and she just couldn't stop them. "I'm sorry," she sobbed, pressing her face to his leather clad shoulder.

"For what, Nikki?" he asked her softly.

"Crying..."

"Cry if you want," he told her gently.

He was climbing now, going up stairs, not even winded though she wasn't a small girl and had developed a good deal more muscle than she'd carried before the world went to hell.

It was so dark in the store, she couldn't see a thing until he looked down at her. His eyes were visible, faintly glowing, deeply blue.

She felt him kick something with his foot, then he was putting her down into a chair of some kind. "Can you stand being alone for a few minutes? I'm going to try and find some candles or flashlights and batteries."

"Alone?" She almost squeaked, gripped by sudden unreasoning terror.

"Never mind." Arms picked her up and moved her to a different place and she realized with a shock she was on a bed. He'd said they were in a department store. Maybe they were in the furniture department.

She steeled her resolve. "Go on, I'll be okay here. Find some candles and stuff."

"You sure?" A gentle hand touched her cheek, his thumb tracing the shape of her bottom lip in a tender caress.

Where had the icy killer gone? Was she asleep and dreaming?

No. Anya, Chet, and Dal *were* dead. And Hawk...Hawk was probably a captive of the Rangers.

"Just don't be gone long, okay?"

"Sure, Nikki."

She heard him walk away, as a faint whisper of sound, the ting of a bell, that faded in the darkness.

Alone, she wrapped her arms around herself and started to sob. She just couldn't stop crying.

\* \* \*

Moving through the stygian gloom of the store, Bells searched for what he needed. Candles, matches, a flashlight, tissues, or something else Nikki could use amid the wreckage that the looters had left behind. Light was comforting, reassuring. It held the horrors of the dark at bay and had since the days when humans had huddled in chilly caves with only the power of firelight to keep the monsters conjured by their minds

away.

Bells didn't fear the monsters that lurked beyond the firelight because he knew he was one of them.

No, the only thing that scared him was his increasing desire to protect Nikki. A desire that came with the annoying side effect of growing sexual need. He wanted her, and not just because of her tears. It was the depths of her eyes, the light of her gentle soul shining in them. The whole way up the frozen escalator he'd been hard as steel, and glad as hell it was too dark for her to see. The last thing she'd be in the mood for were any sexual gymnastics. She'd just lost everyone she held dear, everyone she loved, and he had no right to foist his own emotional melodramatic baggage on her.

He couldn't ignore what he felt for her. Not anymore. But he could put it under wraps and lock it down the way he did everything else that bothered him.

Finding a display of candles and incense that was virtually untouched by the looters, he scooped up several of the largest multi-wick candles, grabbed a box of matches from the shelf above them, and hurried back to where he'd left Nikki, stopping only to grab a pile of linen napkins in lieu of tissues.

"Is that you, Bells?"

"Yeah," he affirmed, ripping open the package of matches, stripping off the plastic film from two of the candles. The scent of vanilla filled the still air. He struck the match, seeing her flushed and tear-stained face, her disheveled hair, and a ugly bruise that discolored her cheek. There was dried blood on her lower lip, the flesh swollen, sore.

Hurt, scared, emotional wreckage. His heart ached for her, his body warmed with anger. He gritted his teeth, focusing on the simple act of setting match to wick, giving her light to drive away the horrors that lived in the dark. He put one candle on the

top of a display table and sat holding the other one so she could see him clearly.

"Thanks," she said, hiccuping in the middle of the word.

He passed her the pile of napkins. "I couldn't find any tissues. Will these do?"

Nikki nodded and took one, blowing her nose.

"Will you be okay if I leave you for a little while again? I'm going to try and find some food and clean clothes for you."

He watched her nod.

Leaning in closer, he met her sable gaze. "You sure?"

Tears spilled free.

He couldn't take it.

Putting the candle on the floor, Bells sat down on the display bed and pulled her into his arms.

\* \* \*

Her little show of courage died and Nikki started sobbing, her arms twining around his neck, face pressed to his shoulder.

It hurt. It hurt like knowing she hadn't been there for her parents. Hurt like watching so many people die. And the pain worse than anything she'd ever felt before because they'd been her family, not by blood, but by choice. Their friendships, and love—yes, love—forged in the fires of the post Apocalypse hell they were condemned to live within were more strongly bonded together than anything she'd ever known.

She couldn't help but cry.

Couldn't do anything but throw her arms around his neck and hold tightly to the last small bit of comfort left in a world of madness, hatred, and instant death.

Happiness was so fleeting. Just a few hours ago they'd been together watching a stupid movie, drinking beer, laughing, throwing popcorn at Chet.

Anya had asked her to be a bridesmaid. Now Anya was

dead.

She sobbed harder.

There'd been no time to say goodbye, no time for anything but the sudden cold brutality of senseless death.

Her face pressed to the blond's shoulder, she became aware of his warmth. His strength. Nikki comprehended with the stunning clarity of a revelation that she actually felt safe in the circle of his arms. Safe in a way that even Hawk's reassuring presence had never evoked.

But it was all a foolish dream, an illusion left from a better age, a better time. There *was* no safety.

In the end Hawk hadn't kept them safe, even with Dal's help. The Rangers had caught up with them and that was the end of it. Even Bells himself hadn't kept them from dying. But he'd surely tried.

Hawk was a good, strong, and capable man. Immortal. Good with a gun. But he hadn't carried himself with the same cool confidence Bells showed under fire.

Hawk had been in the Second World Conflict when he'd been a young man.

But he hadn't really been a warrior.

And that, Nikki realized, was exactly what Bells was: a warrior. Not simply a killer. No. Roderik was that. A murderer and master of rapine. Bells was a soldier, a fighter, and whatever else he might be, she knew in her heart that he would do whatever was necessary in order to protect her. He'd sworn he would do it, and she believed him, but she wasn't going to be a passenger in her life either. Whatever it took, she wanted to help him keep herself out of Roderik's hands.

She'd find a way to make Roderik pay for what he'd done to her, Anya, and her friends. Dragon or not. Immortal or not. Roderik had to die. He had to.

Because if he didn't he'd wind up ruling what remained of the United States, and that would be a real taste of the Apocalypse.

It had been something they'd talked about, her and Hawk, Dal and Anya. Finding a way to bring down Roderik's little Kingdom of Hell. And now they were dead, and any hope they had of Hawk and Bells managing to kill Roderik were gone.

As dead and gone as Chet and Anya.

The question of what had happened to Hawk and Dal ate at her and she cried harder. At least Chet and Anya were beyond Roderik's grasp. But Dal? Hawk? What had happened to them?

She might never know, and that was even worse than knowing the other two were dead because she'd always wonder what had happened. And she'd never know.

Her sobs renewed, but the power was leeching from them. Her eyes and head ached, and she weary from grief. But the tears wouldn't stop. They just wouldn't stop.

\* \* \*

Bells cradled her close, stroking her hair, rocking her gently as she wept, letting her cry out her pain. Willing to hold her all night if that was what it took to give her comfort, he listened to her sobs and wanted to kill the men who'd done this to her with a fury bordering on madness. A rage he had to keep in check because he didn't dare leave her to exact vengeance.

There was a flare of heat, a Beast seeking to win free of the restraints that held it in check. Awareness of her burned through his body, warming his blood. He clamped a lid on the reaction, but her softness against his chest, the tight clasp of her arms around his neck, the proximity of her sweetly rounded behind in his lap was almost more than he could stand.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd had sex, much less the last time he'd made love. But then, what *could* he remember?

Roughly thirty-six hours out of exactly how many years of life? Hell, he didn't even know how old he was. For Immortals, even mirrors lied.

"They're dead..." she sobbed out. "Anya...Chet...Dal."

He looked down at her tear streaked face, "I'm sorry. I really am, Nikki."

"And Hawk. What happened to Hawk?"

"I don't know. He probably got away. I didn't see him, and if they'd captured him we would have heard them celebrating." He tried to reassure her on at least that, but personally he didn't know if Hawk had escaped or not. He'd been too busy keeping Nikki and Anya alive in the hail of lead.

In the end he'd failed Anya. That hurt, too. A woman and her unborn child dead because he'd failed. He tightened his arms around Nikki, pressed his cheek to her hair. Only one saved. One precious life out of the four he'd accepted responsibility to protect. Chet he mourned, but Anya and her unborn child...losing them was a dark stain almost worse than any other sin he'd ever committed. And he'd committed so damned many.

He'd put Nikki on the front of the bike, not Anya. He'd put the other woman and himself between her, and there was some undeniable instinct telling him that, despite Anya's condition, Nikki was the one who came first. The one he *had* to protect no matter what. The knowledge chilled him, and sent a whip of flame through his blood.

"Oh, God....they're gone...gone..."

She was sobbing again, and he caressed her face, touching the tears, brushing them away. "Shhhhh.." he murmured. "You couldn't have saved them." But a little voice in his own head told him if he'd protected them the way Hawk had wanted, if he'd taken charge of the situation, Anya and Chet might still be alive, too. Without a vehicle they wouldn't have all escaped, and there

was no way in hell that truck could have gone fast enough to outrun the military vehicles. Not burning oil the way it did.

"I know...but I miss them so much already." She was shaking, her tears falling onto his chest.

"Nikki," he wanted to take her pain away. Wanted to make the hurt stop.

And he couldn't.

"Oh, Bells, they're gone, they're gone! And Roderik isn't going to stop chasing me. Not ever!"

Pulling her tighter into his embrace, he kissed the top of her head, the soft fragrance of her hair adding more heat to the molten lava already churning inside him. The buttons on his jeans were getting remarkably uncomfortable.

"What will we do now? Where will we go?" She was still crying, clinging to him as if he was important to her, as if she wanted him and not the friends she'd just lost.

"Not Horton. That's what the Rangers expected. At least that would be my guess since it was the nearest town. I took a different road. We're heading north now, not west." He could hear the roughness of passion in his voice. He swallowed, hoping she'd missed it.

"But what about the Rangers?"

"They'll be more interested in chasing Hawk, and Dal," he tried to sound reassuring, but wasn't sure how successful he was. He was at a loss for something to say, so he kept quiet.

"Dal? Do you think he's alive?"

"He might very well be, Nikki. Tigers are resilient, one of the toughest non-Immortals around."

"Keane was tough and you took him down," she remarked.

"Grizzlies aren't all that tough if you know their weaknesses," he murmured, as he stroked her back, too aware of her body, too aware of her behind in his lap. And certainly too

damned aware of how tight and painful his jeans had gotten.

"We'd been doing good, staying ahead of them. What went wrong? How could it have all gone so wrong?"

"I don't know, Nikki. Maybe if the truck hadn't broken down, or if Chet hadn't found the house...Or if a million other things had or hadn't happened, it might be different. Who knows? I don't. I never have understood why one person lives and another one dies." Bells was speaking softly, whispering in her ear as he caressed her back, feeling the tension of emotional exhaustion that was making her shudder uncontrollably.

"I'd be dead if you hadn't gotten there when you did." She held him tighter and he felt something south of his navel tighten even more, the ache already passed the point of pain. That would teach him to wear button fly jeans.

\* \* \*

Abruptly she pulled away, "Oh, God. How bad are you hurt?" she asked, the sudden memory he'd been shot in the back rising up to show her how unutterably selfish she'd been.

Her hands fumbled with the buckles that held his jacket closed.

"I'm fine, just bruised. The jacket's bullet proof."

She'd gotten one buckle open, "I want to make sure."

She slipped out of his lap, helping him to get the jacket off. She pulled up his shirt and stared.

His back a mass of bruising, not just from the bullet she knew about, but from other things as well. "Bells, I'm so sorry. You've got to be in pain. Maybe there's some aspirin or acetaminophen here somewhere."

A warm hand closed gently around her wrist as she stood up, her eyes searching the darkness beyond their small pool of light.

"It's all right, Nikki. Really. I'm already healing."

She regarded him skeptically. "I just don't believe you aren't in pain."

There was drying blood on his thigh. She'd been sitting on that leg.

"I've been so selfish," she murmured as she touched the bullet hole in his jeans, and noticed something else. A hard bulge in his jeans that his jacket had hidden before.

"Don't worry about it, Nikki. That and the bruises will be gone by morning." His voice was reassuring, gentle and she lifted her gaze away from his evident arousal to find herself staring into brilliant cerulean eyes that caught the candlelight and seemed to glow.

Were glowing. She glanced away and found her eyes back on the hard line of his erection. She swallowed.

"I just want to help," she murmured. Tears flooded her eyes again as she realized how much he was probably hurting, and he'd been taking care of her without a single complaint. Like Hawk or Dal would have done, minus the rampant evidence he wanted more from her than just a few aspirins and an admonishment to rest.

"Come here," there was a distinctive growl in his tone as he pulled her gently into his lap and set his lips to hers in a kiss that scorched her to the bottom of her soul. It was a hungry, demanding, possessive kiss, and her body reacted strongly to his passion, nipples tightening while her mind reacted with panic. Roderik's brutal abuse was warring with her desire for the blond.

When he broke the kiss, Bells was breathing raggedly, eyes blazing, the irises very evidently glowing in the candlelight.

"I shouldn't have done that," he told her quietly as he turned his head away, the bells at the ends of his braids chiming sweetly.

Nikki stared at him, her heart pounding. Did she dare?

Could she do it? Steeling her nerve, she said, "No. You shouldn't have." Grabbing a handful of his braids, she set her mouth to his, giving back as good as she'd gotten. Her lips parted, her tongue sliding along the seam of his lips which opened, giving her entrance. Bells was letting her be the aggressor, their tongues writhing in a seductive dance.

He pulled away, eyes alight. "Too many clothes," he said as he stripped off his shirt and tossed it aside. Before she could reciprocate he grabbed the bottom of her blouse and pulled it gently off over her head, his hands reaching behind her to free her breasts from the bra she was wearing.

Nikki gasped as his mouth closed over a peaked nipple, his tongue sweeping across the sensitive flesh while his hands sought the button and zipper of her jeans.

Part of her mind was sounding an alarm, whimpering in fear over what they were going to do. Roderik had been brutal, rough, his brand of sex more like the rutting of a beast than the act of a human being. And always he'd restrained her, held her helpless to his will. She was a thing to sate his appetite, not a person.

But Bells wasn't nearly as physically menacing as Roderik, who towered over her the same way Hawk did. No, the slim blond was only an inch taller at most, and he didn't have the unbelievably powerful musculature of the other man. He was fit and lean, a graceful athlete built for speed. Next to him, Roderik's bulky weightlifter's physique would look clumsy and ill-formed. He wasn't a tall man, but he was perfect in form, and far more beautiful than any man, Immortal or otherwise, had a right to be.

She kissed him, gripping his hair at the nape of his neck, seeing how long he'd let her have the dominant role.

\* \* \*

His mind was telling him he shouldn't be doing what he was doing, but his body wanted more, and so did the powerful creature at the center of his being. The taste of her skin, the scent of her body inflamed him. He wanted to back away, leave the room, douse himself in a pool of ice water. He wanted to claim her, make the woman his as the Beast strained at the chains he'd bound it with. His mental control was battling the power of his own soul and part of him had to lose—either his mind, which was crying out against his desire, or the creature's passion. Both sides couldn't win.

Her mouth on his was hot and sweet. The salt of her tears added a poignancy to their kiss. It wasn't really him she wanted. It was the solace of pleasure, of human contact, and the closeness of warm skin on skin.

He couldn't deny her that comfort. Wouldn't because she needed him, if only for the moment. If only to ease her own pain. It would be enough. Would have to be enough because he couldn't risk letting It get free.

"Nikki..." he gasped her name, breaking their kiss to stare into her heated sable eyes. Her fingers were tangled in his braids, gripping them tightly. Under the passion there was a trace of fear, and he understood that someone had hurt her. A man had hurt her. And he knew who that man must be. Roderik.

Fury rose up from the darkest regions of his soul and he slammed down the emotion, a tremor running through him at the nearness of the disaster he'd barely curtailed. *It* was seething to get free, fighting for release. He focused on Nikki to cool the rage with another kind of emotion, one less caustic in its virulence. And for him unbridled desire was almost as dangerous as hate. Courting disaster on either hand, he would at least retain more conscious volition under the lash of passion than he'd retain under the driving fire of a murderous rage.

Going slowly, watching her eyes for any traces of panic, he pulled her jeans off, sliding his hands down her long legs, revealing creamy flesh, feminine perfection. Her sex was covered with a pair of silky pink panties, the color reminding him of the soft petals of a woman's inner folds. The delicate satin of her most tender flesh. He knelt in to dip his tongue into her navel, then stood slowly, drawing a line of damp flame up her stomach and across her right breast. Her hand was still locked tightly in his hair, pulling, adding a tiny hint of pain that added a piquancy to the desire heating him. It felt good and he wanted more.

He heard the catch of her breath. Saw the way her body shuddered, the nipples of her breasts peaking so tightly it looked like it should hurt. He drew the tip of his tongue around the areola, one hand pressed at the small of her back, holding her still for his exploration.

She tensed slightly and he eased his hold, sensitive to her reactions, both positive and negative, learning what she liked and what sent a dampening of desire through her on the wings of fear. He didn't want her to be afraid of him. He wanted her to know nothing but pleasure from his every touch, his every whispered breath across the silk of her skin.

"Bells..." she almost screamed his name as he closed his mouth around the stiffened nub, sucking, teasing it with the edges of his teeth.

Pulling away, he met her gaze. Awakened desire warmed her sable eyes. "Do you want this from me?"

"Yes!" There was no reservation or hesitation in her reply, nor in the way she kissed him afterward, her entire being seeking what he offered with the same intensity he had sought her. Her answer was as immediate as her need, and just as heated as his own.

"Good." He swept her up off her feet and lay her down on the bed, kissing her breasts and throat, easing his weight down on her a bit, gauging her reaction.

When she froze, a look of rising terror in her eyes, he understood what had been done to her. He shoved his own flash of wrath aside and raised himself off of her to shower her soft body with kisses, driving away the panic.

"Please, please," she gasped, fumbling with the button on his jeans.

Eyes burning, he left the bed, pulled his boots and pants off, his gaze locked on the beauty of her face, the perfection of her form. Female. Feminine. Delicate and beautiful. But she was strong of spirit. Capable. Courageous.

And he wanted her.

\* \* \*

Nikki devoured the hard planes of his body with her eyes, taking in the impressive size of his cock. But what really caught her attention was the way he stared at her. His eyes were filled with a raw, primal desire that ignited a slow burning heat low in her belly while it sent a flutter of unreasoning terror through her.

*He is not Roderik*, she reminded herself firmly.

She held her arms out to him in invitation, spreading her thighs like a wanton whore.

"You're beautiful," he murmured as he joined her on the bed, most of his weight held off of her, the blue flame of his eyes felt like they were staring into her very soul.

"So are you," she told him as she raised her hands to touch his shoulders, caressing warm golden skin. He was the same shade everywhere except his cock, which was darker, engorged with blood. The ends of his pale gold braids brushed her breasts, the contrast between the tickling of the feathers and the cool caress of the silver bells adding a exotic eroticism to what she

was feeling. A chill swept through her.

His lips were hot, almost scalding as he kissed his way down her body, lapping at her flesh with his tongue. Or perhaps it was just her own passion that made every touch of his mouth, every caress of his hand feel like the kiss of a branding iron searing his mark on her. No one had touched her like this since before the Collapse, his mouth and hands exploring everywhere, tasting, teasing, until she thought she'd go mad with need. She felt the heat of his breath through the thin barrier of her panties and she moaned, wanting to throw her legs around his head and make him do more. Much more.

"Bells...please..." she gasped out, tense from the desire he brought to life. She knew her panties were soaked, her body wet and aching for the stiffness of his cock to plunge into her heated center. She'd been used by men since the Collapse, had lovers before that, but none of her experiences had prepared her for the assault of a skilled man who took pride in his ability to pleasure a woman.

The scars in her heart and soul began to heal under his masterful touch, memories of Roderik's cock slamming inside her helpless body fading under the blond's caresses.

His kisses and touches stopped and when she looked up he was smiling. A wicked gleam lit his gaze and he leaned down to grip the thin fabric of her panties in his teeth, working them down without so much as the slightest touch of his hands. His breath, the touch of the feathers, the cooler sensation of the bells and beads at the ends of his braids created an experience that stole her breath and left her hotter and wetter than she'd ever gotten in her life.

No, he wasn't Roderik. He was something very different. And Nikki wanted more of that difference.

When her panties were gone, he knelt on the bed between

her knees and just looked down at her, gaze bright with passion.

For a few wild heartbeats she stayed where she was, frozen on the bed. Emboldened by his earlier reaction to what she'd done, Nikki sat up, her hands grabbing his shoulders. Her mouth locked to his in a demanding kiss that he returned without reservation. Their bodies pressed tightly together, and the feel of his hard chest against her breasts, the touch of his cock brushing her sex sent electric sparks of excitement up her spine from the cleft between her thighs.

She broke the kiss, but her mouth found other employment. Nikki kissed down the side of his face following the line of his jaw, lips dancing across the strong cords of his throat until she reached the expanse of his chest and a tiny peak of male nipple. She licked it, biting as gently as he'd bitten her.

\* \* \*

Bells groaned, his arms around Nikki, face pressed to her soft hair, breathing in the scent that was her very essence. Female musk. Female heat. *It* shifted, sliding against the chains, holding it captive, seeking freedom. The pull of strong emotion, of desire and an undercurrent of hate disturbing its long slumber.

Her kisses and caresses were a balm to the loneliness he'd felt. Her touch healing the terrible indefinable ache in his soul, an emptiness that only a woman could fill.

Yin and Yang, positive and negative energies in balance. Harmony.

Except for the struggling of the thing that wanted free of the constraints he'd put upon it.

Delicate fingers stroked the bruises beneath the skin of his back, but instead of awakening pain they gave easement, soothed the hurt. He groaned as soft lips touched his chest, rested briefly over his racing heart, a tongue dancing over the jutting nub of a pale nipple. Downy hair tickled the head of his cock and he

could feel the drenched heat between her thighs, feel the silken wetness of her cleft. She wanted him as much as he needed her.

"Nikki," he murmured, lowering his head to kiss her shoulder, nipping tenderly.

Her hands cupped his ass and drew him closer, nestling his cock between her thighs, tormenting his body with the nearness of what lay there.

"Hell with it," he growled, feeling the chains over the thing at the center of his being snapping, falling away. But not completely. No, not totally. He didn't dare that. Not here, perhaps not ever. Just a little, enough to give them both a taste what he really was under the human skin.

He eased her to the bed, mouth burning a new trail down her body, over her belly. His breath tickled at the dark 'V' between her spread thighs and he turned a sexy grin on her right before he plunged downward with his face, tongue slipping into her honeyed slit, sliding like a bolt of lightning over her clit.

Her gasp of pleasure sent an answering flash of electricity though his groin. Molten heat roiled deep within his body, his balls tightening with the incandescent flame of sensuality that had fully overridden every vestige of his control. It was the pleasure a man got from knowing he was driving his woman mad with need. The Beast was still leashed, but it was free to play. And it had one of its favorite games waiting. Slowly, enjoying every twitch of her body, every roll and clutch of her sex in his face he licked her, savoring the taste, the thrill of knowing she wanted him, lusted for him. The velvet heat, the sweet cream of her passion were for him and him alone.

His tongue rolled and flicked, thrust and fluttered over her clit, darting and delving into her hot channel, while his hands held her thighs spread, keeping the feast of her body open to his hunger.

Her hands were locked on him, one tightly woven into his braids, the other gripping his shoulder with a fierceness that gave a hint of pain. Sweet, cherished pain.

When she came she screamed out in a bold, unhindered shriek of passion, his name on her lips, fingernails cutting his skin, the hand locked in his hair twisting tightly.

It felt good, and the Thing purred, the sound leaving his throat as a groan of pleasure.

\* \* \*

Nikki returned to awareness from an orgasm that had resounded to the very depths of her soul, one that echoed through her mind. It's power reverberated through flesh and bone with the power of a symphony, the crescendo leaving an indelible mark on her very being. Erasing some of the fears residing in her mind and heart because she'd been the one in control, at least nominally because she understood they were both out of control. If they hadn't been, they wouldn't be having sex. But she wanted to feel him inside her, wanted to hold him and make love with *him*.

Bells was watching her, eyes full of unsatisfied hunger and unutterable self-satisfaction. His expression told her that the man knew exactly what he'd done to her, and he was pleased with himself the way a only a man could be, that satisfaction in himself shining in his gaze.

The cold aloof killer was gone, and Nikki found herself confronting the real man, the heat of the passion had driven away every trace of Bells's normal emotionless mask. He gave her a brilliant unreserved smile, leaning down to take a nipple into his mouth, his tongue laving over the heated flesh. Nikki shuddered and arched her body into the exquisite torment of his mouth. She knew first hand exactly what that mouth was capable of accomplishing.

"Liked that, did you?" he asked, his breath cool and teasing across the sensitive peak he'd just warmed.

"Yes. And I want more!"

"Do you?" he asked, teasing her with words as he dropped his head down to capture her mouth with his, kissing her deeply, their tongues dancing. She the flavor of her musky cream was in his mouth.

"You taste so good. Everywhere," he whispered after the kiss. "The more I taste, the more I want."

"I want more of you," she replied, lifting her head to kiss him.

He laughed softly and didn't deny her wishes, their lips meeting in hot desire. She broke the kiss, hand locking into his hair.

She saw a very visible shudder pass through him and tightened her fingers a little more to see if she'd imagined his reaction. She hadn't, he actually trembled.

He dropped his head down, kissing, the tip of his tongue darting out and she came to the realization he was tasting the dried tears on her face.

"Can I watch you cum again?" he asked softly, his mouth roaming along the graceful curve of her cheek down to her ear, the trail leading him her throat, and along her collar bone before making the journey toward her aching breasts.

Everywhere his mouth touched, she tingled.

"Yes. Whatever you want, Bells."

"Jason. My real name is Jason," he told her. He was kissing along the soft rise of her right breast, his lips painting a flame of desire across her skin. Pleasure seared through her mind in an unchecked inferno of quickly rebuilding need.

"Jason," she moaned. "Fuck me. Please. I want you so much."

He laughed softly. "I prefer making love to fucking," he murmured, "and I thought making love was what I was doing."

"I want more!" There was a demanding, almost commanding note in her voice. She was actually surprised when he smiled.

"Well I'll be happy to oblige. Who am I to deny such a beautiful woman her desires?"

She smiled at him, hearing his playful tone, wondering where the man in bed with her had come from because he certainly couldn't be the coolly emotionless killer she'd met by the road two days ago. "Stop talking, start fucking!"

"Is that an order?"

"Has anyone ever told you what an ass you are?" she asked as she pulled his hair.

"If memory serves, yes, on several occasions."

That did make her laugh because she knew he didn't have any real recollection of his past. Hawk had been very clear on that point while they'd been watching the second DVD.

Sadness filled her for a moment. But she wouldn't let it ruin what he was giving her. There was time enough for the real terrible world to intrude on them: later.

"Now where were we?" he asked. "Ah, yes, I do remember what you wanted." He lifted her hips, carefully positioning himself. He grinned. "You're sure?"

In answer she reached down between her spread thighs and wrapped her hand around his cock. "I want this," she said firmly, and pulled gently on the fistful of manflesh until the head touched her wetness, "inside this."

"As my mistress commands," he said and slid himself into her waiting heat.

She watched the intensity of the pleasure he felt burning in his cobalt eyes, hearing it in the way his breathing hitched,

seeing it in the gritting of his teeth as he fought for control.

Nikki gripped his biceps as he rested inside her for a moment. Panic stepped up her racing heartbeat a few notches and she fought the urge to shove aside. She was not going to ruin this for them. Jason was not Roderik. But arguing with herself wasn't taking the fear away. Nikki's body was reacting the way it was trained to react, with fear when a man was above her.

*You're no better than Pavlov's dog*, she chided herself, battling the terror.

His hips pulled back slowly, moving in a constrained glide, the inward thrust delivered with the same feeling of carefully reined power. He felt good, filling her completely yet giving no hint of discomfort. She remembered nothing with Roderik but agony. But the man had only cared about his own pleasure.

Bells was different. He treated her as if only her pleasure mattered. He'd even allowed her to take control when it suited her without any compunctions. And while he was cool and standoffish normally, she could tell he was a man at ease with his own sexuality.

But the anxiety wouldn't go away and Nikki's breathing became ragged as desire and rational thought warred with the things that Roderik had done.

"Is this what you had in mind?" he asked her, his dulcet voice warmed by the pleasure they were sharing.

Instead of answering him, Nikki pulled his head down for a kiss which he accepted and returned. She refused to admit defeat. Roderik would not ruin her life.

He broke the kiss to give her a wicked grin.

"Want to be on top?"

For a moment Nikki just stared at him. He was going to let her ride him? To take the dominant role? It stunned her into silence and at the same time she wondered if he'd read her fear

the way he'd read the events beside the wading pool back at the farmhouse. Then she smiled and gave an enthusiastic nod. "Yes, I'd very much like that."

\* \* \*

Shifting his legs, he pulled her into his lap and then lay back, Nikki straddling him, his feet firmly planted on the bed, hips canted up slightly. He gripped her thighs and started to move, the pace slow, meant to last.

They were both tired. But sex made a good balm to wounded souls, and Nikki's soul had been battered and beaten tonight. Ravaged in the not too distant past. He wanted to make this good for her. If it was good for him, too, then that was just a wonderful side benefit.

With Nikki's hands braced on his shoulders, they started to move slowly, learning one another's rhythms. She felt good, her soft heat encasing him firmly, the fit perfect, just the right amount of tightness for him without being painful to her.

Leaning down, she kissed him, and he knew she was tasting her own flavor there on his lips.

Sure that they would stay synchronized, he started to run his hands over her body, lightly pinching her nipples, skimming his hands over her ribs, her buttocks and thighs, learning the feel of her, the poetry of her form coming alive beneath his touch.

Her whispers of pleasure, her gasps, each shudder of her body sang through him, heightening his own awareness, adding to the sensations.

She was female. Life. And she gave herself to him, surrendered the sweetness of her body, her soul to him.

In return he could do no less.

\* \* \*

Bells stepped up the pace of his hips, driving into her, taking her breath away. Nikki had never had sex with a man

who'd had this kind of stamina, and her mind informed her that the truth of the matter was, she wasn't exactly having sex with a man, *per se*. If Hawk had been correct, Bells—Jason—was an Immortal Dragon which was a completely different beast altogether.

Aqua mist swirled around them, and for the first time Nikki caught a glimpse of his Immortal self, wings spreading, a shimmer of aqua scales tipped with gold, the ghostly image of the Dragon fully revealed before her in its brightly shimmering splendor. The blond's eyes burned bright as lightning, hot as an arc welder's flame, and he started driving himself into her, the pace faster, harder. Deeper.

Nikki felt him wrap his arms around her, felt the power of his body as he sat up, their groins still locked. His cock thrust deeper as he lowered her to the bed, his pace never slowing, his erection never slipping completely free.

Dimly she marveled at the strength he'd just shown. From experience she knew it wasn't easy to change positions mid-fuck as readily as this man managed. And what he was doing was exquisite, his lean body driving the spike of flesh into her with powerful, tightly controlled thrusts.

On her back once more, the fear lost amid the pleasure, Nikki wrapped her legs around his hips, moving with him, hands locked on his shoulders, fingernails digging in, eliciting a gasp from Bells. But it wasn't a cry of pain, it was one of passion unchained.

Wrapped in the blue mist, the scent of vanilla candles and sex swirling in the air, Nikki screamed as her second orgasm of the night roared through her body, a Dragon's shouted pleasure resounding like a million wind chimes in her mind.

## *Chapter Seven*

The pallid light of dawn trickled in through the shattered windows at the front of the department store, coming in through the skylights above to illuminate the woman on the bed. But the man watching her didn't really need the light in order to see how beautiful she was. He'd seen it by candlelight and through the eyes of the Dragon living in his soul.

His gaze roved over her body in a heated visual caress, the slow rise and fall of her breasts entrancing him. He remembered their taste, their softness, and swallowed the knot in his throat, battling emotions he shouldn't allow himself to feel. Almost reaching out to touch the pink-tipped round of a breast, he refrained instead because he knew what he'd done was wrong. Wrong for her.

He'd made a mistake. Several in truth.

First, he'd let Anya die.

Second, he'd made love to Nikki.

Third, he'd fallen in love with Nikki.

And that was the worst of the three. The most unforgivable sin.

Her taste, her scent, the way she'd looked as he'd taken her, had driven him over the edge. The carillon ringing through his body as he'd come to her scream of pleasure had set bonds on him, mind, heart, and soul. If she'd wrapped him in real chains she couldn't have possessed him more thoroughly than the bindings of her gentle spirit had done.

Bells could feel those bonds. Cool, soothing, a gentle spring breeze caressed by the sun, wrapped around everything he was, good and bad.

It was wrong for him to love her. Very, very wrong. She didn't need someone like him. A killer. An Immortal.

But he very badly needed someone like her to give his wretched existence some sort of meaning. He closed his eyes, but her image was burned into his mind. Only Beauty could tame the Beast. And he was easily domesticated. Too easily.

His gaze slid along her body, remembering how she'd reacted with such unrestrained passion, with such vital urgency. He wanted her again. His cock went hard, his heart beating a little faster, the Dragon shifting restlessly beneath the chains of his control. Now that he had set It free, even if only during the act of love, it was harder for him to contain. More difficult to keep under the constraint of his will.

And he didn't dare let it free. Not completely. There was too much danger. For himself and for those around him, too.

For her.

He closed his eyes for a second, opening them to see her with the second sight. Golden light emanated from her, pouring forth from her very soul.

Roe Deer.

His heart banged in his chest, hard and sharp, sending pain through his back and arms. For a moment he saw not the woman lying before him, but one who was smaller, her skin a honeyed cream, black hair, sweetly formed lips, almond eyes.

Kimiko.

So long ago. Lost to him for all time.

He'd freed the Dragon to save her life, and they'd survived. But she'd died in a wreck a few much too short years later, and he'd lived, only then discovering the that price the Dragon

exacted for its freedom was the dubious gift of Immortality. And now he couldn't die.

But everyone he loved did.

Kimi had. Nikki would. Sooner or later they all did.

And there had been so very many. Women mostly. A few men. It was the women who meant most to him. Their gentleness. Their passion. Fleeting memories, faces, names rose up out of the blankness that was his memory. Most of them had been dark haired and dark eyed, like Nikki. Like Kimiko. She'd been the first and, like Nikki, the center of her soul had been the gentle creature he'd just seen as he stared at Nikki. A Roe Deer.

Swallowing down his sorrow, pressing tears out of tightly closed eyes, refusing to let them fall, he slipped off the bed and started getting dressed. He wanted a bath, but there wasn't any water.

Much as he'd have enjoyed just lying there, watching Nikki, pretending there could be more between them than pain and sadness, they didn't have that luxury. The Rangers could well be following, and the issue of food, water and weapons remained. He'd lost his katana and very much wanted to find another one. He had no bullets for his revolver, and that was a serious problem, too.

"Nikki?"

"Hmmm?"

"We need to go."

Sable eyes opened, and stared at him in confusion for an instant, the woman waking from a dream of being home with her parents, introducing them to her new boyfriend. A boyfriend named Jason.

He couldn't help but watch the jiggle of her breasts as she sat up, looking for her clothes, and had to grit his teeth and look away as his cock jumped to attention.

Her soft laughter caught him off guard. "I guess you like what you see," she remarked.

"Yeah, I guess I do," he agreed, picking up her pink panties. They were too dirty for her to wear now, smelling of aroused female. He could still smell how hot she'd been. Hot for him.

A cool hand closed around the ridged shaft beneath his jeans and he gasped.

"I'd say you definitely like what you're seeing," she whispered right before she unbuttoned his jeans and freed him. He gasped when she took him into her mouth.

"Nikki...we don't have time," he hissed, trying to fight what she was making him feel. But it was no use. The Dragon slipped free, and before he fully realized what he was doing she was down flat on the bed, his clothing gone, cock inside the slick heat of her sheath, driving into it in a frenzy of passion she met stroke for stroke.

\* \* \*

It felt so good to have him inside her, mouth kissing along her collarbone. The quietly murmured whispers of encouragement as they fucked served to help her through the loss of her second family, the way simple words alone could never have done. And his weight over her was no threat. He wasn't pinning her down, he was making passion sing through her body the way no one had ever done before.

Nikki locked her long legs around his hips and helped him get deeper, adding her strength to his to gain more force. He was letting her set the pace, allowing her to use him for her own pleasure.

She came in a bright flash of spicy ecstasy that made her shudder, but she didn't stop the drive of her legs because she wanted him to cum, too.

Heat filled her and she heard him groan, and give a few

sharp thrusts before he collapsed on the bed, his arms wrapped around her sweat dampened body as he drew her closer, a sigh ruffling her hair.

They lay there, relaxed in the afterglow of quickly sated passions. Nikki's hand stroked his braids, caressing the curve of his ear, fingers following the line of his stubbled jaw. His face was still slightly flushed from what they'd done, his breathing ragged. With his eyes closed he seemed even younger. It was only when they were open, with the icy killer looking out at the world, that he seemed older. They were ancient eyes, she realized. Dragon's eyes. Blue as summer's brightest sky, cold as a glacier.

But not when he made love. They glowed with life then. And Bells—Jason—became who she suspected he really wanted to be, or who he'd once been. A lover. A man. Not a killer. Not the Dragon. Just Jason.

She kissed him, a golden braid between her fingers, using the grey feathers at the end to tickle his ribs, a contented smile pulling at her bruised mouth. The bottom lip was sore, tender from where she'd been hit yesterday. The previous day's events rose up in her thoughts, making her sad, her kiss becoming more passion filled, more needy. Jason was the only one left. And she hardly knew him.

But she'd fucked him just to have the reassurance of another human presence. To remind herself that she still lived. And so did he.

He actually smiled into the kiss and mumbled, "You're tickling me."

"I know."

"Well, just so long as you know what you're doing," he replied, giving her another languid, slowly exploring kiss.

Nikki was perfectly content to just lay there, kissing the

man in her arms, until she heard his stomach complaining loudly and realized she too was hungry.

People died, but life went on anyway. Pragmatic, after so much loss, she'd done her crying, might even cry again, but right now her Jason needed food. And so did she.

"Okay, Don Juan, I think we need to find some food and water."

"Don Juan?" he asked, one pale gold eyebrow lifting, a sexy little smile curling his lips.

"Hm..." she smiled coyly, "maybe not Don Juan." She kissed him again. "Mister Dragon, have you finished ravishing this fair damsel?"

He actually grinned, and Nikki felt her heart soar. The smile was for her, and he was so incredibly handsome it stole her breath.

Looking at him with that warm, totally human expression, the glint in his eyes, Nikki could only stare. He was more than handsome. Hawk and Dal had both been that. Bells—her Jason—was heart-thuddingly, breathtakingly gorgeous. Perfect. She found herself wondering if he'd always looked like that, or if the Dragon had changed more than just his mortality.

"Hardly. But I'll refrain for the moment," he replied, the grin sliding away.

Warm lips caressed her mouth, touching the sore lower lip gently, the kiss tingling. His gentleness awakened emotions she couldn't set any name too, but they were emotions that made her think of blond babies and lazy summer afternoons.

The kiss broke and Nikki watched him roll off the bed. He started picking up his clothes. "I'm going to have to be careful."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"Damsels are habit forming."

She couldn't help it; he was standing there, stark naked, the

picture of strength, of masculine beauty, and he was actually joking with her. There *was* a human being under the killer, hidden inside the power of the Dragon. She started to giggle and found she couldn't stop, her laughter as much a part of the grief she'd felt yesterday as their desperate sexual encounter last night had been.

He didn't really want her. He'd just done something to make her forget.

The laughter broke on a gasping sob. Before the first tear rolled down her cheek he was there, wearing nothing but his jeans, his strong arms wrapped around her, pulling her close. He was strong, his embrace comforting, reassuring.

"Don't cry, Nikki. I swear I'll make this good for you. I'll make a better life for you out of the ashes we've been handed."

That got her attention. Sable eyes met his intensely blue gaze.

"What...what do you mean?"

His arms tightened, "I'm not going to let anyone hurt you ever again, Nikki. Not ever. I swear."

His voice was still the velvet baritone she loved to hear, but his words were fierce, self-assured.

If only she could believe him.

But Hawk had made her the same promise and she didn't even know where he was now and everyone else was dead.

Everyone but Bells. And, like Hawk, he couldn't die.

\* \* \*

"I smell like a whore."

"When we get to a town I'll make sure you have a nice hot bath," he promised her.

It was a mistake to love her. Another mistake to admit it to himself. And it was a serious mistake to promise her anything. But if he was consistently good at anything from reality to

reality, it was making mistakes.

*Reality to reality?*

*Oh, yeah,* his mind said, *the whole slipping through time thing. I'd forgotten that.* He didn't stay in one reality, he slid through the cracks between them. Or maybe it was more like being a watermelon seed and getting spat from one existence to the next on an as needed basis.

The problem with being one of his kind wasn't just never dying, you also got saddled with being the person who changed the course of history for a world. Failing wasn't allowed. If you failed the Powers That Be hit your reset button and you had to start all over again.

He had the nagging suspicion he'd failed recently, but he couldn't remember how or where. But his memory *was* coming back. Bit by disturbing bit.

He knew, for instance, he was a Dragon. Knew how to organize an army and that he had a reason for being there that went beyond Nikki.

He was a Protector, an Immortal Hero.

And there was a job here for him to do.

But what the hell it was he hadn't a clue.

"Jason?"

He blinked, came back to the here and now.

"You okay, you went away on me again."

"Yeah, I'm okay," he reassured. She was dressed and standing by the bed, her gaze filled with deep concern.

*When did she get out of my lap?*

He shook his head to clear away the fog and realized he was tired despite the few hours of sleep he'd gotten. The motorcycle wreck, the fight, being shot, and their wild lovemaking had drained even his reserves of endurance. He needed a couple days of rest, some good food, and a hot bath, not necessarily in that

order.

"Let's see if there's anything salvageable here that might work as trade goods. We're going to need something to barter for what we need."

She nodded. "Maybe we can find clean clothes and food too."

"Good thinking," he agreed as he rose to his feet.

\* \* \*

The store had been looted, yet they found quite a haul of useful and usable things. Clothes, candles, matches, jars of gourmet olives, caviar, cans of smoked oysters and clams, canisters of fancy cookies that hadn't expired, and some bottled water. There'd also been expensive scented soaps, and Nikki was looking forward to a nice hot bath with the rose soap she'd found. They'd even dug some gold jewelry from the ruins of a glass case. There wasn't any guarantee anyone would consider that valuable, it was purely dependent on local commerce, or what passed for it these days. Food, cigarettes, and ammunition were far more valuable to most people than gold or cut gems, even diamonds. Pretty baubles had lost their charm in the harsh reality left after the Collapse.

It came down to a decision between things they could and couldn't carry. Bells loaded up a backpack from the camping department of the store, and filled two others, using bungee cords and rope to tie them on the back of his bike. He'd topped off the load with a two man tent and compact sleeping bags.

Nikki had worried about the weight, but he'd assured her that the bike could carry them and the stuff easily enough so long as they weren't being chased. If it came down to that he'd dump the stuff in a heartbeat, not because the weight would slow them, but because it would make the bike a significantly harder for him to control at high speeds.

They made a quick breakfast out of olives, bottled water, a can of smoked oysters, and some fancy imported crackers that were in a tin. They weren't too stale, and between them they finished off the entire tin, needing the energy the carbohydrates would supply.

As they'd left she'd pointed out a gas station, but he'd just smiled and told her the bike didn't run on gasoline, but he wouldn't tell her what did power the machine.

They'd stayed on the road all day, finally stopping an hour after dark without coming to any towns, inhabited or otherwise. He'd set up their camp, such as it was, and she'd opened a tin of the cookies and one of the bottles of water so they'd have something to eat and drink.

\* \* \*

While she unpacked their meager food, Bells took a walk around their camp, making sure there were no dangers, as he searched for a stream. He wanted a bath as much as Nikki did, and was anticipating the use of the sandalwood soap he'd tucked into the pockets of his jacket.

The thing he'd most wanted to find, bullets for his .357, had not existed at the store. While they'd had a sporting goods department, they hadn't carried any type of firearms.

Going back to camp, he accepted the bottle of water Nikki handed him, savoring a few swallows before recapping it. He let her drink as much as she wanted; he could get by on less for a while. There was a shallow rill of water, but he didn't trust it for more than washing. It was just too likely to be contaminated with something harmful if ingested.

He let her go wash quickly, then cleaned himself up; the smell of the sandalwood was pleasant, but not nearly as powerful as the rose soap she'd used. It clung to her like an olfactory mist and he found himself breathing it in, the perfume

acting as an enhancement to her own sweet feminine smell which he already found too enticing.

He sat down across from her, upwind, so he couldn't catch that maddening female scent.

"Do you want one of the hazelnut creams or a chocolate cookie?"

"Doesn't matter," he replied, accepting the cookie from her, more interested in watching her fingers as she licked melted chocolate from them.

"Are you okay?" she questioned.

"Yeah."

"You're tired," she stated. "Why don't you get some sleep? I'll keep first watch."

"No need. I'll know if something's going to happen."

He watched the way she looked at him, aware of her lips in the dark, the breeze, perversely shifting so he was able to catch the scent of woman, and roses, the hint of female arousal. The first two scents slid through his awareness and made him ache uncomfortably just south of his gunbelt. The third fragrance nearly undid him, but he slammed his control down and stayed exactly where he was, making himself pay attention to her words, not her firm, luscious body.

He shook himself, the bells in his hair chiming softly.

"You warned us even before Hawk knew. I remember that now." She took a bite of the cookie and he could tell she had trouble swallowing it.

*Hell with it*, he thought to himself as he stuffed the cookie she'd given him back in the tin. He got up and sat beside her, putting his arms around her knowing she was going to cry and hating it. Her tears bit with a caustic agony that touched his heart with all the force of a psychological cataclysm. Inside he seethed, angry at himself for not being able to save Anya and

Chet. For failing her and them.

Hawk and Dal had already made the decision to sacrifice themselves to save the other three. Dal had likely known he wouldn't come back, or maybe he'd been a real optimist considering his agreement to marry Anya. Hawk had probably gambled against the risk of capture and had accepted the possibility as price of freedom for the other three.

But the only one he'd saved had been Nikki.

Some people lived. Some died, and there was no way of knowing who would be left until the lead stopped flying and the smoke cleared.

This time it had been Nikki and him.

Next time it might only be him.

And that was an idea he didn't want to accept.

He pulled her close and let her cry, but she didn't cry long. Not this time. With forced pragmatism she finished the cookie, drank more water and then settled into the circle of his embrace.

"Go to sleep, Nikki. I'm here. I won't let anyone hurt you." He grabbed one of the sleeping bags they'd salvaged from the store and pulled it around her.

"Is that a promise?" she asked as she settled against him again.

"Yes. It's a promise," he agreed, resting his cheek against her hair.

For a long time he sat there, holding her, listening to her breathe, letting his mind go blank until he was only aware of the cherished presence of the woman in his arms and the emptiness of the land around them.

\* \* \*

*Danbridge isn't much to look at, at least not from this side of the concrete wall, Nikki thought as they came to a stop before the wooden gates. But at least the siren has stopped. And it was*

true. About a mile from town they'd heard the sound of a siren wailing a warning, probably to warn people that strangers were coming. Why a town would be worried about two people on a motorcycle was something that Nikki couldn't quite grasp. Unless they were concerned that the pair of them were scouts for someone like Roderik. A distinct possibility, since that was how Roderik did things. Sent a few scouts out to do recon on a place he planned to acquire as part of his own realm. She'd shouted a warning to Bells, and he'd shouted his agreement. They'd ridden in silence since then, just as they'd ridden in relative silence the entire way to the small town, the rush of the wind and the hum of the bike, and her own thoughts and the only things to occupy her mind. There hadn't even been much to look at after they'd left the department store. Just scraggly bushes, a few trees, dying grass, and one lonely burned out gas station about twenty miles behind them.

There were four men on the top of a twenty-foot-high wall, their guns trained on them. There were two men outside in front of the open gates, and who knew how many out of their line of sight inside. They were all heavily armed. Mostly with assault rifles or shotguns, and an assortment of handguns. The weapons were understandable considering the state of the world.

Nikki was very much aware of how they were looking at her. She'd become much too familiar with the expression on their faces. Lust. Beasts ready to rut. It sickened her when she realized how far down the spiral toward true barbarism humanity had slipped in the course of a year.

Still leering at the woman on the bike, one of the men stepped forward. "We don't let no folks in unless they can make the toll payment and state their reasons for coming to Danbridge."

His eyes shifted briefly to Bells, but returned to Nikki in a

disturbingly ravenous inspection. She stared back, her gaze showing not the least trace of fear or subservience. Let him think what he wanted, she wasn't any man's chattel.

"What's the toll?" she heard Bells ask. His tone was flat, neutral, and she knew without looking the cold killer's stare had returned, the mask he normally wore hiding his emotions even from her.

Nikki understood it now. It was like a game of poker, but in this game the odds were their lives.

"The woman would do," the city guard replied, licking his lips.

Nikki couldn't help the shudder of disgust that passed through her.

"Since that's not happening, let's try other alternatives," the man on the bike behind her said, voice cool and not the least bit friendly.

"The woman, the bike, guns, ammo. Those are what we're looking for."

She heard him shaking his head, the bells in his hair ringing sweetly, the sound incongruous in the situation.

"Look, jingle-boy," the man said nastily, "we got no use for queers. Women we can use. Guns we want. But *you* we don't need. We got enough of your kind here already. Now get off the fucking bike, hand over the bitch, and take a hike."

Nikki's heart jumped. They were going to try and take everything from him, including her. Fear made her mouth go dry. Neither of them were armed. Not even with a knife, and her skills at unarmed combat were almost nil.

The blond put the kickstand down, and slipped off the bike.

"That's a good boy. Now drop the backpack."

Out of the corner of her eye Nikki saw Bells remove the backpack. He was going to leave her. He was going to do exactly

as they asked! She couldn't believe it!

He'd promised to protect her. He wouldn't just leave her, would he?

Her heart hammered a frantic beat driven by terror, she turned imploring eyes on him, ready to beg him not to leave. She opened her mouth to speak, then she noticed the way he was looking at her, the faintest smile quirking his mouth as the heavy backpack slid to the ground.

Freed of its hindering weight, Bells became a blur of movement, hand snatching the assault rifle from the guard, cracking the butt of it against the side of the man's face before he sent a warning burst over the heads of the men on the wall.

"That did *not* have to miss," he informed them loudly, voice and eyes cold as glacial ice. That was when she realized something. What he'd just done hadn't involved using his Immortal abilities. That was pure ass-kicking capability at work. Good as Hawk had been, he'd never fought without relying on the Fenyx at the center of his being. Dal, too, had relied on the power of his Tiger Soul if there was a fight. It made her wonder exactly what Bells was—or rather, what Jason had been—before he'd tapped the Dragon within his soul.

Bells' eyes were no longer blue. They were the grey of gunmetal, hard and dangerous. Nikki stared. "The next asshole that threatens me, or my woman, is going to get a taste of death, up close and very personal. Is that understood?"

The men on the wall, and at the gate stood there slack-jawed. Most of them just nodded, one managed to blurt out, "Sure thing, mister."

"Anyone else got any ideas about taking my possessions from me? If you do, say so now. I'm in a piss poor mood and I just want to kick back and have a good time. I'm sure you boys can appreciate a man wanting to do that, now can't you?"

Nikki frowned, somewhat annoyed to be listed as a 'possession,' even by Bells. Or perhaps *especially* by him was more to the point. She'd had sex with him—and sure she wanted him, was probably in love with him—but that wasn't any reason for him to speak as if he owned her. Then again, with these morons, it was probably the only type of conversation they'd understand. It still rankled, though.

A thought struck her abruptly. He'd said she was *his* woman. *His!* Perversely her heart soared. What if that was the only way he could tell her how he felt? Maybe...Maybe she was a fool to think he wanted her that way. She knew what she looked like, when she was clean she was attractive. But Bells was head turning handsome, and an incredible fuck. He could have any woman he set his sights on.

From the way he moved and fought, he'd be able to keep any woman he wanted regardless the odds too. So why would he want her anyway?

Her attention was drawn to the raw fear on the faces of the men by the gate.

In unison they were shaking their heads in a definitive no over their intentions, and making agreement with a man's desire for a good time. Everyone, that is, but the man Bells had slammed in the face with the butt of the gun. He was sitting on the ground, glaring at the blond. Nikki saw his hand move.

A booted foot snapped into the man's chin as Bells kicked him. He went sprawling on his back and didn't move. Nikki realized that the Immortal hadn't even glanced down, his stormy grey eyes were still regarding the men on and near the wall.

"Holy shit..." one of the guys on the wall muttered. They were all wide eyed.

"Martial artist, damn, that little shit's fast," another commented.

"Murph dun went and tangled with a fucking white boy version of Jet Li," another remarked, chuckling a bit. He was a pretty big man, ugly as sin. He smiled at Nikki, the expression more friendly and respectful, less lecherous as if she'd changed category from common whore to respectable woman in the man's opinion.

*I guess he's established where he falls in the pecking order with these guys,* Nikki mused.

"I think we've reached an understanding. Now, someone want to give me a reasonable toll to enter here, or can we just go in like civilized people and dispense with the bullshit?" Bells asked.

"We ain't really got much of a toll. If you got some canned goods we'd take a can each for you and your woman," one of the men on top of the wall said.

"How about a jar of caviar for both of us?" Bells asked as he passed the assault rifle to her. Nikki took it, cradling the rifle the way she would have held a shotgun while the blond crouched down to search for the caviar inside the backpack.

"Yeah, that'd work. We ain't seen no luxury goods in a long spell. Sorry about Murph. He's got it big in the head since Sheriff Dobbs made him an official deputy."

"Sure, no problem."

She heard the bland tone as Bells replied, saw the way he didn't look away from the men as he dug through the backpack by feel alone. It was all so—practiced. Just as if he'd been in this type of situation and had an instinct for what he could and couldn't do. Maybe he did. She'd seen cops and ex-soldiers with that same type of hard, chilly stare. She'd also seen gangers that held the same look in their jaded eyes. It made her very curious to know more about him, while being equally afraid of what he might tell her if she asked. Providing, of course, he could even

remember.

He passed the caviar to the guard and then scooped up the .45 Murph had tried to draw on him. Nikki observed how graceful his movements were, how controlled and precise. She'd seen Hawk and Dal act the same way when they'd been in Sugarsprings. Wary. Alert for trouble.

She and Bells had already gotten a bit of that here in Danbridge. If they were lucky the guys on the wall would let their buddies in town know to leave them alone.

"I'll just be keeping both guns for now. If your friend wakes up and wants them back, he can come talk to me. But no one draws down on me with impunity."

"Sure thing, mister. I'll let him know," the guy who'd accepted the canned goods agreed.

"Be sure you do."

After hefting the backpack on again, Bells mounted up behind her and rolled the bike slowly forward. They passed through the gate without further hindrance, Nikki holding the assault rifle in prominent view as they rode down the street.

\* \* \*

It didn't take Bells long to locate the motel. It was the only one in town, the building sitting at the corner of Main Street, the road they'd come into town by, and another road that no longer had a sign. The place was named after the town—Danbridge Motorlodge—and looked about as seedy as every other building they'd passed. The one good thing they'd both noticed, and which Nikki commented on, was the obvious presence of electricity in some of the buildings. They'd seen the flash of a neon sign in the window of a bar, and they'd passed a diner with big ceiling fans running.

The diner caught their attention with its promise of a hot meal, though neither of them had their hopes up too high. Nikki

couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten something that hadn't come out of a can or jar.

The place almost looked normal if you ignored the wall surrounding it and the fact that every man they saw roaming the streets was armed with guns or other weaponry. Knives, displayed prominently, even a man carrying a bow and arrows.

Of course there were other things you'd have to ignore too for the place to appear 'normal,' like the fact that they'd seen no women outside. Bells had an uneasy feeling as they pulled into the motel parking lot that any women were kept out of sight for some reason beyond the simple expedient of their safety. His spotty memory hinted at female slavery and degradation. Something that was a constant of the backsliding of civilization.

But he could be wrong, too. Maybe the folks of Danbridge were just very cautious. Considering the little he knew about Roderik and others like him, hiding the women was probably just a good survival practice.

Never a trusting soul, Bells murmured, "Stick close to me," as he dismounted from the bike and headed into the motel.

True to his command, Nikki walked along at his heels, the rifle in her hands.

"If you have to use it, don't worry about aiming. Just make people duck and I'll handle the rest," he advised.

He waited for her slow nod, seeing a flash of anger in her eyes.

"I know you can take care of yourself, Nikki. But I don't know how many shots that rifle has and I'd rather not run out of bullets if it comes to fighting our way out of here.

His eyes were still the grey of a stormy sky, his state of alertness heightened by the creeping chill that came and went up his spine. They were in for shit, he just didn't know what kind of shit it would be, or where it was going to come from. But they

needed food, water and rest too much to just cut and run.

There was a tap bell on the counter and Bells rang it, wondering how many of those things he'd used in his centuries of existence.

*Centuries? Am I that old?* His mind told him yes, but his memories stayed silent on the matter. Probably for the better since he had an eerie feeling of *deja vu* as he glanced down at the worn and scarred walnut top of the counter.

A man fat enough to double for Santa Claus came out from the motel's office. Santa, however, wouldn't have carried a shotgun in the crook of his arm.

"Do you have rooms for rent?"

"Might. Who's asking?"

Bells forced a smile onto his face, knowing damn well it didn't touch his eyes. "I am. For me and my woman."

From the corner of his eye he saw Nikki tense at the 'my woman' part and knew he was going to have a bit of explaining to do. This wasn't the fine old world she knew, and equality of the sexes was dead. Things Nikki herself had said, things the others had mentioned told him that was a fact. He could tell by the lack of women in evidence that they were at the very least, off in hiding for their own protection, if not outright enslaved. Of the two choices he found himself fervently hoping the women were just being carefully protected.

The old world of freedom and near sexual equality was gone.

"It'll cost you," the man's gaze went to Nikki, and the front of his pants showed that he liked what he was seeing, his cock tenting the loose trousers he was wearing.

"Not her, not even for a fuck," Bells stated, letting a hint of the anger he felt hardened his voice.

The man's eyes went from Nikki to Bells. "What's a kid like

you need with a fine whore like that?"

A hand shot across the counter, catching the front of the man's shirt. "I don't know what the hell is wrong with you people here in Danbridge, frankly I don't care, but I can tell you I'm sick of her being considered part and parcel to any deal I try and make. Whatever you want for a room and a bath isn't worth me letting you put your damned stinking dick in her! She is *my* woman, and mine alone. Got it!"

"Yeah, sure, mister," the man agreed, not even trying to use the shotgun in his hand because he could tell the blond would take it from him the second he tried to get it into firing position.

"I'd appreciated it if you'd make sure that information got around town," Bells told him as he let the man's shirt go. "I'd hate for there to be any accidents to your local population."

"Of course, yeah, anything you like."

"Now about that room?"

"The lady can stay free, I'll take canned goods for you and the bath. We've got running water, even hot if you want."

"Will you take a tin of gourmet cookies?"

"They any good?"

"Yes."

"Sure. Yeah. Been a while since we had those here in town."

Bells smiled and dug out the tin. "Well, consider this your lucky day."

## *Chapter Eight*

It felt good to be so totally clean. It was the clean you only got with good soap and hot water. Nikki had luxuriated in the tub, lathering up and rinsing twice, then lolling around in the sudsy water until it was barely tepid.

She was sitting on the edge of the sway centered bed brushing her damp hair, listening to the splashing from the other room.

Bells taking a quick bath in the water she'd already used.

*I'm as bad as Chet ever was*, she told herself, not realizing that they'd only get one fill of the tub for their use. Now it was cold and smelled of roses. He'd said he didn't mind, but she had her doubts. He'd mentioned liking the idea of soaking in hot water before she'd gone in.

*I bet he's aching from all the fighting. Even if the bruises do go away pretty fast, he does feel pain, and he hurts like anyone else.*

She was just about to go and ask him if he wanted anything when he came out, wrapped in a ragged towel, his braids still streaming lines of water down his chest. He was a study in grace and power, even when he was wrapped in no more than a towel and dripping wet. She stared, feeling the thrum of desire between her thighs.

There weren't any bruises visible anywhere, and the bullet hole in his leg was also gone.

He healed rapidly, far more quickly than either Dal or even

Hawk did. What had Hawk told her? The older an Immortal got the more powerful they became, the faster they healed. Hawk was a little over seventy years old, but he'd only had his power for thirty years. He'd been in his early forties before he'd discovered the Fenyx lying dormant in his soul. The bullet hole in the blond's leg would have taken two or three days to heal if it had been in Hawk's leg, four or five for Dal. She suspected it took Bells less than twenty-four hours to heal that type of damage. It made her wonder exactly how old the too youthful looking blond might actually be since he'd never even mentioned an age to her, not even in passing. But there was the whole tree induced amnesia thing preventing him from remembering.

"What next?" she asked.

He shook his head, the ringing of the bells muted by the water still trapped inside them. "I haven't decided," he admitted as he picked up the towel she'd used on her hair and started squeezing water out of his braids. The feathers tied into them were almost black and looked rather bedraggled.

"Let me help," Nikki said, putting the brush aside to help him press the water out of his hair.

She stood up and reached for the towel, their hands touched and Nikki realized how close his mouth were to hers.

Spontaneously their lips met, but Nikki took it a step farther, unwinding the towel from around his hips, seeking the smooth velvet of his cock. Her fingers closed around flesh that was already hardening as she touched it.

"Nice," she murmured as she grabbed a handful of his hair and kissed him again while she stroked his cock, feeling it pulsing against her palm with each rapid beat of his heart.

"You want something?" he asked.

"I'd like some of your cock, Mr. Dragon."

He laughed. "And I thought I was addicted to damsels."

"We're mutually addictive, Mr. Dragon." Nikki told him as she dropped to her knees and gently lapped at the head, tasting the tiny bead of precome in the little slit of his cock. His hands caressed through her damp hair.

"Hmm...I thought you were hungry."

"I am. For this," Nikki murmured and sucked the head into her mouth, tongue sweeping sensitive skin in a lascivious demonstration that elicited a groan of appreciation from Bells.

\* \* \*

She was on her knees, the head of his cock being sucked as if he were a piece of candy she'd been yearning for. It felt so good, eroding his resolve to stop the madness of their relationship.

It was too late. Too late for so damned many things.

He wanted this. Wanted her so much it hurt. Worse than a bullet, worse than dying without death to silence the pain.

Her mouth, teased, enticed. Her hand caressing his balls sent streamers of light through him, heat that coiled deep, molten, burning.

"Nikki..." he moaned her name, letting her hear what she was doing to him. No longer hiding. Not from her, and not from himself.

He was lost. But he was also found in the same breath, in the same throb of his heart, the pulse echoing through his body in time to the passion she had returned to life in him. Passion he'd thought dead. Gone. Gone with Kimiko.

A few tears slipped from his closed eyes, tears she didn't see. They fell into her damp hair, unnoticed as she drove him toward orgasm with her mouth, the touch of her hands.

Bells couldn't take it. He didn't want to come in her mouth. He wanted to be inside her, within the clinging embrace of her slick velvety channel.

He gripped her shoulders, "Nikki, please, I want you."

Sable eyes met his as she tilted her head back, but she didn't let go of the flesh in her mouth.

"Please, Nikki. Let me fuck you."

Her mouth moved faster over his cock and he had to brace a hand on her shoulder as the pleasure built higher. The sweet musky scent of her arousal, the feel of her skilled tongue and hands on him were driving him rapidly toward an orgasm. One he wasn't willing to give into. Not yet. He remembered the flavor of her as he'd fed on her cream. He wanted more. He wanted it now, the Dragon's hunger as aroused as Nikki's body.

He had her down the bed with a speed that left her breathless a squeak of surprise coming from her parted lips as his tongue slipped along her slit, dove in and struck her clit, jolting a pleased gasp from her. Bells grinned and lapped gently, tasting, worshipping her with his mouth as she deserved. He plunged a finger into her depths and heard another exultant gasp that brought a smile to his lips as he worked her clit over with eager strokes of his tongue.

Female. She held him balanced on the edge of sanity and madness. Between man and Dragon. His Warrior's Fire alight, the Dragon shifting beneath the binding chains of his will, Bells fought to retain the tenuous control he had on the Beast at the heart of that Fire.

Nikki moaned and bucked under his mouth, her cunt clamping down on his thrusting finger as she came for him. Bells's smile became a pleased grin.

The Dragon was definitely winning.

\* \* \*

Bells made her feel loved. Each and every kiss, the way he drank her up like a starved cat in a bowl of cream, how he fucked, how he groaned when he was inside her. No man had

ever given her what Bells—her Jason—gave her each and every time they made love.

Tears spilled from Nikki's eyes as she felt him kissing his way up her belly, her wet slit hot and ready for more of what he had to offer. Eager for the hammering thrust of his hardness as he rammed into her. She wanted it, wanted him.

"Hey, Nikki, did I hurt you?" he asked her softly as he kissed her closed eyes. She could smell herself on him as he kissed her tear streaked face, taste herself as he kissed her lips.

"No," it came out as a tremulous whisper, her body still limp from the power of the orgasm he'd given to her.

She felt herself being lifted into his embrace and she opened her eyes, the tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Tell me what I did wrong," he murmured, lips brushing her cheek, the tip of his tongue lapping away a tear. Drinking it in the way he drank from her womanhood. "Nikki, what did I do?"

"Nothing, Jason."

She saw him smile at the use of his real name. "You sure?" His gaze was bright, blue, but dark, full of concern.

"Yeah." She tipped her head back a bit and kissed him, her hand dropping down between them to caress the heat of his cock, wrenching a soft moan of pleasure from him. Her thumb brushed over the slit in the head, slicking precome over the end, and he shuddered.

"Your turn," she murmured as she pushed him down onto the bed.

"Ride me," he told her.

"Not yet. I want to taste you the way you have tasted me."

The smile he gave her was quirky. "Ah, the Damsel plans to turn the tables on the Dragon, does she?"

Nikki giggled and nodded. "Yes, Mr. Dragon, that is exactly what I plan to do."

He grinned and shoved a pillow under his head, making sure he could see her. "I'm going to watch, if you don't mind."

"Not at all, Mr. Dragon," she replied.

Sitting on her knees, Nikki bent down and took the head of his cock into her mouth, licking slowly in a circular pattern around the edge before she bent down just a bit more and licked it from tip to base, then back up from the base to the tip following along the bottom.

One glance showed her lust warmed eyes, his gaze gone from their usual bright blue to a deep cobalt. He was watching her, his expression intent. Hot. Excited. And she was the one doing that to him. Her, Nikki, making the Dragon inside his soul sit up and take notice.

Roderik, and his Dragon had never allowed anything like this. Couldn't abide the thought of anyone having power over him or his body, his emotions. No, the only thing he understood was the heat of a woman's cunt as she cried out in pain and humiliation.

But the Dragon within the man under her teasing mouth was a different sort of Beast. It was as much a lover as a killer. At least to Nikki that's how it appeared. She could see it shining in Bells's eyes, a blazing intensity, his gaze full of emotion, desire—need.

She wanted to believe this was more than just sex. Really wanted to hear him whisper *I love you* into her ear, to know that he cared for her as more than a responsibility; someone foisted off on him as part of an agreement with Hawk. But what she wanted never did mesh with reality. If it did her parents would be alive. Chet, Anya and Dal would be alive. Hawk would still be with them.

Bells—Jason—would love her.

But that wasn't the reality she'd been dealt. She had the

reality where everyone died. Where all she could hope for out of life were a few stolen moments of pleasure, a few little glimpses of a world dead and gone. A world in which her wonderful dreams of a career, family, love and children were shattered forever.

While she was thinking she made sure her pace on his cock stayed slow and teasing. When she glanced at him again his eyes were riveted on her, half lidded with desire, a sexy smile curving his lips.

"Nikki," he murmured. Just her name, his voice gone a bit deeper, the dulcet tones rich, roughed by passion.

Opening her mouth wide she took in his entire length, her nose hitting the nest of gold curls at the base, lips closing tightly around his manhood, a hand moving to cup his balls, caressing gently as she slowly slipped him out of her mouth.

She could do this without any bad associations. Roderik had never let a woman's mouth near him. He'd either feared being bitten too much, or didn't like the power exchange he perceived such an act entailed. It was a woman doing something to him, causing pleasure he wouldn't control, so it was one sexual act he had never sullied for her.

And it was one she enjoyed.

His hips bucked twice and stilled, and she could see he'd gripped the sheets in his hands, fighting the urge to fuck her mouth, letting her stay in control. It was not something most men she'd ever been with had seemed to want. Her in charge. But Bells was different in that respect, and in so many other things. She wondered if it was because of the Dragon, or the man he'd been before he'd become Immortal.

"Nikki..." his voice showed the strain of the tight control he had on himself.

When she reached the tip of his cock she plunged down

again, and he cried out, hips arching off the bed, body shuddering.

And she was doing that to him. Making him react so strongly. Making him cry out with the pleasure.

It was a strange situation for her now, the ability to call the shots in bed. So much control. So much power, and she wanted to see just how far she could take it. Her hand took the place of her mouth and she stroked him slowly.

"Can I tie you up?"

For an answer he sat up, reached over the side of the bed and stripped a piece of leather cord from his gunbelt. The restraining cord that went around his thigh. Smiling he held it out to her. There was a bright glitter in his eyes, anticipation that sent a thrill through Nikki.

"You're sure."

"Absolutely," he replied without the slightest hesitation.

\* \* \*

The leather cord was wrapped around his wrists, Nikki's breasts in his face as she leaned over to tie him to one of the supports holding the headboard. Grinning, he took advantage of her position and raised his head to suck a delicate nipple, his cock jumping at her gasp of pleasure.

"Did I tell you to do that?" she asked softly.

"No, Mistress."

The surprised look she gave him was priceless.

"Jason?"

"Yes, Mistress?"

She stared at him, and he grinned.

"You really don't mind being submissive to a woman, do you?"

"Should I?"

"A lot of men wouldn't want to do it." She was thinking of

Roderik, who always tied his women down and gave them no control and no real pleasure. She'd mistakenly believed all Dragons would be like Roderik. She should have realized that it wasn't the fact Roderik was a Dragon that made him a bastard, it was the kind of man he'd chosen to be.

Bells laughed, the sound warm, mellow. "More the fools they," he told her with a wink. "They don't know what they're missing."

Before she could retreat he captured her nipple again, nipping gently but she pulled away, going back to what she'd been doing, gently sucking his balls into her mouth, her hands holding his thighs spread wide for her exploration. He gasped and bucked when she blew cool air over the sensitized head, then plunged his entire cock into her mouth, sucking gently.

\* \* \*

A groan of pleasure rumbled out of his chest and he gripped the edge of the headboard, hanging on tightly, fingers digging into the thin padding, tearing the old vinyl.

"Jason."

He lifted his head to look at her. Obedient to her will. Expectant. He wanted what she was doing to him, enjoyed having his choices, and all control of the situation stripped away.

She was kneeling between his legs, fingers curled around his erection, stroking slowly. Her knees were spread wide and he could see the creamy wetness in the dark curls covering her sex.

"Mistress?"

"Have you been good?"

"I don't know, Mistress. Have I?"

He saw her smile. Saw her slip a finger into the cleft of her sex, her hand moving slowly.

"I'm not sure," she replied. He could only watch, unable to reach for her as she continued to finger herself slowly, the

motion of her hand mesmerizing him.

Watching her like that, seeing her touching herself, out of his reach, made his heart pound. His cock twitched when she rose up to stand over him, her hand staying where it was, still moving slowly.

"Nikki..." he couldn't help it. Couldn't stop the begging note from entering his voice. "Mistress. Please, Mistress Nikki."

He could have easily broken the leather cord holding him to the bed, but he didn't. What they were doing was helping her overcome whatever horrible cruelties Roderik had visited upon her mind and body. And he was enjoying the game of letting her be *Mistress Nikki* and letting her call the shots.

Hell, it was fun to watch her standing there, looking down at him with those dark eyes, her entire body visible to him as she played with herself. She was so hot, so damned beautiful. Tall and firm, with breasts that shifted enticingly with her movements. Firm like the rest of her.

He wanted her so much it hurt, and not just for casual sex. No, he wanted Nikki. The Dragon wanted Nikki. This was beyond simple fucking. It was genuine love. And pure disaster.

But at the moment all he cared about, typically, was the roiling tension centered below his erection.

"Mistress Nikki, please. I want you."

\* \* \*

He was begging for her touch, and the woman stared down at him seeing...something strange in his gaze. Something wild and desperate that shocked her to the core of her being.

"Nikki, please."

"What do you want, Jason?" she asked, using his real name.

"You. Your sweet wet heat around me. I want to be in you."

She knelt down, straddling his hips and gripped his cock, guiding it into her eager body.

His back arched, driving him into her, sheathing himself to the hilt. She dropped her ass down onto his hips and held him there, not letting him move. Not yet.

He hissed and Nikki leaned forward to kiss him.

"Let's see how good you are, Jason."

"Yes, Mistress."

She raised herself up, and slid herself down, setting a very languid pace, fingering her clit with one hand, reaching back to caress his balls with the other.

A groan rumbled in his chest and he tensed his thighs, thrusting upward to meet her torturously slow grinding.

Fingers brushed over the base of his cock as Nikki stroked her clit. Bells knew she was teasing him, the edges of her fingernails and the tips of her fingers making contact with his erection with each downward motion of her hand as her hips lifted. He watched what she was doing intently, her face slightly flushed, eyes glazed with desire. He groaned, wanting more, wanting release.

Her own soft cries added even more urgency to the tension in his body.

She finally put on a burst of speed, that jarred him out of his reverie, her ass slamming into him, pressing him down into the mattress with each downward stroke, her need driving her to fuck herself on him. It was startling, a thrill to Bells as Nikki took her pleasure, giving him his as she screamed out his name, her yielding wet silk clasping him spasmodically, driving him over the edge into ecstasy.

He was still gasping out her name when Nikki fell limply forward, her head pillowed on his chest for a few moments as she caught her breath. Her hands roamed up his arms, fingers tugging out the knots tying him to the headboard.

"Yes, you were very good, Jason. Very good."

"Thank you, Mistress Nikki," he replied, turning his head to kiss her cheek, the words *I love you* unspoken on his lips.

\* \* \*

After cleaning up, Bells had taken a few of their trade goods with him on his quest for real food. Walking into the diner had been a decided mistake. It wasn't just the hostile looks, although they went a long way toward convincing him he should just head back to the motel. No. That wasn't what had caught his attention most. It was the way about half the men present looked at him. The same way the men at the gate had stared at Nikki. Leering. Lustful.

It was a little disconcerting, but if Nikki could live with it who was he to do any less?

The enticing aroma of freshly cooked food set his mouth watering and clinched his decision. He took a seat at the counter, patently ignoring the stares. There was no sense of danger coming from the men, no icy ant feet dancing the macarena down his spine.

No canned meals here. What he was smelling could only be home cooking.

It might just be worth getting roughed up a bit if he could get food for the pair of them. They were both starving.

A balding and rather fat man behind the counter favored him with a none too welcoming stare. He looked like the owner of the motel with an extra fifty pounds heaped onto an already overburdened frame. "You want something?"

He could feel the hostility in the air, but they had to have food. "Yeah, food. Man at the hotel said you did most of the cooking for the town."

"Don't come free," the man shot back.

"I wasn't looking for a handout.

"I'll take ammo for food," the man stated.

"That I don't have to spare."

"What do you have?"

He pulled the stuff he'd brought with him, setting it down on the counter. There was a gold ring set with a pair of diamond chips and a decent ruby, a jar of the caviar, and one of olives.

"Ain't none of that much use to me."

Bells sighed. "Any work you need done?"

A man at one of the nearby tables chuckled. "I need my dick sucked."

Bells turned to glance over his shoulder, regarding the man coolly. "My girl isn't for public use."

"Who said anything about your girl? Any man with hair like that's got to know how to suck cock." the man shot back, a big grin on his face.

Swiveling the seat around, Bells smiled frostily. "I bite."

The rest of the men in the diner broke out into rough laughter.

Getting out of his seat, the man approached Bells, a grin still plastered on his face. He topped the blond by half a head, and outweighed him by better than forty pounds, and very little of that was flab. "Damn you're a pretty boy, ain't you?"

"So people tell me."

"Pretty mouth, too."

"Fuck off." He said the words clearly, in a level non-sense tone.

It only made the man grin wider. "If you put out I pay for your meal, and one for your girl," the man told him, clearly spelling out what he was offering the blond.

There were two ways to go with the situation. Take him up on the offer, or refuse. The first was somewhat repugnant, the man didn't smell as if he'd bathed in over a week. The second might result in him getting the crap knocked out of him. He

couldn't risk having the whole town come down on them either over something as minor as being made to suck a cock. That was more repelling than harmful to him, and, his mind informed him he'd done it before. That revelation was a bit jarring, but little he might have done before could really take him off guard. He was too much of a cynical pragmatist not to have done things he'd be less than proud to admit.

"When was the last time you bothered to take a bath?"

"You saying I stink?" The man's smile faded a bit.

"Like shit," Bells told him.

"And if I was clean?"

Bells shrugged keeping his answer non-committal.

"Told you he was a faggot," one of the other men at a table chortled to the man seated across from him. "Pay up, Ron."

"I didn't say I was gay," Bells replied. "But my girl is hungry and so am I. Better for me to suck cock for our dinner than for me to expect her to do it. She's not a whore, and I don't let anyone treat her like one. Me, well I grew up in a big nasty city, so I know sometimes you've got to do shit you don't like in order to survive. Especially the way things are now."

It was more talking than he was used to doing, but if it kept him out of a fight it would be worth the effort. The Dragon was too close to breaking free as it was, and he didn't want to risk a fight, no matter how petty, that could set it loose.

"Where you from then?" the man behind the counter asked.

"New York City, to be exact," his mind supplied.

"Don't sound like you're from there."

"No, I suppose I don't. But I was just a kid when I left."

The big man standing in front of him laughed at that. "You're still a kid."

"Hardly," he replied dryly. Sighing, he noticed motion from the corner of his eye and realized it was Nikki crossing the

street, the assault rifle cradled in her arms.

Every single pair of eyes swiveled to watch her approach.

\* \* \*

They were all staring at her as she shoved the door open, the tableau of Bells seated, facing a larger overly sweat reeking man, everyone in the room frozen in place as if she'd hit pause on a DVD player. She smiled at Bells, staying by the door with the gun in her arms.

"I'm starving, are we going to eat soon?"

"Give the lady something to eat, Karl. She's too thin, no sense in letting her starve," the big man facing her lover said.

"Appreciated," she heard Bells say, his tone clipped. He was mad. At her, she could see it in the glance he shot at her.

Moving into the diner, she smiled at the men, her heart racing, wondering if she'd walked into some sort of danger. He'd told her to stay in the motel, but not knowing what was happening had driven her to come out, just to make sure he was all right. She was starting to wonder how much of a mistake she'd made when the man behind the counter set a bowl of stew down for her.

"Eat up. Luke's paying your way."

"Thank you," Nikki said, glancing at the man who was still standing over Bells, their positions unchanged. She shoved the bowl closer to the blond. "We could share."

"No, Nikki. That's for you."

His voice was chilly as he spoke to her, and she found herself worrying that he was angry with her for more than her arrival.

"Go on, darlin'," the man who was apparently named Luke told her. He leaned in a little closer to Bells and grinned in his face. "Does she know you suck cock?"

Nikki had just taken a bite of the stew when the man

blurted his question out. She started choking, gasping on the food that had gone down wrong.

Bells answered his question coolly. "My business is my own."

She grabbed for the glass of water the diner's owner offered her. He actually looked a bit worried, and she gave him a grateful smile. But the words the men had just exchanged...what the hell was going on? Bells...her Jason, sucking cock? No. There was just something strange happening, something she'd walked into that wouldn't make sense because she hadn't heard the start of the conversation.

The way he fucked he could *not* be gay.

She turned and looked at him. Long hair. Handsome face, body to die for. *Oh God! Not possible, Nikki. Get a grip.*

But she'd known a gay man at work who'd been married and had three children before his wife divorced him to marry another man, not because he hadn't been faithful, but because *she* hadn't.

*No. This cannot be happening.*

Lost in her own fears, Nikki had missed part of the conversation. But she didn't miss seeing Luke reach one big rugged hand out to touch the blond's mouth much the same way Bells himself had caressed her lips.

He moved away from the touch. "Don't," he said in a voice that held a note of serious menace in it. Nikki felt herself breathe a sigh of relief as she made another attempt to eat the stew.

"Changing your tune now that the woman's here, huh? Okay. We can talk more later." The big man walked away and Bells turned his seat around to face the counter.

"You folks have a doctor here?" she asked after she swallowed a mouthful of the food. It was good, real beef, potatoes and carrots with a hint of onion and garlic. If nothing else the food was almost worth whatever danger they were

facing. And, from the icy expression on the blond's face they were in some kind of serious trouble.

Something the man at the gate, Murph, had said to came back to her then.

"We got enough of *your kind* here already." He'd thought Bells was gay.

The implication behind the words hit her.

There were gays in town. Maybe a lot of them.

And one of them wanted *her* man.

\* \* \*

Bells's eyes widened in shock as Nikki turned and grabbed his shoulders, laying a smoldering kiss on his mouth in front of everyone in the diner, one hand sliding up to grip the braids at the nape of his neck.

Breaking off the kiss, she glowered at the room full of men. "Just in case any of you boys were getting ideas, he belongs to me!" Her voice had a hard edge to it, and her hand was still tangled in his hair. "And I *don't* loan him out."

There were a few laughs. Luke actually smiled at her, showing crooked teeth. "So he's your boy? And here we thought the boy had himself a woman. Turns out she's the one in charge."

"You better believe it, and no one plays with my toy but me."

She saw Bells staring at her, his expression clearly showing that he was wondering what she was up to. Trying to save his ass—literally—from the sound of it, the very same way he'd been trying to protect her from the men at the gate. He gave her a very slight almost smirking ghost of a smile and a tiny nod of his head. His eyes glittered. Amusement. She could see it clearly.

It was more emotion than she could recall him evincing in public before.

She dropped a hand on this thigh and gave a proprietary squeeze, "I've got me a good one here, I don't plan on giving him up. Not even for an hour."

"What if we took him from you?" one of the other men asked.

He watched as the woman looked over her shoulder at the speaker, her face locked in a decidedly unfriendly glare, full of menace and confidence. "You're welcome to try, but I'd have to kill you."

The cool confidence in Nikki's voice startled Bells as much as the kiss had, but he kept the reaction off his face this time. The funny thing was, he got the distinct impression she wasn't bluffing. This time he didn't even try to hide his smile of amusement.

The diner's owner was regarding Nikki thoughtfully. "You said something about a doctor? You know where we can find one?"

Nikki nodded. "Right here," Bells heard her say. "I'm a doctor."

"Hell, woman, why didn't one of you come out and say so!" Luke stated enthusiastically. "We haven't had a doc around here since the Plague. If you're the worst quack ever given a degree you'd be better than anything we've got."

"Lots of folks need doctoring around here, too," another man added from where he sat down the counter from them. "My wife's expecting. I'd be willing to pay your boy's meal if you come and check on her."

"Food for her and your boy's on the house," the diner's owner stated. "Soon as you're done eating, you can start doctoring with me. I got a sore foot that's driving me crazy. Frank over there can pay your breakfast. You earn a meal for every person you take care of, sound reasonable?"

Nikki grinned at Bells and nodded. "Sure."

Her hand squeezed his leg and she smiled at him. "All right then," he replied, his admiration for going up another notch. She'd solved their problem, rather than adding to it. He nodded to the diner's owner as the man put a bowl of the stew down.

"Eat up. If she can fix this damned foot of mine, you'll both get seconds."

"Deal," Nikki told the man. "If you've got any medical supplies, I'd like to have use of them, if no one minds. We don't have any."

"You'll get whatever you need," Luke told her. "Just tell us what you need and we'll get it for you. As needed, of course."

Bells took a bite of the stew. "You're right," he told Nikki, "This is good. Real good."

They ate, then Nikki took care of the man's foot, digging a piece of glass out of the heel and treating him for an infection as Bells watched, the blond still wary of the people. His worry was unfounded, and before the hour was out they had another patient and the use of some medicines that the residents of Danbridge had been hoarding. They'd also had their fill of stew and fresh baked bread, and had received five bullets for his .375 which pleased him.

The cool ping of tension that had kept him on the alert faded and he finally relaxed somewhat, able to stand nearby and watch Nikki as she worked, realizing as he did that she was an excellent physician.

## *Chapter Nine*

Word spread fast through Danbridge that Nikki was a doctor. Before the pair knew what had hit them, she was flooded with patients in need of care, most of them from the town itself, but others coming in from outlying farmsteads and more distant towns once the only working radio station in the area transmitted the news.

She diagnosed and treated people as best as she could. After a few days they let her into the nearest thing to a hospital they had where she could dispense medications they'd been hoarding in their combination clinic and pharmacy since the Collapse. All the medical people in town had died when the plague swept through, and they were only too pleased to give her free rein to take care of those people who really needed her help. In exchange they gave them more ammunition, food and water, and one of the older men helped Bells rig hard shelled saddle bags for the back of his bike. It would let them carry what they needed and alleviate the backpack Bells had been wearing. The bike was heavier, harder to handle, but he assured Nikki it wasn't too much for him to control. She took his word for it.

Nikki wasn't the only one who had skills that could help the townsfolk. Bells taught a few of them, two women and a man, how to reload bullets, and repaired a trio of machine guns they'd gotten from a National Guard armory. They had stopped working for reasons too complex for the townsfolk to handle, but, with a little assistance at the local machine shop he soon

had all three guns working. He helped convert several of their cars to burn alcohol, adding to the capabilities of their police force.

Once people realized that the man with the bells in his hair and the pretty woman weren't going to do anyone any harm, and that they weren't spies sent by any of the Warlords—local or otherwise—the way they were treated changed. The sheriff even offered to have another house added to the power grid if they'd just stay.

And they'd considered it, until the day a Hummer carrying a pair of Rangers showed up.

Not wanting to bring that kind of trouble down on the people in Danbridge—even as well armed as they were, with the wall to help protect them—the pair came to the conclusion that they'd have to leave rather than jeopardize the town because there was no possible way for Danbridge to hold off the Rangers if they came in force.

Not when Roderik could send tanks to back up his killers.

One thing they had found out was that the Rangers were looking for three men and a woman, and had given descriptions of Hawk, Dal, Nikki, and Bells, going so far as to mention the first three by name. They were termed *hunted outlaws* in the eyes of the King of the Lone Star Empire, but none of that held any weight to the people in Danbridge. The Empire's most northern border was still far to the south and the laws of their self-proclaimed king didn't extend anywhere near them.

But, knowing they were being actively sought meant Bells and Nikki had to leave rather than bring any trouble down on the townsfolk.

To the sorrow of the folks in Danbridge, they set a day when they'd be moving on. It was getting well into fall now, and if they didn't go soon snow would keep them from leaving until

spring.

At the urging of a larger community farther north, they decided that would be where they went. It would keep Nikki where she was needed. She was the only doctor within two hundred miles, and she derived a sense of accomplishment from using her knowledge to help people who appreciated her efforts.

\* \* \*

The whole community had turned out on their last night in town to say their goodbyes and to throw the biggest party they'd had in a long time, everyone pulling out the stops for the potluck at the diner. Strings of Christmas lights ringed the outside of the diner and hung around the room inside, draped the counter, and ran down the street from building to building. The band had set up on the street and there were tables and chairs lining the sidewalk and street, the center of the intersection left as a place for folks to dance.

Nikki smiled at Bells as he spun her around, then stepped away as the line of men and women separated, the square dance caller leading them apart.

During their few weeks in town he'd changed, losing some of the coldness, the killer taking a back seat to the man. Or was it the Dragon? She wasn't sure, but she did know one thing with heart-wrenching certainty. She was in love. She'd never felt as strongly attracted or as emotionally attached to any man in her life. Sure, she'd been in love before, but this was different. This wasn't just a desire to be with him, it was a need. An ache. When they were apart she missed him, looked for him, listened for the sound of his voice.

But even through his smiles, through their lovemaking, she could tell he was holding himself a little aloof. Keeping his distance. Avoiding attachments.

It wasn't in anything he did, or said, that showed he was

holding back. It was in his eyes. In the way he looked at her sometimes. Or in the way he wouldn't look at her at others.

Knowing he wasn't in love with her left an aching emptiness in her heart. But she could take it so long as he was there. And he'd promised, *promised* to always take care of her, and that was something she believed.

It wasn't enough. But it was better than losing him completely.

They were back together, spinning with the caller's orders, dancing to the sound of the town band amid a crowd of laughing, happy people.

Taken away from Bells again, Nikki found herself paired with Luke. A bathed and smiling Luke.

"We're sure gonna miss you, Doc Nikki. We really are." He put his hands on her waist as they wove between the other dancers.

"Well, Colby isn't that far away."

"Sure we can't convince you to stay?"

Nikki smiled, "Colby's got more of a militia, I think we'll be safer there, and they'll be able to handle the Rangers better. You know how those bastards are, I wouldn't want you folks have to take them on for our sakes."

"Yeah, they had no call to shoot Clyde the way they did. None at all."

"Well, he should be able to go back on guard duty by the end of the month. So long as he does as he is told and stays off that leg."

"He will, I'll see to that," Luke asserted. "Missy sure does wish you'd stay on a little longer. What with her being so close to having that baby."

"I know that, too," Nikki said, glancing at the hugely pregnant woman who was seated on a bench near the door of the

diner. There were two little girls, tow-headed, blue-eyed, hanging on her, both of them eating candy apples and laughing.

The music ended and Luke grinned at her as he took a step away from her, giving Nikki distance now that the dance was over. "Any chance of me borrowing that boy of yours?"

Nikki frowned. "Now, Luke, I've already told you no several times."

"Yeah," the big man glanced at the blond who was heading their way, "but I had to ask one last time. He's got such a pretty mouth, and that ass of his, whoohoo."

She couldn't help but smile at the man's words, "Yeah, he's got a fine butt, doesn't he?"

"Damn right he does."

"Yet again I find myself the object of a discussion," Bells said dryly, but there was a sparkle in his eyes that Nikki caught before his gaze went hooded and unreadable.

Nikki felt a thrill as he slid his arm around her possessively, and she leaned into the contact, taking what she could get, even if it wasn't love. Affection was something at least.

"Matt wants me to play guitar for a bit, do you mind?" he asked her.

"No, of course not."

"I'll keep her out of trouble," Luke promised.

"Yeah, but who's going to keep you out of trouble?" he countered, giving Nikki a gentle squeeze.

"Well, that's one I'm sure I don't have an answer for, what with Clyde being stuck in that wheelchair for the whole party." He grinned at the blond. "Of course, I'd be happy to let you get me in trouble if you get bored with our fine Doc here."

Nikki heard the silken laugh, saw the glitter in her lover's gaze, and wondered if, maybe, they'd done something she didn't know about. She didn't think they had, but there was something

in the way Bells looked at the bigger man that made her suspicious. She'd never gotten up the courage to ask, nor was she sure she would have wanted an answer.

"Okay, Matt's waiting for me. He's starving and they can't play anything until I get back over there." He gave her a quick kiss and was gone.

Nikki watched him go, then realized that Luke was watching him, too.

"He's in love," he commented to her in a quiet, very thoughtful tone.

"Love? Bells?" she laughed, but there wasn't any humor in it. "No. He just likes the sex."

Luke regarded her quietly. "He might never say it, Nikki, but believe me, I know what I'm talking about. He loves you." The man gave her a sad smile. "Lucky girl. I'd trade my right nut to have a man like that."

Nikki blinked. Glanced at her blond lover as he strummed a chord on the guitar, made an adjustment, and smiled at the rest of the people in the band.

*Can Luke be right?* she asked herself.

She didn't have a chance to think much more about what the man had said because she got swept up in the dancing and the farewell party, which went on far later into the night than anyone had anticipated.

But she did learn two things about her lover.

He could play guitar with the best of them.

And he had the most wonderful singing voice she'd ever heard because he'd sung a song, a love ballad from some rock group she only vaguely remembered, and it had brought tears to her eyes because he'd been looking at her as he'd sung it.

Luke, standing nearby, his hand on Clyde's shoulder, gave her a slight nod of his head and a knowing smile.

Maybe he was right. But she wouldn't get her hopes up over one song and a nice time at a party.

\* \* \*

Bells shoved the door to their motel room closed, the last of their well wishers calling out their farewells as he turned the lock. "Damn..." he muttered, and noticed through the crack between the drapes that the dim pastels of dawn were starting to color the horizon. "We should be leaving right about now. That was the plan anyway."

Nikki laughed behind him. "Best laid plans of mice and Dragons."

"No shit," he agreed, turning around to find her getting undressed, her back turned to him, long curls of chestnut hair tumbling free as she pulled off her knit sweater, the pale glimmer of her skin drawing his gaze like a candle drew moths.

His mouth went dry and something south of his gunbelt stirred to life.

She was so beautiful. Gorgeous.

"I just about danced my feet off," she remarked as she tossed her bra aside, then shoved her shoes under the edge of the bed.

He'd watched her dress and undress dozens of times in the last few weeks, and the sight of her creamy skin never ceased to get him hard, or make him want what she had to offer. Crossing the few steps between, then he slid his hands around her waist, fingers finding her hands as she unfastened the button of her jeans.

"Hey," he whispered, pressing his face into her hair.

"Hey," she replied softly. Her hands went still under his, and she leaned back into the warmth of his embrace.

Bells just stood there, holding her, wanting so much to tell her how he felt. But he didn't dare. He couldn't bring himself to

say it, to let her know what he was feeling. It wasn't fair to her. Wasn't right for Nikki either, much as he wanted her, ached for her.

"Tired?"

"Yeah," she agreed.

"Okay," he murmured, helping her out of her jeans, pulling the covers back so she could slip into the bed. He pulled them over her, leaning down to press a gentle kiss on her mouth. "Sleep well, Nikki."

"Hmmm..." she wound her arms around his neck and pulled him down for another kiss. "Coming to bed?"

"Yeah."

Her arms slid away, to let him get undressed.

Shoving his revolver under the pillow, he got into bed beside her, turning on his side to wrap his arms around her firmly muscled body, fingers tracing along the curve of her hip. He liked her contrasts. Firm muscle with soft curves. It was a sweet combination that turned his blood to flame.

Bells smiled when she snuggled back into his embrace, her cold feet pressing to his under the covers, his face buried into the curls of her faintly rose scented hair. Even being able to hold her was good. Felt right. And was so very wrong.

He was starting not to care, and that was dangerous. Wrong or right, he wanted Nikki. The real question was did she want him? And if she did, what the hell were they going to do?

*I've got to be out of my mind, thinking that she'd want me, or that it could work for us.*

\* \* \*

Nikki lay within the circle of Bells's arms, thinking long after the slow, even breathing from him told her that he slept. She loved him. But she didn't want to make him feel trapped or pressured. He'd been saddled with the job of protecting her by

Hawk, not of his own volition. And the way things had gone down, the attack on the farm house that had killed the others, had left him no other options.

She also knew he felt guilty as hell over Anya. He'd already said as much, telling her it had been his fault.

But it hadn't. Nikki never even considered that. He'd done everything humanly, and even probably inhumanly, possible to save both of them.

As fate—luck or destiny, karma, whatever label you slapped on it—would have it she'd been the one still alive out of their little family when the last bullet had been fired.

He gave a quiet sigh in his sleep, muttering softly. The words were something she'd heard him say before, always in his sleep. But she never understood what he said beyond, knowing it wasn't in English.

It was strange really. Not just the fact that he spoke other languages, and only when he was sleeping, but there was also tonight. She hadn't known he could play guitar, or sing. He'd never mentioned it. Hell, she hadn't even known he could dance. He looked so young, and she knew he wasn't. But he hadn't told her how old he was, even the one time she'd gotten brave and asked. It was very possible he didn't even know himself.

*Maybe that's the answer. He just doesn't remember his life before the crash.*

There was also the fact that they didn't really talk very often. Not about the past. His or hers. Or the future. Ditto. Everything they talked about was set in the moment. Immediate. The only plans for their future they'd made was the decision to leave Danbridge in favor of Colby which was even farther from Roderik's influence. Running away rather than facing the problem.

But what else could they do? Face Roderik? Hawk had told

her only a Dragon could kill a Dragon. So the only way to get rid of Roderik once and forever was for Bells to kill him.

But the opposite was also true. Roderik could kill the smaller man.

Good as the blond was, Nikki wasn't sure he could manage to kill the other Dragon without help. And Roderik was incredibly dangerous, especially since he came complete with the Rangers and a whole damned army of like-minded homicidal goons.

She wanted to stay with Bells for the rest of her life, but what sort of future could they have? He was an Immortal, and in a few all too short years she'd die. Of course he couldn't love her. It would be a waste of his time.

She felt for his hand and gripped it gently, feeling him nuzzle her hair, but she could tell he wasn't truly awake. His body was relaxed in a way he only got when he was sleeping. She could feel calluses from the work he'd been doing around town, helping them refurbish different buildings, repairing their guns. Practicing his fighting skills.

Someone had even found a katana stuffed in an attic and given it to him. It wasn't in the best condition, but he'd said it would suffice for the time being.

\* \* \*

Bells squeezed Nikki's hand gently. "Sleep baby," he murmured. He'd drifted off, but her tenseness had awakened. Something was bothering her. Probably upset about leaving, or just thinking about losing her friends, her family.

He couldn't replace them. He wanted to ease the pain in her soul, and he couldn't do that either.

"Jason?"

"Hmm?"

"Have you ever been in love with someone?"

"Yeah." He wouldn't lie to her about that. No real point in it anyway. "Why?"

"I was just wondering if an Immortal has the same emotions as other people."

"Oh." He inhaled deeply, taking in her scent, the Dragon shifting in its chains. He wanted her, but pushed the desire away. But, persistent, it sat there coiling at the base of his cock demanding to be satiated. She was tired. He was tired.

"Do you?"

"What?" he asked. Her maddening fragrance and the thoughts it generated in his mind, the reaction of his body, had conspired to distract him.

"Have the same emotions us mortals do?"

"Yes, Nikki, we do." He drew in another breath of her, the perfume of her body, the sweet musk of female slipping through his defenses easier than any bullet could ever do. Closing his eyes, his cock hardening, he started to reach for her breast...and stopped himself cold. Angry at his lack of self-control, he rolled over and stared at the wall. The desire coursed through his blood, making the Dragon strain at the hold he had on it. Soon, very soon, he wouldn't be able to control it anymore. And when that happened he had to be far from Nikki. Very far. She had to be safe. Safe with people who'd take care of her. Because he wouldn't be able to do it anymore.

Tears slipped from beneath his closed eyes. He had to stop thinking about her. Had to stop wanting her because his love would burn her to ash. Only a certain type of woman could stand in the combined conflagration of Warrior's Fire and Dragon's soul and not be scorched.

A woman like Kimiko.

And Kimi had been a Roe Deer like Nikki.

*Maybe that's why I'm drawn to her, the animal is the same.*

*But the women aren't. Nikki isn't Kimiko.* His teeth gritted together, grinding, his whole body going tense with the effort to contain the tears and the damned Dragon.

A gentle hand touched his shoulder and he jumped.

"Jason, is something wrong?"

"I'm just tired, Nikki." And that was *definitely* a lie.

Sometimes lies were easier and safer than truths. Truths could hurt so much more, and he didn't want to hear Nikki say he was a great fuck, but there was no possible way she could love someone like him.

Hell, she didn't even think he had emotions like other people.

Her soft lips touched his, and he turned his head away.

"Jason."

"I told you, I'm tired, Nikki." His words came out as a snarl, voice a growl of repressed emotions.

\* \* \*

Angry. Bells was terribly angry with her, and she didn't understand why.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, scooting away to lie there with her back to him.

His presence so near beckoned. But he'd made it very plain she wasn't wanted. She'd wondered what she'd done to upset him so much. Everything had seemed normal when they went to bed. And there'd been the song....

"Don't be sorry, Nikki." She felt him turn over, his back to her. He was facing the door now, and she felt a chasm opening up between them. One without a bridge. Tears stung her eyes.

She told herself she was being stupid. Tired and weepy. A total moron.

He did sound tired. Exhausted, and she'd been trying to entice him into having sex, mistakenly thinking he'd want it. But

he hadn't. Maybe he just did it to keep her content and quiet, though she wasn't so far gone into emotional self-doubts that she'd think he hadn't really enjoyed fucking her. But maybe he was tired of pretending he wanted to go through the lengthy foreplay, or letting her have control of the situation.

Or he might just be tired like he said.

She surreptitiously wiped at the tears in her eyes feeling all alone and lost. Confused over so many things. He'd sung a song to her. A love ballad, and he'd sounded as if he'd meant every word. Sex with him wasn't just a quick fuck and goodnight ma'am. He made love. Passionate, fiery love. He smiled and joked with her, became someone else when they were alone. Jason. Her Jason.

And he'd almost been that man tonight. Playing guitar, dancing with her. His eyes had been warm, friendly, and alive. The killer and the Dragon put aside for an evening.

But like all dreams, it had ended. The killer was back, the Dragon's snarl in his voice.

She didn't want the man who called himself Bells—they weren't the same. Bells was a cold son of a bitch. Jason was a lover who played guitar and sang to her.

And it was Jason she wanted. It was him she loved.

Not the killer. Not the Dragon.

She loved the man underneath the power and death.

Tired as she was, it was a long time before she fell asleep.

\* \* \*

Black edged red scales, crimson wings, and ravening claws that tore flesh. A scream of rage burst from his lips and he recoiled from the attack. Acid pain burned through him his own Dragon answering the challenge, fighting back with claws that ripped his dark opponent's chest.

The black Dragon roared, talons raking for the aqua Dragon

it faced.

Flames rose up around them. Inky black shot with crimson and burning emerald and aqua shot through with mist that burned like a glacial wind.

The blast swept outward from the combatants, a whirlwind of flame and destruction that charred the gathered armies into ash, melted the steel of vehicles and burned the images of the soldiers into concrete walls as the concrete itself cracked under the intensity of the unnatural fire.

The gold edged scales of the aqua dragon darkened under the assault, the red scaled Immortal's hide beginning to melt in the hellish inferno, the men that housed the powerful Beasts crumpling to the melting ground beneath their feet as the Dragons at the heart of their beings fought it out for supremacy.

But there was nothing left to win.

Both armies were dead or dying, and the town the Dragons had been contending over was in flames, the townsfolk killed in the backwash of the battle.

\* \* \*

The dream-memory dissolved, leaving uneasy images of death and destruction roiling around in his mind. But Bells was already rolling out of bed, leaving Nikki's side, a glacier wrapped in lava, igniting body into action, mind screaming the coming danger out to his nerves, supercharging him for action. Warrior's Fire burning in his soul. But that was safe because it wasn't part of the Dragon. It had always been there for him to tap, even before he stopped being Jason and became Bells and turned into the Dragon. "Nikki, get dressed. Fast! There's trouble."

He didn't have to repeat his warning. She sat up and reached for her clothes, rubbing her eyes. "What's wrong?"

"I think the Rangers have come back. This feels bad. Really

bad," he told her as he finished pulling on his boots. He already had his jeans and shirt on, his gunbelt around his hips. It was dark in the room. He could smell rain, feel the dampness in the air. He could also feel how late in the day it was. They should have been hours gone already.

"I don't hear anything," she told him. From the corner of his eye he could see she was shaking as the adrenaline blazed a path through her, but she wasn't paralyzed with fear the way some women got, and her ability to function, to react in a crisis with calm self-assurance was part of why he was so damned attracted to her. She didn't run around screaming or looking for a place to hide. She looked for a gun and whoever needed to be shot. In a world like the one in which they lived, a man couldn't have found a better woman than Nikki.

He planned on making sure she lived by keeping her as far away from danger as he could.

Another plan he had was to get her somewhere there were men deserving of such a woman. Somewhere like Colby.

"Get our stuff packed. I'm going out to alert Luke and the others."

"I'm on it," she replied.

She was already dressed and slipping into her shoulder holster as he left.

Hopping on the bike, he kicked it to life and roared down the street toward the southern gate, knowing that was the direction from where the Rangers were coming. He got there fast, kicking the stand down but leaving the bike running. He didn't even bother with the stairs up the wall, instead taking a few running steps and jumping to land beside a startled Murph.

"What in hell's fire are you doing out here?"

"We've got company coming, and it's not the kind you'd invite to dinner," he told the other man.

"What company? I don't see anyone on the road," Murph replied. The man squinted into the darkening evening, but the rain made a blur of the distance and there were too many rises and dips in the roadway out of town.

Standing there considering what he should do, Bells heard a faint sound far out into the rain soaked distance. A sound his memory knew but his conscious couldn't quite identify.

He leaned forward on the edge of the wall, eyes closed, straining to hear, to remember.

Eyes gone the grey of the storm clouds overhead, Bells turned to Murph. "Ring the alarm, Murph, that's a tracked vehicle I'm hearing. An armored personnel carrier, if I'm not mistaken."

The man's eyes bugged out and he mashed the button that would activate the town's emergency sirens. They'd been installed for tornado alerts back in the 50s, but every resident in town knew there were two different and very distinctive wails the sirens could make since they'd been upgraded. The long, slow wail was for weather advisories. Short honks were to alert the town to incoming warlord based activity.

The sirens were honking like psychotic geese as people boiled out of their homes, most of the women and every child in town were running to the emergency shelter hidden under the old fire station. Men and the more militant women came running to the gates, arms brimming with various combat related hardware.

Grinning, Luke and his lover's son Ted bounded up the stairs. "Bet that old bastard Roderik sent his boys back like they promised last month."

Bells nodded. "They've got heavy gear with them, an APC at least."

Luke's eyes widened, but he was grinning, "Well, damn

boy, they must want your owner pretty bad then, huh?"

"Well, don't just stand there! Get your shit, grab your girl, and take the north gate out of town," Ted told the blond. "No sense hanging around here."

"If it comes down to a fight..." Bells started to argue.

"We'll handle them, is what. Now get going. Leastwise when Sheriff Dobbs and me tell them you're not here, we won't be lying." Luke patted the blond on the shoulder, "Besides, you'd already be gone if we hadn't had that party."

Bell studied the man for a moment as Sheriff Dobbs puffed his way up the stairs.

"Boy, what you doing standing there, get the fuck out of town!" the man ordered. He grinned, "Well, git!"

He gave the old man a brief nod. "Luck."

"You, too, young fella. Take care of that girl of yours, she's a special one," the elderly sheriff said.

"Yeah, she is," he agreed. He jumped from the top of the wall and headed for his bike as the rain started to pelt down.

\* \* \*

Nikki peered from the door of the motel. There was no sign of Bells, and it was raining hard.

The siren kept blaring and she glanced at the office of the motel, wondering if anyone would know what was going on.

Women and children were pouring out of their homes, heading for the emergency shelter.

An elderly woman she recognized, Mary Kate, waved at her. "Come on, girl, time to get under cover and let the militia handle whatever's going on."

"Does anyone know is happening?" Nikki asked, taking a step out of the door to glance up the street.

"Not a clue, honey. But if that siren's going it's not something good," the old woman told her. "Johnny, go on with

your sister," she urged a young boy, gently pushing the girl after her brother before she walked over to Nikki.

"Your man gone to the gate?"

"Yeah."

"Best grab a few things and come on then, honey. He knows what he's doing, let him do it."

"We were supposed to leave."

"Not much chance of that now." She looked into the motel room, "You're all packed. Best grab that stuff, I'll help. But we need to get you hid. Pretty girl like you, and a doctor, too, like as not if whoever's at our gate gets in they'll make a grab for you."

"I know, Mary Kate. But...I can't just hide. People might need my help if they're injured."

"Well, come on then, we'll go over to the clinic and get things ready."

Nikki nodded, pulled the door of their room closed, and followed the elderly woman to the clinic. They turned the lights on and started getting out things they would need to treat injuries like gunshots.

She was just starting to organize a few more volunteers, older women mostly, when she heard the sound of her lover's motorcycle.

"Nikki!"

The door flew open, and he came running, dripping water. "Come on, we're leaving. Sheriff's orders."

"But, what if someone is hurt..." she began.

Mary Kate shook her head, "No, girl, if Dobbs wants you out of town, you just go. Those men are probably here looking for you, and if that's the case the sooner you're gone the better."

Bells was taking his jacket off, water running in a puddle onto the floor. "Come on, Nikki," he told her as he held out the coat.

She gave Mary Kate and the other pair of women quick hugs and hauled the heavy armored jacket on, shivering at its chilliness.

Sweeping an arm around her, Bells led her to his bike, which was already loaded with their things.

From the doorway of the clinic Mary Kate called, "Be well and happy girl! You've got yourself a good one there, don't ever let him go!"

As they got on the bike Nikki glanced at Bells. At the cold grey eyes and the emotionless mask of his face. He was being unusually brusque as he fitted the helmet over her head and slipped onto the seat behind her, kicking the bike to life without a word.

She waved to the elderly woman watching them as long as she could. Within a moment they were racing through the driving rain, speeding through the open north gates of Danbridge into the growing darkness.

## *Chapter Ten*

Bells stopped the motorcycle, pulling off the road into a parking lot filled with rusting, weather battered cars. Most of the plants in the medians between parking areas were dead, though a few hardy perennials struggled for survival in a weed choked flower bed.

He rolled the bike slowly through the one of broken doors in the shopping center, choosing the furniture store both because it offered somewhere comfortable for them to wait out the storm, and because it looked to have suffered the least from the depredations of the looters that had ravaged the rest of the businesses.

"D...don't you...w...want to go far...farther?" Nikki asked him. Her teeth were chattering so badly she could barely speak.

"No," he told her as he helped the woman off the bike. She was freezing cold. If she got pneumonia from the soaking it was going to be difficult for them to keep traveling. And Colby was another three or four days farther north. He stared out into the darkness at the pounding rain. At higher elevations that hard rain might be falling as snow. If it was they might not be able to reach Colby until spring. That would mean turning around, and returning to Danbridge which wasn't a viable option. Not when the Rangers were already there looking for them.

He grabbed a mattress that was covered in dust and weather spotting and flipped it over. At least that side would be cleaner, though it still smelled musty to him. Bringing out their sleeping

bags, he spread one out on the bed.

"Get out of your clothes."

Her dark eyes regarded him in the intense gloom. He knew she couldn't see him. She pulled his jacket off and stood there, unable to see where she should put it down.

"I'll light a candle," he told her and did just that, setting it down on a nearby display table, the single wick casting a dim glow over the bed.

The sodden jacket went over the equally wet seat of the motorcycle. She was struggling with her clothes, shivering so bad she couldn't make her hands work.

He gripped her shirt and pulled it over her head, feeling the icy cold of her skin, a growing sense of alarm starting to ring through his head. She was too cold, possibly hypothermic, and that sent a bite of panic through him. He had her undressed and down on the bed, his own dripping clothes gone, in the space of a few heartbeats. He drew the other sleeping bag over them like a comforter and held her close.

The rain hadn't affected him much, the Warrior's Fire keeping him warm. But Nikki was icy.

He rubbed her skin, trying to restore warmth.

"C...cold..." she got out.

It was a surprise when she grabbed the back of his head and pulled his face down to kiss him with lips that felt like snow from the chill gripping her body.

"Is that what you want, Nikki?" he asked her quietly, breaking their kiss at the same time.

"Y...yes...Make...m...me warm..." she got out through chattering teeth.

"Anything you want, baby," he whispered, kissing her, running his hands over her shivering body. She was cold, and she wanted him to warm her. Much as he knew he had to stop

this thing between them, he just couldn't. Not yet. Not when she really needed him right now.

\* \* \*

Nikki felt his hands burning on her icy skin, the heat of his body as welcome as his caresses. Shivering, she guided him over her, wanting to feel more of his skin, of his firm body pressed to hers. She wasn't afraid of him. Killer though he was, she didn't fear anything about him because she knew in her heart, to the depths of her soul, he wouldn't hurt her the way Roderik had.

He was a study in strange contradictions. Dispassionate killer, wildly passionate lover. Gentle to women, kind to children, but ruthless to anyone who stood in his way.

There was a building heat inside her, low in her belly, the ache starting despite how cold she still was. Firm lips closed over her left nipple in a searing kiss made all the hotter for her having been drenched in icy rain. She gasped, back arching into the touch, her arms wrapping around him, hanging on, forcing Bells to stay where he was, to keep doing what he was doing.

When no resistance was forthcoming, Nikki smiled. Her shivering abated under his caresses. As he continued to lick and kiss his way over her breasts and throat, driving away the iciness, she moaned quietly, letting him hear her enjoyment. Getting a bit bolder, Nikki started exploring his body with her hands, caressing along his shoulders and upper arms, touching, loving the feel of him, the sound of him as he reacted to her fingers on his erection.

His mouth wended its slow, torturous way down her body, along her left leg, up her right leg. She was hot and wet, the ache between her thighs so intense when he blew gently across the dark curls at her cleft she whimpered and spread her legs wide, inviting more. A light caress, teasing stiffness, lapped at the cream on her tender lips, slipped into the nest of curls to find

petals of a delicate tenderness.

Nikki screamed at the jolt of near climax that shocked through her. She was so hot, wanting and wanton. Sitting up, she pushed him over on his back, a handful of his braids firmly gripped in her hand, and straddled his face. Hearing his soft murmur of enjoyment at the pull on his hair, she lowered herself and felt a second white-heat shock as he thrust his tongue deeply into her folds to find the entrance of her sex.

Gasping, Nikki bucked her hips, riding his mouth, his hands on her hips aiding her balance rather than rejecting her desires.

"Jason, pleasure me."

He laughed softly. "Yes, Mistress."

Her breath caught and his tongue sank as deeply as he could thrust into her body before sliding out, lapping at her clit and darting into her yielding cunt. He repeated the lick and thrust until Nikki was writhing on his face, hands locked in his braids. She felt herself teetering at the brink, body shuddering.

Hands grabbed her hips, pulling her down tightly to his mouth, his thrusting tongue dancing inside her, driving her over the edge, a scream torn from her lips.

Spent, warmed by her orgasm, Nikki eased the tightness of her grip in his hair, becoming aware in the languid after glow that his tongue was still busy.

A shudder passed through her and she moved away, sitting down on the bed to look at him.

"You really do like that, don't you?" she asked him softly.

He smiled, eyes bright with amusement and passion. "What do you think?" he countered turning onto his side and sliding a finger where his tongue had been.

Nikki gasped, but swatted his hand away. "And you don't mind me taking control like that?"

He sat up, the stiff rod between his thighs showing a

glistening bead of arousal; his own desire pulsed through the flesh with each beat of his heart. Nikki smiled. There'd been a shop they'd passed. She remembered despite the shivering that had wracked her.

*Naughty Nat's.*

A sex toy shop.

"Feel like going for a little walk?" she asked him.

\* \* \*

"A walk? Where to?" The woman was up to something, he could see it in her eyes.

"There's a store back that way." She pointed out the front doors and he raised an eyebrow, prompting her to add, "Naughty Nat's."

Bells couldn't help himself, he grinned. "Sounds fun if there's anything left of the stuff."

She was reaching for her wet clothes as he rolled off the bed. "We can walk along under the eaves of the stores. That way we won't get wet."

"Sounds like a plan."

Man, did it ever sound like plan, and he wondered exactly what she was going to do.

The excitement was killing him. And so was buttoning the fly of his dry pants over an erection as stiff as granite.

They walked down the shopping plaza, staying under the overhang to keep dry. He had his arm around her waist, protectively. He smiled as Nikki slid her arm around him, leaning into his body. The shops were looted, but from the windows he could see there were a lot of things remaining inside. Once the sun rose it might be a good idea to search through the wreckage and see if they could find anything of use.

"I wish we had a flashlight," Nikki sighed as they paused at the door to the sex toy store.

Bells pulled a candle out of his pocket and struck a match, lighting it as he stepped across the mound of broken glass where the shop window had been. He helped Nikki inside and paused. "What are you looking for specifically?"

"I'll let you know when I find it," she replied enigmatically, a little smile twitching the corners of her mouth. She took the candle from him. "You wait here, I'll be back."

His cock jumped and he swallowed, mouth gone dry at the thought of what she might be looking for inside. It excited him, not being allowed to go with her sent a flash of slow burning heat through his body. "Yes, mistress," he replied. His eyes glittered with anticipation and he knew she could see that eagerness. He didn't care. He was eager, and his passion for her was only growing with each and every thing she did to him. With him.

"Good boy," she said as she walked cautiously away, careful of the debris littering the floor.

She moved off with the candle, and he watched her progress through the store intently, watching what she was doing.

"Hey, turn around. I don't want you to know what I'm getting and I know you can see."

He laughed. "Damn. You're going to kill me with the suspense."

"Suspense is good for you," she replied lightly. "Now turn around."

Her voice was insistent, a sharp order. Smiling broadly, he did as she asked, turning his back to her, staring out into the rainy night. The nagging urge for a cigarette hit him and he sighed, not because he wanted it, but because he had none. At least smoking would have killed some time and given him something to do while the woman strolling through Naughty

Nat's selected some toys. It would also have kept him from thinking on the things he was hoping she'd get.

Whatever she brought he'd put to use however she wanted. He smiled, because their little power exchange was so enjoyable for him. He could be Billy-badass whenever it was required, and let her be 'Mistress Nikki' the rest of the time. It suited him just fine.

"Oh, now this is interesting," he heard her comment right before he heard the rustle of plastic shopping bags.

He almost turned around to look but stopped himself in time. "I'm glad you're having fun."

"I hope you're still hard."

That made him laugh softly. "Oh yeah. Definitely."

\* \* \*

Nikki couldn't help but smile at the reply as she stuffed a few more things into the already bulging shopping bag. There was so much scattered around, so many possibilities. But she took what she wanted for the night and made her way back to her lover, blowing out the candle once she was beside him.

"Okay, let's go."

He didn't reply, he just put an arm around her. They went back to the furniture store, guided by the single light of the candle they'd left burning.

"Strip," she ordered.

"Anything you want, Mistress Nikki."

She stared at him. "How serious are you about that?"

Blue eyes gazed at her as he tossed his shirt aside. "How serious are you about domming me?"

Her heart slammed into high gear. In answer she pulled a riding crop out of the bag.

He actually smiled. "Pretty serious."

Laying the crop down on the bed, Nikki stripped her own

clothes off, watching the man do the same thing. She wanted to make him beg for release the way he'd made her beg.

"We're going to play a game," she told him. "It's called Mistress and her boy. Do you want to play?"

In answer he knelt naked at her feet and bowed his head. "Yes, Mistress, this animal wishes to play your game."

Nikki stared. She swallowed hard, fighting a memory of Roderik. She reached down to cup his chin in her hand. "You aren't an animal, you're my boy. Understood?"

"Yes, Mistress, your boy understands." His face was calm, serious, but there was an amused glitter in his gaze.

"You really like this, don't you?"

"Yes, Mistress."

"Good. Get on the bed."

She watched as he rose gracefully to his feet, turned a burning look on her and crawled onto the bed giving her a nice view of his ass.

"Would Mistress like me face up or face down?"

Nikki had the impression that her lover had played this game quite a bit. From the way he was acting the part she suspected he'd played it a great deal more than she had. It reassured her to know he had no reservations.

"Face down," she told him as she rummaged in the bag looking for the package she wanted.

Compliant to her wish, he lay down, but he had his head turned to watch what she was doing.

Tearing open the package, she took out the fuzzy handcuffs and got onto the bed, reaching for one of his hands.

She saw a flicker of something in his gaze and blinked. Had that been a hint of...nervousness or fear? Nikki hesitated but he offered his wrist to her, his expression calm once more, making her think she'd imagined what she'd seen. "You're sure?"

"Yes, Mistress."

Opening the cuff, she locked it around his left wrist, then fastened the other end around the bars of the headboard. A second cuff fastened his right wrist and she regarded her handiwork with a satisfied nod.

She picked up the riding crop and trailed it down his back, following the line of his spine. Her heart pounded and her mouth had gone dry. She remembered how painful a swat from the crop could be, or how it could leave bloody welts behind when wielded in anger the way Roderik had employed it. But this was part of the dominance game. Part of the sadomasochism that Roderik had used to subjugate her and the other women.

But the man on the bed wasn't Roderik.

"It's okay, Nikki. You can't really hurt me." Bells's tone was reassuring. Encouraging.

She gave him an experimental swat, the crop leaving a bright mark on his golden skin.

He gasped, shuddering under the kiss of the braided leather.

Surprised, she laid the crop on his ass a second time and heard a repeat of the soft cry he'd given before.

"You...want this, don't you?"

"Yes, Mistress, yes!" he groaned, hands gripping the short length of chain.

The crop popped sharply, leaving another pink line on his skin, wrenching a louder cry from him, his body shuddering.

Nikki dropped the crop, and reached out to cup the hot mark with her hand, tracing the heated line, feeling him quiver under her touch.

No, Bells wasn't anything like Roderik. Nothing like him at all.

She kissed the fiery line she'd raised on his skin, some of the heat in the welt already fading, his body erasing the slight

damage she'd done him. Nikki stopped what she was doing to regard the stripe on his ass. She could see it fading as she watched. The mark almost gone now. He healed amazingly fast.

"Mistress?"

"Yes?"

"Why did you stop?"

"Because I don't want to hurt you, Jason."

He twisted himself in the confines of the handcuffs to regard her with eyes that burned with passion, "Do I look hurt, Mistress?"

Shaking her head, Nikki picked up the crop and smacked him with it hard enough to leave a bright red welt. This time the groan was sharper, his breathing gone harsh, a shudder dancing through his muscles.

But, much as part of her cried out to beat him the way Roderik had beaten her, as much as that damaged part of her psyche wanted to see a man hurt and crying the way she'd been hurt, she couldn't bring herself to actually do him any serious damage.

Instead she trailed the tip of the crop along the crack of his ass, considering other options.

Leaving the crop laying across his back, she pulled another package out of the bag. This one contained a bottle of lube advertised on the label as being super slick and long lasting.

Well, she was going to find out just how slick it was. She opened the cap and poured a few drops out onto her finger, feeling the cool slickness between finger and thumb she smiled and nodded with satisfaction. It would do nicely.

Another package came out of the bag. A box with several different sized sexual aids.

She leaned down and kissed the fading welt, slipping the slicked finger into the crack of his ass.

\* \* \*

Spreading his thighs, he tensed them a bit to lift his ass toward her probing finger. He knew what she was considering, and though he was a little disappointed that she hadn't used the crop a bit longer—he really did enjoy the kiss of pain during sex—he wasn't going to ask her to do anything that made her unhappy. And he got the impression that not wanting to hurt a lover was what had stopped her. For him the pain was minimal, not much worse than having his hair pulled, or her gentle love bites. It faded away so fast he barely got to enjoy the sensation.

It also drew his mind away from the cuffs holding him to the bed.

But he wouldn't pressure her into it. That was his kink and he could do without it if she wasn't prepared to go down that road with him. There were so many other ways to experience pleasure under a woman's control that the lack of the rougher ones would make little difference.

A finger, slick with lube, found the tight ring of his ass and pressed delicately at the opening. He closed his eyes, and relaxed, enjoying the sensation, relishing her hesitancy. She was worried about hurting him, or upsetting him with something she thought of doing.

"It's okay, Mistress. When I said you could do anything, I meant it."

He felt the finger pressing harder, slide in, testing for any negative reaction. The scent of her arousal was mixed with a tinge of fear.

"Nikki?"

"Jason?" He could hear the tension in her voice.

"Let me out of the cuffs. Just for a few minutes, okay?"

"Okay."

He was quickly freed. "Come here," he turned around and

grabbed the box of toys she'd just opened and the bottle of lubricant she had out. "There is nothing in this box you can put inside me that is going to hurt," he told her. "Not even this one," he said as he picked up a rather large butt plug and held it up for her inspection.

A blush colored her cheeks, "I...I've never done this before. I just..."

"I know. You're curious, and scared," he leaned closer and kissed her.

"Tell you what," he pulled her into his arms and held her close, "how about we leave off the game for now and just have a bit of fun?"

She nodded.

Grabbing the bag, he brought it closer and peered inside. "Whoa, now that's impressive," he remarked as he pulled out a strap on dildo. "Any particular reason you picked this up?" He grinned. "Or can I guess?"

Her blush deepened. "I was, just...thinking..."

"About playing the role of the man, maybe?" he prompted.

She gave a slight bob of her head.

"You want to?"

Her eyes widened. He saw her nervous swallow as she shrugged noncommittally.

"Come here, baby," he murmured, guiding her so she was standing by the bed. Kissing her belly and breasts, he loaded the batteries into the vibrator that would give her pleasure before putting the harness on her. He made sure the fit was tight enough to hold it in place, and the little controller for the vibrator and clit stimulator were where she could easily reach them.

\* \* \*

Nikki just stared at what he was doing. She knew this was probably not meant for women to use on men. It had been in a

section marked for lesbians in the shop. But she'd brought it because it had sparked a flare of curious desire in her.

And now Bells was putting it on her. And he seemed eager.

*God, maybe he is gay*, she thought. It was hard to reconcile a straight guy wanting to be fucked. But then again, he seemed really sexually self assured. Nothing, other than when she'd cuffed him, ever made him balk. And he hadn't balked at that, it was more as if he'd recalled something unpleasant. The way she remembered Roderik.

He was pouring lube on the jutting dildo in front of her pelvic bone.

Then he stood up in front of her, blue gaze locking with her eyes. "Nikki, listen to me.

"Okay."

"I don't know what he did to you, I won't ask you to talk about it. But I'm not him. Whatever he did to make you afraid to be under a man, I swear will never happen with me. And if that means you keep me under you in bed, or fuck me to prove something to yourself, it's okay. I meant it when I said you could do anything to me that you want. And I swear I do mean *anything*, Nikki." He was smiling warmly, gaze full of something she'd have mistaken for love if she'd been foolish enough to think he could love her. He bent his head down and his mouth burned along her breasts, up her throat, and sealed his oath to her with a searing kiss.

*You can do this, Nikki. He's going to let you do this.* she told herself. She watched as he turned his back to her and crawled up onto the bed, beckoning her with a hand to join him.

She crawled onto the bed behind him, reaching around his hip to caress the silken length of his erection. He was still hard, and at her touch he groaned. But she couldn't bring herself to do it. Fear had dried her mouth to dust and her heart was pounding,

remembering.

He turned around. "Baby, its all right." He touched the little dial that activated the vibrator and clit stimulator, keeping the setting low as he kissed her, hands reaching up to caress her breasts, drawing rough pads of his thumbs over the sensitive flesh.

She sighed with the pleasure, met his gaze, and asked, "You're sure? You won't be upset?"

His smile was sexy, self-assured. "Nikki, you're my mistress. You can do whatever you want with me."

Eyes narrowing in consideration, Nikki nodded to herself, and decided to test him a bit.

Hand closing in the hair at the nape of his neck, she kissed him, sliding her other hand down his body, gripping his cock and feeling the vibration of his groan of desire in their kiss.

He wanted her, wanted what she was going to do. And she *was* going to do it. She'd made her decision. Breaking the kiss, she put the sharp edge of command in her voice.

"On your knees for me, boy!"

\* \* \*

Willingly complying, Bells got into position, on his hands and knees.

Bracing himself, Bells waited for his mistress. His pulse was hammered, excitement and anticipation driving him into a precarious state where the chains on the Dragon, the power of his will, faltered, teetering near the brink of failure.

He didn't care. The blaze coiling in his groin was what mattered. That and Nikki. She could do anything she wanted to him. Anything at all, even restrain him—even if it had sent a queasy feeling through him that he'd identified as some dim, unremembered cause for fear—if that was what she wanted, she could have it.

Her hands caressed over the small of his back, down the hard planes of his ass, along his thighs. Teasing, the touch adding to his eagerness.

"Do you want this?" she asked in a low, sexy voice.

"Yes, Mistress."

She parted the cheeks of his ass, and he felt the cool touch of the lubed dildo on his anus. He relaxed the tight ring of muscle, took a deep breath, and felt the end of the hard vinyl slip inside him, the initial inch of penetration uncomfortable until it stroked his prostate, tearing a gasp from him as the lightning flash of pleasure set him aflame.

"You do like it," he heard her say, the surprise in her tone quite apparent.

"Yes," he groaned as she gave him another gentle thrust.

Her hands caressed his back and hips, down his thighs as she moved behind him, whispering words of praise, but not love. And he didn't know what he would have done if she'd said the words to him. But he knew it would be a damned foolish thing to admit he wanted her and loved her because there was no possibility of a relationship like that working. So he kept his teeth locked on the words he really wanted to blurt out.

It felt good, incredibly good to have her doing this. He closed his eyes, feeling the restraints containing the Dragon slipping away.

Hazy wings formed across his back, aqua mist and flickering emerald flames, incorporeal as the wings themselves, danced around his body. A patina of aqua tipped gold scales covered him, unreal in their beauty, totally inhuman, flickering in and out of visibility.

\* \* \*

Nikki gasped as the Dragon manifested before her startled gaze. Her heart pounded with a trace of fear which she quickly

mastered. This was just the Dragon, her boy's Immortal form made manifest before her gaze. He wouldn't hurt her. He wasn't Roderik, and he would never do anything she didn't want. But he would do anything she wanted. Anything.

And he was beautiful. The scales glittering in the candlelight, blue-green mist mingled with dancing flames of bright green spinning around them in a sedately paced saraband.

She thrust into him, hearing his unrestrained groans of pleasure. He did like it, was really enjoying what she was doing and it brought a delighted smile to her mouth that lit her eyes with love. He *would* do anything she wanted. Absolutely anything.

Grabbing a handful of braids, she picked up the crop and swatted him lightly on the thigh while pulling the braids down toward the bed. Obedient he folded his arms under him and spread his legs wider. With his body at a steeper incline, it gave her a new angle of attack inside his ass.

The sound that came from him was almost a pleased purr as she drove into him, and Nikki gave him an experimental swat with the crop which drew a reverberating sound, a deep, rumbling that did resemble a purr even more clearly.

Giving him another light swat with the crop, Nikki let it dangle from the lanyard around her wrist and changed the setting of the vibrator that was stimulating her, a moan of pleasure at the increased sensation mingling with another gasped cry from the man under her.

Nikki gazed down at the narrow hips in front of her, at the expanse of muscular back, the handful of braids in her fist. She had the power now. Her. Nikki. Not the man under her. He was as helpless to her will as she'd ever been beneath Roderik.

Hers. Hers alone. Every gasp and groan, every rumble of his strange purr were for her, from what she was doing to him.

She swatted him on the thigh and he yelped, reacting to the little kiss of pain.

Unlike Roderik, she didn't need to beat him until he cried out for it to end, as she'd been made to beg for mercy from the brutal use Roderik had put her body to time and time again. She didn't need to break what belonged to her. But she would possess and control, taking pleasure in the ability to make such a beautiful man cry out from pleasure. From what she was doing to his body.

More than any other thing, hearing Bells's dulcet voice rumbling in a groan of uncontrollable passion enflamed her courage to try more with him. Letting go of the crop, she gripped his hip instead, holding onto him, pulling his ass into her pelvis, the dildo slipping in and out faster and faster.

She saw him start to reach between his own legs and pulled the braids. "No."

Groaning, she bent over him and gripped his cock, stroking it in counter point to her thrusts into his body. A sense of wonder, of elation filled her as he gasped and strained toward release beneath her, unrestrained, letting her do what she pleased in the manner she desired. She was filling him, taking him. Fucking a man. She had the position of power and he had yielded himself to her.

Her own release hit her with the power of a tsunami, a scream of triumph rending the air as she drove into him harder, hips bucking with her own release.

"NIKKI!" he shouted a moment later, his cock exploding in her grip, aqua flickers of light, emerald flames spinning around them in an ephemeral whirl.

He actually collapsed beneath her and she lay over him, one hand fumbling the vibrator off, her cheek pillowed on his shoulder, the change in their angle making the dildo slip free. He

was damp with sweat but so was she, her heart pounding from her own climax and the excitement of what she'd done to her Jason.

Her Dragon.

\* \* \*

Bells opened his eyes. There was a feeling in the air. A tension. The sensation of being poised at the edge of a catastrophe had him alert, nerves humming with a current of warning.

A head was pillowed on his chest, Nikki still asleep after their night of lovemaking. He hated to move. She had one arm across his abdomen, one leg thrown across his thighs in a tender display of possessiveness that warmed his blood and brought a smile to his mouth. What she'd done to him last night would linger in his mind long after she left him for another man.

It was that sobering thought that got him moving. Slipping from beneath her, he felt the bite of the cold and noticed his breath was steaming in the air.

There was a thin dusting of snow on the ground and more falling from the sky as he watched.

"Shit."

That woke Nikki and she peered out from under the sleeping bag. "It's snowing!" she exclaimed.

"Yeah. We need to get moving." He was already getting dressed, but it wasn't what he really wanted to do. What he wanted was to climb back into bed with Nikki and repeat what they'd done last night. A slight smile, a glimmer of unbridled desire, lit his face.

She grinned at him. "I know what you're thinking about."

"Do you?"

Picking up the riding crop, she ran it through her fingers in a suggestive caress. "I think I do."

It was an instantaneous reaction, his cock hardened. Mischievous sparkling in his gaze, he walked around the bed to kneel at her feet, head bowed, the braids falling over his face, hiding the smile he couldn't force away. The beast rustled its wings and flexed its claws eager for another taste of freedom.

"Yes, Mistress. You know what I'm thinking," he agreed.

A hand closed in his braids, pulling his head up, sable eyes gazing down into his. "Are you mine?"

The beating of his heart seemed to still, his muscles tensing. She couldn't be asking what he thought she was asking, could she? No, this was just part of their game. Just a game, nothing serious. But she had his attention. "Yes, Mistress. For as long as you want me, I'm yours."

\* \* \*

Nikki wondered if he was serious in his answer, or just enacting the role he'd adopted with her for their game. She wanted him. Not for a few more nights, but forever. She loved him. That was something she could not deny. He'd given her everything she'd ever wanted from a man last night without the slightest hesitation. Let her do a few of the things she'd always dreamed of doing but never had the courage, or opportunity, to act upon.

From now on she wouldn't accept anything less from a lover than his full acceptance of her wishes. Her desires. All the efforts Roderik had used to suppress her naturally dominant personality had been swept aside by the blond man at her feet.

One way or another, Nikki was determined to keep him.

"Is that a promise, Bells?" She used what she mentally considered to be his public name, rather than the name only she knew. She wanted the promise from the killer, the Dragon, not just the man he'd been before he'd become what he was now. She wanted the Immortal's promise.

Intense blue eyes stared into her own. "What are you really asking for, Nikki?"

She hesitated. What was she asking? For him to be hers? Almost the same way she'd been Roderik's. But he was Immortal and she wasn't. He wouldn't want to be saddled with her while she aged and died. Not when he'd stay young and beautiful. Forever unchanging. She let go of his hair. "Never mind. We should get going before the pass gets blocked and we can't reach Colby."

The bells in his hair rang sharply, jangling in a discord as he rose to his feet, spinning around so his back was to her in a single, breathtakingly graceful movement.

An angry one.

"Yeah. I'll get stuff together while you clean up a bit."

The air wasn't the only thing cold in that room. His voice cut her heart like a winter blizzard. Turning away from him to hide the tears, Nikki grabbed the moist towelettes she'd found in *Nat's* and quickly wiped away the last residue of their night together mourning what she'd just ruined between them. Lamenting a chance she'd been too fearful to take.

## *Chapter Eleven*

The wind had stopped, but the snow continued to drift down in light flurries as they made their way toward the town. The drifts weren't too bad if he stayed toward the middle of the road.

They reached Colby, the people welcoming them with smiles and worried frowns. Word about what had happened at Danbridge had already reached them through the local radio station—the residents giving notice that the Rangers had gone south, running ahead of the unseasonable snowfall that had been born out of the rainstorm.

Amateurs before the Collapse, the local radio operators were only real communication the area communities had left. They were also the only entertainment. With no government organization to tell them what they could and couldn't do regarding their programming, they did what they pleased. The night Nikki and Bells arrived there was a broadcast denouncing Roderik, naming his Rangers nothing more than two-bit thugs in the employ of a petty dictator.

The broadcast played over a public address system so everyone in the town of three hundred people could hear it.

It was the kind of sentiment they could both relate to, and the kind of thing that got people killed by order of the petty dictator himself.

They were shown to a neatly appointed little two-bedroom house, and told it was for Doc Nikki and her boy, which elicited

a smile from Bells and a tiny laugh from Nikki. In exchange for the house, the power to keep it warm, and food for the both of them, Nikki was offered the job as the town's Chief of Medicine. She accepted since she was the only *bona fide* physician—or close enough to it that it hardly mattered she'd still been in her first year of residency—within three hundred miles.

They settled into the house and, much to Nikki's dismay, Bells took the smaller of the two bedrooms for his own, then quickly volunteered his services as a town guard.

Within a month he was the official 'Military Advisor' on the town council and had as much standing as Nikki herself did.

But that wasn't what was bothering her. It was the fact that, since their arrival in town, he hadn't gone to bed with her once, no matter how much she tried to coax him. She wondered exactly how angry he'd been over how she'd backed out of her proposal. She also wondered if that was the real reason for his anger. A nagging voice in her head kept insinuating it was because she'd fucked him and he'd decided he didn't want a repeat of the same thing. Of course, there was the other voice that reminded her how he'd acted while she'd been fucking him, and her thoughts kept going back to the innuendo between him and Luke and she found herself wondering if he was really gay.

She hadn't wanted to end their affair, but she also didn't want to force him into a relationship that he apparently didn't want.

In the end she'd gotten what she'd thought was right for them both. She knew he didn't love her and it was better for them to be apart before she got so attached she couldn't let go. But that didn't make it any easier for her to take.

Colby being a small town, it wasn't long before other men noticed that Doc Nikki wasn't attached to the man she'd arrived with. And after that it wasn't long before some of the men started

coming by just to chat, trying to get her to warm up to them.

And it wasn't long after that before Bells—her Jason, her Dragon—packed up and moved into a small apartment above the Sheriff's office.

She started dating a man named Corwin. He was pleasant, doted on her, and was the man in charge of Power and Lights for Colby. An engineer, he'd lived in Chicago before the Collapse with a wife and a child. He was the only living member of his family, and he was easy to talk to, unlike a certain blond man with bells in his hair.

\* \* \*

There was two feet of snow on the ground, but he walked along as if there were no impediments to his steps, the heavy boots crunching through the icy crust unhindered. Men bigger than he were having trouble negotiating the trail, but not Bells. He stalked across the street heading away from the Colby Munitions factory and the work he'd just finished. It had been the biggest employer in Colby. A government defense contractor before the Collapse, they'd make munitions for tanks and small arms. Now it was probably the only munitions manufacturing plant in operations on the entire continent. When the raw materials were gone, it too would cease operations.

The fact that they could still produce munitions was in their favor. And the men of Colby had gone to the trouble of raiding their local National Guard Armory for a pair of tanks. Unfortunately the fuel for the tanks was in very short supply, which limited their usefulness. But the combined Fuel and Power teams were trying to solve that problem.

They still had a lot of work to do, and Christmas was fast approaching. Before Roderik arrived—and they all knew that was just a matter of time because, for some reason, the man was set on getting Nikki back—they had to have things ready.

There'd been quite a lot of trouble in Danbridge, Roderik's men demanding that anyone in possession of Nikki return the woman to her rightful 'master' with an implied 'or else.' They'd searched every building, every shed in Danbridge. When that failed to yield their quarry, they'd tried to bribe and intimidate the people there to tell them where the woman had gone. But the residents played dumb, and finally the falling snow had sent the Rangers packing south again rather than be caught by winter in hostile territory.

But they'd be back.

And Colby was determined to be ready for them. They already had impressive defenses blocking the two passes leading into town. A series of walls and gates. But, like the gate and wall back in Danbridge, it wasn't going to hold up against a tank or shelling from a howitzer, even mortar rounds or rocket launchers would make short work of the best reinforced concrete.

No, the only way to stop Roderik would be through superior firepower—or superior tactics.

And that was why, after a discussion of tactics with the only ex-military man in town—a retired Marine Drill Sergeant—they'd put Bells in charge of the town's militia and munitions. He knew how to kill. More importantly, he knew how to protect people from being killed.

He had to pass Nikki's house on his way back from the munitions facility and he saw lights on inside her house.

His gaze went to the window, seeking a glimpse of her beyond the frilly curtains.

What he saw turned his heart to lead.

Nikki laughing, standing with her arms around Corwin, giving him an enthusiastic hug.

Seeing her like that, holding another man, drove home how deeply he missed being with her, missed her kisses, her laughter.

An ache that wouldn't go away filled his chest.

She was better off with an engineer than she would be with someone like him.

Locked in its chains, the Dragon raised its head and cried out in misery, a few crystalline tears falling where no one could ever see them. The fell onto the ashes and desolation of a soul that had once belonged to a man as human as any other. A man who'd been named Jason.

\* \* \*

Nikki pulled away from Corwin. "That was so thoughtful of you," she told him as she admired the kitten sculpture he'd brought for her. It was a grey kitten sculpted with its nose touching a butterfly, one paw raised inquisitively. She'd mentioned wanting a kitten and this was the closest he could get to her wish.

It was very thoughtful and sweet, and it made her uneasy.

"I'm glad you like it," Corwin told her, a warm smile brightening his green eyes as he gazed down at her.

Nikki backed farther away from him. His height still made her skittish, or maybe it was just the fact that she didn't know him very well.

Or maybe it was another blond she really wanted. A sleek killer who was only a bit taller than she was, and never made her feel afraid as she often did with Corwin. He wasn't a bad man, he wasn't Roderik, but he made her uneasy.

His hand closed on her upper arm. "Hey, Nikki, where are you going?" he questioned quietly. It wasn't a tight, unyielding grip, but it sent a tiny stab of panic through her just the same.

"I thought I'd make us some tea or that coffee substitute Mary Kate brought yesterday."

"Why not just stay here and talk to me?" he asked, "I promise I won't bite."

"Ooookay," she agreed, taking a seat on the chair closest to the door.

Sighing, he sat down on the couch and just regarded her in companionable silence.

He was attractive, with a firm jaw and a good smile. But there was something about the color of his eyes, that reminded her too much of Roderik. Roderik, whose Dragon was a deep green.

"I want you to move in with me," he told her quietly.

"Corwin, I don't think our relationship is at that point."

"It could be if you'd just stop pining over someone who doesn't want you, Nikki."

"I'm not pining."

"Then what do you call it? God, Nikki I've seen you watching for him to go by in the evenings. And I've seen how you look at him during the weekly meetings of the Town Council. Why don't you just let it go? He doesn't love you. Even you've said that, so why hang onto a burnt out torch?"

Nikki sighed and closed her eyes. "I'm not carrying a torch for him, burnt out or otherwise."

"Then tell me why you won't make love with me?"

"Because I'm not ready for it!" she snapped back, genuinely tired of the way he'd begun to pressure her for sex over the last few days.

"You've known me for two months now, and we've hardly even kissed," Corwin said in exasperation. "But you told me you'd only known him a couple of days when you became lovers. Don't you understand I want the same chance to show how much I love you as you gave him? And he doesn't love you! I do!"

"I know. I'm sorry, Corwin. I just..."

He got off the couch and moved to kneel at her feet. "I'm

serious about this Nikki. I'm serious about you." He took a small box out of his pocket and grinned. "And here's a little token of just how much I mean what I'm saying."

Nikki stared at the little box in his hand, her mouth gone dry, a roiling unsettled feeling beginning in her stomach. It had been happening a lot lately. The same sick feeling she'd always had any time Roderik had touched her. She felt trapped.

"I...don't know what to say..."

"Try yes," he suggested as he opened the box and pulled out the gold ring. There was an impressively large diamond set in it, and she knew it was just a bauble he'd picked up. Maybe even taken from the home of a family, off the finger of someone who had died. In the post Collapse world what meaning did a diamond have? He hadn't had to earn it by working hard, or saving and scrimping to show he loved her, he'd only had to find it lying around somewhere. She remembered the piles of jewelry they'd found in the department store, real pieces mixed willy-nilly with costume junk.

Bells's words whispered through her mind. *We're vultures living off the corpse of civilization.*

And like him, Nikki was tired of being a vulture. "I'm sorry, Corwin, but I just..."

He put a finger over her mouth. "Shhh...Don't talk. Think it over." He leaned in and kissed her, his mouth too possessive, his teeth closing on her bottom lip and biting, smarting, and she knew it would leave a noticeable bruise. Something else Bells had never done even once. He'd never hurt her, not even given her a hickey as if he'd known what would upset her somehow, as if he could read her thoughts. Being Immortal and a Dragon, maybe he could to some degree. She didn't know. She did however know she didn't like the way Corwin was pushing her tonight, as if that little gift of the sculpture and the offer of the

ring somehow entitled him to something from her, something she'd plainly told him she wasn't ready to give.

"Don't," she said as she pulled away and scrambled out of the chair, almost knocking him over, bolting for the kitchen.

"Nikki! Dammit! What is wrong?" He got up and followed her.

"I'm sorry, Corwin. I'd just like to be alone for a while. Do you mind?"

He stood there, looking down at her, a frown on his face. "Yeah, I do mind Nikki. You're avoiding me now and I want to know why."

She watched as he took up a position in the kitchen doorway, leaning against the door frame, blocking her way out. It sent a chill through her. Aggression. Male dominance. That was why she was so hesitant. He was displaying traits that sent a frisson of alarm through her. It was why she kept putting him off.

Yes, he was tall, and probably stronger than she was. But this was Corwin, not Roderik. And it was stupid to keep being afraid of big men because of what Roderik had done.

*He's not Roderik. He's not going to do the things Roderik did, so stop being such a coward.*

"I keep thinking about Roderik," she replied truthfully.

Sighing, he crossed the kitchen to put his arms around her and pull her close. "Then give me a chance to prove I'm not like him. Please, Nikki?" He cupped her chin and made her look up. "I want to prove to you that I'm not like that trumped up bastard."

Her belly quivered, but it wasn't arousal she was feeling as she said, "All right, Corwin. You've got your chance."

"You won't regret it, my love," he promised as he swept her up in his arms. Kissing her, he carried her to the bedroom.

\* \* \*

An unexpected blizzard trapped everyone in their homes that night, keeping people inside where it was safe and reasonably warm.

Everyone but a certain belled man who hadn't been able to sleep all night. The tension of the coming storm had kept him on edge. That and a nagging feeling he should go see Nikki. That was an urge he'd resisted, but it kept growing, the tension thrumming along his nerves until it reached a point he could not longer sit still. He'd paced for two hours, then pulled his coat on and stalked out into the blinding storm. It was almost two in the morning, but he had to make sure she was all right.

The cold bit at him with icy fangs, the power of the wind almost enough to knock him down the stairs. He paused midway between his apartment and the street, knowing he was being a five kinds of fool for going out in this, and for thinking Nikki would want to see him. She had Corwin now, and there couldn't have been anything between them anyway. Much as he still ached for her at night, he had to admit that she could never accept what he was. Hell, most days he hated himself because of the things he'd done and would undoubtedly do in the future. So much killing and death, so much blood on his hands. He was starting to remember some of the past, having disturbing nightmares of blood and death. Dreams that clung like a nuclear wasteland of destruction in his memories, images that proved the taint of eternal damnation was darkening his soul. They left him with the irrefutable knowledge that no one with so much blood on his hands deserved love.

Especially not the love of someone like Nikki.

Roe Deer. Devoted physician. Beautiful, caring, and compassionate Nikki.

He knew now why his memory of the past had been so

disjointed, so hazy. He'd slipped between the cracks of reality and, like it always did, it mercifully blurred what had happened in the prior world. But this time there'd been the added brain scrambling effect of going head-on into a tree at high speed. The impact and resultant damage to his skull and the brain under it had totally blanked out everything.

And from the bits he could remember, he was grateful to that tree because the few details that came back to him at random intervals when he was awake, and the nightmares that haunted his sleep, were more than enough to make him realize he didn't even belong in the company of the human race, much less the good people living in Colby.

He stumbled at the bottom of the stairs, went to his knee as a gust of fierce wind tore around the corner of the building. Ice was already forming in his hair, and he couldn't feel his fingers. Not that it mattered much. He already knew he couldn't freeze, and certainly wouldn't die from cold. There really wasn't anything he could die from short of being slain by another Dragon.

One of his nightmares involved an explosion and waking up in pain beyond imagining. After that dream it had taken several long drinks from the bottle of whiskey in his apartment to get the shaking to stop. Even now the recollection of the dream made him shudder in horror.

He doubted anything could compare to that sort of agony.

Except losing Kimiko.

And knowing that he loved Nikki and couldn't have her.

*Fool, if you know that why in hell are you wondering around in the middle of the fucking night heading for her house thorough a blizzard? Hmm...I guess being a fool sums that one up.*

The lights were still on in the house when he got there, and

he knocked on the door. No one answered, and he figured the roar of the wind was drowning out the sound. He tried the doorknob and found that it wasn't locked.

Shaking himself like a dog to rid his clothes of caked snow, he stepped into the house, the warmth of the room comparable to a blast furnace to his chilled body.

It was quiet in the house except for the roar of the storm. He checked the kitchen and found it empty. He turned off the light in the kitchen and was about to turn the one off in the living room when he heard a soft, familiar sound.

Stalking across the room, he entered the hallway and paused, hearing the noise a second time. Nikki's room.

There was a sudden ache in his chest, but he couldn't just back out of the house. He had to know. Had to be sure.

Her bedroom door was open a crack and he paused outside. Listening.

The bed was creaking in a rhythm he knew, understood. The color drained from his face as he heard a woman's quiet moan. Nikki. He turned, took a step, the world pitching unsteadily around him. The pain of knowing he'd really lost her was almost more than he could take.

He'd survived worse. At least he could go on knowing she was alive. Happy.

In the arms of another man. Even that was better than dying in his embrace. He didn't know if he could endure that kind of pain ever again, saying good-bye to someone who meant more to him than life, a life he was so very tired of living.

She'd be in another man's bed, be another man's wife. *But that's better than the alternative*, he told himself.

"Stop, please stop..."

There was pain in her voice, the tension of fear.

His head snapped around.

"Please..."

He shoved the door open.

Nikki was on her back, pinned to the bed, Corwin moving over her, inside her. He had her wrists captured in his hands, the position purely controlling, completely dominating.

He grabbed the man by one leg and yanked him off of Nikki, throwing the larger man across the room as easily as a child threw a toy. The fury boiled over, pallid blue mist tinted with aqua spun around him.

He stood over Corwin, seething, and pointed to his face. "You see this?" he said. "You see what you're doing?"

Corwin looked up, mouth agape. "Your eyes are changing color!"

"GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!" Bells roared, his body language promising violence of the most deadly type.

\* \* \*

Tears of pain and humiliation streaked Nikki's face, but her fear was gone, forgotten at the sound of a voice shouting in outrage, the removal of the hands and weight holding her down.

Bells. Her Bells was there, stalking toward Corwin like an avenging god, eyes burning with the maelstrom blue of nuclear fire, flickers of emerald flame and trails of aqua and pale blue mist swirling trailing off of him as he moved, the Dragon rising around him.

Corwin scrambled backward, terror in his gaze. "Wait! I wasn't hurting her."

"LIAR!" The roar reverberated through the room and the small blond grabbed Corwin and hurled him out of Nikki's bedroom with the ease a terrier would have tossed a rat.

Grabbing the sheet and wrapping it around herself, Nikki bolted after the enraged Immortal. "Bells! Don't kill him! Bells!"

If he heard her he gave no sign, his hands closing on

Corwin.

This time the man made the mistake of striking the Immortal, punching him as hard as he could. He might as well have missed for all the affect it had on the Dragon. Horrified, Nikki watched as Bells grabbed hold of Corwin's wrist and squeezed, snapping the bones of Corwin's forearm as if they were twigs.

Corwin screamed in pain and struggled vainly to escape.

This was Bells, this was the Immortal Beast that lay within him, and it was terrifying in its killing aspect. She could feel it as a living entity, ancient, immensely powerful. And the Beast was about to murder Corwin.

He'd hurt her, but she didn't want him dead. He wasn't Roderik and he'd tried to prove that, but he'd made mistakes. He'd underestimated how terrified she was of being under a man, held down and helpless to do anything but submit. Corwin was about to pay for that error with his life, unless she could find a way to stop the Dragon and reach the man beneath the murderous rage.

Hands closed on Corwin, the man kicked and screamed. "Stop him! Nikki! Stop this maniac!"

She grabbed Bells by the left arm, but she might as well have grabbed a truck and tried to stop it barehanded. He shook her off and slammed a fist into Corwin's stomach, the man shrieking in agony. The impact was brutal, and a second one might well be fatal.

"JASON! STOP! STOP IT!" she screamed at him, shoving her body between the two men, making the Dragon see her.

Eyes of cobalt flame stared at her. "He hurt you." The voice was velvet soft, concerned, full of tenderness.

"Shh...No, I'm not hurt," she lied. It had hurt, emotionally and physically. But she knew if she told the Dragon that they'd

likely have to clean up Corwin's remains with a mop and bucket. Laying a hand on the belled man's cheek, she caressed him, trying to reach the man inside. "It's all right, Jason. Let him go."

He obeyed her, releasing Corwin, who scrambled back, sobbing in unbridled terror at what he was seeing, what was happening.

"My God...My God..." he gasped, "one of the Immortals. He's one of the Immortals."

The cobalt gaze left her face to focus on Corwin, the hate in the eyes mirrored in the twisting of the man's visage into something inhuman, draconic.

Strangely Nikki realized she wasn't afraid, that she had no reason to ever fear Bells. And she didn't. On some instinctive level she couldn't have explained she knew that no matter what she might do to him, Bells, the Dragon, her Jason, would never hurt her.

Nikki didn't dare take her attention away from Bells, not even to tell Corwin to run. Not when it might put the engineer at risk. Much as she'd like to cut his balls off for what he'd done to her, and regardless that she'd never want to be in the same room alone with him ever again, she didn't want him dead. Colby needed his abilities with the power grid too much, and what he'd done had just been a stupid male mistake. Pure masculine ego. It wasn't worth killing him over.

On further consideration she decided that he probably didn't deserve to live in a town of decent people, but that wasn't something she'd get to resolve herself. She would be sure it was brought to the attention of the Town Council.

"Look at me, Jason," she murmured, her hands caressing over the Dragon's body. This was who she really wanted. Bells. Jason. The Dragon. No one else. "You're my boy, remember? You said you were."

The eyes returned to her face, his gaze seething, aglow, living flame. She could see the outline of the Dragon surrounding him, the gold edges aqua scales dancing in and out of her vision. Nikki wanted to look at the Dragon, to step back and take in the whole sight of what her lover was, she wanted to see the Dragon in its entirety. But she didn't dare break eye contact with him, and she knew it. He was seeing something as he looked at her, and it seemed to be calming him.

\* \* \*

A gentle golden light encompassed Nikki. A familiar glow that soothed him and tamed the savage anger boiling inside his soul; the Dragon raging free, unchecked, consumed by rage. But the murderous fury was fading. *Her* hand was touching his face. *Her* voice spoke to him through the madness of rage that had unleashed the Beast's power.

Female. His female. The one who had laid her chains on him.

He could hear her voice, sweet, soothing, reasoning with him, speaking to the man, not the Dragon. The Dragon heard her, too, listened to her, craved her slightest touch, her scent. The Dragon wanted Nikki like an addict craving a fix. And it was the Dragon that was in control.

A gentle hand stroked down his cheek and he leaned into the touch, feeling the quieting nature of her soul lapping at the shores of the anger, draining it away, bit by bit. He took a small step closer to her, resting his cheek on her silken hair, the sweet rose scent he loved filling his senses. He could detect the strong musk of the other man on her, but he chose to ignore it, letting himself be lost for the moment in Nikki's presence.

He was totally unaware of Corwin, of anything else.

For him only Nikki mattered.

And that was a mistake.

He felt the pain, but it didn't totally register.

"Corwin, NO!" Nikki screamed, trying to stop the engineer from stabbing the smaller man a second time, but the blade drove in deeply, rising to strike a third time.

\* \* \*

It was like a slow motion nightmare. Nikki looking up just in time to see Corwin driving her biggest kitchen knife into Bells's back, yanking it free to repeat the attack, the blade finding flesh a third time before she punched the bigger man, hitting him in the forearm, but failing to make him drop the knife. "CORWIN, NO!" she screamed, seeing what was coming and knowing there was nothing she could do to stop it.

Bells started to turn. Corwin thrust the blade at the smaller man, and Nikki stepped into the path of the knife, not by intention, tripping on the tail of the sheet wrapped around her.

It didn't hurt, but there was blood on the floor and Corwin, eyes wild with abject terror and killing hate, tried to stab Bells again.

They bumped into her and she stumbled, falling onto her couch. There was an incredible flash of light, bright as being at ground zero of a lightning strike. In the dazzling afterimage she couldn't see anything, but at least there hadn't been a boom of thunder, just a furious roar and a scream that was cut off ominously short.

She felt herself being picked up, carried. By the scent of leather and sandalwood she knew it was Bells but there were still pinpoints of light occluding her vision.

"I've got you, Nikki." It was the voice she loved, she was in the arms of the man she trusted.

"You're hurt."

"Hell with me. He hurt you!" his voice was a velvet growl.

"You killed him, didn't you?"

He put her down on the bed. She could tell it was her spare room because the room lacked the rose scent that filled her own bedroom. When he didn't reply she knew the reason and closed her eyes. The night that had started out with the gift of a ceramic kitten had ended in pain, hate and death. *Where had it all gone so wrong?*

The answer to that was simple. Corwin hadn't accepted it when she'd told him what he was doing scared her. He had continued holding her down, pinning her to the bed as he fucked her rather than let her have her hands free as she wanted. He'd been so determined to prove that he wasn't Roderik he'd duplicated the things Roderik had done, thinking that would help her see the difference. But it had only made him seem cruel and domineering when he'd refused to heed her pleas for freedom. Instead of showing a difference between himself and Roderik he'd all but proved to Nikki that he was almost as bad as the man she hated. She should have realized from the way he'd pressured her to sleep with him, move in with him, that he was not the kind of man she could have a relationship with. And maybe, on some subconscious level she had understood what he would be like, otherwise why would she have refused for so long?

*Because you still want Jason,* her mind replied, making a valid point. *He's never pressured you, he's just let things happen. Even that first time, he didn't insist on anything. He kissed you and apologized, he let you set the pace and decide what you wanted to do with him, not the other way around. He submitted to you.*

Bells took the bloody sheet off of her, looking at the cut. It was shallow, barely a scratch, but it had initially bled like a much more serious injury.

The blond pressed the sheet to her belly, and the blood stopped.

That was when she noticed he was shaking, trembling.

"Bells?" Her vision cleared, the glare obscuring everything was fading.

He swept her up into his embrace and started crying, stunning her into shocked silence as he whispered, "I almost lost you. I almost lost you, Nikki."

She put her arms around him and let him cry, amazed at his reaction and realizing that maybe he'd had reasons other than not wanting her for staying away. Seeing the tears in his eyes now, compounded with the fierce protective reaction he'd shown to what Corwin had done, Nikki finally understood why he'd left her. The Dragon and its killing rage was a danger. Not to Nikki, but the potential existed that it could kill someone, like it had killed Corwin tonight, not just for what he'd done to Nikki, but because the man had gone mad with fear and attacked Bells.

*Or maybe it wasn't what set the Dragon off*, she pondered. *It was as if he went mad for a moment after Corwin cut me by accident. Is it only me that sets the Dragon off?* She thought back to their time together and realized the only time she'd actually seen any sign of the Immortal Beast had been when they'd made love. She was the one that triggered the Dragon, setting it free, and that explained everything, even his reluctance to make love once they'd reached Colby, his moving out. While they were alone there was no danger to other people. In town they were surrounded by humans, people that he must feel he was a danger too because of his involvement with her, and rather than risk hurting anyone, he'd ended their relationship.

The tears told her how much the decision hurt him. It was a reaction that spoke to her of more than simple lust. Men didn't cry over lust. But she'd known quite a few to cry over lost love. Hawk, who'd cried when he'd told her about his dead family. Chet, when he'd told them how he'd found his parents dead, in

one another's arms. Then he'd cried again when they'd found those old people in a similar embrace.

It was a lot of insight into the heart and soul of the man she loved. He didn't want to risk the lives of others for his own happiness. But, somehow, when she'd been scared and hurting under Corwin's manhandling he'd known and come to protect her, the Dragon escaping his control to kill: which was the very thing he'd feared.

"Shhh...Jason. I'm okay. Shhh..." she murmured to him, feeling the violence of the tremors that were shaking him. She didn't know what was causing them, whether it was emotion running wild, or the result of the Dragon getting loose and his fight to contain it, but he was shaking badly and she found it disturbing. The way his muscles moved reminded her of mild seizures of some type.

"It's okay, Jason. Relax, please relax."

"Nikki, I could have lost you." He kissed her with a desperate passion that took her breath away and drove all rational thought from her mind.

But only for an instant.

She broke the kiss, not because she didn't want him, but because she had tasted blood in his mouth and knew his injuries, while they couldn't be fatal, must be serious, and that went a long way to explaining the why his body was shaking. He was in deep shock. A look at his dilated pupils, the pallor of his face added to her conviction. He was Immortal, so he wouldn't die. But even an Immortal was weakened from being hurt, losing blood. Shock couldn't be good either and was concerned that it could slow down the healing process.

"You're in shock, Jason. Let me see how badly you're hurt."

"I'll live," he replied, his voice was harsh but she knew the growling tone. Desire. He wanted her, and didn't care how badly

injured he was. She, on the other hand, did.

"I won't make love with a man who's a bleeding wreck, Jason. Now calm down and let me look at you."

He subsided and she got him out of his jacket and ruined shirt, noticing that the damned jacket didn't show any signs of damage despite the fact the knife had punctured through it. While that realization made her wonder what the hell was going on with that, she had more pressing things to deal with at the moment.

The stab wounds were hideously deep, her trained eyes seeing indications that two had gone deep enough to puncture a lung. "My God," she breathed in horror.

If he'd been human he would have been dying, or already dead, and he'd carried her into the bedroom. She wasn't sure Hawk could have done that with similar injuries.

She checked his gaze again and found that the eyes which had blazed with cobalt flame were dulling, either the Dragon going dormant or his body starting to feel the effects of so much lost blood.

"Lay face down on the bed for me, Bells."

Instead he tried to kiss her again.

"Jason!" She put the crack of authority in her voice, "Do you want to be punished?"

He gave her a quirky grin "No, Mistress Nikki." Obediently he lie down.

"Stay!"

"Yes, Mistress Nikki." He was still smiling at her, but Nikki noted that all the fire had gone from his eyes and they were dulled, whether from pain, bloodloss, shock, or a combination of the three she didn't know, nor did it really matter. He needed medical help.

With the blizzard raging outside she couldn't even have him

moved to the hospital, and she only had very basic medical supplies in the house. She'd to her best to make him comfortable and keep him in bed for a while until his remarkable healing faculties repaired the damage.

She came back to find him asleep exactly the way she'd left him.

Cleaning the sanguinary mess away she saw he was already healing, the shallowest of the three wounds taking on the appearance of an injury more than a day old. It had been less than twenty minutes since he'd been wounded, and a chill crept over her.

How old did an Immortal have to be to heal that fast?

She didn't know, but she was planning to ask him once he was awake again.

\* \* \*

Much to Nikki's shock, Corwin wasn't dead, but he *was* badly hurt. Bruised, an arm broken, his shoulder dislocated, a knee wrenched and badly swollen. And the strangest part of all, his entire body was covered with what looked to be a nasty sunburn and wasn't, which left her wondering what that bright flash had been when the men were fighting.

Bells himself stayed asleep for the duration of the blizzard, only waking briefly to let Nikki clean up the bed and shove him into a tub to wash the blood away. She managed to get a few swallows of soup into him before he went back to sleep, which, she decided pragmatically, was for the best since Corwin was stark raving terrified of the Immortal.

As soon as they could get out of the house she had some of the men come and help her get Corwin to the hospital for treatment, not only of his injuries but of his rattled mind as well.

When Bells finally did wake up the town was so badly bogged down in snow that his services as one of three men able

to drive a snowplow were put into use. Just as easily as he'd returned, Bells vanished from her life, going to his own apartment rather than coming to her house at the end of the day as she hoped he would.

This time she was determined not to let him drift away. Not after what had happened. She refused to let him go. Bells was her boy, and that was the end of the story as far as she was concerned. She just had to get it through his blond head and wasn't above using his smaller head to assure she had his attention.

\* \* \*

Nikki wanted to see him, but Bells was doing whatever he could to stay away from her. Much as he wanted her, the Dragon was too dangerous. His only consolation was that Corwin had survived his attack, probably because, at the last instant as the dragonfire started to burn the man, he'd realized what he was doing and stopped himself.

Whether the man's mind would ever recover was another story, and he genuinely felt bad about that, too, even though Corwin had made the foolish mistakes that had brought on his current predicament. A man did not treat a woman like that. Not ever. And it still angered him that Corwin could have been so stupid to believe holding her down, making her confront a fear head-on with such ruthlessness would 'fix' the problem. Instead he'd reinforced it.

He finished the box of bullets he'd been making and sat back in his chair, stretching the stiffness out of his shoulders. Twelve hours of work, twelve hours of doing a job that required little conscious thought from him had left him too much time to think about *her* when he knew he didn't dare resume their relationship. What he'd done to Corwin had driven that home.

Freed from the tenuous control of his own will, the Dragon

was far too dangerous. All it would take was a few moments of unleashed rage and Colby and her citizens would be nothing but burning buildings and ash on the wind.

Even if he had to confront Roderik—and it was a possibility—he wouldn't dare let the Dragon loose. Not with so many people in the vicinity at risk. He'd done it once, and carried the stain of the deaths on his soul even if he couldn't fully remember the incident. That, he knew, was a mercy because so many people had died. Innocents. Women. Children.

It was something he could never allow to occur, shouldn't have let happen the first time, not even if it meant his own death.

But he owed Nikki an explanation. Especially after he'd cried in front of her the way he'd done, making a damned fool of himself. Nothing new there. He'd done that with other women before Nikki, and most assuredly she wouldn't be the last one to see him being an overly emotional moron.

After so many centuries, though, he should have gotten over his need to be with a woman—or out of desperation, another man—but he hadn't, and by now he was coming to the realization that he just wasn't designed to be alone constantly. Maybe it was that the Dragon didn't like it. Or perhaps they both lacked the elements of personality that would keep them away from other people. Those were questions he didn't have any answers to, and probably never would.

A hand fell onto his shoulder. "Hey, bossman, why don't you go get some rest?" a woman's voice suggested.

He knew the voice, the scent. Alice, one of the munitions specialists from artillery. He glanced up over his shoulder and gave the woman a shrug. She was in her late thirties, pretty, with sparkling blue eyes and luxurious curves. "I'm all right," he told her.

"Bells, you've been here since seven yesterday morning."

"Yesterday?" he glanced at his watch, which clearly said it was, indeed, seven in the morning, not seven in the evening as he'd thought a moment ago.

"Go home!" she insisted. "Or better yet, go see Doc Nikki."

"I umm..."

She pulled on his arm, "Go home, Bells. Don't make me get Rudy and Sam to drag you there. It looks bad to the folks here when our boss has to be dragged out of the plant twice in one week."

He actually gave her a bit of a sheepish grin, "Yeah, I guess it does."

"See you tomorrow."

"Hey, before I go, how are the tank shells coming?"

"Only a few hours off production schedule now. If the weather holds we'll make up the lost time, if not," she shrugged, "we'll have what we have when Roderik gets here and do our best with it."

Bells nodded, the silver in his hair ringing softly.

"Leave. Now," she ordered. "And if I find out you've stopped by the office to check production I'll have them lock you into your apartment." She grinned, a bright glitter in her eyes, "Or maybe I'll just get my kids to sit on you."

"Woah, don't scare me like that." The woman had six kids, the oldest a sixteen-year-old that topped the blond by a head.

"Go home!"

He nodded and left.

Passing by Nikki's house he paused, went up onto her porch. It was quiet, the woman either gone or not awake yet.

The desire to see her was strong, but so was his control. He walked away from Nikki's house with a hard knot in his chest and need heating his groin.

## *Chapter Twelve*

Winter ground on, days passing faster than anyone liked. They had so much work to do, and the occasional whiteouts that kept everyone near their homes didn't help. Projects fell behind, especially the work the defense group was handling. With the munitions building at the far end of town, the blizzards prevented people from getting there to work on the guns and ammunition they'd need to repel the Rangers when they arrived after the thaw.

On days that it was clear and sunny they worked like dogs, putting in sixteen hour days. They never got ahead of their production goals, but they didn't stay far behind them either. Bells worked with a will and by the end of January he and his team had one tank operational. It would give them an edge they desperately needed against the heavily armed Rangers and their APCs. The chopper defied their best efforts, though, and they were forced to scrap the project because their machine shop just couldn't make some of the parts they needed.

Not to say life was idyllic, but it was the best life Nikki had experienced since the Collapse. Her only regret was that Dal, Chet, and Anya hadn't lived to see it.

Jim, one of the senior members of the town militia, came back and reported that the pass was clear, no more snow blocking the road, though the road itself was going to need the usual repairs to patch winter damage caused by thawing and refreezing over the last few days.

Two days later the siren went off, announcing unknown visitors.

As the duly re-elected Military Advisor, Bells was at the gate when the pair of men arrived in a battered and beaten up truck that made the most awful grinding rattling noise as the engine struggled toward the town.

"Son of a bitch," he said, grinning.

He knew both the truck and the men inside.

Hawk and Dal had survived and found them. They'd even found Bells' lost katana and brought it with them.

The reunion between the men and Nikki was an all night, no holds barred celebration. The townsfolk, always happy to have a reason for a party, joined with an exuberance that left Hawk and Dal happy, stuffed with good food, slightly drunk, and grinning like fools.

Drafting both of them as assistants, Bells listened as they gave their oaths to uphold the laws of Colby and protect its citizens, adding the disturbing fact that newly crowned *Emperor Roderik* had already started north from the Lone Star Empire with an army numbering over a thousand men.

The combined population of Danbridge and Colby was only three hundred and ninety people, and of those only about sixty could fight worth a damn. Even if Horton and Sugarsprings came in on their side, they could only field a force of about one hundred able-bodied combatants.

In the end Sugarsprings went over to Roderik, while the residents of Danbridge and Horton abandoned their towns, packed up what they could, and evacuated to the mountain town of Colby, which was renamed Fort Colby by popular vote.

Mary Kate and the ladies who had helped Nikki in the Danbridge clinic joined her staffers at the Colby Hospital, their first official act being to get Luke and Clyde to repaint the sign

to say Fort Colby Memorial Hospital. With a pair of RNs from Horton adding to their ranks they had something approaching an actual staff that swelled in number when two women, a medical assistant and a gynecologist from Sugarsprings, showed up at the town gate seeking asylum from the slave pens of the Lone Star Empire. With them came about half the women from Sugarsprings and almost four dozen children. One of the larger apartment buildings of Colby was put back on the power grid and the water turned back on to house all the new residents of the growing town.

As word spread over the next few weeks, people started to trickle into Fort Colby, bringing with them their belongings and knowledge, adding to the viability of the town as a whole.

There were more people to feed, but there were also many more hands to work on vital projects and everyone worked, even the older children and teenagers, a few of them joining the town militia as spotters who were sent out to the pass on rotation to watch for Roderik's approach.

\* \* \*

They wouldn't be able to meet Roderik's army head on, but there were a lot of ways to fight a war, and Bells knew every one of them.

The Town Council stared at the map several of the children had helped make using plaster, modeling clay, and parts for model train sets, mostly trees and road signs. It was a fairly accurate map of the town and surrounding mountains laid out on sheets of plywood. At the south edge was a mark that indicated the location that had been Danbridge until Roderik had erased it from the map. Not that anyone had been there. The residents had pulled out, the last of the militia cleverly locking the gates from the inside and climbing over the wall to make it look like the town was still inhabited. At least on casual inspection.

Rather than go down to the plains to fight Roderik, they'd make him come up into the mountains where his own tanks and APCs would be bottled up in the passes.

"And that will be his undoing, because, gentlemen, ladies," the Immortal said during the meeting of the Colby Defense Council, "we're going to drop the mountain on them."

Walt's eyes widened. "That dynamite! You're going to use it to take them out?"

Bells' voice was filled with ice. "Yes."

"Best place is at Dalton Point. The walls are steep there and rocks come down during spring melt anyway," ex-Marine Sergeant O'Brien said. "It would be easy there."

"Precisely," the blond man replied, smiling faintly.

"Well," Walt began, "it looks like we've got a war on our hands."

The meeting broke up, everyone hurrying to do their part for the defense of Colby.

\* \* \*

And their plan worked. It stopped the tanks and APCs that Emperor Roderik had with his army, but it failed to stop the rest of the army or Roderik himself. And of everything his army had, he was the single most dangerous element.

They'd sent the armored division up one pass, and taken the other one into Colby—now the self stylized Fort Colby, a designation they would soon learn gained them nothing—Roderik riding in his command vehicle in the vanguard of the attacking force.

He was met at the closed gates by his own brother, the younger man waiting for him outside, a white parlay flag fluttering over his head. There was a young man at his side, the pale glow surrounding him in the second sight showed he was some type of Beast, but not an Immortal.

No, of the half dozen Immortals that existed in this world, Roderik and his brother were the only ones with their freedom on his continent. The one other, a three hundred and fifty-year-old Unicorn named Tobais, was languishing in Roderik's prison, kept weak by the Dragon's tapping of his power through a weakness he'd discovered all Immortals had. The ability to have their vitality tapped by someone they loved. And the fool Tobais had loved a woman who betrayed him and gave what she held to Roderik. Love was for fools. Women were not worth that sort of devotion and loyalty because they themselves could not give it. Women were good for a single thing only; making children to repopulate the empty world. And to make new Immortals that would owe their allegiance to him, Roderik, the Great Dragon. Any of them that denied his right to rulership would meet the same fate as Tobais the Fool.

But for his scheme to bear the fruit of his plans he needed that bitch Nikki back. Only through her could he realize his goals because she was the One. The woman from whom Immortal sons could come forth. All that was needed was an Immortal sire.

And he, Roderik would be the father of those sons. With the strength of his own draconic Immortality, and the power of a Unicorn backing it, no Immortal in the entire world could stand in his path. Not even his own brother who'd stolen her from him and tried to begin his own Empire.

Leaving his command vehicle, Roderik walked forward, alone, to meet his brother under the flag of truce.

"Ready to surrender already?" he asked.

"Funny you should ask that," Hawk remarked, "because that's what I was going to ask you."

Roderik gave his brother a quietly snide laugh. "My, now that *is* funny. What are you going to do to keep me from taking

that slut back? Kill me? You don't have the power and you know it."

"Sure I know it. But I also know that, without your armored division your ass isn't going to get into Fort Colby."

Roderik frowned.

"We dropped a mountain on them, so they're not going to show up for the party, Roderik," the younger man at his brother's side remarked, a pleased, malicious smile on his face.

Roderik could now see the overlay of his Beast across the man's face in the second sight. A Tiger. He would be a dangerous opponent for any of his men to face. The young man was most assuredly responsible for Keane's demise at the farmhouse last fall, and that definitely made him an opponent to reckon with since Keane, the Grizzly, had been one of Roderik's best men.

But no Tiger could face the fury of an unleashed Dragon, and there were no other Dragons. Roderik knew that as fact because he would have felt the presence of a rival to his power.

\* \* \*

Dal regarded Roderik with cool determination. He and Hawk were going to keep Roderik out of town, and away from Nikki, until Bells could get back from Dalton's Point where they'd gotten rid of the pseudo-Emperor's armored unit.

He and Hawk might stand some small chance of keeping Roderik out of town. His own chances of survival were low, and he knew it. But since Anya was dead he didn't much care about anything. He missed her, and the only family he had left were Nikki and Hawk. And there just no way in hell was Roderik ever getting his hands on Nikki. Not as long as he could draw breath into his lungs.

He glanced at the men on the wall, hoping to see the signal that Bells had made it back from the ambush: a bright blue scarf

one of the people on the wall would casually wipe his face with at the first sign of the Immortal's return.

The scarf was firmly stuffed into Sheriff Dobb's belt, the older man himself grim-faced.

Roderik was still spouting his mouth off, telling Hawk how he was going to raze the town to the bedrock if Nikki wasn't brought out to him immediately.

"Well now, you see, there's a problem with that," the Fenyx told the Dragon.

"And that would be?"

"She'd rather die than be yours again."

Dal watched the rage suffusing the Dragon's face and wished he could die of an apoplexy, or maybe from something nasty and incurable. Like lead poisoning from a few dozen clips full of bullets. A man like Roderik deserved to die ignominiously.

"This is your last chance."

"That's what you said two last chances ago," Hawk countered laconically, his jeering grin meant to enrage the other man.

\* \* \*

Which was exactly what it did.

Bellowing in fury, Roderik let his power rise, the dark green Dragon that was his Immortal Beast coming to life in a welter of bilious green fire that sent Dal stumbling away, his Tiger answering the challenge of an Immortal gamely. Stripes appeared across his cheeks and down his bare arms, drawing bars of deep orange through his dark hair. Hawk's Fenyx burst into flame around him in a seething roar of red and yellow fire.

Hawk met his older brother's charge, the pair of men grappling, struggling to gain even a momentary advantage, green fire encompassing the Fenyx, the yellow flame of the aviform

Immortal wrapping around Roderik.

Dal darted in, risking serious injury, taking a swipe at the Dragon, the claws of his Tiger form raking shallow gouges down Roderik's arm.

Roaring in fury, the Dragon turned on the Tiger, flame billowing from its gaping mouth.

The only thing that saved Dal were his quick reflexes, the Tiger dodging aside, avoiding the fire that would have roasted his soul right out of his body and left his flesh burned.

\* \* \*

Hawk tore at his brother with burning Fenyx claws, drawing lines of pain down the older Immortal's chest, poisonous green fire searing him, weakening him. Roderik was too strong. His stolen power making the contest between the brothers thoroughly unequal.

Roderik couldn't kill him, but the stolen vitality from Tobais meant his brother would be able to fight on long after Hawk collapsed from exhaustion.

Dal came in at Roderik for a second dangerous attack, the Tiger daring to leap for Roderik, clawing, not at the man himself, but at the wings of his Immortal form.

Roderik bellowed in outraged pain and spun around, breaking the hold Hawk had on him, sending the younger brother crashing to the ground as he rushed for the infuriating Tiger, intending to crush him like an insect.

He struck Dal, the Tiger successful in partially evading the attack that could have killed him as the Dragon's claws ripped his shirt to ribbons and slashed flesh and muscle beneath. Bleeding, flames licking at the blood in the wounds, Dal backpedaled away from Roderik as Hawk launched himself, slamming into the other Immortal, taking them both to the ground.

"RUN!" he shouted at Dal, telling the Tiger to get away from them.

The fire was burning him, eating his life away. Staggering, Dal got farther away from the fight just as the gates into Fort Colby opened and Nikki came running out with the elderly Mary Kate hurrying after her.

\* \* \*

Nikki saw what had happened to Dal and grabbed the man, pulling him away from the pair of combatants. She didn't know what to do, how to stop the vile flame from consuming him, but she knew she had to do something or Dal was going to die.

"Stay away, Nikki. I'm not going to make it this time," he gasped out to her as he collapsed to the ground.

Seeing the fire, Nikki felt something coming to life within her. Something cool and soothing. She reached out to Dal, her hands moving over the deep gashes in his flesh, barely touching him, the sting of the fire feeling like the bites of ants on her skin.

A golden glow surrounded her, filling her hands, the flame extinguishing in the wake of her touch, the wounds healing visibly.

His pain was an ache in her, a hurt that she could assuage. Mind drifting she lost her awareness of what was happening, of what she was doing. She was seeing a quiet pool of moonlit water surrounded by dark forest. A light wind ruffled the leaves of the trees.

From the darkness beneath the forest canopy a proud doe stepped into the clearing by the pool, her large all-seeing eyes met Nikki's, a flash of recognition linking them.

*Healer, physician, the power of life lies within your hands. Use it well.*

Then the doe and the strange vision were gone and Nikki found herself gazing into Dal's startled eyes.

\* \* \*

"Holy shit," Dal murmured looking from his sore chest to Nikki's serene gaze. They were deep pools of sable brown, full of compassion, of gentleness. Faintly he could see the outline of some type of Doe, but he wasn't familiar with the exact type of deer it represented.

"I didn't know, Nikki."

"Neither did I," she replied as he got to his feet.

"Get back inside the gate!" he told her, "It's you he's here for, and now I think we know why. You're special, too, Nikki. With you he could have an unstoppable army."

She shook her head. "Help Hawk. I'll do what I can for you both, but I'm not going back inside the town and putting these people at risk."

As they spoke Hawk was thrown aside, the man sprawling like a broken doll.

From the wall the guards opened fire with every gun they had, trying to slow Roderik down now that neither the Fenyx or the Tiger would be in danger of a stray bullet.

Draconic wings swept into the line of fire, most of the bullets stopping, slowing, only a few hitting their target and doing any damage.

But the barrage didn't do anything to prevent Roderik from stalking toward Nikki.

Nikki almost fell when Dal shoved her away from the enraged Dragon, and Mary Kate grabbed her arm and pulled her toward the gate. "Girl, you can't help them! All you can do is get caught!"

"I can help them!" she countered, as Dal was thrown backward into her arms, the pair of them and the old woman falling from the force behind Roderik's attack.

Injured and bleeding, Dal wasn't moving. She slapped her

hands over the deep wounds and healed him, the Tiger getting up to face the Dragon as Nikki scrambled for Hawk's motionless form.

Inside the gate a cheer went up and she wondered what Dal had done to the Dragon as she dropped to her knees beside Hawk. The man was already trying to regain his feet as she arrived.

"Nikki, what the hell are you doing out here!" he demanded.

Instead of wasting breath by answering, she ran her hands over his body, closing his wounds, almost completely healing the damage Roderik had done to him.

"Holy shit," he said, repeating Dal's words without realizing it.

"Go help Dal before that son of a bitch kills him!" she ordered, hauling at the big man's arm.

"Damn you're good, girl," he said as he charged back into the fray.

Dal was already down again, and Hawk didn't last much longer before Nikki was hurrying for them, trying to keep Roderik busy.

The gates of Fort Colby opened and a slender blond, his hair ornamented with a riot of beads, grey feathers, and small silver bells came walking out. Calm as you please he drew his handgun and emptied all six rounds into the Dragon who had just turned to go after her.

\* \* \*

Roderik turned around, a furious scream coming from his mouth at the pain of six shots in his back. Six bullets that should not have penetrated his defenses since they were from an old fashioned revolver. It took high powered guns to hammer through the inferno of green fire spinning around him, and the

bullets from anything less than an assault rifle shouldn't have touched him. But they had.

"Who the fuck are you!" he snarled.

"The one who just shot you. I thought you'd be smart enough to figure that out on you own. I see I'm wrong." The smaller man's tone was loaded with derision.

"He's the guy that came up with the plan that trashed your armored division," his brother informed him with a gore-stained smile as he struggled to get to his feet. His pelvis was broken and he wouldn't be getting back up, a fact which pleased Roderik.

The Dragon regarded the smaller man, standing there so calmly, reloading his revolver as if he had not a care in the world.

"We don't have to do this," Roderik said, seeking a useful ally rather than another corpse that was of no use to anyone. If what his brother said was true, the blond was a good tactical leader, which was something he had in short supply, and the attack in the pass had been strategically sound, though it had failed to take his own power and that of his Rangers into account. Even without the armored division they could still easily capture the town.

But he thought knew how to appeal to the young man. Didn't all men desire power and control over others? And women. Roderik had both to give. Prestige and a high position within the Lone Star Empire, and whatever women struck his fancy. "We could work together. Build an Empire from the wreckage."

"No thanks. I'd make a lousy Duke or whatever. Besides, Duke Bells just sounds too stupid for reality." The reply was delivered in a flippant tone, sliding though a mouth curled in a mocking smile that angered Roderik. He'd never been able to

tolerate such offhanded comments, they offended his sensibilities.

"Fine. Then you'll die."

The smaller man just smiled, raised his hand, and made a little 'come hither' motion. It too was mocking.

"I won't make your death an easy or quick one," Roderik warned. "Be reasonable. Take my offer."

"I suspect you only honor your deals so long as they benefit you." The blond gave him another one of those mocking smiles. "Besides, hasn't anyone ever told you that you shouldn't make deals with the devil?"

Roderik frowned. "I'm hardly the devil."

"I never said *you* were the devil, did I?"

Cocky arrogance. The blond might be a good strategist, but his ego was going to get him killed, and quickly, because Roderik was running out of patience.

"Turning me down will only get you killed," he told the smaller man.

From the corner of his eye he could see his brother moving sluggishly. He wouldn't be in time to save the blond. He didn't heal nearly fast enough to be of any consequence in what was about to happen.

"Anything's possible," the small man allowed, his unruffled calm disconcerting to the Dragon.

The blond man had to realize what he was facing, had to know he couldn't win. It didn't make any sense. "I'm offering you a chance to join me."

"God, Roderik, don't you ever take the clue?" Hawk asked him sharply. "We aren't going to let you have Nikki."

Roderik glanced at his brother, "You can't stop me."

But his brother grinned at him. "Want to place any bets on that?"

\* \* \*

Bells finished reloading his .357 and raised the gun, taking aim with a casualness that none of the many witnesses missed. He squeezed off the first shot and while Roderik was turning around the other five went off with sharp cracks of sound, every one of the bullets impacting flesh, the Dragon staggering under the speed of the assault.

Guns on the walls opened up, most of them stopped by the fire shield around Roderik.

But they were making an impression on the fast healing Dragon, Bells could tell by the shocked expression on the tyrant's face.

While his opponent reeled under the damage he started to reload his revolver. Like his jacket, motorcycle, and katana, it was no longer exactly what it appeared to be, the magical emanations of his Immortal form having imbued his oldest possessions with power.

"You have no hope of killing me. Only another Dragon can kill a Dragon."

Bells laughed, and raised the revolver. "Great believer in rules, are you?" he asked as he opened fire for a third time, watching the impacts of the bullets, paying keen attention to how quickly Roderik healed from their impacts.

*He's stronger than he should be, but not so powerful that I can't handle him without the Dragon.* He stood there, contemplating reloading the gun or just getting down to the real business of killing the other Immortal.

Roderik stalked closer, anger contorting his face into a demonic mask of hate and rage. "I can't be killed by the likes of you."

"Guess we'll find out if you're right, won't we?" Bells asked him, his voice still calm.

The distance closed and Bells holstered his revolver. At close range he'd just lose it when Roderik attacked anyway.

Bells watched the much larger man, waiting for him to make a move. The liquid nitrogen burn through his veins sent him to the left just as Roderik kicked for his head, the attack followed by a second one that should have taken the smaller man in the ribs, but sailed above him as he dropped beneath the kick, rising into an attack of his own that popped his fist squarely into Roderik's stomach.

\* \* \*

Roderik retreated a step, newfound respect for the slim blond showing in his expression. The Emperor had erred on more than one score in his estimation of the belled man. He'd thought because he was smaller he wouldn't have the same kind of strength a larger man would. But as his aching belly showed him, the blond was far stronger than he looked, and much faster than he'd anticipated.

Too fast to be a mere human.

But he wasn't an Immortal. Roderik could feel the power emanating from others of their kind the same way a human could catch the scent of orange blossoms on the wind. There was none of that feeling coming from the belled man before him. In fact, he couldn't even catch the scent of a Beast which only added to the puzzle of exactly what—and who—the blond was exactly.

Things that didn't fit the neat patterns Roderik relied on disconcerted him.

The pair of men circled, Roderik watching how the belled blond moved, realizing that, unless he was moving fast to attack or block, those movements were soundless, the bells not even making the faintest of jangling sounds. That too was somewhat disturbing to Roderik because it indicated something uncanny, a skill he doubted all but the most seasoned killers among the

mortals could develop. And that thought made him think. *A professional killer? Is that the answer? An assassin could move this way, I think. But even the best assassin cannot kill an Immortal.*

He studied the blue eyed man, his own near black gaze tinted with the green of his Dragon's deep green orbs. *Graceful, and quite deadly to other humans, I'd imagine*, he mused as they circled one another. He was going to let the blond make the next move. *Time to see what he can do.*

When it came Roderik barely had time to react; the man's speed was phenomenal, totally inhuman. The punch for his face missed, but the kick that sent him staggering backward, the feel of a rib cracking under the lightning quick blow, startled a yelp of pain from him.

His counterattack missed, the blond rolled across the ground and came to his feet faster than any opponent he'd ever faced. Not even his own brother could match the belled man's quickness.

"What are you?" he asked, not actually believing he'd get a response.

\* \* \*

Bells gave the man a cold killer's smile. "Just a man."

He watched Roderik as the larger man stalked around him, studying him with cold calculation. He could tell the Dragon was displeased with the way things were going, and that suited him just fine. If he could wear the Immortal down he'd be able to deal with him under his own terms. He didn't want to let his own Dragon free, not when the consequences could be so devastating to everyone around him.

Innocent people. Women and children.

He had to kill Roderik without using the Dragon's power, and, tough as he was, he didn't know if he could do it using only

the Warrior's Fire that existed around the core of what was housed in his soul.

"I'm going to kill you."

"So you tell me," Bells replied.

"What are you?"

"We've been over this."

"You didn't answer me."

"Sure I did, I told you I'm just a man."

Roderik frowned at him. "You act as if you have a hope of defeating me."

Bells shrugged. "Are we done with this pissing contest now?" Bells asked the man as he moved a step closer to Roderik, body relaxed, hands not even up in anything resembling a defensive posture.

Roderik came for him, the Dragon barely in evidence.

Side-stepping, Bells slammed his fist into the larger man, but his attempt to dance out of Roderik's way went awry and he felt powerful arms close around his waist, hauling him against the bigger man's chest as the Dragon manifested at full power, the flame searing at him.

Pale blue fire flashed into being around Bells, his Warrior's Fire protecting him from serious injury. But alone it wasn't strong enough to stop the drain on his vitality that exposure to dragonfire caused any being, even an Immortal.

He tried to break loose, ramming his knee up between Roderik's thighs, hearing the rewarding gasp of pain from the man, feeling the grip around him loosen enough that he could escape.

Breathing hard, in pain from the burning of his soul in the conflagration of the dragonfire, Bells staggered away from Roderik, shaking himself, focusing on reawakening his faltering Warrior's Fire.

Roderick staggered closer, chuckling. "You're weak," he chided. "I can even see it in your eyes, how they pale."

Ice water trickled through his veins and he went to full speed, evading what was coming for him.

\* \* \*

Roderik had let his Draconic power fade, letting himself regain a bit of vitality as he circled around the smaller man, and he had been pleased when the ploy worked as he grappled the younger man, calling up the power lurking within his soul, the Dragon answering him with renewed vigor. Thick, green haze blurred his outline, ghostly wings spreading from his back, the Beast's face superimposed over his own visage. Grinning, he took a menacing step toward the blond. "Do you see what you now face?"

To his annoyance, the blond just stood there, looking bored.

"Your death will be slow and painful," he hissed and came in for an attack, leaping into the air.

All he hit was air as the small man easily evaded one of his most devastating attacks. He stared at Bells in uncomprehending confusion. He'd been using his Dragon's power to speed up the attack. No human had ever evaded it before. He narrowed his eyes, truly studying the blond for the first time. A pale blue nimbus flickered around the man as he viewed him through the second sight.

"What are you?" he asked suspiciously. "A Leopard? Perhaps a Cougar?"

The man just offered him one of those small, mocking smiles.

"I'm one of the Immortals. You have no hope of killing me," he stated confidently.

He gave the blond no other warning, attacking full out yet again, his body becoming a deadly weapon, deep green claws

extended before his hands.

\* \* \*

They were moving so fast now that Nikki was having trouble following the battle. The hazy outlines of their forms further hampered her ability to see what was happening.

She was very worried. Roderik was powerful. Very powerful, even Hawk said so. The man was also devious and fought dirty. Of course, by now Nikki knew that Bells didn't fight by any 'civilized rules,' either.

"He's too confident," Hawk murmured, trying to stand. "He can't fight Roderik alone."

"Maybe not," she heard Dal reply, "but you sure as hell can't get into that. Not hurt the way you are."

Nikki looked away from the battle and knelt down beside Hawk. "He's right. Immortal or not, you're hurt badly. Maybe you can't die, but in your condition you'd only get in his way and be a liability."

The big man frowned, his gaze going from her to Dal. "Don't you just hate it when she's right?"

"More than you know," Dal admitted, looking at his bloody thigh and broken arm.

Nikki put her hand on Hawk's hip, trying to call up her newfound healing power, to no avail. She was too upset over what was happening to Bells.

She looked away from her patients to see the man she loved and the man she hated engaged in a knock down, drag out round of ass kicking. For a moment she forgot to breathe as she saw her lover stagger. But he was on the attack before Roderik had a chance to take advantage of the damage he'd done. And there was damage because she could see the blood in the dirt even if she wasn't able to see the men clearly.

The pair was totally obscured by Roderik's Dragon form as

they fought, the fire around them burning, blue sheathed with seething green as Roderik tried to kill the blond with every means at his disposal.

"Please, please...Bells...Jason...don't die," she clasped her hands in prayer, begging, pleading for the life of her man, her boy, silent tears rolling down her face. She loved him, she couldn't bear to lose him. Bells, Jason, the Immortal Warrior, who or what he was no longer mattered nearly as much as having him survive the fight did.

When the two combatants broke apart this time Nikki could see a lot blood across Jason's chest. Roderik was staggering, legs wobbling beneath him as they moved farther apart, both of them breathing hard.

It was the blond who fell. His legs giving way, he crumpled to the ground.

She ran, heedless of Roderik, seeing only that her Jason was down and wanting to help him if she could. Before she reached them they were fighting again.

\* \* \*

The impact hurt, but not nearly as much as the idea of losing to Roderik did. He'd made a promise to Nikki, and if it killed him he'd make sure Roderik could never touch her.

Claws raked his chest, but the wounds were shallow. Snarling, he drove his fist into Roderik's face, following it up with a flurry of punches to the man's body. They didn't have much effect and he found himself thrown backward. He hit the ground hard, rolled, and a booted foot caught him in the ribs, sending him tumbling again.

*What the hell?* he thought to himself as he was knocked down, breath slammed out of his body. He'd felt ribs break at the impact.

He was weakening too much. The Warrior's Fire burning

down to embers, deserting him when it should be enough to defeat such a young Immortal as Roderik was purported to be. Something was very wrong. Roderik had as much power as a far older Immortal. One close to his own age and that made no sense.

He raised his head, a streamer of blood running from his mouth, and caught a boot with his face. The world went dim.

\* \* \*

Roderik watched the other man collapse limply and he allowed himself a little victorious smile. Even another Immortal could not survive a confrontation with him, and this fool hadn't had a chance. Pleased with the outcome, he turned to speak with his watching men and saw the woman who was at the heart of the whole conflict.

Nikki.

His woman.

He strode forward, grabbing her by the arm. "Now, slut, there will be no more running!"

"Let me go!"

She had the audacity to slap him. Eyes narrowing in fury, he slapped her in return, knocking her to the ground, dazed and bleeding.

Her hand groped for the gun holstered under her left arm, but a punishing grip closed on her wrist, squeezing, grinding bones and flesh so painfully she let go of the revolver with a gasp.

"You try my patience, bitch! No more of this foolishness. Haven't enough people died to protect you? You're nothing. A worthless slut."

"If I'm so worthless why did you come after me, Roderik? If I'm nothing, why go to all this trouble to get me back?"

He grabbed her and yanked her to her feet, dark eyes

blazing in rage at her. "Because you are mine!" he shouted, gripping her by her upper arms and shaking her.

"Wrong, asshole. She belongs to herself."

Roderik turned to see the blond back on his feet. But the blue glow was dimmed around him. Faded. Weak.

Why the man wasn't dead yet Roderik couldn't understand. By all rights he should be since mortals couldn't take the kind of damage that had been heaped upon him.

Shoving Nikki aside, Roderik rushed the other man.

\* \* \*

Terrified, her fear that Bells would be killed becoming new incentive, Nikki rushed back to where the Immortal Fenyx and the Tiger were laying.

"We've got to do something!" she told them.

"No shit," Dal replied. "Heal Hawk and then me and we'll see if the three of us can't take the bastard out."

Nikki saw Hawk watching the fight. "Why isn't he using his full power?" the man asked.

"I don't know! I think he's afraid of it for some reason," she replied as she laid her hands over Hawk's broken pelvis.

The man grunted as something inside moved, and she could feel the bones going together under her hands. "Hurry, Nikki. I don't think he's going to hold out much longer," Hawk told her quietly.

Nikki had barely finished what she was doing before Hawk was gone, running to the aid of her lover.

She turned to Dal. "Try to avoid being hit," she admonished as she passed her hands over his injuries.

There was a heaviness starting in her legs, a leaden weariness pulling at her body and she understood that healing their wounds had come with a price she'd not been aware of: it drained her own vitality.

"I will, and you stay the hell away from that man," Dal told her as he jumped to his feet and hurried to help the pair of Immortals who were battling Roderik.

\* \* \*

Hawk arrived just as Roderik shoved a bleeding and weak Bells aside, the smaller man collapsing, eyes faded to pale blue once more, his breath coming in labored gasps.

"I think that's enough, Roderik," he told his older brother. "My turn."

Roderik laughed in his face. "You are such a fool, Elijah."

Hawk's eyes narrowed at the use of his given name. He hadn't used it since he'd discovered the Immortal hidden at the center of his soul. "I'd rather be a fool than what you've become, Roderik."

The pair of men grappled, green and yellow fire swirling around them.

Tired as he already was, it wouldn't take long for Roderik to overcome him. Hawk knew he was fighting a losing battle, but he was determined to keep fighting in the hopes that Nikki could get through to the blond: without Bells unleashing his own Immortal Beast, they had no hope of winning.

Green flame seared across his back and he shuddered as Roderik's Immortal form battled with his Fenyx, the Dragon's jaws closing on one of his Beast's wings, tearing it viciously.

Hawk screamed, his Fenyx echoing the cry as the Dragon ravaged its already broken wing, Hawk feeling his own arm shatter under the impact of his brother's kick.

\* \* \*

Hawk and Roderik were fighting, the Fenyx struggling with the Dragon, both of them wreathed in flame, bright red and orange, a deep poisonous green that slowly overwhelmed the clean fire of the younger brother's Immortal form. Dal was

circling around them, looking for an opening so he could join the battle against Roderik.

Nikki put her hands on her wounded lover, caressing his face. There was a soft golden glow around her and she leaned in to kiss him gently.

"Jason, you have to let go. Let It go and fight. You promised to protect me. Don't break your promise."

Dulled blue eyes regarded her without any sign of real comprehension. Nikki leaned down and kissed him again. "Bells, please. He's going to kill Dal. Don't let Roderik take me. If he wins I swear I'll kill myself! Do you hear me?"

She heard Hawk scream in pain again, heard Dal roaring.

There wasn't any time left.

"Jason!" her voice cracked like a whip, "Jason! Mistress Nikki will punish you if you don't listen!"

\* \* \*

Roderik shoved Hawk aside, glaring in triumph at his defeated brother. "You've never been strong enough, Elijah. You were a disappointment to Dad, and I have no further use for you except as a way to feed my powers. You can't die, but you can be drained the same way I'm draining that fool Tobais."

Hawk lifted his head, staring dully at his brother. But his gaze wasn't focused on him. He was staring at something behind him.

The woman and her dying lover.

\* \* \*

"Mistress Nikki?"

He felt her arms around him, felt her kissing him. But he was so tired, and he just wanted to sleep. The Warrior's Fire was embers, dulled, falling to ash, nothing left.

"Look at me!" she snapped.

Their eyes met, hers filled with love, big and dark, the

golden nimbus framing her. He was seeing Nikki, seeing what lay at the center of her soul. Roe Deer. Like his lost Kimiko.

Nikki was the One. Absolutely.

Getting to his feet, he closed his eyes, the calm descending over his mind. Motionless.

He set the Dragon free.

\* \* \*

Nikki let him go, watched her lover's body heal before her eyes, saw his eyes go from pale listless blue to slate grey in the space of a few heartbeats.

Hawk fell, dazed and bleeding to the ground. Dal staggered, bleeding and burning from the Dragon's claws. She got up and stumbled to him, managing to put out the fire but unable to heal him. She was too tired.

"Why is he so powerful?" Dal asked.

Unaware of Bells, Roderik was stalking toward them, his gaze on her. Nikki grabbed Dal's hand as the man started to get to his feet.

"No, Dal. He'll kill you this time. Let Bells handle him."

Dal nodded and put an arm around her, the pair of them backing away from the approaching would-be Emperor.

"You can't run from me, girl, there's no where left to go."

He reached for Nikki. Dal pulled her out of the man's reach and stepped between them before she could stop him. Roderik knocked him aside and grabbed for Nikki's hand.

"Hey, asshole!"

\* \* \*

Roderik turned. It wasn't possible. The blond was on his feet, fully healed.

"Slut, this is your doing! Well it ends now!" He slapped Nikki, sending her sprawling beside the wounded Tiger before he turned to face the blond.

"I'm going to kill you now!" he snarled.

"Well you're zero for three already, so I'd say odds of that are against you," the smaller man snarled, his eyes almost black now. Roderik frowned. There was something beyond all his experience about this man. He was like no human Roderik had ever seen, resilient as any Immortal.

They circled, Roderik wary of anyone that could take what he'd dished out and still be on his feet. Nikki had healed him, perhaps that was the secret. So long as Roderik didn't kill him outright the woman could bring him back to health.

But that wasn't going to happen anymore. He'd see to that.

Snarling, he rushed at the smaller man, launching one of his most devastating attacks, his incorporeal claws wreathed in insubstantial flame.

\* \* \*

Bells unleashed the Dragon, letting it burn as he leaped over Roderik, twisting in midair to land behind the other Immortal, wings unfurling, the gold scales of the ghostly Beast's form around him seeming to glitter in the sunlight.

Roderik turned to face him and froze in abject disbelief. "That isn't possible," he murmured.

Hawk laughed at his brother's discomfiture. "That's priceless. Absolutely priceless."

Bells smiled at Hawk, winked, and turned his gaze on Roderik's face. "Surprise."

Even as they watched the intense blue of the man's gaze, the Dragon's eyes slowly whirled, going opalescent, milky white, aqua, and emerald with tinges of ruby and cobalt.

Roderik roared and launched himself at the blond, claws reaching out.

Bells met him head-on, blocking the man's attacks, countering with attacks of his own, each blow strong enough to

shatter human bones. But neither of them were human.

Roderik broke away, shoving Bells and sending him sliding backward, wings snapping out wide to keep him on his feet, acting as a brake.

There was nothing even remotely human in the blond's eyes now, just the icy opalescence of his Dragon's killing fury. Lips curling in a sneer, he walked toward Roderik. He scented fear, smiled a Grim Reaper smile, stalked closer to the other Dragon.

"What's the matter, King Dragon? Discover you aren't the biggest fish in the pond anymore?"

"What are you?"

"I would have thought that even someone with your limited intellect could tell what I am."

"It's not possible. There aren't any other Dragons here. There can't be. It's one to a world."

Bells spread his arms akimbo. "Sorry, I seemed to have missed the memo about reading your rule book."

The man rushed in at Bells, the pair exchanging a flurry of blows.

Bells could sense his opponent's tie to the Unicorn now. His own Dragon fully unleashed, reached out and snapped the binding on the Unicorn's soul, freeing him.

Roderik, struggling in the grip of the smaller man, felt the magical link as it was severed and knew he was doomed. "Please, don't kill me."

Dragon regarded Dragon, opalescent eyes meeting green, just as the men stared at one another locked in the tableau. Soul meeting soul, Immortal Beasts reading the stains of sins, the marks of redemptions blazed in their own hearts.

"I suffer no evil greater than my own to live," Bells whispered to Roderik.

A conflagration of light, of heat, and roaring sound jetted

up around the men, swirling, a tornado formed of flame that completely hid both of the combatants, their Dragons and an area about fifteen feet in diameter around them. Nikki, Dal, and Hawk were all well inside the column flame, and the people on the walls of Fort Colby could feel the searing heat as it lashed at Roderik's army.

Shrieking, the men abandoned their vehicles as the conflagration screamed toward them, the first of the cars and trucks melting in the blast of inferno heat. There was a bright flash of light, a slam of sound loud as a sonic boom, and when anyone could see again all that was left of Roderik's dreams of Empire were a few smoking trucks and a horde of screaming, terrified men.

The walls of Fort Colby were scorched, but no one had been hurt.

Mary Kate, shaking and crying, started to search for Nikki and the others as people came out of the gates to round up the one time members of the Lone Star Empire's army.

"Nikki!"

The old woman found Nikki with the three men. She was unconscious, wrapped in the arms of her lover, shielded by all three of men. Hawk and Dal were worse for wear, and none of them were conscious, but they were all alive and that was what mattered.

The only sign of Roderik to be seen was the scorched outline of a dragon burned into the melted roadway.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

After a few days of rest the four who'd taken part in defeating Roderik were up and about, to the relief of the Town Council and the citizens of Fort Colby.

With the leadership of the Lone Star Empire gone the army had disbanded, only a few stubborn members of the Rangers giving the Fort Colby militia a hard time. But with a Dragon and a Fenyx coming out to discuss terms they quickly surrendered to the custody of the militia.

After a brief debate among the leadership of Fort Colby, the Rangers were disarmed and sent away with the understanding that any effort to reorganize into a fighting unit would result in another, more final meeting with the Dragon.

Hawk then gathered the shattered remnants of his brother's army and took them south, the bulk of the men just glad to be going home. Dal went with him, the pair planning to pick up the pieces of the mess Roderik had left behind and to make sure Tobais and Roderik's newest harem were freed.

Not taking no for an answer, Nikki ordered her boy to move back in, and Bells, smiling slightly, did as he was told without an argument. He was Nikki's and he wouldn't put up a fight. They did belong together, she'd proven that to him beyond any doubts.

By early summer everything was running smoothly, Fort Colby becoming the seat of government for the area that encompassed Danbridge, Sugarsprings, and Horton, the

residents of the abandoned communities returning home. Sugarsprings accepted the transition from Roderik's control to that of the Council which ran Fort Colby. The collective members then elected a leader, choosing someone they knew would never abuse power, and who they had already entrusted with their well being.

They chose the title of Queen rather than President for Life because they wanted a hereditary title, one that would promise stability, with the best suited of Nikki's children elected to office by popular vote to ratify his or her place as ruler once Nikki stepped down. It was an odd compromise, but they felt it could work, especially since Nikki had such loyal and loved advisors in Bells and Hawk.

Queen Nikki came into power on June first, which became Queen's Day thereafter.

Immediately after her Coronation, Nikki appointed her council, making Hawk an advisor. Dal became her official 'captain of the guard' and Bells retained his post as Military Advisor. Even though Roderik was gone, there were other Warlords around and fighting could break out at any time.

Before he could get away, Nikki proposed to Bells, asking him to be her Prince Consort. With half the people in town watching he knelt at her feet, bowed his head, and humbly accepted her proposal, a slight smile playing at the corners of his mouth as he agreed.

\* \* \*

Civilization had fallen, but Nikki was determined to see it rebuilt.

There would be no more vultures feasting off the ruins, no more despoilers raping the land under her control. It was time to move forward, time to stop backsliding into barbarism, and with the aid of the people of Fort Colby and the surrounding towns

they could form a bastion of rationality and civilization to stave off the threat of a new Dark Age of Man. By holding onto the best parts of the old way of life and discarding the things that no longer worked or fit a post-Collapse world, they could make a new civilization to replace the old one.

That was Nikki's goal, and the goal of the Council of Colby.

There was a grand wedding planned for July Fourth, with dignitaries from as far away as the Knights of the Eastern Kingdom and the Democratic States of California-Oregon in attendance. The Prime Minister of British Columbia even sent her emissary.

The day of the wedding, Fort Colby was decked out in every string of lights and all the crepe streamer that could be found, and preparations for a reception party were well underway, and Hawk made sure the fireworks would be ready for the evening celebration.

The platform had been constructed so the crowd could see the ceremony, the Queen resplendent in the laciest confection of a wedding dress Mary Kate and the elderly women from the hospital could work up in a month of frantic sewing and fittings. It was white, dazzlingly so, with tiered ruffles of lace and a train almost fifteen feet long. It looked as if it had come out of Cinderella's worst nightmare, but it was what the old women—who'd watched far too many DVDs of romantic period pieces—thought a queen's wedding dress should look like. Nikki gracefully accepted the gown, glad she was in such good shape because the weight of the train made her feel like she *was* dragging a train behind her. A freight train, loaded with bricks. Fortunately they'd made it detachable, realizing she'd want to dance at the reception.

Her Prince Consort had been forced into a tuxedo, and he looked absolutely miserable, but unutterably delicious with his

long hair cascading down his back, a single braid adorning the left side of his face, a trio of little silver bells, a few beads and a tuft of white feathers at the end.

Looking at him took Nikki's breath away, which, considering she already felt far too compressed in the tight bodice of the dress, wasn't a good thing. But she managed not to pass out as Hawk, who was standing in as her father, walked her to stand beside her soon to be husband.

Dal, decked out in his new royal blue dress uniform stood in as Bells' best man, the Tiger looking dashing and quite the gentleman.

Nikki heard Bells say, "Not bad for a dairy farmer."

Dal just chuckled.

Sheriff Dobbs, who went by Reverend Dobbs on Sundays, holidays, and for Royal Weddings, waited until a less sharp-edged version of the song Bells had sung to Nikki during at the party in Danbridge was played by the band, Matt even doing a fair rendition of the guitar solo.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today before the eyes of God and everyone within about five hundred miles, to join our Queen Nikki with Jason. If there's anyone here going to object let them speak now or keep their darned mouths shut."

Nikki couldn't help but shake her head and smile at the Reverend Dobbs rendition of the opening to their wedding vows.

"Well I'd like to object on the grounds he never did suck my cock!" Luke bellowed from the front of the platform.

"Too damned bad, Luke! This is Queen Nikki's boy, now pipe down!" the Reverend hollered back. For a moment Dobbs stared at the book in his hands, trying to find his place. Nikki giggled. "Right, now umm...yes. Speak now...got that...umm...okay, here it is.

"Do you, Queen Nikki of Fort Colby, take Jason as your

Prince Consort and husband to have and to hold, even occasionally beat when he deserves it, till death do you part?"

Nikki could tell Bells, her Jason, was laughing, but doing a manful job of hiding it. The sparkle of amusement in his cobalt blue eyes gave him away.

"I do."

"And do you, Bells...err Jason...take our Queen Nikki as your wife to have and to hold, and obey or else, till death do you part?"

"I do," he replied, his gaze focused on her through the lace of her veil.

"All right, I now pronounce you Queen and Consort. Jason, kiss your Queen and let's get this party underway."

Smiling as he lifted the veil from her face, he stood, simply looking at her for a moment, a grin lighting his face. Nikki felt tears blurring her vision.

Before he could get farther, Nikki reached up, grabbing a handful of long blond hair at the nape of his neck. She smiled and pulled him close, kissing him, catching hold of him and dipping him as low as she dared in the tight gown.

There was a loud shout from everyone watching, but even over all the other voices they could hear both Hawk and Dal, and even Luke, whooping it up.

When the kiss was reluctantly over, Nikki held up her hand, shouting, "I have an announcement to make."

Silence fell as everyone waited to hear what Queen Nikki wanted to say.

She smiled at Jason, who just gave her a puzzled tilt of the head.

"Since I'm now the Queen I thought you, my people, would want to know that I'm pregnant!"

For a scant few seconds there was silence, then a cheer that

would have drowned out the take off of a jet went up, the gathered people rattling the windows of Colby with their joyous shout.

\* \* \*

Cobalt eyes regarded her, love burning in their depths. He smiled. "I love you."

Nikki lay her head on his chest. "Mr. Dragon, would you care to snack on a Damsel?"

He grinned. "Hmm...I suppose I could manage that, but I did eat an awful lot of cake."

"Well you've had your cake, it's time to eat the Damsel, too."

Laughing, they walked arm in arm toward their house.

"We're going to need a bigger place," he remarked.

"I guess so." She paused, regarded him. "Actually we're not going to have a 'place,' it's going to be a 'palace,' you realize."

"Let's just stick to a house. I hate dusting," he replied.

"Dusting?"

"Well yeah, we can't expect the Queen to clean house, can we?"

"No, I suppose not." She giggled, "But her 'boy' the Prince Consort can, right?"

"Absolutely," he agreed as he scooped her up and carried her into the house. Outside there were cheers, and they recognized the voices of the four loudest people.

Hawk was shouting, "Don't let him boss you, Nikki!"

Dal had yelled, "Make him beg, Nikki!"

Luke had bellowed, "Boy, you are in for it now!"

And Clyde had added, "Show him no mercy, Nikki!"

"It's good to have friends," Nikki said.

"Yeah. Now where can we find some that aren't so damned noisy?"

Laughing, Nikki waved at the crowd outside right before the door banged closed, kicked shut by her husband. "I've got you exactly where I want you," she told him, her hand sinking into the loose flow of his hair.

"And where might that be, fair Damsel?"

"You'll see," she promised, and pulled the golden strands in her hand.

"I'm going to hold you to that promise."

The door to her bedroom—their bedroom—was pushed open. Nikki gasped when she saw the room was strewn with roses, red and pink, the floor was adorned with a few straws of wheat. Pink and red rose petals scattered the bed, a vase of jasmine and gardenias rested on the night stand.

She was put on her feet and allowed to look at the room. The fragrance of roses mixed with the sweetness of gardenia and jasmine filled every breath.

Bells picked up a pair of roses and a straw from the floor. "Mary Kate helped me with this. This means love," he presented her with the red rose, "and this is grace and beauty, which describes you," he said as he gave her the pink rose.

Nikki took the roses and smiled. "They suit you, too, Jason. You are the most beautiful, graceful man I've ever known."

He opened his mouth but she put the pink rose to his lips. "Don't argue unless you want to be punished."

The grin on his face showed her what he was thinking. He wanted to know what type of punishment that would get him.

"I'll make you sleep on the couch," she warned.

The grin didn't change. "Just what do you mean by 'sleep,' Nikki?"

"Behave." She plucked the wheat straw from his fingers and looked at the grain heavy head at the top. "And this means?"

"Wealth and the continuation of life. Building a family."

"And the jasmine?"

"It's part of Japanese Hanakobota, flower language. Jasmine means happiness, gardenia means purity. Together it means pure happiness. That's what I'm promising to you, Nikki. Love, and pure happiness."

Nikki saw the flicker of sorrow in his gaze and knew he'd once given those to his first love, Kimiko. Now he'd given them to her and she wondered if any other women had gotten such carefully chosen flowers from her Jason. She decided it didn't matter. He was with her now, and the past, hers and his, was over. Their future was just beginning.

\* \* \*

"HEY IN THERE! WE DON'T HEAR ANY CONSUMMATING GOING ON!" Luke bellowed from outside their bedroom window. There was a loud boom as the first of the fireworks started. A bright flash lit the window.

Bells shook his head and laughed quietly. "And we wanted friends because?"

Nikki giggled. "Impatient, aren't they?"

"Yeah. But so am I," he told her as he took her hand and guided it to the fly of his tuxedo.

"Oh my, Mr. Dragon, what in the world is that? Did you stuff a salami down there?"

"Something like that," he replied as he leaned in and gave her a slow, exploring kiss, her lips parting to allow him entry, their tongues moving together in a writhing exchange that promised him a long torturous time before he got his release and told her there would be no mercy in his lovemaking.

He removed her wedding dress, going slow, unveiling her body as if he'd never seen it before and wanted to commit every curve, every inch of skin to memory. His hands and mouth gliding over her satin soft skin, touching, caressing, worshipping

the woman who was now his wife.

The very woman who would be the mother of his child. His heart lurched, remembering another face, another love and their shattered dreams, their unborn son.

The past was over. He had here and now, with Nikki, and that was what mattered. Not the past, not the unknown future, just the here and now with the woman he loved.

And that was all he wanted. Today. Nikki. And as many today's, as many moments as he could possibly get. So long as she lived there was no one else for him. He belonged to her, not because she was Mistress Nikki, but because she had tamed the Dragon and now held it on the gentle leash of her love.

That was all anyone, even an Immortal Dragon, could ever want.

\* \* \*

Nikki's skin was on fire from his kisses and caresses, her body hot and ready, wanting what only he could give her; love and the freedom to express it the way she desired. Her way, because in whatever manner she chose to manifest her love, he would accept it. Enjoy it. And he would always love her on her terms, no holds barred.

He lifted her from the pool of her discarded wedding dress, carrying her to their bed and laying her down amid the silken coolness of the rose petals. Their scent, their cool touch sent a thrill of pleasure through her, his mouth found her breasts, breathing through the lace of her bra, teasing.

He was above her, his weight on her, but there was no panic, not with her Jason. Never with him because he was her boy. Her man. Her Immortal Dragon.

"I love you," he murmured, his hands unfastening the clasp at the front of her bra. "You are the light within my soul. The dawn within the darkness that filled me. I won't ever leave you,

Nikki."

Shocked, she lifted her head and stared into eyes that burned bright as flame. "When I'm old..."

"Not even then, Nikki," he told her softly. "I love you, and I won't ever stop loving you."

She put her arms around him, pulling him close, letting his weight rest on her, his lips touching a nipple in a gentle caress.

"I'll age with you, Nikki. My hair will turn grey, and I'll look old."

Caressing down his back, feeling the hard muscle beneath the tuxedo coat she closed her eyes. "Why?"

"It's part of the power you have over me, over the Dragon. You age so I'll age."

"And when I die?"

"I die to this world, fall through time and I'm back to being what I was when you met me. Minus the extra scrambling the wreck caused. My memories will be foggy and confused from the timeshift, but they come back."

She held him tighter, tears burning his eyes. She'd be gone, and he'd be alive, somewhere—somewhen—alone and maybe mourning her the way he still mourned his Kimiko. For his sake she hoped the memories of her would fade away because she didn't want him to feel the same pain over her loss as he felt for his cherry blossom girl.

"Love me, Jason..."

"Yes, Mistress Nikki."

"...and get out of those clothes."

He grinned at her and Nikki could see he was up to something as he said, "Yes, Mistress Nikki, your boy will do whatever you desire."

\* \* \*

Bells got out of the bed and began a slow, seductive strip

tease, undoing buttons with gracefully erotic motions, running his hands over his body, watching the passionate heat of her gaze as they followed his every move. He obeyed the commands of the woman who owned his heart, but he was taking liberties with the order, heightening her anticipation. The jacket slid to the floor behind him and he started the slow unbuttoning of his white shirt, a wicked grin on his face.

"You are a very naughty, but entertaining boy, Jason. I think there's going to be some punishment if you don't get into this bed soon and pleasure me."

"Doesn't Mistress Nikki like what she's seeing?"

She laughed. "Yes, very much, but I want you undressed and back on this bed now!"

He pulled the rest of his clothing off, his cock jutting out, showing her how much he wanted her, beckoning him closer. Nikki motioned him to his knees on the floor.

He knelt, a little smile curling his lips. He was Nikki's. Body, mind, and soul, he was hers for as long as she lived. And if she motioned him to kneel at her feet when she was old and greying, he'd kneel obedient to her will because Nikki, his Mistress, wanted it and he belonged to her.

And if he had anything to say about it, she would live a long time. Something he hadn't told her about was one additional ability his own age granted. He couldn't make her Immortal, but he could slow down the aging process by a few decades. And he fully intended to do that, even though it would weaken him and leave him more vulnerable in the next world. He didn't care. He wanted to be with Nikki for every possible moment they could have together.

"Now where were we?" she asked. He saw how she was looking down at him and felt a flare of increased desire at the possessive expression on her face. "Ah, yes, I remember. I was

going to suggest you make love to me," she told him as she lay down on the bed.

"Yes Mistress Nikki," he replied, lying down beside her, his weight held away from her with one arm and his knees while he kissed Nikki's face, throat, and breasts, tongue gliding along her flesh.

A hand gripped his hair, her other hand cupped his balls, caressing, sending jolts of molten heat into his body where they coiled deep beneath the base of his arousal. He moaned, breath shuddering across a tongue dampened nipple.

"Like that, do you?"

"Yes Mistress Nikki," he agreed as her hands continued what they were doing, pulling his hair, teasing his balls.

He kissed his way down to her belly, hands sliding over her sides, breasts and hips, fingers dancing over her skin, inflaming her already heated body to fever pitch.

\* \* \*

Nikki couldn't take it any longer. She gripped his shoulders and guided him over onto his back. "Stay right there."

His answer was instantaneous. "Yes, Mistress."

Slipping off the bed, Nikki pulled out the bag she had stashed under it and poured out the sex toys she'd kept from their little salvage mission at *Naughty Nat's* those long months ago. Picking up the handcuffs, she snapped them around his wrists and locked him to the headboard, his lips caressing her breasts, tongue lapping gently at her nipples, teeth grazing and sending flashes of heat pulsing deep inside her belly. The entrance into her body aching with the need to be filled, she got onto the bed and straddled his hips.

"No mercy," she told him as she grabbed his cock and lowered herself down onto his straining flesh in a single, fast slide.

His gasp made her smile, and she trailed the edges of her fingernails down his chest, feeling the satin of his skin, the firm musculature beneath.

"Nikki..." he gasped her name out, hips jerking under her.

"Don't move, Jason."

He groaned. "Yes, Mistress Nikki."

Leaning down, she kissed him as her finger and thumb gripped a pink nipple and pinched, a little smile of accomplishment curving her mouth as he cried out sharply at the tiny bite of pain. Her hands slipped over his chest in a teasing caress, her mouth finding his throat and nibbling along the cables of tendon, nipping above his collarbone down the top of his shoulder, biting a bit harder at the junction of neck and shoulder then clamping down and sucking, marking him as her man.

His arms strained at the cuffs, body shaking under her, hips bucking. "Nikki!"

She heard the strain in his voice, the overriding need to thrust, to fuck her, drive his cock into her tight wet heat. "Wait," she murmured, "just a bit longer."

A hand drew down his chest, nails leaving faint pink trails that vanished quickly into the gold of his skin.

"PLEASE! PLEASE, MISTRESS NIKKI!" he shouted it out and quite clearly Nikki could hear the amused laughter of Luke and some of the other men.

She didn't think Bells heard it. Not when she could see the fire burning in his gaze, the aqua and emerald mist rolling off of him, wings unfurling like gossamer in her sight. Ephemeral, she couldn't touch them because they didn't exist in exactly the same reality she inhabited. She understood that, but she reached out anyway, closing her eyes, imaging what it would feel like.

Her hand met a yielding surface that wasn't the bed. It was

warm, soft as rose petals and tingled under her questing fingers. When she opened her eyes it was to briefly see, not Jason, not Bells, but the Dragon itself. Huge cobalt eyes stared at her, blinked. Gold tipped aqua scales glowed under the light of a different sun, warmer, brighter. Beside the Dragon was a tiny reddish deer, its head pillowed on one titanic clawed foot.

"She is with me always..." the Dragon told her.

Then the vision was gone and she understood. Kimiko had died, but her soul was forever part of the man she loved. And someday, someday she hoped was far in the future, she too would join him, her soul part of him forever.

"I love you, Jason," she whispered as she started to move above him, "I love you forever."

"Aishiteru," he whispered. "Aishiteru Nikki."

And she knew it meant love forever, undying and for all time.

She braced her hands on his shoulders, matching her movements to his, their bodies finding the rhythm of the most primal dance in the universe. It was known to all species, all races. It was the dance of life, the dance of creation. The Apocalypse was over, and now there was more than enough time for them to dance eternally together.

## *Epilogue*

A slender young blond stood on the balcony, looking out over the growing city of Colby. As was the tradition he wore his hair long, a lock by his face braided and tipped with a silver bell, a bright blue bead and some grayish feathers. The bell had actually belonged to his great-grandfather and he was proud to wear it.

Lights, powered by the dynamo the Dragon had built, lit the streets and homes of their citizens. Run by magic somehow drawn from the Earth itself, it had powered their city for three generations.

"Highness?"

He turned to face the man who'd entered his private chambers. Dark eyes, hair tinged with grey, the man had served their family since the fall of the old world and the beginning of the new.

"I'm glad you're here, Hawk."

"You did summon me, Highness."

The young man smiled. "Are the plans for the Gala going well?"

"Yes, Highness, they are."

"They would have been married one hundred years today."

Hawk nodded. "This is true."

The young Prince smiled. "I remember them, but not well."

"You were very young when Queen Nikki died, Highness."

"I was three. And she was..." he thought about it for a

minute, "One hundred and fourteen then."

"One hundred and seventeen, Highness," Hawk corrected gently.

A young woman in the aqua and gold of the house livery came in and bowed low to the Prince, "I'm sorry to intrude, Highness, but His Majesty would like to see you."

A smile lit the young man's face, making his intensely blue eyes sparkle. "Tell my brother I'll be down to see him in a bit."

"Of course, Highness." She bowed and left.

"She lived a long time," he remarked to the Immortal.

"Yes, Highness, she did. And she loved all of you very much."

"She said I'd grow up to look like her Dragon."

"You have," the Fenyx affirmed. "You look very much like him when he was your age."

"Do you miss him?"

Hawk smiled sadly, "Sometimes, yes."

"Like today?"

"Yes," Hawk agreed. "If that's all, Your Highness, I have some duties to attend before the Gala begins."

"Yes, forgive me, General. You may go."

The man bowed himself out, leaving the eighteen-year-old Prince alone with his thoughts.

Fort Colby was prosperous, seat of the Kingdom of the Dragon, home to the descendants of Doc Nikki and her Immortal lover. Home to the Dragon's children, who were on their third generation now. Soon to be fourth since his brother the King was getting married in a few weeks.

They had survived, the world had survived the Apocalypse and learned to dance to new music.

New technology based on magic rather than machine, based on working with nature not against it would lead the human race

to new heights of achievement.

He looked at the darkened sky glittering with millions of stars.

Man had walked the moon once, long ago.

Jason, Prince of the Dragon's Blood, was determined that humanity would once again reach for the stars.

Smiling, he turned from the window, hurrying to meet with his older brother Nikkolaus.

Pale aqua mist swirled in the air behind him.

## *About the Author*

M. Barnette's work has been appearing around the small press for a number of years. Also published under the name of t'shai k., M. primarily writes vampire/goth and cyberpunk poetry and stories, some with erotic themes. M. was nominated for a Spectrum Award in 2003 for the short story 'Zoner' which has now appeared internationally in both English and Italian language editions. This is M.'s first romance, but there will be more to follow.

Once a resident of Coconut Grove in Florida, M. relocated to Georgia a few years ago where there are fewer gunshots and yard to yard searches for suspects to disturb the writing muses.