



A Passion Draconic

Elisabeth Drake

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Email:
raven@LSbooks.com

Editor
Ansley Velarde

Cover Artist
Anne Cain

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Chapter One

Time was running out. Shaiandral could *feel* it. Lightning flashed in the stormy sky above, sending iridescent sparks coruscating off the dragon-scale exterior of the palace. Her side ached as she came closer, and her breath came in low pants. She'd been walking too far, too fast, for too long. *Hurry, damn it. It isn't far now. You're nearly there.*

Shaiandral's knees and legs screamed in pain as she drew closer to the rain-slickened onyx stairs that led to the palace entrance. She leaned on her carved wooden staff, trying not to slip as she limped up the steps, gasping for breath. At the top, she stared at the great palace doors that stretched three times her height. A pristine white dragon's skull lay embedded in the center of the doors, contrasting with the stark blackness of the remainder of the palace. Shaiandral drew in her breath and banged the ivory hoop lanced through the dragon's mouth against the door.

"Who is it?" A cautious female voice passed through the sable doors as if they weren't there to block sound.

The Dragonlord's palace has powerful magic. I should have assumed. Shaiandral swallowed, pushing away her trepidation. "It is the Healer Shaiandral of Clan Sharteka, coming as summoned."

The woman on the other side did not answer. Shaiandral pursed her lips. *All this way, and I'm not even welcomed? I won't be taken for granted by my people's sworn enemies.* Hell, she wouldn't even *be* here if not for her Healer's Oath.

A human-sized door to the left swung open, and a wide-eyed blonde woman poked her head out. "Thank the Goddess. Come in." She beckoned at Shaiandral.

The door slammed behind Shaiandral as she entered into the main hall of the palace. She couldn't help gaping. None of her people had ever seen the Dragonlord's palace, and certainly not her. Torchlight shone off the ebony walls, providing the only source of light in the hall. The ceiling stretched high above her head, and the perimeter was larger than her whole cottage. It could easily fit a dragon—or more than one.

"Goddess! You're soaking wet!" The woman's voice drew Shaiandral's attention away from the hall. She didn't sound concerned, but angry that Shaiandral had dared to drip on the precious stone floors.

"It doesn't matter. I was summoned to heal the dying Dragonlord. Now, we can stand here and screw around over my wet clothes, if that's what you want. Or you can take me to the Dragonlord, and I can do my best to heal him. It may be too late." A prickle at the back of Shaiandral's neck and a cold taste in her throat told her there wasn't much time left—if any.

The woman tightened her jaw, and her blue eyes went ice cold, but she nodded curtly. "You're right. This way." She took a torch from the wall and began walking down the hall.

Shaiandral followed, her sopping leather sandals squishing against dark stone. She couldn't help but gawk at the stark decoration. Black marble columns rose to the ceiling, and animal heads stared down from the walls between them. Rather than bronzed, they were set in ebony. *That's impossible ... but then, the Dragons wield different magics than us.* Sets of black eyes gazed down at her, almost as if they followed her movements. She

shivered.

“That's what happens to the Dragonlord's enemies.” The blonde's low voice cut through Shaiandral's thoughts, and she snapped her head around to look at her.

“What?”

“You heard me.” She nodded at the heads. “They're war trophies. And warnings to any that might dare oppose him.”

“Animals?” Shaiandral shook her head, and frowned, realization dawning. Goosebumps rose, chilling her body. “They're not animals, are they? They're shape shifters.”

“They are,” she said coldly, without looking at Shaiandral.

She stopped for a moment, startled, and stared at a jaguar head. Even in his jaguar form, she *knew* that face. Prince Caztli of Clan Sharteka. *Her* clan. Mindless rage pulsed through her mind, and her fingernails itched. Claws rumbled from beneath the surface of her skin.

Prince Caztli had disappeared on hunt one night. No one had found his body. He wasn't a war trophy. He was a victim. Of what, Shaiandral didn't know.

Her claws poked out. She shoved them back into their sheaths, reversing the shift. *Calm. Balance. You're here as Healer. Control yourself, damn it. No matter what he may have done, you're a Healer, and you have your duty to perform. You can arrange his murder later, when you aren't forced by your Oath.*

Shaiandral's mouth tightened as she followed the woman out of the hallway, through a short arched doorway into a corridor so narrow they had to go single file. Torchlight flickered, shining off sparkling garnets set in the ebony wall. The air felt heavy. It weighed down on her like a spectral force pressing from above. Dark tendrils floated in the air like whirlpools, sucking at the energy around them, pulling it within. Shaiandral tightened her shields and avoided the maelstrom energies.

The hair on the back of her neck prickled, and goosebumps rose on her skin. The deeper she went into the palace, the more she felt that something was *wrong* beyond anything she could sense. She hesitated to name it, but ... *evil* tainted the palace. It swathed around her, trying to gain a hold on her aura as she followed the blonde woman through the corridor. Shaiandral stiffened and sent out a flash of white fire, surrounding her aura. The tendrils shrank back. They weren't dangerous. Not yet.

“Here it is.” The woman's voice startled her, and her othersight concentration broke. Her shields held; they didn't need that level of focus to function.

The door opened, and dark light poured into the corridor. The blonde waved Shaiandral into the room. “These are the Dragonlord's chambers. I leave you here with him to work your healing.”

Before Shaiandral could say anything, she shut the door behind her.

“Hey!” Shaiandral grabbed at the doorknob. A latch clicked on the other end. She snarled as she tried to open the door without success. “Bitch.”

No matter. You're here for healing. Do the job. Then deal with the bitch. She spun around into the room. Crimson orbs of glowing fire levitated, shining eerie light onto a dark four-poster bed on a raised platform. A small ebony end table sat beside it, a wilting burgundy rose in a dark glass vase set on it. The rest of the room didn't matter. Shaiandral lifted her small but strong hand to release the clasp at her throat. Her soaked cloak fell to the floor with a squish. Shaiandral's right hand fell to her leather satchel with her

medicines.

Drawing in her breath, Shaiandral stepped up the platform. Her knees wobbled with exhaustion, but she ignored that. She was a Healer. Sable silk curtains hung from the four-poster bed, shielding the Dragonlord from view. She pulled them back. Darkness reigned within the bed. Not only a lack of light, but an energy darkness, as well. Shaiandral glared at the crimson orbs.

“Why couldn't you be *white*? That way I could see.” She growled under her breath.

The orbs flashed, showering crimson flecks, and radiated brilliant silver fire. They flew past Shaiandral to shine down onto the Dragonlord. She gaped, then shook her head. *Magic. I really should get used to this ...*

She looked down at the Dragonlord. He lay under a black rabbit skin coverlet. *Tezca, they really like their black, don't they?* Golden hair tumbled past his shoulders in waves of luxurious curls. He looked peacefully at rest.

At rest? Shaiandral frowned and reached for his throat to check his pulse. As her fingers brushed against the high silk collar of his pajama top, the Dragonlord jerked away, a snore choking in his throat. He coughed, his breath wheezing, and settled back into the thick feather pillows.

Pursing her lips, Shaiandral slowly drew back the coverlet, revealing his body, clad in ebon silk pajamas with onyx, jet, obsidian, and garnet stones embroidered into elaborate sigils. He *looked* completely healthy. His body wasn't shrunken from any sort of disease, and his face and hands were unmarked. *Unless it's an internal illness?*

Shaiandral chanted softly under her breath. Energy swirled around his body, and his aura glowed brilliant crimson—but plagued by sick yellow-green pustules. She narrowed her eyes, watching as the taint spread, eating away at the healthy aural tissue. *This is a magical disease. But how...?*

There wasn't time for that. He was fading fast. If she didn't act quickly, there would be no saving him. At the rate the disease was spreading, there'd be no way for her to counteract it with the magic she had immediately at hand. She would have to raise more. *I might not be able to save him, even then.*

But I haven't come this far to give in now. I have to try. Shaiandral edged onto the bed and straddled his body, as necessary for the magic. She reached into her satchel and gripped her ceremonial dagger. Bringing the knife across the palm of her hand, she recited the proper chant to sanctify her blood for healing purposes.

A crimson drop fell onto the Dragonlord's chest. Flame exploded as it soaked through and touched his skin. Shaiandral fell back against the soft featherbed with a yelp, her ceremonial knife flying out of her hand. “Gods!”

Time slowed. She tensed. A dark force prowled the room. She felt like she was being stalked. Or ... Shaiandral yanked herself back to a sitting position. The blood drained from her face, and she gasped. Shadow energy, blacker than black, foamed from the Dragonlord's body, gathering itself into a semi-corporeal form as it swirled above the body. Like smoke. Shaiandral's eyes widened, and she scrambled backwards, trying to get away from whatever it was.

Slits appeared in the fog creature. Crimson eyes with onyx pupils narrow like a snake's opened. The creature hovered over the Dragonlord's body, now detached from him. Lips darker than jet formed, and smiled.

Shaiandral shook. She knew what it was now. *A demon. What the hell am I going to*

do?

The demon's mouth moved, forming words in a deep voice that echoed off the ebon walls of the Dragonlord's chamber and reverberated within her soul. "Healer. You have come."

Shit. "Yes—I..." She stammered, fear constricting around her heart. A demon had killed her teacher, the Priestess Alza, one of the most gifted Healers in the Clans. *How can I fight it? Tezca, my patron, give me strength...*

"You're barely in time." The demon frowned, making a tsk-ing sound in the back of his throat. "My host is dying."

"Do you think I can't feel it?" Shaiandral wracked her brain, trying to remember anything Alza had ever mentioned about demons. Unfortunately, it hadn't been much.

Damn. "I'm here to heal him."

The demon began to swirl and change form again, growing arms and legs. Turning into some weird cloud adaptation of the human body. "Do your work." Crimson eyes narrowed, and his voice brooked no argument.

She bit her lip and turned back to the Dragonlord, trying not to think about whom the demon was and why he was here—and how she'd get away afterwards. But that wasn't important—she had a dying man to heal. Biting her lip, she took hold of the power rippling through her body and focused on using it to cleanse the tainted sickness from the Dragonlord's body.

But her efforts were in vain. As hard as she tried, he still continued to fade. The disease fought back against her power. *It isn't enough.* Deep down, she knew that no matter how much of her power she threw at it—it wouldn't help. Whoever did this had far more power at his disposal than she. Sweat broke out along her face as he grew weaker, despite the massive amounts of energy she directed at the taint.

Swaths of blackness swarmed out from the demon in anger, stretching towards her. "Veren is dying."

"I know!" Shaiandral snarled. "I don't know what's wrong! I've dealt with all manner of sicknesses before, but I've *never* encountered a magical toxin of this magnitude before! Yes, I'm losing him, and I don't know how to stop it!"

The demon levitated over the Dragonlord's—Veren's?—body and stepped forward. A tendril of dark energy shot out from it, grasping for her. Shaiandral threw herself to the side, rolling towards the edge of the bed—but a strong, slimy tendril wrapped around her wrist and yanked her back. She cried out as she flew into the center of the bed.

Phantom weight crushed against her abdomen, and Shaiandral gagged as energy filthy as sewage piled on top of her. The demon glared down into her face. "You will heal him."

"I can't do it! I don't have the power to fight it. Whoever did this wanted him *dead.*"

The demon looked even more displeased, and her skin crawled. *There's nothing more I can do for the Dragonlord. I have to get away from here. Or I'm going to become his next victim.* Roaring, she spat in his face and fumbled for the defense knife at her hip. She yanked it from its sheath and brought it up into the demon's back.

It passed through like it would a ghost. Her eyes widened, and the demon laughed. "You think you can harm me that way, shifter? I'm impervious to physical harm. Your puny weapons can't touch me." He closed his hand around her dagger and yanked it away with a grin, baring jagged obsidian teeth. "I can make my form corporeal at will."

Shaiandral's blood chilled. *Shit. What the hell am I going to do?* She didn't know *anything* about dealing with demons. They were so rare, it wasn't thought necessary to teach.

“Now.” He clutched her shirt collar, leaning forward, menace tendrils washing over her. “You will heal him. Or you will die.”

Chapter Two

“I told you, I *can't* heal him.” Shaiandral bared teeth and snarled. “I'm not a fount of endless power! You want him healed, find someone who can do the job instead of bullying me!”

“You're the most powerful healer in all the Clans. You can do it.” The demon's jet eyes fell to her cleavage, and she shivered. His thoughts were plain in his eyes. He dipped a hand to caress her collarbone. She flinched away. “It's been so long since I've had a shifter.”

“Yes, I'm powerful. But I'm afraid my greatness has been overly exaggerated. I can't do the impossible, and I'm telling you, that's what this is.”

The demon grinned and tightened his hands around her arms. “Are you a virgin?”

“That's none of your concern.” Shaiandral realized the full implication of his words, and her gut clenched, sending waves of sick nausea through her. “You can't be serious.” The expression on the demon's face told her he was. Virgin's blood was incredibly potent—add to that, the power from her sacrifice would give her enough juice to heal him. *But if I do that, then I lose everything I am.* She shook her head, emphatic enough to send her braid flying over her shoulder. “*No.* I am *not* doing it.”

He shrugged. “The dying man or me. Take your pick.”

He means it. Shaiandral shook with apprehension. She didn't know which was worse—the thought of having sex with a demon, or with the Dragonlord who had murdered her cousin. Panic rose within her. *I'm a sworn virgin. If I do this ... then everything I have sacrificed will be for nothing. I will return home in disgrace.*

But what choice did she have? *None. I can't fight my way out of this. I either sacrifice my virgin blood to heal the Dragonlord—or let the demon have me.* Then a thought occurred to her. “What if I refuse? You could rape me—you could even kill me—but it won't get your host healed. He'll still die. And then where will you be?”

The demon ruffled gray fog hair and grinned, scarlet eyes twinkling with deep malice. “Inside you. In more ways than one.”

She froze. *He'd possess me? Take me as his host?*

He nodded, slow and deliberate, seeing the question in her eyes even though she hadn't spoken aloud.

Shaiandral shivered as she turned back to the Dragonlord. Now her *life* rested on it, if it hadn't before. *Gods.* Chills passed through her body as she gazed down on the Dragonlord's barely breathing form. *I don't know how to do this. But I have to—or I'll end up a living slave to that monster. Getting out of this alive is more important than protecting my sanctity.*

“Should I take your inaction as acceptance of me?” The demon leaned forward and whispered the words into her ear, his breath hot and moist. It felt like maggots crawling over her cartilage and into her ear to wrap around her brain. She swallowed hard, forcing back her gorge. If she was going to have to screw Veren, she didn't want her vomit all over his body. “It'll take me a moment. I have to think about what I'm going to do.”

The demon raised an eyebrow. “It takes that much thought to decide how to fuck him?”

“It's not like I've ever done it before.” Shaiandral tossed her hair. “Besides, what happens if I do something wrong? Virginity isn't something you can re-grow like a fingernail.”

“I don't know about that. I think some creatures can.”

“Well, I'm not one of them. Now, will you kindly leave me alone and let me do this?” *I've had quite enough of this shit.* She made an obscene gesture at the demon. He chuckled.

“Very well. If you need any help...” he trailed off, the offer blatantly obvious.

“I'll figure it out on my own, thank you very much.” Shaiandral turned back to Veren and inhaled, trying to gather up her courage. He lay on satin crimson sheets, contrasting with the black silk pajamas he wore. She stood in the bed and stepped forward to straddle his body again. Her hands trembled as her fingers closed around small black obsidian buttons. She opened his shirt, and drew in her breath. Pale white skin glowed with a growing otherworldly energy. Death's touch. *Tezca. He's even worse off than I thought.*

Her whole body quivered. Could she do this? Would her sacrifice be powerful enough? Would it do what was needed? Would it heal Veren? Would her virgin blood be that potent and that powerful?

Or would she fail, and have her body and soul devoured by the demon?

Shaiandral pursed her lips. *No. Failure is not an option, damn it. You are going to do this. And you will succeed. You're Alza's prodigy. You can do this. No matter how repulsive, no matter how difficult, you can and will do it.*

“Well? What are you waiting for?”

She snarled at the demon, losing her temper. “I told you. Be quiet if you want me to do this. You need me, if you want your host revived. This takes focus and concentration. Any magic of this magnitude does. Unless you'd rather I let him *die*, shut up and let me do my job.”

He rubbed his chin. “Maybe you would make a better host. You're much more vivacious.”

“So you'd rather have a Healer without any influence at all in the world as host, rather than the King of Dragons? If you'd really prefer that, I suggest you have your head examined. It may have been injured from shock when Veren became infected.” Sarcasm rolled off her tongue. She wouldn't have dared speak so frankly, but ... *He needs me. What's he going to do, kill me? Not likely, when his place in the world depends on me.*

“You do have a point.” The mass of black fog shaped as human settled on the bed. “Go on, then.”

Shaiandral returned to Veren's body and finished opening the rest of his shirt, thinking hard. If she could weave the tantric energy raised from the sexual act with the blood and death magic that was present ... but she wasn't trained in any tantric practices. Alza had considered them immoral and had not taught them. But she knew a little, overheard from other healers and practitioners. It wasn't the same as being trained, but it would have to suffice. There wasn't anything else she could do.

Gods, I am insane. Drawing in her breath, she opened the buttons on his silken pajama bottoms and slipped them off. She swallowed, her eyes fixating on his cock, soft, nestled in a bed of golden curls. She'd seen naked men before, but never had she been this close to intimacy with one before.

“Do you need a step-by-step guide?”

“I think I can handle it,” Shaiandral said, sarcasm lining her voice. She leaned down, resting herself on the bed between Veren's legs, and took his warm cock into her hand, squeezing lightly. Even though he was fading, his body responded to her touch, growing hard. Tentatively, she licked the underside of his shaft, tasting his musk, bringing him to full erection in her small, firm hand.

Now she could begin. Shaiandral closed her eyes. *Build up energy first. You're going to need it.* She stretched down into the earth, feeling for the ley lines, grasping for energy. Her eyes flew open and she gasped as her energy field touched a pocket of pure, radiant power beneath the palace. *They built it over a ley line. Damn.* She wished she'd realized before. Normally, she used her own power, but if necessary, she could draw from other sources. *I think this qualifies as “necessary”.*

She reached out a tendril of energy from herself, and connected to the ley line. Controlling her breathing, taking slow, deep breaths, she drew power into herself, hot tingling energy, until she felt filled to the brim. Shaiandral opened her eyes. Her own aura shone iridescent with power, and she felt energized, strong, rather than exhausted.

His hard cock bore into her eyes, and she shuddered, despite the gnawing hunger between her legs. *You have to do this. You don't have a choice. Do it, or end up a slave to that demon for the rest of your life.*

She steeled herself and tore her shirt off over her head. Her nipples tightened and rose as cold air caressed them, and she gasped as chills overtook her.

The demon wolf-whistled.

Shaiandral shot him a glare. “Didn't I tell you to be quiet?”

“Maybe I don't want to?” He waggled his eyebrows and stretched out his inhuman fog arm to tweak her nipple. A tightness constricted between her legs, despite the disgust she felt at his touch

“Go to hell.” She bared her teeth in a snarl.

“Will you come with me?”

“Only if I can kill you at the end.”

He chuckled and withdrew, gesturing to Veren. “Resume your healing.”

“*Thank you.*” Shaiandral rolled her eyes, sarcasm weighing down her voice. She slipped her sandals off her feet, and then stripped off her skirt, completely naked before Veren.

Gods, I'm going to fuck the Dragonlord. Her mind screamed that this was wrong, that she couldn't do this, that she should find another way—but there was no other way. Not if she wanted to keep her own soul.

And my soul is far more precious to me than my virginity. I'll get over it. I think.

Shaiandral bit her lip. *You have to do this. Now, before you lose your nerve.*

She straddled Veren's hips and positioned herself. Her breasts pressed against his feverish chest, and she fidgeted, squirming, trying to get him inside her. *Damn.* Shaiandral grabbed his cock and positioned it. The head pressed against her wet entrance, and a wave of nausea passed through her. She would lose everything. *Do it.*

Shaiandral closed her eyes and shoved herself onto his cock. Sharp pain ripped through her as her hymen tore, and she gasped as pleasure accompanied the pain. She breathed hard, sweating. Her face prickled with goose bumps, and her tongue went dry with—shame? *You have no choice. Keep it up. The rite isn't finished. You have to bring him back.*

A wave of self-loathing passed through her. *Stop it. You don't have a choice. It'd be worse if you were fucking that demon. And once he had you—he'd have you for the rest of your life. Or longer.*

“Well?” The demon broke through her concentration.

Furious rage pulsed through Shaiandral, nearly overwhelming her. Her words came out in a scream. “I've got this man's cock up my cunt! Don't you *dare* rush me!”

He shut his mouth.

She drew in a breath, trying to calm and steady herself. Power slipped from her, loosed with her anger. She yanked it back around her and closed her eyes. Sending out spurts of power at exactly the right times, Shaiandral intoned in a deep, low voice. Her ceremonial voice. The words reverberated across the chamber, echoing as if she'd spoken a thousand times louder. As she spoke, she drew her body back and forth, rubbing herself up and down Veren's shaft.

His chest rose with a ragged, choking breath. The taint began to recede from his aura—slowly—but surely. *Gods! I did it!*

Shaiandral continued the rhythm, coming down on him. His breathing increased, and his body began to warm. His eyelids fluttered and opened. She stared down into brilliant blue eyes.

“Welcome back.” Her voice came out in a whisper between pants. Power built around and inside her, flowing as if through a conduit. *I hope I can control it...*

He lifted his hand to the side of her face and stroked her cheek. She shivered. His cock inside her wasn't cold anymore, but hot. Veren tightened his hand and brought her face to his. He kissed her, warm lips pressing against her. She gasped as a wave of pleasure passed through her.

Returning his kiss, she let her mouth open to permit his entrance. His tongue flicked into her mouth and caressed hers. She moaned as Veren wrapped an arm around her and pressed her close to him. His cock pulsed inside her as she came down onto him, over and over, in a rhythmic movement, continuing to wield the power. Triumph and pride mixed with elation. *I did it! I brought him back from the edge of death!*

Warmth touched her back, and she froze, feeling that demon's filth. His hands reached around to massage her breasts, tweaking her nipples.

He penetrated her ass before she could do anything. The demon's head rested on her shoulder, and he whispered into her ear as he drove himself into her, with a slow rhythm matching hers against Veren. “I said I wanted you, shifter. And I have you.”

Power overwhelmed Shaiandral, intoxicating her. She didn't care anymore. She threw her head back and laughed as three became one, feeling him massaging her breasts, kissing her throat. A hand reached between her legs and rubbed her clit, sending spasms through her. Veren nibbled up and down her face, making her body tingle with joy. Her muscles constricted around his cock, and she gasped, her eyelids fluttering as passion and pleasure tore her out of reality. Shaiandral's control on her power slipped as her orgasm built.

Energy beyond anything she'd imagined flowed into her as the three of them reached orgasm. A scream tore out of her as her body jerked in pleasure. A stray thought came to her with the power as she writhed, unable to control her body, knowing without images what she must do—and how to do it. *Bind the demon. Bind him now.*

The demon's cock was still in her ass. Grinning madly, she yanked his energy

through her.

“What are you doing?” he roared in a voiceless scream, helpless to do anything.

Shaiandral didn't answer. She pulled the demon into herself, riding the power, swirling him into a tiny ball of mass energy inside her body. When secured, she thrust the demon's energy out of her, into the black rose on the nightstand, even though he struggled and protested. “By Tezca, I bind you, never to be released from that object though it turn to dust!”

The power left her. Shaiandral gasped as she looked down into the Dragonlord's face. Tears streamed from the corners of his eyes. “You—he—the demon...”

“You're free. He'll never again control you.” Exhaustion overtook Shaiandral, claiming her body. Her eyes rolled back in her skull as she fell against Veren, plummeting towards unconsciousness.

He wrapped his strong arms around her. A whisper reached her, even in the depths of herself. “Thank you.”

Chapter Three

Shaiandral woke, mind fuzzy from sleep. She blinked, foggy, as she tried to remember where she was. A warm, strong, masculine body lay against her, his arm slung over her shoulders. *What the hell?* Her tongue went dry with fear as she jerked upright to a sitting position, scrambling away. She fell off the edge of the bed, her legs tangling in the covers. Her tailbone crashed against the hard floor, and she cried out.

“Are you all right?” A deep, smooth male voice filled with concern spoke. He looked over the side of the bed at her, eyes blue as the Syndican Ocean setting on her.

Shaiandral growled, narrowing her eyes. “I just woke up and I fell off the bed. What do you think?”

He laughed and stretched out a hand towards her. She took it, her small hand dwarfed by his, and he pulled her up onto the bed, next to him. Shaiandral glanced at his well-proportioned naked body and then at the deep red rose sitting in a vase on the nightstand. Memories of the previous night flowed back, and her eyes widened as she gasped. *Gods—I wish it had been a dream.*

“What is it?” Veren put a hand on her shoulder, sounding worried.

“I—oh, gods—I remember...” Shaiandral shivered, wrapping her arms over her breasts, suddenly freezing cold and trying to warm herself.

“Here.” He threw a blanket over her shoulders, and she pulled it close around her.

“Thanks.” She managed to flash him a grateful look.

“Now.” Veren spoke in a no-nonsense tone of voice, and Shaiandral looked back to him, trying *not* to think of how damn handsome he was. *He's Dragon. You've fulfilled your Oath—and broken it—and you are no longer bound to him in any way.* “What were you doing in my palace?”

Shaiandral bared her teeth and snarled, rage overcoming her. *How dare he question me when it is I who was summoned in the first place? When I sacrificed so much?* “I saved your life last night, that's what I did. Your demon didn't give me much of a choice about it! I was a virgin, damn it. And I gave *that* up in order to save *you*.” Her hands curled into claws. “And this is the thanks I get? You *summoned* me!”

Veren's hand clenched around her shoulder as his eyes smoldered with anger. “I never summoned you.”

“If you didn't, who did?” She shoved him away roughly as anger flooded her body, accompanied by waves of ... something else. Desire. She'd not felt that since she'd taken her Oath. *Don't touch me. I don't know if I can control myself.*

Of course I can control myself, she thought indignantly, her thoughts offending her. *I've done so for years. I was the oldest non-sworn virgin in my tribe. I'm not some weak-minded youngling to be overcome by physical urges.* Shaiandral's eyes darted back up to Veren, who stared at her like a dragon waiting to pounce on a jaguar. “I received a summons in my village from the Dragonlord, demanding my expertise as healer because he—you—were dying.”

“Our people are sworn enemies!” Veren scoffed. “Why would I summon a Sharteka healer to aid me, when I could have a Dragon *without* inter-clan repercussions?” He swept his arm out in a gratuitous gesture.

“I don't know. Maybe you didn't want to risk your Dragon Healers screwing it up?” Sarcasm dripped off her voice. “After all, if you die, it's hard to bring you back.”

Veren hesitated a moment, as if considering his words. “Still, you healed me. And you freed me from the demon's grasp. I am ... grateful to you.” He lowered his eyes, as if gratitude wasn't something that came easily to him.

“You damn well *better* be grateful!” Shaiandral dug fingernails into her palms, forcing her eyes away from that handsome, sexy face, those soft, kissable lips that she wanted to devour into her own ... “I gave up a lot for you.”

Veren sniffed. “You gave up your virginity. That may matter to the humans, but you're not human. You're Sharteka, a proud Jaguar. What does virginity matter to you?”

Shaiandral bristled and hissed. Waves of anger passing over her loosened her control on her form, and she began to shift. Claws formed out of her fingernails, but she forced them back. *You can't lose control like this. Not now.* She fought to restrain her temper and explain her situation to the obviously uninformed Dragonlord. “Virgin blood carries great strength. The most powerful healers in my clan are virginal. I am—was—a Healer, a Priestess of Tezca, ready to continue on to higher training.”

Her eyes narrowed with anger, at him and at herself, though she'd had no choice and he'd been possessed. *That gods-damned demon stole my life from me,* she thought, heart raging with absolute fury. *What's done is done, and there is no way to get it back.* “I could have been a Master Healer. My teacher thought I had the potential to become one of the greatest Healers ever. And now that ... that is lost to me.”

Tears choked in her throat, and she tightened her fists. She wouldn't cry. She wouldn't show weakness in front of a *Dragon. I must be strong. I am Sharteka. I will be strong.*

“I'm—sorry. I didn't know.” Veren had the decency to look chagrined. *Does he really feel that way or is it just an act?* “Our healers are under no such restrictions. Many Dragon healers are tantric practitioners”

She pursed her lips and stared at the dying rose, watching its petals fall to the sleek ebony nightstand. Her body pulsed with an intense hunger she'd never before felt, literal physical hunger pounding in her belly, but also sexual, throbbing between her legs, flowing through her veins to every part of her body. She tingled with desire. She *wanted* him.

What is wrong with me? Fear and confusion accompanied her lust. I've felt desire before, but ... never like this? What's happening to me?

Veren's hand settled on her shoulder again. She snarled and jumped to her feet, throwing the blanket aside. “Don't touch me!”

A wave of dizziness passed over her, and she stumbled, suddenly weak. Veren caught her and pulled her onto the bed, her back settling against the soft fur comforter. He looked down at her, concerned. Gods, she wanted to fuck him again, long and hard and passionate, their bodies pounding against each other until they screamed with mindless exuberant joy...

“Are you all right?” He touched her cheek, and she shivered. That voice. Just his *voice* alone sent electric shocks through her skin. She wanted him so bad. Golden blonde curls hung around his face as he bent over her. “Healer?”

Too much. Just too much. She couldn't fight it anymore. Resistance gave way to lust. Her hands shook as she lifted them to the sides of his face and stroked, her fingertips

tingling as she touched him.

“What...” Veren's eyes betrayed his surprise.

Shaiandral growled and pulled him down on top of her, kissing him, her lips nibbling against his. Strong, gentle hands cradled her chin and cheeks as warm lips strayed from her mouth to kiss her nose and cheeks and then each eyelid.

Moans escaped her, stretching out of her throat. She could feel Veren against her, hard and muscled. His musky scent intoxicated her as his lips roamed over her face. Her fingers tangled in his curly hair.

Warm wet circles drawn with his smooth-as-silk tongue sent shivers through her, and she threw back her head against the soft featherbed, reveling in the sensations rippling through her body. Veren licked down the side of her face to her neck, where he sucked her soft flesh. A groan passed between her lips. She felt like she was on fire, everywhere at once.

Shaiandral wanted him, and she wanted him *in* her. His licking, his touch ... his hands roamed over her whole body, down her chest, massaging her breasts ... he drove her mad between her legs.

“Veren.” She spoke his name with as much calm as she could muster, between her gasps. “*Veren.*”

He stopped and gazed into her eyes, serious. “What is it?”

“I—I want you.” Shaiandral stumbled over the words, her face burning red with—either embarrassment or arousal. She couldn't tell which. Or both.

Veren quirked his lips, giving her a sardonic lopsided grin. “That much is obvious.” He tweaked a nipple, hard, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger. Pleasure roared from her nipple to her genitals, and she arched against him, overcome by his ministrations.

Solid hot flesh pressed into her abdomen. He was straddling her, and his erection about drove her insane with desire. She reached down and took his cock between her hands. Squeezing, she rubbed up and down in a slow, massaging movement. Veren's eyes rolled back in his head as he closed them, and he groaned, hands tightening around her breasts, kneading them, thumbs teasing their nipples. It was almost too much to bear.

“Veren—I—I need you...” She gasped out the words as she writhed under him, her body feeling like it was going to implode with pleasure.

He kissed her and began to reposition himself, her fingertips caressing his cock as he drew away. She spread her legs and wrapped them around his hips as Veren deepened the kiss, his tongue entering her mouth. She threw her arms around him, fingers tangling in his hair.

Veren penetrated her, his cock driving deep within, slow, controlling his thrusts. Arching her back, she tightened her legs around him, driving him into her and moving her own body upwards to meet him. Her muscles constricted around his cock, tightening and relaxing. He groaned with pleasure, breathing hard against her cheek. She growled in low guttural moans as he drove into her, in and out, again and again in a pounding rhythm.

Thrill tingled through her, and she screamed with each thrust, pleasure building on itself, pulsing between her legs, deep inside her body, spreading outwards until she felt like her whole body throbbed with that same pleasure.

She exploded, screaming, ripping claws across Veren's back as he buried himself in

her one last time. She breathed hard as her body spasmed with joy. He came, spurting within her, and withdrew, collapsing upon her.

They rested together, Veren laying on Shaiandral. She held her arms around him and smiled. *This is wrong ... but it feels so right. How can this be? What has happened?*

As the feeling of complete and utter satisfaction faded, hunger rose again in her belly. Not sexual this time, but hunger for blood, meat, the chase, the kill...

Veren rose enough to meet her eyes. "You feel it too."

"Feel what?" She blinked, confused.

"The hunger. Wild, pulsing through your veins, hunger for food ... you need to eat. After raising me, after this ... you need to replenish yourself." Veren rolled off her and sat up. "And I need to as well."

She sat upright and watched him, his sleek muscled body, her body quivering from hunger pangs. "Are you going to have food brought to us?"

Veren looked at her, horrified. "Already dead meat? Never. No. You and I will hunt. Together."

Shaiandral licked her lips. The thought of hunting prey, taking down her kill, ripping out its throat and drinking sweet hot blood, filled her with excitement. She stood and grabbed her clothes off the bed. "Then let's hunt."

Chapter Four

“Where are we going?” Shaiandral glanced at Veren as they left the palace. It was different in daylight, without the rain and thunder and lightning. Less menacing, but ... *Don't be fooled. This is still Dragon domain. Without the Dragonlord's summons, you are nothing but a trespasser now. Stay on your guard.*

Veren gave her a droll look, his eyebrows arching. Despite his human form, he looked very much like a dragon. “Hunting.”

She rolled her eyes skyward, keeping pace with him despite the fact he was a foot taller. “Really? And here I thought we were going to perform a moondance naked in the middle of the afternoon.”

Grinning, he slid a hand down her back to squeeze her ass. “We could do that later, if you want.”

“We could do a *lot* of things later.” Shaiandral raised her eyebrows wickedly, then blanched. *What are you doing? For Tezca's love, he's the Dragonlord! You aren't supposed to flirt with him!*

It's kind of late for that, isn't it, though? I've already slept with him. She ducked her head, trying to push back the shame of sleeping with her tribe's worst enemy. Yet there was something so *attractive* about him, beyond his looks. *If I could only put my claw on it...*

Hunger constricted her belly, interrupting her train of thought. Shaiandral almost doubled over with pain.

“Are you all right? Do we need to stop?” Veren touched her shoulder, concerned.

She balled her hands into fists as she tried to regain control over herself. “I'm fine.”

“You don't look fine.”

“I'm hungry, that's all.” He didn't look like he was convinced. Shaiandral sighed and went into the full explanation. “The ritual drained most of my energy. A lesser practitioner would've fried just from the massive energy flow.”

“But you're not a lesser practitioner, are you?” he prodded.

“No,” she said flatly. “I'm not. I told you, I could've been a Master.” *Could have been...*

Veren said nothing. Shaiandral looked forward. They neared a towering jungle—and she didn't recognize it as the same one she'd come through in the first place. Damn. She'd hoped to have an easier escape from him; she knew the Border Jungle quite well. “We're to hunt in the Dragon forests?”

He snorted. “Where else do you think we're going to hunt? The ocean? Or should we return to the palace and hunt rats?”

She scrunched up her nose. “I don't think the castle cats would appreciate that.”

Veren shot her a wicked grin as they walked on a small dirt path leading into the jungle—further into Dragon territory, from the scent of it. “We could always hunt *them*.”

Shaiandral's blood chilled with shock and anger. She snarled and spun, taking a threatening step towards Veren, even though her body wobbled from hunger. “If you *ever* harm one of my little cousins, may the gods help me, I swear I'll cut your cock off and feed it to you.”

He laughed. Rage flooded her mind, and she longed to strangle him with her bare hands. *How dare he threaten my kin?* “I don't think you could do that.”

She bared her teeth, trying to hold back the urge to rip his throat out. “Why not?”

“You like my cock in you too much for that.”

“Do I?” Shaiandral growled. “Arrogant bastard, aren't you?”

“I'm Dragon.”

“Yes, but...” A scent of fresh meat wafted up her nose from within the jungle. Tapir. Her mouth watered. She could just *taste* the hot sweet blood ... hands turned to claws as the shift came over her. She couldn't control it. Fur sprouted over her body as her face elongated and her spine shifted. Hands and feet turned to paws. A tail stretched out from the base of her spine, and her vision changed, the colors dulling. Her sense of smell heightened and so did her hearing.

Shaiandral didn't even remember the Dragonlord. Now in jaguar form, all she could think of was the tapir, lapping water from a stream a short ways away.

She bounded into the jungle towards the tapir, her paws beating against the moss-covered ground. Closer ... closer ... she snarled as she heard human feet trying to keep up with her, then remembered Veren. *He can't shift here—he'd be too large in dragon form.*

Ignoring him, she continued further into the jungle. She needed food, she needed the hot meat, nourishing blood and muscle; she lusted for it, tasting the metallic tang in her mouth...

A large tree stretching high into the skies came into view. She bunched her legs and bounded into the treetops to stalk the beast from above. The humid jungle heat comforted her. It felt almost like home.

But it's not home. This is Dragon territory—and you had best not forget it. Hunger and instinct overtook her as tapir scent rose from below. She glanced down. There it was. She tensed, her eyes narrowing and pupils dilating, her whiskers twitching as her tail wiggled.

Shaiandral pounced, roaring as she fell through the bush. The tapir threw its head upward, splashing water as it tried to move. Too slow. She came down on its back, digging claws in as she grasped for its throat with her sharp fangs.

The tapir squealed and bucked, trying to shake Shaiandral off. She held fast, stretching for its jugular, feeling nothing but bloodlust pulsing through her veins.

A strange cry that sounded like a cross between human and reptile startled her. Her grip on the tapir loosened—not much, but enough for it to buck her off. She fell into the stream, splashing. Water poured into her nose as her snout hit the muddy streambed. Yowling with indignant fury, she jumped out of the water.

Tapir squeals filled her ears, and she jerked her head towards the noise. Her eyes widened as she caught sight of a monstrous man-shaped creature with black dragon scales all over his body and gleaming inches-long obsidian claws and fangs. He attacked the tapir, digging claws deep into its hide. The scent of blood touched the air. Shaiandral snarled. Who was this man to take *her* prey?

Then she remembered—*Veren. Tezca, damn him. That's my prey, and he won't take it from me.*

Shaiandral pounced out of the water with a roar. Veren's head snapped up to look at her as she hit the other side of the tapir and tore claws into its side. Blood oozed where

her claws punctured it. She sunk teeth in. The tapir screamed and tried to kick at her. Shaiandral darted out of the way of its feet and came in again.

With one quick movement, she caught its neck in her wickedly fanged mouth. She bit down, hard, crushing it. Blood spurted into her mouth as the tapir's legs buckled. It fell to the forest floor, twitching in death throes.

Pounding hunger took her over. She ripped into the tapir, devouring it, its fresh hot blood intoxicating her. She was only barely aware of Veren sharing the tapir. Right now, Shaiandral didn't care. She ate until she was completely satiated and all that remained of the tapir was licked-clean white bones.

Gorged, she made the shift back to her human form, breathing hard. Her lips felt hot, as did her face. Tapir blood covered her body. Shaiandral glanced at Veren from under heavy eyelids. He hadn't shifted back to his human form. Blood dripped down his face, staining the dragon scales sprouting from his body. Serpentine black eyes stared at her with an intensity—and a longing—that made her shiver ... and thrum between her legs.

Her eyes locked on his blood-stained cock. Growling, she crawled on her hands and knees towards him, shaking her head and snarling like the jaguar she'd only just been. Veren towered over her. Shaiandral only had to give him a look. He fell to his knees. Staying in that position, she first licked up his shaft and rolled blood in her mouth.

Veren moaned in a reptilian fashion—it sounded more like a hiss than anything else. He put his hands on her head, tangling fingers in her hair as she took his scaled cock in her mouth and sucked. Sweet metallic blood mingled with masculine salt. She nibbled gently, flicking her tongue across him. Strong hands pushed her deeper against him. Her clit throbbed. She reached down between her legs and massaged just above it in a circular movement. Her cunt constricted as pleasure washed through her. She wanted him in her. Badly.

Shaiandral stopped touching herself and took Veren's balls in her hands, rubbing them. She slid his cock out of her mouth and kissed its tip. Rising to her knees, she licked over his belly scales, lapping up the blood, reveling in its tang. Veren hissed with pleasure. Shaiandral continued up his chest and wrapped her arms around his back as her teeth fastened on his nipple. She flicked her tongue against it. Claws dug into her back as he threw back his head and moaned.

She sucked hard as her hands roamed up and down his back, caressing. Veren mimicked her movements and squeezed her ass, claw-tips pricking into her soft skin. A moan escaped her and she ground down on his nipple, biting it. His hands tightened, and she thrust forward, on impulse, hitting his thighs.

Abruptly, she released his nipple, rising up his chest, kissing and sucking and licking. Purring under her breath, Shaiandral came up to his neck, her breasts pressing against his chest. Blood pulsed through his jugular. She could smell it, feel it, almost taste it through his skin. Shaiandral bit lightly, not hard enough to break the skin, and sucked, kissing him. Her hands rubbed against his smooth, muscled chest, and her clawed fingertips pressed into his skin.

Veren held her close, drawing her nearer. His large strong hand cupped the back of her head. She could hear his growl under his breath—not an angered growl, but one of pleasure. Her teeth nipped him, and her tongue licked against his flesh.

Shaiandral moved upward across scaled neck-flesh. At first, she'd half-expected his scales to be sharp, because they gleamed like a razor-sharp blade. They weren't. Instead,

they had an almost soft edge to them, giving way under her agile tongue. Maybe because he was only half-shifted, a cross between human flesh and dragon scales. She didn't know. And didn't care.

Letting out her breath, she pulled back, panting as she gazed into his ebony eyes for a moment. Her hands caressed up his collarbone to his cheeks. She cupped them, fire beating through her body. With a quick movement, she kissed him, her lips pressing against his, soft and sweet and tasting of blood. Her tongue licked slowly across his lips, and Veren opened them. Their tongues touched, his a forked serpentine dragon's tongue, and blood mingled. She fell against him, hungry, panting, driving her mouth against his in a mad frenzied lust.

Veren's hands squeezed her ass again. She wanted him. His stiff cock pressed into her abdomen. As she kissed him again, Veren lifted her off the ground with his strong arms. Shaiandral's legs wrapped around his hips, thrusting his scale-covered cock deep into her. Her muscles tightened around him. She gasped as he lowered her back down to the soft mossy forest floor and drove inside her, slow and rhythmic at first. Shaiandral's eyes widened and her voice came out in low, growling pants as she arched against him.

Maddened by the overwhelming bloodlust combined with sexual desire, she clutched at him, her claws raking across his back as he came into her, faster and harder, grunting with every thrust. Her breasts pressed into his chest, their nipples screaming out with joy as they slid against his soft scales.

Wild mindless joy erupted through her body, spreading out along her veins as she came, every nerve tingling, making her writhe as she roared her pleasure. Veren exploded within her, his seed spilling out as he buried himself in her deep, warm body. He threw back his head, and her claws dug into his back as the last spasms of her orgasm faded.

Veren withdrew. A cry escaped her as he did so, a last tingle piercing her hot, satiated cunt. She gazed into his ebony black eyes, her body trembling. He rolled over beside her and pulled her close. Shaiandral started to struggle, but surrendered to his embrace. Resting her head against his shoulder, she listened to the sounds of the jungle, the stream's rippling water slowly lulling her to sleep.

Chapter Five

The sound of buzzing flies and lapping water woke Shaiandral. Strong, warm arms surrounded her, held her close. Her eyes widened as her cheek rubbed against scales.

What the hell—

Memories returned, fast, heavy, filled with color and brightness and vividness. Shaiandral's face went completely pale, the blood draining. *Tezca ... what's wrong with me?*

Without any conscious effort on her part, her claws extended, digging into Veren's shoulder. He made a sound like a choked snore, and his eyes flicked open, deep ebony slits staring at her with concern. He lifted a hand slowly and caressed her shoulder with nimble fingertips. Instinctively, she trembled. Veren frowned and spoke, his voice raspy and serpentine. "What's wrong?"

She shuddered, closing her eyes. "I—I don't want to talk about it. I don't even want to *think* about it." *I just want to forget this ever happened and go back to my life. I wish it'd never happened at all.*

Her eyes tightened even more closed. *But this isn't a dream. I can never go back.*

Veren's voice, calm and quiet and soothing, despite the reptilian lilt, broke her out of her thoughts. "It's obviously bothering you. I don't think you can stop thinking about it. Maybe it would help you more to talk about it."

Pain washed through her heart and mind. Shaiandral's eyes popped open, narrowed like a furious cat, and she hissed. "Even if talking about it *would* help, why would I want to talk to *you*? Why the hells should I trust *you* enough to confide my deepest feelings in you? I've only just met you. Besides..." Shaiandral wrinkled her lips "—you're a *Dragon*."

Veren's eyes went cold. "Yes. I am. And you're Sharteka. And we just made love."

She snarled, enraged. "I fucked you like a cat in heat. That's all. It doesn't mean I trust you, and it certainly doesn't mean I want to be friends with you."

"Generally, it's wise *not* to sleep with people that you won't want to talk to the next morning." His lips quirked almost humorously.

"It's not like I had a choice in the matter." Shaiandral dug her claws in deeper. "If I did, do you really think that I, a Sharteka healer, would fuck you, a Dragon king?" She snorted. "You're not *that* hot."

"First, please withdraw your claws from my shoulder, unless that's *meant* as a come-on." Veren grinned evilly.

Shaiandral growled and did as he asked—raking claws down his arm as she did so. "It's not."

Veren glanced down at his wounds. He dipped a hand to wipe the blood, and licked it off his hand. "If it wasn't, then that most definitely is."

She clenched her hands into fists and glared at him. "Isn't three times in twenty-four hours enough for you? I've had enough."

He tweaked her nose. She resisted the urge to bite off his finger. They were in Dragon territory, and if she made any move to harm him ... *The very land may rise up against me.*

Despite her fury, she didn't feel like fighting a whole *jungle*, with whatever terrors it held. *I'd lose. And I'd rather not die yet.*

“Your head and your mouth say that, but your body doesn't. It wants me.” Veren caressed her shoulder, making his way down to the swell of her breast.

Shaiandral resisted the urge to tear his arm out of its socket. Instead, she said, cold as she could manage, “I don't let my body dictate what I do. Now get your hands off me before I bite them off.”

“Ooh, love bites!” He smiled at her with an intensity that made her shiver. “If you don't let your body dictate to you, then why have you fucked me those past two times? The demon isn't an excuse for those.”

Shaiandral clenched her teeth. She wanted to argue, but ... *He's right*. Shame washed through her at the self-admission. The demon was coercion and therefore excusable. But what she'd done afterwards had no defense. She'd slept with a Dragon of her own free will; let him defile her body, her people would say. Not just once, but twice. And not just any Dragon, but the Dragonlord himself.

Gods. What will my clan think of me now? They knew I was summoned as healer, and obligated to go by my healer's oath, but this ... they would never understand. I don't even understand it myself.

“We'd best get back to my castle.” Veren's voice broke through her thoughts. “It grows late.”

“Big tough Dragonlord, scared of the dark?” Shaiandral taunted him on purpose. She wanted to make him angry. She wanted an excuse to fight him and make him pay for everything he had done to her.

Veren remained unruffled. *Damn. Doesn't anything anger him?* “I'm not afraid. We can stay here and fuck in the dark if you'd prefer. I would rather my warm bed.”

She narrowed her eyes and hissed. “Aren't you being a bit arrogant? What makes you think I'm going to sleep with you again?”

“Just a feeling.”

“Lovely how you decide that I'm going to return to your palace for another night of sex,” Shaiandral said, sarcasm lining her voice. But she glanced at him again, seeing his naked body. Self-loathing flushed through her as she felt herself go hot with desire. *No. I can't want this. Not again. Tezca, please...*

Veren stood. She took a step backwards and snarled at him. He towered over her, his expression concerned. “Shai ... what's wrong?”

“Don't call me that. Only my friends call me 'Shai'—and you are *not* a friend.”

“No. I'm your lover.”

Shaiandral clenched her hands into fists, angered by his presumption. “A one-night-stand doesn't give you the right to call yourself that.”

“You're right. It doesn't.” He took a slow step closer. “But I want to be your lover.”

Her body prickled with thrilled heat—and shame. She burned for him, feeling alive in a way she never had before. *I can't feel this way about a Dragon.* But she did, and that sent nausea swarming through her.

“I don't want to be yours.” She whispered the words, her face gone completely pale and cold. She shivered and wrapped her arms around her naked breasts.

Veren took a step forward slowly and put his arms on her shoulders. He spoke, his voice calm, sexy, and powerful. “I don't think that's true. I held you in my arms. I heard

you scream as you came with my cock inside you. We're two of a kind, Shaiandral. Dragon and jaguar. Different ... but so much alike, and part of each other.”

Shaiandral shook her head furiously, fear pulsing through her body like her blood. “Great sex doesn't mean you have a great relationship. Or even that you know that person.”

“No. It doesn't. But...” Veren trailed off for a moment, then sighed. He looked back at her, deep into her eyes, his gaze and voice completely serious. “I want that relationship with you. I want to learn more about you. I want to be your lover, and more than that ... I want to be your mate.”

Goosebumps rose all over her flesh. Deep within her heart, she felt a delighted warmth. She curled her lip, disgusted at herself. “I don't want to be yours. Let me go. I just want to go home to my people and forget that this ever happened.”

“You can't.” He squeezed her arms. “It's happened, and no matter how much you want to forget ... you can't.”

“Don't you think I know that?” Shaiandral yanked herself away from him, angry. “I know I can't forget it! But, by Tezca, that doesn't mean I'm going to jump into your arms and take you as my mate!”

“I didn't expect you to.” Veren met her gaze steadily. “I spoke ahead of myself, and I apologize. But—I do want to be with you, Shaiandral. I want to be closer to you.”

“Well, that's just too bad, because I don't want it. I'm Sharteka. You're Dragon. Anything between us isn't possible. It just can't happen.”

“Why not?”

“We're enemies,” she said flatly. “Dragon and Sharteka have been cold enemies for centuries. You know that.”

“Times change. It doesn't have to be that way anymore.” Veren stepped closer. “We can change it. We can make a difference.”

It was so tempting. She could be with him and they could ... but she realized what she was thinking. Fear pounded in her skull and her eyes widened. *What am I thinking? I have to get away from here before I do anything stupider than I've already done.*

Shaiandral burst forward, pushing Veren aside. She shifted to jaguar form and ran—from him, and from herself. As she jumped into the trees and bounded towards Sharteka territory, she could hear Veren calling out her name.

She ignored him and fled without glancing back.

Chapter Six

An unfamiliar pain thundered in Veren's heart as he watched the Sharteka woman flee into the distance. He growled, his body urging him to run after her, take her back, and force her to stay with him. That's what any other Dragon would do, and what their women expected.

But she is not Dragon. Veren controlled himself, setting his jaw. *I won't hunt her down like the uncaring Dragon brute she expects. I won't do that to her.*

Besides, he didn't need to give the Sharteka a reason to wage full-fledged war against his people. *Especially not now, when I need to focus on assessing the demonic threat.*

Still, the thought of pursuing her and dragging her back to his palace made him burn with desire. Sighing reluctantly, Veren tore his eyes away from the deep jungle and headed back towards his palace. There was much work to be done. Years of memories lost with the demon who'd possessed him. What damage had they managed to do in the time between?

Shaiandral's scent drifted on the wind, filling his mind with images. Her smile. Her hiss. Her eyes squeezed shut as she took her pleasure beneath him. Veren took a deep breath, trying to control himself, even though all he wanted to do was take her in his arms, breath in her musky feminine shifter-scent, and never let go.

She's gone. Veren bit down hard on his lip, drawing blood, as tears threatened at the corners of his eyes. *I will not be so weak as to cry over a woman.*

He snarled under his breath as he strode through heavy brush. He couldn't get Shaiandral out of his head. Why? Any Dragon woman would be willing—and she would not carry inter-clan repercussions. Shaiandral, on the other hand...

Is that it? The danger of a forbidden relationship? Veren considered for a moment, then shook his head. *No. I would want her if she were a Dragon woman.*

It wasn't about race or taboo. He'd never met anyone like her, ever. Her inner strength, her raging temper, her cutting wit ... and yet she held him softly in her arms.

Veren leaned against a tall jungle tree, his talons digging into the bark as he breathed hard. *Gods. I don't want to think about her anymore. I can never have her.*

That thought echoed through his mind, reverberating with pain. Growling, he shoved away from the tree and bounded back to his palace. Xalidora, his mistress, leaned against the entryway, waiting for him.

"Veren!" She stepped forward as he approached. "Was the hunting good?"

His eyes traveled over her lush body as his loins stirred with hunger remaining from Shaiandral's touch. They didn't look anything alike. Where Shaiandral was short and dark, Xalidora was tall and fair—a true Dragon woman. She wore nothing but a crimson robe wrapped tightly around her body, and the pale flesh it didn't hide tantalized him. His body flooded with lust and his cock rose to full hardness as a draconic growl escaped him.

She grinned, her eyes lighting wickedly at the sight of his erect cock. "Not good enough, apparently."

If Shaiandral was my prey, then she got away ... Veren grimaced, trying to banish her from his thoughts. He wanted to forget all about her, like nothing had ever happened

between them. But even still, he burned with hunger, not for Xalidora, but for *her*...

With a quick motion, Xalidora squeezed his cock, running her hand up and down the shaft. Fire tingled through his body as he moaned. Her eyes sparkled mischievously. “Evidently the Sharteka bitch is worthless at satisfying Dragon needs.” She ran hands down her hourglass figure, hesitating over her breasts, and winked at him. “You need a *Dragon* woman.”

But I want Shaiandral ... He clenched his jaw, furious at himself. *You can't have her. She doesn't want you. Take what you can get.*

Veren kissed Xalidora, pulling her close against him, his fingernails digging into her back. Where he'd been gentle and tender with Shaiandral, he didn't bother with a tough, hard Dragon like her.

Xalidora growled as they kissed, her hands tightening around his cock. She attacked his lips, her teeth biting against them. Veren bit back, forcing his tongue into her mouth. Her teeth came down on it, just enough for him to feel it, and her half-shifted forked dragon tongue tickled his.

Veren squeezed her shoulders as he deepened the kiss, gnawing on her lips. Raw animal need raged through him. He wanted to rip off her clothes, shove himself into her body over and over again, not stopping until he'd come and made her scream 'til she was raw.

She drew away from the kiss, her teeth scratching his tongue slightly as her fingertips did the same to his cock. Gentle enough not to really hurt, but hard enough to inexplicably excite him. Xalidora's lips quirked wickedly. “Want me? Then come and take me ... if you can...”

She winked at him and bounded into the hall, laughing as her bare feet slapped against the ebony floor.

Snarling, Veren leapt after her. They were about the same height, and Xalidora wasn't running that fast. He grabbed her arm and spun her around. She fell against his chest, eyes wide in feigned shock—and her own lust. He kissed her, hard, his hands squeezing tightly into her arms, so tight she let out a mew of pain. He dug his fingernails, shifted towards slight talons, into her skin. Xalidora moaned and thrust her hips against him. It drove him wild as his cock pressed against her robe, her skin hot beneath.

Veren growled and bit her cheek. Xalidora gasped and bucked again. Too much. Just too much. With a serpentine hiss, he tore her robe open with a clawed hand, baring her full breasts. He grabbed one and took its nipple into his mouth, sucking and chewing on it as his other hand cupped her ass and pressed it against him.

Xalidora's hand scratched across his back as he sucked, and she moaned, her voice coming in pants. “Veren...”

He barely heard. Gods, he wanted her and he wanted her *now*. And yet ... Shaiandral's image haunted his mind. It wasn't *Xalidora* he wanted like this, it was Shai ... and he couldn't have her. Anger rose in him. If he couldn't have her ... then he'd drive out her memory through Xalidora's flesh.

Veren bared his teeth and hissed as he ripped her robe open the rest of the way. He released her nipple and lifted her ass. She wrapped her legs around his hips and he shoved her down on him, rough, hard, fast. He nipped the side of her neck as they pounded into each other, her tightening around his cock and moaning. Waves of pleasure crashed through him as he thrust himself into her, over and over, trying to forget that she

was Xalidora and not Shaiandral...

Xalidora cried out a moment before he came, clawing up his back as she trembled in his arms. He exploded within her, and just held her close, wishing she was that little Sharteka woman, as his orgasm faded.

She breathed hard, panting, and then looked at him as he lowered her to the floor. That pale face ruddy from orgasm, that white-blond hair, those brilliant ice-blue eyes ... so wrong ... His heart felt like it would break as shame encompassed his body. He felt empty. *Gods. What's wrong with me?* Shaiandral haunted him. He couldn't forget her, no matter how he wanted to.

"Veren?" Xalidora's voice broke through his thoughts, and she touched his clean-shaven face. "You're distracted."

Irrational fury flooded him at the sound of her voice. He hated her. She disgusted him. And he disgusted himself for having sex with her when it wasn't her he loved, but Shaiandral. Contempt rode his voice as he narrowed his eyes and sneered at her. "You noticed?"

"Yes, I noticed! Veren..." She shook her head, looking confused. "Love ... what's wrong with you?"

"You're my mistress." Veren snarled, enraged at her presumption. "Nothing more. You have no right."

Xalidora took a step back. "Wh—What?"

"You heard me."

Something flashed in her eyes—anger?—before her face crumpled. She whimpered, then turned away and fled, her long blonde hair trailing behind her.

Veren stared after her. Xalidora was a strong Dragon woman. She'd never had that kind of reaction to harsh words before. *Unless something has happened in my absence I do not know about.*

He narrowed her eyes and rubbed his chin. *Or else there is more going on here than meets the eye.*

Chapter Seven

Xalidora hissed under her breath as she stormed through the winding maze of ebony-plated halls, listening for the sound of footsteps behind her. None. *Good.* She balled her hands into fists at the memory of Ylé's harsh words, her fingernails digging in 'till her palms bled. *We've been lovers for years. Why would he say something like that to me? Except...*

She narrowed her eyes. Something had felt deeply wrong the entire time they were having sex, but she hadn't been able to describe it. Now, the answer seemed so clear. *But how would Veren manage to surface? Ylé has never lost control of his host.*

The blood drained from her face, her cheeks and lips tingling with shock and fear. *The healer.* That short little Sharteka woman. Xalidora stood dumbly in front of her chamber door. *Ylé didn't lose control. He was bound—or killed.*

A strangled cry escaped her, and Xalidora bit down on her lip hard enough to draw blood, the metallic tang oddly comforting. She glanced to both sides, making sure no one had heard her, and entered the room, closing the door behind her.

She leaned her head back against the cool wood and closed her eyes, trying to control her frantic breathing. There must be another answer. He can't be dead.

But no matter what way she looked at it, there *wasn't* another reasonable explanation. If Ylé had simply been exorcised, he would've appeared to Xalidora. Even within the human shell, she'd be able to recognize him. He'd shown no signs of discontent or rebellion. Unless he was better than she thought at hiding secrets, that truly left only two options. Either he was bound, or he'd been killed. She reached into the ether, searching, hoping for a trace, a clue, anything ... but nothing responded. It was like he'd been completely torn from the world—or faded away into the mist of death's embrace.

Sorrow-fueled rage tore through Xalidora. Unable to do anything else, she grabbed a vase holding a bouquet of dark red roses Ylé had only just given her. With a forceful movement, she sent it crashing into the opposite wall. The shards fell to the floor, glimmering in the magelight that lit the room.

Xalidora fell to her knees, sobbing, tears running down her cheeks as the recognition echoed through her body. Ylé, her lover, her partner, her other half, was dead. Never again would she see him, on this world or any other. She curled in a ball, shuddering against the cold ivory floor as she wept in mourning. His silent elegy.

It felt like an age dawned and passed before Xalidora finally lifted herself onto her knees, her muscles stiffened and her eyes blurred and swollen from tears. "I won't let her get away with it," she whispered to herself, her voice barely a croak. "I *won't.*"

She stood, wobbling, and walked to her altar, set on a small windowsill overlooking the garden. An ivory-handled ritual dagger with an obsidian blade sat upon a cloth of crimson velvet. Xalidora drew in her breath, afraid of what she was going to do. *I have no other choice. I will have vengeance. I won't let him die in vain.*

Xalidora didn't wince as she sliced the sharp blade against her palm, slowly. Blood trickled to the surface, beading against steel. Drops fell to meet the velvet. Her lips parted slightly and she began a quiet chant in her demonic tongue. "By this blood, I swear upon my mortal soul that I will avenge Ylé's murder." Fury raged below the surface, but she

did not raise her voice. “I will avenge him, and the Sharteka healer who bound him from this world shall regret the day she ever answered my summons.”

A few more words, then Xalidora lowered her head, closing her eyes. She cut another line along her palm, crossing the first, binding her oath. A tremor shook the magical atmosphere, its pulse of power assuring her that her oath had been recognized.

She wiped her blade on the cloth, pursing her lips as she thought. Now came the hard part. How to put that vengeance into action?

Goosebumps chilled her body as a realization hit. In her shock and grief over Ylé's death, she hadn't stopped to think about it. This was bigger than just Ylé's death. When he controlled Veren, her people *owned* the Dragons. Now...

“Hell.” The word tumbled forward in a whisper. Now *Veren* was back in control of his body. Thankfully, a properly controlled host would have no memory of his life while occupied. But that wouldn't stop him from investigating the matter. *And we don't have enough people to adequately handle this. If he finds out what I am...*

Xalidora's eyes widened. *He could kill me too. Our plans would be completely ruined if that happened, and who knows how long it would take to reestablish a hold within Dragon?*

That left only one course of action. She had to call on one of the others. She couldn't deal with this on her own, and she'd be damned if she let that meddling Sharteka bitch ruin everything they'd worked so hard to accomplish. Xalidora clenched her hands into fists, pain lancing through the wound. She didn't care. The pain of the flesh was nothing compared to the pain searing her heart.

She crossed the room with a few lithe steps and lay down on her bed, pearly white satin sheets smooth and cool against her bare skin. After the encounter with Veren, she hadn't re-dressed, but nudity was not uncommon amongst Dragon kind. *All for the better. Clothes would only get in the way now.*

In order to contact her people, she'd need to raise energy. With Veren back in control of his body, taking a servant for blood sacrifice would just send up a red flag. She couldn't afford—her people couldn't afford—for Veren to discover her true nature. Tantric magic, then, was her only option—even though sexual pleasure was the last thing she wanted.

Xalidora drew in a shuddering breath as she closed her eyes. She ran her hands over her breasts, circling her nipples, teasing them to hardness. *Ylé used to touch them like that...*

No. She wouldn't think of him. Couldn't. The magic. She had to think of the magic.

Spreading her legs, she moved her hands down her flat, muscled stomach to her warm cunt, pressing the flap of skin above her clit. She made slow, circular motions, pulling the skin back and forth against the sensitive flesh. She gasped as her body responded to her own nimble touch. *Concentrate.*

The power built within, slow, but definite. Xalidora's eyes squeezed shut as she moved faster, then suddenly dipped downward, sliding her long fingers into her wet slit. She played with herself, circling around the entrance before diving in, stoking the hunger between her legs, a screaming need for penetration.

Tantric power surged within, growing stronger ... but not enough. Not yet. Biting her lip, she reached into her bedside stand and pulled out a large wooden dildo, carved and sanded into a perfectly shaped cock. She slipped its hard length inside her cunt and

cried out as her muscles constricted around the cool wood. A cry escaped her as she came, but she didn't stop—she continued pounding the dildo inside her, orgasm spilling through her body as she rubbed it against her g-spot furiously. The atmosphere around her thrummed with sweet tantric joy—energizing power that rushed through her as she slammed it into her again, triggering a final bursting orgasm. She threw her head back, screaming, yanking the power within, riding it as well as her pleasure.

Xalidora fell back to the bed as her orgasm faded—but the energy remained within, a filled reservoir. She lay on the bed a moment longer to catch her breath, then stood. It was time.

Power sparked at the edges of her aura as she crossed the room, and Xalidora tightened her resolve to control it. She'd done this many times before. Tantric magic wasn't unusual or difficult for her. Xalidora went to her scrying bowl and filled it with water from a matching pitcher on the stand next to it. Taking a deep breath, she gathered up all the tantric energy she had raised and sent it out into the world on a focused narrow beam.

The image of an old, wizened man, his hair and beard completely white, appeared in her scrying bowl. He narrowed his eyes, studying her. “Xalidora? Why have you contacted me? What has happened?”

“Orell...” Xalidora took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. *Don't show fear. Even if he's the oldest and most powerful demon alive, you need his help.* “Ylé is dead, and Dragonlord Veren has retaken control of his body.”

Shock filled Orell's eyes. That surprised her. She'd never thought she would see *that* expression from him. “*What?*”

“I said, Ylé...”

He waved his hand in an annoyed gesture. “Don't repeat yourself. I heard you the first time. But—how did this happen?”

Breathe. “Ylé's host body has been ill for some time, from a mysterious magical disease. I...” She gulped. “I summoned a Sharteka healer known for her skill. I don't know how she did it, but she exorcised Ylé—and killed him.”

“How do you know he is dead?” Orell gazed at her, steady, his self-control regained. “Are you certain?”

Xalidora hesitated a moment before nodding, curt and firm. “Yes. I would know.”

“How?”

She narrowed her eyes and lifted her chin. *I will not be doubted by this man.* “Ylé and I were bloodmates. If anyone would know ... I would. I had hoped I was mistaken, but I cannot feel his spirit anywhere on the earthbound planes. He's gone.” Xalidora's eyes closed despite herself, and a wave of sorrowful misery washed through her. Never again would she be with her beloved ... never again would she hear his voice, see his smile, make love with him, share his days and be his mate ... That was all dead.

And she will pay for it. In blood. Xalidora's hands clenched into fists, and she opened her eyes, vengeful fury pulsing through her veins. “I am here alone. I ... I need assistance. Someone to come here and take Veren, before our plans are ruined. I don't know how much Veren knows. But it's dangerous to let him loose for too long. He needs to be controlled, otherwise our mission to conquer the shifter lands will be ruined. The Dragons are too powerful to leave unchecked.”

Orell nodded. “Yes. They are. You're right. This is a matter of grave importance. I

will come myself to attend to it.”

The blood rushed from her face. “*What?*”

“I’m coming immediately. Be prepared for my arrival.” Before she could respond, the image faded away, leaving only clear water.

Xalidora’s jaw dropped and she stared at the scrying bowl. The most powerful—and dangerous—demon she had ever personally met. The only one she’d ever feared. And he was coming here. What have I gotten myself into?

Chapter Eight

Shaiandral panted with exhaustion as she entered Iztlan, her home village. She'd run the whole way—or most of it, at least. Confusion pounded in her skull. It was so hard to think. She clenched her teeth as she trudged along the dirt path into Iztlan proper, large mud-brick houses on either side of the streets. Cacophony from the busy, swarming streets assaulted her ears. Normally, it didn't bother her, or even seem like that many people, but now ... now she just wanted to cover her ears and curl up in a whimpering ball.

Gods. What's happening to me? Thoughts swirled through Shaiandral's mind as she walked, avoiding people's gazes. That wasn't like her. Usually she was the friendly village healer, stopping to talk to people. Now ... she didn't want to talk to them. Shame washed over her with every step, and she felt unclean. *You slept with a Dragon. The Dragonlord, of your own volition. Gods. What will your family, your people, think of you now, Shaiandral?*

“Shaiandral!”

She froze as she heard the voice. She didn't recognize it at first. Then it sunk in. Tlanextli. Her best friend. A sigh of relief escaped her, and Shaiandral turned around. She tried to force a smile, but she thought it had to look completely fake. “Yes?”

Tlanextli's face broke out in a grin as she walked up the path and embraced her. Shaiandral's mouth ran dry as her friend's touch sent spasms of desire lancing through her body. “I was so worried about you! They said you went into Dragon territory on healer summons. And I...I...”

Shaiandral raised an eyebrow as she pulled back from the embrace. “What, you thought I'd fall prey to the fierce Dragons?” She snorted and tossed her hair. “I'm stronger than that, and you know it.”

I only fell prey to him in a different way ... She closed her eyes. A long, drawn-out sigh escaped her.

A warm hand closed around her forearm. Shaiandral's eyes popped open, and she stared into Tlanextli's concerned eyes. “Shai? What's wrong? You look...”

“I look like what?” The words came sharper than Shaiandral intended. She sighed and backed off, smoothing her currently nonexistent fur. “Sorry. I didn't mean that. It's just...”

Tlanextli raised a hand, cutting Shaiandral off as she looked at her intensely. “Something's wrong. Something happened that you're not telling me about. You're not normally like this. What's wrong?”

Shaiandral's eyes darted around the crowd, the noise still nearly deafening on her ears. “I don't want to talk about it here. Not in public.”

“You're afraid someone would overhear?” Her friend cocked her head to the side, blinking. “It *must* be bad, then.”

She drew in a strangled breath. “I said I don't want to talk about it in public. Please.” Her eyes wavered as she met Tlanextli's gaze, and her lower lip trembled, despite herself. *Get a hold on yourself. You have to be strong. You're a healer, damn it. You can't let it get to you like this.*

Tlanextli stared at her for a moment, then made a slow, steady nod. “All right. My grandmothers are out hunting at present. Do you want to go back to my home, or your healer's hut?”

“I don't care. It doesn't matter. Either one is fine.” She was shaking now, gooseflesh prickling all over her body, fear accompanied by shame making every single fine hair stand on end. Shaiandral bit her lip. *I am so indecisive. What's wrong with me? I don't usually—* “We'll go to my hut,” she said abruptly, cutting off her own thought. “It's closer, and there's no chance of us being interrupted.”

“Interrupted?” Tlanextli raised an eyebrow and gave Shaiandral a wicked look as they walked in the direction of her hut. “I didn't think you were interested in me like that.”

Shaiandral didn't answer. Her palms sweated, and her body trembled as her eyes traveled over her friend's strong, stocky, well-formed body. She wanted to embrace her again, kiss her dark lips, nibble her chin, caress her large breasts and suckle their nipples, make slow, sweet, gentle love to her ... She slammed herself out of those thoughts, horrified. *Gods! You've never felt this way before? What's happening?*

They made their way through the busy street without being stopped or interrupted, and stepped out on a small dirt path leading off into brush. Jungle birds chirped above them, and the wind rustled the leaves. A short ways down the path, they came in sight of a small mud-brick hut. Shaiandral smiled, this time for real. A weight lifted off her shoulders. She loved her home. It soothed her. It was her sanctuary. It gave her calm.

And right now, calm is the one thing I need the most ... Shaiandral let the thought trail off as she entered her hut, Tlanextli right behind her. Familiar soothing atmosphere swept over her, and she breathed a sigh of relief. “Gods, it's good to be home.”

Tlanextli chuckled. “You were only away a couple days.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Only two days, yes, but that doesn't mean that I didn't miss it. I love this place.” Shaiandral pressed her hand against the cool brick wall, and smiled, her eyes half-closing as she did so.

“So.” Her low, brusque, to-the-point voice snapped Shaiandral out of her thoughts. “I want to know. What happened? What's wrong, Shaiandral? There's something ... different about you. You look so scared.”

“It's because I am scared.” Shaiandral walked across her cluttered hut and picked up her tea kettle. “Would you like some tea?”

Tlanextli shook her head, then looked at Shaiandral, shocked. “What the hell? You're that upset and you want to know if I would like *tea*?”

“Chamomile. It'll calm me down, and gods know I need it right now.” Shaiandral filled up the tea kettle and started a small fire in her brazier.

“You're dodging the issue.” Tlanextli folded her arms over her breasts and gave Shaiandral a serious look. “What's wrong? You brought me all this way here and now you're going to dangle me like a button on a string toy?”

She tightened her lips, then gestured at the wood table. “Sit down and we'll talk.”

Tlanextli did as she asked, then looked at her, her face completely serious. “Shaiandral ... you're my best friend. You and I have been close since we were cubs. You're not normally like this. What's going on?”

“I know I'm not like this.” She blew a strand of hair out of her face. “That's what's bothering me. Tlanextli...”

“What?” Her friend reached out across the table and squeezed her arm. “I’m here for you, Shai. I care about you. I’m worried. What happened?”

She squeezed her eyes shut at the memory, her face burning with shame. She remembered the demon. She remembered Veren. “I ... you know I was summoned.”

“Yes.”

“I...” Shaiandral drew in a deep breath, trying to steady herself and gather up all her courage. She sweated, and her body chilled with fear. Gods. What would Tlanextli, her friend since childhood, think of her once she knew what she'd done? But she couldn't lie. She had to tell her. Tlanextli had to know, and Shaiandral couldn't keep it hidden inside herself forever. Eventually, someone would find out. “When I got to the Dragonlord's palace ... I was too late. He was dying.”

Tlanextli pursed her lips. “What happened? If he was dying...”

After letting out a sigh, she told Tlanextli everything that'd happened, the whole story pouring out of her. She trembled with fear as she finished. “And ... then I came back here.”

Shaiandral looked at Tlanextli anxiously, waiting for some sort of response. Tlanextli didn't say anything at first. She looked like she was thinking, and Shaiandral's gut did flip-flops. *Oh gods. Tezca. What's going to happen? What does she think?*

If she lost her best friend in the entire world to something she had done, to sleeping with the Dragonlord ... She shuddered to herself. She didn't know what she would do. If Tlanextli turned away from her ... then she didn't know if there would be *anyone* in the Sharteka clan that would stand by her. She and Tlanextli were that close and had been so since they were kittens.

Tlanextli took in a deep breath before speaking. “Shai ... I ... I don't know what to say.”

Her heart plummeted to the floor, and more than a tad of anger welled up in her. “Fine. Call me a Dragon-loving slut, then. That's about what I am, aren't I?”

“No!” Tlanextli's eyes blazed with fury, and her fist slammed down on the table. The movement made Shaiandral's teacup slosh hot water over her hand. She hissed and licked off the liquid as she kept her attention on Tlanextli. “You're not a slut, damn it. You're a healer. You went in there to do your duty, and you had to perform tantric magic to bring the Dragonlord back from death's embrace. You've never done that before. I don't think any healer in our city has.”

Shaiandral shook her head, her ebony hair hitting the sides of her cheeks. “I don't know of one. Alza, perhaps, but a very long time ago if she did.”

“Exactly. You aren't trained for that. You had no idea what you were doing, and—thank the gods for your sake that it *worked*. That kind of power could easily have backlashed on you. But...” Tlanextli trailed off for a moment, choosing her words carefully. “You were a virgin. And determined to remain that way. That wasn't like you. I wonder ... perhaps a side effect of the tantric magic?”

Her jaw about dropped as realization hit her. “*Yes! Oh gods yes!*” It made sense—there was no other explanation for why this was happening. Then her face fell, along with her spirits. “But ... what do I do? If it's because of the tantric raising, then...”

Tlanextli chuckled and touched her hand. Electric tingles ran up Shaiandral's spine, and her tongue went dry. She wanted to pounce on Tlanextli and kiss her and rip off her clothes and ... “Go to Zeltzin.”

Shaiandral cocked her head to the side, surprised. "She's still alive?"

She nodded. "Yes, as far as I know. I'm not aware that she passed on. She's getting old, but..."

Shaiandral snorted. "She's nearly ninety years old. That's more than 'getting old.'"

"True." They sat for a moment in utter silence, then Tlanextli spoke again. "You can go to her. She's a tantric practitioner, and even if the stories say she's evil ... I doubt she is. But ... if it's as intense as you say it is..."

She closed her eyes, taking deep breaths, trying to force down her arousal. *You're not going to have sex with your best friend. Especially not when she's lifemated.* "It's that intense. It's more than that. It's ... it's so hard to control..."

"Then you need to go to her." A warm hand squeezed hers, and she throbbled between her legs. Waves of shame passed over her. "You need to get control over this, and Zeltzin may be the only one that can help. No. I think she *is* the only one."

Shaiandral drew in a strangled breath and opened her eyes, nodding. The thought of going to Zeltzin, the both feared and venerated tantric priestess of Aztla Mountain, sent tremors passing through her body. And yet ... she knew without a doubt that she had to go. "You're right. I have to go ... I have to get control over this..." She forced a smile. "Thanks, Tlanextli. You're a good friend."

Tlanextli smiled as she stood. "As are you. Now, I really have to go and buy some preparations for dinner. *You*—are going to go look up that priestess."

She laughed at her friend's commanding tone of voice. "Yes. Yes, I am."

Without another word, Tlanextli turned and headed for the door. Shaiandral couldn't help but watch her walk away, her eyes following that well-built body. *I wonder what it would be like to fuck her?*

Chapter Nine

Shaiandral left her hut shortly after Tlanextli departed. Fear tingled throughout her body, drying her mouth as she headed into the jungle, towards Aztla Mountain. *Tezca's blood. This is madness, going up into the home of that witch. And not just any witch, but a tantric witch.*

But what have I become? There are some that would call me worse for what I've done ... Shaiandral shook her head, biting her lip. *There's no choice; if I don't gain control of this, I'll lose myself completely.*

Shaiandral feared that the most, falling prey to her ravaging lusts, losing herself, her soul, who and what she was. She quirked her lips in a sardonic expression. *Not much more than a day ago, you were a virgin. And now...*

I don't want to think about it anymore. I just want to forget. If only it were a dream...

Shaiandral clenched her jaw as she stomped through thick underbrush growing over the small rarely-used path to Aztla Mountain. “Well, it's not. It's real, and you have to pay the consequences.” She snarled the words aloud, through clenched teeth.

Insects whistled through the jungle, and the sound of a lapping river reached her ears. It was close, but she didn't know quite how far—or how dangerous it would be. Nobody in over a generation had traveled to Aztla Mountain and returned. If she had a choice, she wouldn't be going there herself.

Maybe I could turn around...

“No. You don't have a choice,” she repeated, grumbling as she trudged through the jungle, eyes surveying the area for possible dangers. “You've *got* to get control of yourself—before you end up with child, if nothing else.”

Chills ran up her spine as she froze in place. “Tezca's blood.”

What if she were? What if Veren ... *Oh gods. If I am ... then I'm carrying a Dragon's child.* Gorge rose in the back of her throat, her belly roiling with shame. She fell to her knees, her face burning as she retched, clutching her belly with horror. *I could be carrying the Dragonlord's bastard.*

Her family might forgive her for sleeping with a Dragon, considering the surrounding circumstances, but they would *never* accept her bearing his child. They'd exile her from the clan.

Anger throbbed in her body, and she narrowed her eyes in determination. *No. I've lost too much to him and his demon already. I've lost my path. I won't lose my family.*

She balled her hands into fists and stood, setting her jaw. *I'll rid myself of it before I bear his brat.*

But even as she spoke the words, her body pulsed with heat, mad wild desire throbbing between her legs. Despite her hatred, she wanted Veren, his cock inside her, large and hot, filling her with excruciating bliss.

Shaiandral forced herself to move faster into the forest, trying to put him out of her thoughts. *Zeltzin can help; go to her. Before it's too late.*

The farther she went, the more she realized just how far the journey was. Her limbs ached, especially her legs, and her back hurt. And she still had a long ways to go. Shaiandral growled and shifted to jaguar form so she could walk faster.

She only made it a short way before total lust overwhelmed her. *Oh gods. I'm in heat.*

River water rippled not far ahead of her, and she called, loud, demanding, screaming for any jaguar tom nearby to come and take her ... Shaiandral lost all comprehension of who she was, unable to think of anything but sex. She wanted a tom, a big strong tom to mount her and drive himself into her. Her calling grew louder and more insistent as no tom came.

A noise in the bushes caught her attention. She perked up and sniffed. *A tom?* Shaiandral's eyes narrowed as a young human man came through, and she snarled at first. He froze, and his eyes widened, but he didn't scream.

Another wave of lust passed through her, crying out with longing for a tom, any tom, to take her. Shaiandral looked up, wild with need, at the man who'd come through. He took a step forward, fascination plain in his eyes.

She growled. Lust washed over her. She fell to the ground, flipping over onto her side, arching her back as she dragged herself against the forest floor. *Tom. Tom tom tom tom tom...*

The man stared at her, his dark hair cut close to his head. Shaiandral started to let out a plaintive mew. It changed to a low rumble, a demand for sex as she looked up at him. She wanted him. She meow-purred again as she rolled over onto her other side and rubbed her cheek against the forest floor.

He wasn't understanding. Shaiandral growled with annoyance. What was wrong with the man? He knew she was in heat. He was a shifter, like her—he had to be. The humans never crossed their borders. But *why* wasn't he making a move?

She pulled her body along the forest floor with her claws, crawling towards him, meowing as she gazed up at him out of her wide eyes. He stared, but a visible lump bulged under his loincloth. Desire spasmed through her, and Shaiandral yowled. Shivers passed through her, making her fur ripple. With hardly any realization of what she was doing, she rolled to her paws and turned away from him. Shaiandral flicked her tail aside, baring herself to the cool air—and him. She scratched her hind legs against grass, wiggling at him as low guttural meows rolled out of her throat.

She tensed in preparation, her whole body trembling with desire. A moment passed, though it seemed like an eternity. And another. And another. Finally, she glanced back at the man. He still stood there, watching her, breathing hard with face flushed red. Shaiandral mrowed at him, beckoning as she shook her rear to the side. But he still made no move.

He doesn't know what I am. The thought reverberated through Shaiandral's mind, piercing the madness of her heat. She hissed in frustration, but if she wanted him, there was only one option. *I'll show him.*

Shaiandral rolled over and came to her feet gracefully, shedding her jaguar form as she did so. The man stared in shock, his gaze sliding over her voluptuous body. Realization washed over his face, and he spoke for the first time. "You're a shifter woman, aren't you?"

The words annoyed her, and another wave of lust flashed through her body. She didn't answer; instead, she crossed the space between them in a few swift movements. He could do nothing but stare at her naked body. Shaiandral kissed him impulsively, wrapping her arms around his neck. His lips were taut at first, but they soon loosened,

and he moved into the kiss.

Strong hands made their way down her back to squeeze her ass and rub it, sending desire pulsing through her. She growled softly, the closest to a purr she could manage in human form, and shoved her hips against his loincloth, feeling his erection. *Take the damn piece of deerskin off already.*

He withdrew from the kiss briefly, smiling at her. A hand drew around her hip and down between her legs. "I've always dreamt of being with a shifter woman." His fingers delved between the lips of her wet cunt. Shaiandral whimpered and thrust herself against him, rubbing her clit against his hand.

One swift movement, and the loincloth disappeared. Nothing separated them now. He lifted her hips with one hand and steadied her back with the other, and then he slowly lowered her onto his cock. It drove her mad with desire, and she cried out, digging her fingernails into his back. *Now. Take me now.*

He brought her down, entering her inch by inch. Pleasure pulsed through her like blood, and low pants rumbled out of her throat, turning to screams as he penetrated deeper.

She screamed, throwing back her head as he reached her depths, as far as he could. He lifted her up and thrust into her again, slowly at first, his hands digging into her back and ass. Shaiandral couldn't help crying out at every thrust; it was almost too much to bear.

Wild mad joy exploded within her as he continued to thrust. She roared, loud enough that it echoed through the forest, sending birds flying away in fear. He cried out as he fucked her harder, faster, pounding within her body, gripping her hard. Shaiandral screamed as she tightened around his cock with every thrust. Her body tensed as he fucked her, and she felt like she was going to explode.

She did. Screams of wild passionate joy roared out of her throat as she came, shuddering against him with his final thrusts. She wasn't fully aware of his groans; all she knew was pleasure washing through her body.

He came inside her and withdrew, his cock slipping out of her, causing one final shudder. Her feet found grass, and her knees buckled. Shaiandral fell to the ground, the heat-lust fading. The man sat by her side, gasping for breath, staring at her like she was a dream brought to life.

Oh gods. I've done it again. The realization hit her as she came back to herself, flooded with shame. *And this time ... a human. First a Dragon, now a human. Gods, where do I stop?*

Her emotions poured through her. She tore away from the human male, completely terrified of herself and what she'd done, and fled, leaving him calling behind.

Chapter Ten

Don't think, damn it. Just. Don't. Think. Shaiandral resisted the urge to squeeze her eyes shut as she raced through the jungle, her paws pounding against moss and grass, self-loathing growing with every bound. *Why am I acting this way? What's come over me?*

She couldn't hide from the shame pulsing through her body like her blood. She couldn't escape from it any more than she could escape from the gravity of what she'd done.

More than anything else in the world, Shaiandral longed for respite from her actions. She tried every trick she knew to distract herself. Counting imaginary tapirs, reciting herbal remedies, remembering family lineage—none of it worked. At all. The fears of how her family and friends, her people, would react when they found out could not be banished. Shame welled in the back of her throat and her tongue went dry.

There's nothing to be done about it now. You've no way to know how they'll react. You can only guess, and that won't do anything but worry you further. Shaiandral flicked her whiskers and continued her ascent through the thinning jungle towards Zeltzin's home.

The air shifted as Shaiandral tapered back to a stroll. Mists converged in front of her, blocking her view of the path. Fear tremored in her breast, and she bit her lip, remembering the stories she'd heard about old Zeltzin. In some, she was an old hag fucking men until they died; in others, a young temptress taking both men and women; still others claimed she was just a twisted fairy tale that had never existed in the real world. Shaiandral didn't know which, if any, of the tales were true.

But, by Tezca's blood, she was afraid to find out.

You're a wreck. Pull yourself together. Shaiandral set her jaw as she strode through the mists, each step deliberate and cautious. The last thing she wanted was to walk into a trap—and for all she knew, Zeltzin could have the very landscape rigged.

Chills shivered over her flesh as the grey fog cleared, baring the jungle's edge. A small ivy-covered path led over a rippling stream to a grass hut surrounded by well-tended plantbeds. Sunlight shone down into the clearing, and Shaiandral gaped as it shimmered off the water, creating an aura of peace. This was *Zeltzin's*? She would've expected anything else.

But then, I haven't expected anything that's happened recently. Why should that change now?

She stared for a moment, then bit her lip and set her jaw, determined. *Stop dawdling and get in there. Staring at her garden isn't going to solve your problems.*

The jungle sounds went silent as she jumped over the stream surrounding Zeltzin's territory. Shaiandral didn't even notice as she returned to human form. She wasn't about to let anything stand in her way. Pumping her legs, she moved fast towards the small hut.

Too fast. She tripped on a rock, gasped, and went sprawling across soft grass into a pile of dirt and pebbles. Her face stung as she shook her head, trying to get the soil out of her eyes.

A strong female hand tightened around her shoulder and yanked her to her knees.

Shaiandral looked up, blinking away the remaining dirt. Sunlight haloed the old woman's wrinkled face. Silver hair trailed to her shoulders, and she wore a simple airy skirt and blouse. Her other hand clenched around a carved wooden staff. Brown eyes narrowed studiously, her lips quirking into a smile that didn't quite meet them. "You've come a long way, Shaiandral."

Shaiandral's eyes bulged, her heart pounding. "What—how..."

"Did I know?" She threw her head back and laughed, a harsh sound that sent shivers rolling through Shaiandral's skin. "I'm a sorceress, girl..." She broke off her sentence, obviously shocked. "What've you done with your shields? They're tattered. You might as well be an open book."

Shaiandral glanced over her shields—and the old woman was right. They might as well be nonexistent. *Tezca, I hadn't realized my control had slipped so thoroughly.* She tried to calm herself. "Are you Zeltzin?"

The old woman bent over with a movement so fast Shaiandral didn't see it. Fingers caressed her cheek, and warm lips touched hers lightly. Her tongue flicked against Shaiandral's lips, making her shiver. Shaiandral didn't open her mouth, even though her body nearly floated with the touch. The woman teased, not trying to force her. Her expert touch left Shaiandral throbbing, and her mouth fell open. The woman's warm tongue licked the tip of Shaiandral's, and she pulled away. Her hand squeezed Shaiandral's wrist. "What do you think?"

Shaiandral panted, trying to catch her breath. "If you aren't, then you're certainly good at imitation."

"I'm the real thing." Zeltzin yanked on Shaiandral's shirt, pulling her up. "Come. This way."

She sighed. "That's just my problem—coming."

"Don't mouth off at me." Zeltzin glared. "You're here for a reason."

"I'm sleeping with almost everything that moves. Is that reason enough?" she said sarcastically.

The tantric healer's eyes glinted, and a wicked grin spread across her face. Shaiandral's gut clenched. *What have I gotten myself into now?* "We can take care of that."

Her final word came out as a loud feline snarl, and Zeltzin pulled Shaiandral towards a clump of trees with superhuman strength. Vines dangled, waving in the wind. Shaiandral tried to tear away from the healer, but Zeltzin held fast. "You're not going anywhere. You came to me. Now I have you. You're mine."

"I'm nobody's but my own," Shaiandral spat.

Zeltzin ignored the comment and shoved her away with one hand. Hard bark scraped Shaiandral's back, and her head bashed against the tree, not hard enough to injure her, but enough to hurt. Moaning, her head fell to the side. Barely aware of what Zeltzin'd said and done, she opened her mouth to complain.

"Don't speak." Heat caressed Shaiandral's skin, and she blinked her eyes open. Brilliant coruscating lights surrounded Zeltzin, who stood naked, hopelessly beautiful in a way no younger woman could meet. She caressed Shaiandral's shoulder with a single finger, then kissed her again, stronger and harder than before. Zeltzin ran her hands up Shaiandral's abdomen to her breasts and squeezed, tantalizing the nipples with her thumbs. Hot lust reawakened, and Shaiandral moaned, pressing herself against Zeltzin.

Vines crept around her wrists and tightened. Startled, she yanked back, her eyes wide as the vines dangled her above the ground. Red energies pulsed around her body, flicking her skin, sending shivers through her body. Shaiandral whispered, low and intense, "Let me go."

"I said, don't speak." Zeltzin narrowed her eyes and muttered a low, guttural word under her breath.

"What the..." A magical tendril waved its tip in her face, cutting her off. Before she could do anything, it shoved itself into her mouth, suddenly corporeal. It filled her, pressing against her tongue and the roof of her mouth, throbbing and tapping. Shaiandral's eyelids fluttered as her belly constricted, tingling from within.

Zeltzin's eyes traveled up and down Shaiandral's body. She murmured words, and the energies around her flared and danced, twining closer to Shaiandral, then around her, caressing her smooth skin with light touches. Shaiandral's whole body trembled as the tendrils sent her body into miniature shuddering ecstasies.

The older woman traced a line down the center of Shaiandral's body, from between her breasts through her pubic hair to let a fingertip rest on her clit. She whispered one word and slid her hand into Shaiandral's cunt, forming a fist. Pain mixed with pleasure ripped through Shaiandral, and she threw her head back, trying to scream but choking on the vine in her mouth. Magical tendrils tightened around her. Two wrapped themselves around her nipples and tightened, sending a shock from her tits downward.

As Zeltzin pounded into Shaiandral, over and over in a fast rhythmic pattern, energy built up, pure power that swept through Shaiandral, power like nothing she'd ever seen. Fear dug into her belly. *I have to do something about it*, she thought, only half-aware. *I have to get control of the energy, or gods only know what'll happen.*

The combination of the tendril in her mouth, the ones playing with her nipples, and Zeltzin's hand sent orgasm rippling through Shaiandral. Her hips thrust against the woman without control, needing her deeper. Power washed over Shaiandral—she tried to exert control over it, but slipped. *Gods.*

Zeltzin slid out of Shaiandral. Energy pulsed again, flowing around them both. The older woman drew another tendril of magic and formed something that resembled a cat o' nine tails whip with tiny spikes on the tips. Shaiandral's throat clenched with fear—and she burned hot with desire. She wanted Zeltzin, and that scared her.

The older woman's eyes blazed with lust, and something else Shaiandral couldn't place. She stepped around her, keeping eye contact until she passed through the magic binding Shaiandral. A single claw raked down Shaiandral's back, and hot breath tickled her skin. Shaiandral trembled. Zeltzin moved away.

Pain tore into Shaiandral's back with the crack of a whip. Her eyes bulged at the sudden shock, and she bit down on the tendril. The whip struck again. This time, she shuddered, pain turning to pleasure. She tried to cry out as ecstasy overwhelmed her, and the tendril pushed down on her tongue, silencing her scream.

Something twined around her leg. Shaiandral glanced down. A magical tendril worked its way up to the warmth between her legs and tickled her folds lightly, then flicked against her clit. The whip cracked again, spikes tearing into her flesh as the tendril drove itself into her, wiggling, pulsing, filling her completely. Her hips thrust against it as it went deeper with every rhythmic strike of Zeltzin's whip.

Magic rumbled beneath and through them both, magic that Shaiandral had no hopes

of controlling. Stark terror froze her mind for a moment. *Oh, Tezca, who will this magic unleashed harm?*

The whip stopped, and Shaiandral breathed with relief, even though the tendrils were still in her.

Hot air breathed into her ear as Zeltzin pressed herself against Shaiandral's back. "It's not over. It's only just beginning."

She blanched. *Tezca, save me.*

Zeltzin chuckled. "You're projecting." She licked a rough wet tongue against her ear, and Shaiandral's eyes widened with realization—she was mid-shift.

"And going to stay that way." Hot breath touched Shaiandral's face as teeth closed on her earlobe. Claw-tipped hands reached around Shaiandral's abdomen, caressing upward to squeeze her breasts. Shaiandral's hips thrust again bringing it further into herself as Zeltzin's hands trailed down her body to massage her furred mound. She rubbed Shaiandral's hot folds between her fingers, sending pleasure rolling through her.

Zeltzin bit down, her razor fangs piercing Shaiandral's ear as her claws did the same to the sensitive skin. Pain ripped through her mind, and Shaiandral would have screamed but for the gag. She didn't know what was happening when a tendril shoved its way into her ass. She hung from her bindings, totally helpless. Energy poured through her, around her, and she writhed with the tendrils' ministrations.

The older woman released her, claws raking her flesh as she pulled away. Zeltzin caressed Shaiandral's back, soothing—then ripped slowly carved into her skin, drawing patterns as she growled strange words. The markings burned with heat, and pain wracked Shaiandral's body, mixed with pleasure that sent her trembling. Magic swept around them, faster, building up, nearly explosive.

It flowed into Zeltzin. Shaiandral could feel Zeltzin's claws tingling with the magic as she made one last mark, and she closed her eyes. *There's no controlling it. It's going to burst.*

It didn't. It came under control—but not Shaiandral's. Zeltzin's. She pulled away, and the tendrils withdrew—all of them. Shaiandral fell to the ground, too weak to stand.

Zeltzin loomed over her, a huge jaguar bursting with magical energy. She lapped Shaiandral's skin with her sandpaper tongue, tantalizing, all over her body, licking the blood away. Shaiandral moaned, and Zeltzin moved downward, her tongue flicking over her nipples, making Shaiandral cry out and thrust against her.

As Zeltzin licked her, Shaiandral felt energy return to her—and with it a control she hadn't felt since she'd lost her virginity. It sank in completely as Zeltzin's tongue both rough and soft all at once lapped her clit, sending orgasm pulsing through her, harder, building on itself and releasing as she threw her head back and screamed, her hands digging into the ground. Zeltzin stopped, and it faded, tapering off slowly, leaving her body spasming.

Shaiandral stared up at Zeltzin as she returned to human form—and her jaw dropped. Zeltzin stood in front of her, rejuvenated, hair long and dark, eyes bright and brown, body young and firm. "What..."

Zeltzin shook her head. "There will be plenty of time for questions later. " She held out her hand. "Come, my apprentice. You have much to learn."

Chapter Eleven

He couldn't sleep.

For nights, Veren tossed and turned, staring at the moonlight shining through drawn curtains, illuminating the room, haunted by the memory of that Sharteka woman. He could almost see her, basking in the night's rays, it setting on her smooth coffee-colored skin, highlighting her obsidian hair, lidded eyes deep and dark as the mother earth staring at him, her whole body radiating the same hunger he felt deep within...

She ran. She doesn't want me. Veren wished he could say the same. But every time he thought of Shaiandral, the shadow of her touch returned, stirring his longing desire awake. His blood burned for her, and her alone—and he could not forget. If he hadn't known better, he'd have wondered if she were a succubus sent to corrupt his soul.

But she wasn't—else, she would never have released him from his possession. Even still he could not remember the events of those years. *She gave me back my life, when nobody else could.*

There is no future for us. None. Veren forced his eyes closed, trying to settle his thoughts. *She'll fade with time.*

But Shaiandral's scent remained, like an old perfume that would not fade. The more time passed, the more she returned to his mind in dreams, her body pressed against his, flesh hot with desire, beckoning him to take her then, hard and fast.

Every time she faded into the mist before Veren could answer her call and plunge himself into her. Her whispered words reverberated through his mind, haunting his waking hours. “Come and find me, my Dragonlord.”

The longer it went on, the more it affected him, to the point that he couldn't concentrate on important state affairs—and with the demon threat, Veren needed his wits about him at all times. Which he didn't have while being tantalized by this woman's shadow.

I can't continue on like this, he thought one day while pretending to listen to one of his councilors drone on about the risk of flooding in East Alysia. *I have to find her—bring her back to me—make her mine.* Just like she begged for in his dreams.

Problem was, Veren didn't know where she was. And there was only one person in the Dragonlands who he knew for certain could help him.

“No. I won't.” Xalidora crossed her arms over her breasts, eyes narrowed with reined fury. “Ever since she came here, you've treated me like dirt. Now you expect me to help you find her?” She snorted.

“You're the only one who can,” Veren said with more desperation than he'd have liked. She started to turn away; he grabbed her by the shoulders and forced her to look at him. “You know damn well you're the only witch in my realm who has the power to scry.”

“There'd be others if your bastard father hadn't gone on a witch hunt and near killed us all!” Xalidora spat and tried to pull away. “Now let me go. You have no right...”

“I am the Dragonlord. I have every right.” Veren tightened his jaw. *The demon gave her too much power. She's forgotten her place.* “In case you don't remember, my dear, you are one of my subjects. I command you.”

She snarled, baring teeth that began the slow shift to dragon fangs. “You don't command me.”

“You will scry the healer Shaiandral for me. That is a direct order given by your ruler and master.”

Xalidora glared at him and turned away.

He grabbed her by the wrist and spun her around. “Do not presume to walk away from me!”

She looked back to him, her eyes now cold with righteous anger. “I'll walk away from you if I please. Are you going to kill me, *my lord*?”

Veren flinched at the sarcasm. “Of course not. Do you think me a monster?”

“Yes.” Her voice was nearly a whisper, and she backed away.

He tried not to let that get to him—almost certainly, it was a ploy on her part. Xalidora had always been manipulative, even before ... Veren pushed the memories away. “I will not ask you again. Scry the woman.”

Xalidora shook her head slowly. “I won't. You can kill me if you want, but I will not scry her for you.”

“Why?” The words came out softer than he'd intended.

She just looked at him. “Because you took away the greatest love I ever had. I don't know who you are anymore. You've ... changed.” Xalidora's soft voice hardened. “If you want her, go down to the Sharteka village and find her yourself. I won't be a part of this.”

Veren lifted his chin and said, his voice cold as ice, “I'll do that.”

I don't have any other choice.

* * * *

Xalidora's eyes narrowed and her hands clenched stiff, fingers curling like claws. A low hiss escaped her throat as she stormed back towards her room. Rage subsumed her, dragon claws poking out of her fingertips as her control slipped. *I need my balance. I can't let him ruin it.*

She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. Her claws retracted, shifting back to smooth human fingers. *Good. Very good.*

Apprehension trembled in her gut as she considered her options. There weren't man. *I have to contact the others.* The situation grew drastically more perilous as Veren continued his investigation.

Even though Orell was on his way, that didn't make her feel particularly better. Xalidora didn't trust him. There were too many stories about what happened to Orell's friends, much less his enemies.

Larn. There's always Larn. Xalidora smiled despite herself at the memory of her old blood-bound friend. *He'll be there for me.*

But would he be able to help her? Larn, unfortunately, was one of those people that wished he could do more than he was capable of.

And in order to contact him, she'd have to raise energy. Tantric energy. Xalidora snarled, her footsteps shuffling against the black marble tile floor as she stalked through the ebony halls. Her nostrils flared as her draconian sense of smell detected an unmistakable human scent. Male. Xalidora grinned cruelly, letting her fingernails give way to silvery claws. *Perfect.*

Just a bit closer. She licked her lips in anticipation.

A servant came sharply around the corner, nearly stumbling into her. His eyes widened, the pupils dilating. “M—M—M—Mistress Xalidora! I'm sorry, I—I—I didn't see you coming.”

“That doesn't matter.” Xalidora took hold, her talon-tipped hand grasping his shoulder while the other caressed his crotch, feeling his soft cock resting against his balls.

He paled, the blood draining from his face as mind-numbing fear pulsed from his aura. Xalidora reveled in it, reaching out to touch the edge.

Oh Serra oh Serra oh Serra what's she going to do to me? Images filled Xalidora's skull, of her raking dragon claws over his bare flesh, fucking his ass while holding a tightened cord around his neck, mutilating his cock with her razor teeth...

And she remembered doing every one of them. Not to him, but to others like him.

He was still hyperventilating. “Mistress—don't...”

Xalidora slapped him, still holding his shoulder. “Don't tell your mistress what to do or what not to do. You will serve me.” She arched her eyebrows.

The coward looked like he was going to pass out. She touched his mind, blowing her way through his weak aural shields. *Don't do that.*

“Don't—what—how...” He stuttered, trying to back away.

Xalidora clenched her hand around his throat, claws pressing into soft skin. Blood pulsed through the crucial vein under her talon. Only a touch, and she could end his life.

But that would be a waste ... for now, at least...

“Come with me.”

The servant almost fell as she yanked him with her down the hall. “Where—where are you taking me?”

“My chambers.”

He gasped and tried to stop. Xalidora pulled him along with inhuman strength. *Oh Serra ... I know what happens in her chambers ... she'll kill me...*

Oh, I don't think I'll do that. Xalidora touched his mind with the words. *I don't think.*

You—you—you—don't mean—

Unless you keep this up. Xalidora snarled into his mind as she threw open her door. *You might make me change my mind.*

He couldn't answer. Sweat trickled down his face, as fear overloaded his aura to the point she couldn't sense anything else from him.

“Get on the bed.”

He stared at her, eyes wide as a deer's.

“I said, get on the bed.” Xalidora lowered her face meeting his gaze. “I'm not going to say this again.”

The servant tore his face away, moving at the speed of molasses as he lay down on the bed.

“Take your clothes off,” she started to say, and then stopped. “No, wait. I'll do that for you.”

Xalidora leapt onto the bed and straddled the shivering man, disgusted. *Weakling. Utter weakling. But he'll do.*

Her talons lengthened as she continued to shift while the man gaped.

“Like them, do you?” Xalidora smirked. “Let's get these clothes off, shall we?”

She didn't give him the chance to respond, but instead brought her claws down, ripping his tunic, tearing into his flesh. The sensation excited her, as did his screams.

“Come now.” She patted his cheek. “That didn't hurt that much.”

Xalidora wiggled back and yanked off his breeches, clawing through his skin. He howled, and she reveled in his energizing pain, tracing a finger across his flaccid dick, welling a thin line of blood. She licked away the metallic liquid, enjoying the flavor and the power it contained. Using the magic raised from his own pain, she tightened a magical band around the base of his cock, cutting off circulation.

By the time she was done with him, it wouldn't matter if he had circulation or not.

With the rest of the energy, she tied him to the bed and gagged him, holding him immobile and silent. Much as she liked the screaming, she couldn't afford for Veren to hear. Her bound slave stared up at her helplessly, his cock hardening despite himself. A familiar sensation surged between her legs—she wanted him in her, the fucking, the blood ... her body hungered for it like nothing else.

Xalidora didn't bother kissing him; instead, she went straight for his cock, taking it in her mouth. She bit down.

The servant couldn't scream, except through his mind. His terror and agony fed Xalidora as she enjoyed chewing at his cock, laughing in her mind. She knew what she was doing and she enjoyed every bit of it. Torture was nothing to her but an afternoon game.

Or a nighttime game. Or day. Anytime she felt like it, really.

Against his terror, his body responded to her, arching up into her mouth, towards the back of her throat. He was disgusted, and his self-loathing tried to accompany the pain. Giggling, Xalidora bounced it off her aura, multiplied it, and fed it back to him. *If that's how he wants to feel, he can have it, as much as he wants and more.*

He yanked at his bindings, trying to escape. *I have to get away ... have to ... or I'll die ... she'll kill me and she'll never regret it ... my family will never find out what really happened to me ...*

Oh, what a pity. Sarcasm rolled off her mind as she touched his, a faint smile on her lips as she licked the tip of his cock. *Maybe I'll take them too. Then you can explain to them exactly what happened to you in the next world. Would you like that?*

Oh Serra ... His mind turned into a sudden rush of uncontrolled images. A young woman, pale and dark and beautiful, holding a small child, a boy of about two years.

Xalidora raked her fangs over the sensitive skin of his cock, drawing blood. She sucked, drinking the sweet liquid. *Yes, how would you like that? I could do this to your wife. I'm sure she'd enjoy it, most women do.* Xalidora fed him an image of his wife in manacles, tied to the wall, her lips held shut with long pins, nipples pierced with nails, legs spread wide, her whole body covered in oozing bloody gashes.

Yes, and don't forget your little brat. He's a bit young, but I can work with that.

Xalidora dug her claws into his sides, feeling blood pulse out. She touched his mind with an image of her doing exactly what she did to him to his son.

Stark terror and horror flooded his mind. Disbelief that she could even think of doing something like that ... *She's a woman...*

Xalidora drew back from him with a barked laugh. *You really think that matters a bit to me? That because I'm a woman I'm automatically supposed to love children and hold them in some high regard?*

Without giving him the chance to answer, she straddled him and drove herself down on his cock, hard, thrusting fast, wanting him deep inside her as she rode the power from

the sex and blood and pain, her head thrown back in joyous revelry. She grabbed his throat and crushed it in her hands, cutting off his airway. *How'd you like to die like this?*

She slammed down on him over and over, digging her claws into his throat, puncturing that critical vein. Blood spurted out over her hands as she came, her body writhing with orgasm. Xalidora snatched onto his throat and licked at the blood, loving the taste, feeling power fill her as that forgettable servant died, his last thought, *Oh Serra...*

Xalidora sat up, wiping blood off her mouth. Blank eyes stared up at the ceiling in suspended horror. She snorted. "That goddess didn't help you, now, did she? I might've let you live if you fought. Coward."

Her skin tingled with the energy she held, the worst of it focused in her arms, traveling up to her fingertips. Xalidora strode across the room to her scrying bowl, leaving the gaping body of the servant. She spoke a word in demontongue, sending the energy out to contact Larn.

His face appeared in the scrying bowl, long, sharp, and angular, like a serpent's. Different than the last time she'd seen him; he must've switched hosts. *He's probably among the Serpent tribe now. It would suit his personality.*

"Xalidora?" Larn's brow furrowed in concern. "What's happened? Why have you called me?"

She let her breath out and explained the situation to him. His face paled the more she told him, and when she finished, he swore. "Gods! She killed Ylé?"

A pang of grief shot through her, replaced by indignant fury only a moment later. "He did. We have to stop her, Larn."

"Yes, we do, but how..."

"Orell's coming."

"Orell?" Larn gaped. "You can't be serious."

She hissed at the scrying bowl, forked tongue licking the air. "Would I have gone to these lengths to reach you if this were nothing?" Xalidora swept out her arm to indicate the corpse laying on the bed behind her.

Larn shook his head, shoulder-length auburn hair hitting his cheeks. "I know your tastes too well."

"Larn, I had to talk to you. You don't know the risk I'm taking. If Veren finds out what I've done, now that he's back in control of his own mind..."

"Do you think he would notice the death of a common human?"

Xalidora balled her hands into fists. "You don't understand. These are his humans. He's bred and raised them. He might not notice the death, but if he does, and he finds out that I did it, and why..." She trailed off, leaving Larn to assume the rest. He wasn't so dense that he wouldn't.

He pursed his lips. "So Orell is coming. Gods." Larn rubbed his face, sighing. "Do you know how dangerous he is?"

"Orell's presence won't make the situation any more dangerous for me than it already is." Xalidora shifted her weight, sensing for Veren. She didn't feel him near, nor did she feel any danger of someone noticing the servant's disappearance.

"I want you out of there."

"What?" She tilted her head, blinking. "You must be joking."

"I'm not. If Orell's coming, he has more than enough power to take care of the

situation. You don't need to stay there and put yourself at risk.” His handsome features marred with concern.

“You don't have to be worried about me, I'll be...”

“No.” Larn slammed his hand down on something, speaking with more force than she'd heard him in a long time. “You won't be fine. Listen to me. You have to get out of there.”

“I can't.”

“Why not?”

Xalidora let out her breath. “Because Veren will notice I'm gone. He knows he was hosted, but he doesn't know about me—yet. I don't want to give him any reason to suspect.”

“What's he going to do if he does? Hunt you down?”

She closed her eyes briefly, remembering what had happened earlier in his chambers. “I don't know. He might.”

Larn stared at her for a moment. “You have to get out. I know it's dangerous. But if you stay there...”

“If I stay here, I can at least keep some control of the situation and prevent it from getting too out of hand. This is about more than just me. You know that.” The anger that'd been building up spilled over, and she couldn't hold it back any longer. “If I leave, we could lose our foothold. The Dragon kingdom is large, and if we control it, we can move on to the rest of the shifter tribes. If we lose the Dragons now...”

“We're not going to. Not with Orell coming.” He set his jaw stubbornly. *Maybe I was wrong. Maybe he's with the Mule tribe.*

Xalidora snarled. “Orell is only so strong, and Ylé was killed by a healer priestess. I don't know how much power that woman has. But Orell could need me. If I'm not here ... I won't be a traitor, Larn. Our mission matters more than my life.”

“Damn the mission!” Larn's nostrils flared. “I care about you, Xalidora! You're my bloodsib. I want you safe. I don't want you hurt.”

“You can't keep me safe. No matter how much you want to, you can't protect me. The world is too big and too dangerous.” She calmed down a little. “It's not possible.”

He looked suddenly tired. “I can't stop you, can I?”

“No.” Xalidora shook her head. “You can't.”

Larn sighed. “I can't come there. I wish I could. I want to be there, at your side, to serve and protect. But ... it's not possible. I'm doing my duty here, with the Serpents, and I've accomplished too much to leave now.”

She smiled sadly. “As have I. We're in the same situation, my friend.”

“No. We aren't. I'm not in danger of being killed. I can't come to you. I can't do anything more than beg you to reconsider.”

“I have my duty. We both do.” Xalidora rubbed her eyes, feeling the exertion from her magic hitting her. She would need to sleep, as soon as she'd disposed of the corpse. *I can't leave that around. Someone might come in and see.*

“Yes. Yes, we do.” He sighed. “Just—take care of yourself. Don't do anything stupid.”

“What, you mean don't do anything you wouldn't do?” She cracked a smile.

“No, I said don't do anything stupid. I've been known to do some damn stupid things in the past.”

Xalidora laughed. "I remember. Like the time that..."

Larn held up a hand. "Do me a favor and don't remind me. I'd really rather not know which one you're thinking of."

She grinned. "If that's what you really want."

"It is, snapdragon."

A giggle escaped her at the old nickname.

Larn looked over his shoulder suddenly. "Someone's calling me. I can't talk any longer. I have to go."

"All right. I..." Xalidora cut off as Larn's face swirled in the scrying bowl and disappeared suddenly. She growled under her breath. *Looks like I'm on my own here, till Orell comes. At least he'll be able to take care of the situation.*

For some reason, that didn't particularly reassure her.

Chapter Twelve

Veren swore as he paced the palace hall, his boots clacking against the marble floor, echoing off the walls. He rubbed his face, the stubble on his chin and cheeks scratching. It'd been awhile since he'd last shaved. Hell, he couldn't remember when; must've been before he'd been released. *Maybe I'll let it grow out. A beard might be flattering.*

He yanked himself out of his thoughts with a sigh. *I don't have time for this. I have to decide what I'm going to do.* What he wanted most was to go after Shaiandral, find her, take her back to his palace—and then fuck her till she couldn't move.

Trouble was, he'd have to go to the Sharteka village, risking an all-out war between their peoples. The Dragons were strong, but he still did not know how fully the demon possession had impacted them. *Would they even fight for me? Or has that demon treated them so badly that they would turn on me?*

Lust wasn't reason to start a war. His people might not care whom he took to his bed, but they wouldn't appreciate him starting a war over it.

Logic told him he should forget about her. Just get on with his life, like it'd never happened. *I have a kingdom to restore.*

Except he couldn't concentrate on it. Every time he tried, Shaiandral returned to his thoughts, intoxicating his senses with her memory. He shivered, hardening as her scent came back to him as if she were really there. Desire to wrap his arms around her soft small body, hold her close, and seek refuge in her encompassing warmth took him over.

The feeling faded, and Veren found his arms wrapped around his chest, a single tear rolling down his cheek. He drew in a strangled breath, trying to calm himself.

“You can't keep this up.” Veren said the words aloud. He was alone, his councilors had long since gone and the servants wouldn't dare disturb him now. He was glad for that. If someone saw him in this state ... he thought he'd die from shame. “Gods.”

He sat down in his huge onyx throne, his large body sinking into the black silk-covered padding. Emotion threatened to take him over, and he buried his head in his hands, trying to fight them back.

You'll go mad without her. The thought teased at Veren. *She's ensorcelled you. You need her. She's perfect. She's everything you ever wanted, and—*

“She doesn't want me.” Veren choked the words out. Saying them felt like self-evisceration with a dull blade. “She made that clear as the Valli Spring.”

So convince her. You're the Dragonlord. You won your place by charisma and strength. She's a Sharteka woman. She isn't as strong as you. Take her.

“Take her?” He looked up, thinking. That was sounding tempting...

Of course it does. Go to her village, track her down, take her back. Win her. Women like shows of strength. Besides, what are you going to do, stay here and pine away for the woman? Be a Dragon. Be the Dragonlord you are.

Veren set his jaw stubbornly and stood, shaking his long golden hair out of the way. He clenched his hands into fists in determination. “I'll go. I'll go and take her.”

After all, I'll go mad without her.

Veren left the palace in a hurry, not bothering to take any supplies or provisions. He didn't need them. It'd be easy enough to hunt on the way to the Sharteka village; besides,

it wasn't more than a few hours flight away.

Hell, provisions and supplies were the last thing on his mind, anyway. His focus was all on winning Shaiandral's body and heart.

With a deep breath, he concentrated on the dragon in his heart and soul as he left the palace. His body quick-shifted to dragon. Veren made a downward stroke with his wings experimentally, and then launched into the air. Wind pounded against his scaled body as he flew in the direction of Sharteka territory, bringing different scents. He ignored them all, focusing on his task, searching for the one. *I have to find her.*

He sniffed the air. A distinct musky scent lay towards the north. Veren brought his wings down hard and flew in that direction.

I have to find her.

* * * *

Shaiandral let out her breath as she sank into the hot bath. Aches spread throughout her body, and she rubbed her legs, feeling the herbal bath mixture seep into her skin and muscles, soothing them. *I'd thought Alza was tough. Zeltzin makes her look easy.*

The steaming water stung the sacrifice wounds on her arms, and Shaiandral let out a low hiss. *Thank the gods, at least the gashes on my back have started to heal.* Those were deeper, harder to ignore—her Healer's marks, Zeltzin said, as she'd rubbed black ink into the open wounds so they would never fade. She'd carry them the rest of her life.

She leaned back, running her hands through her hair, wetting it, thanking the gods for Zeltzin's hot spring.

A shadow covered the pool, blocking out the sunlight. Too large. Shaiandral looked up and gaped at the huge dragon soaring above. It glanced down, grinning strangely. Shaiandral's eyes widened as she stood, water streaming down her naked body. "Tezca's blood," she breathed, a sick feeling in her gut growing by the second. *It can't be.*

The dragon swooped down, coming straight at her. Snarling, Shaiandral shifted her fingertips to claws and her teeth to fangs. *I won't let him intimidate me again. He won't take me—he has no rights here on Zeltzin's grounds.*

But she knew deep down that if he really wanted her ... he would take her, regardless.

Veren shifted to winged human as he neared the ground. He landed on the outside of the pool and let out a breath. "Shaiandral..."

She growled, cutting him off. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come for you." He stepped into the water, holding out a hand. "Shai..."

"Don't call me that." Shaiandral put her hands on her hips, claws pressing into her skin. "What do you mean, you've come for me?"

He opened his mouth to speak, but she barreled on past. "Do you truly believe you'll convince me to come back to your hellhole? I'm Sharteka. You're Dragon. This can never be."

"That doesn't matter." Veren moved closer, the water rippling with each step.

"Of course it matters." She backed away involuntarily, then steeled herself. *Stay strong. If you show any weakness now, he'll never stop.* But that didn't help her physical reaction to the sight of his tanned, well-muscled body clad in only a tight loincloth. She grew wet with lust.

His glimmering blue eyes didn't leave hers. "I meant what I said. It doesn't matter,

Shai. I want you—I *love* you,” Veren said softly.

She snorted, folding her arms over her breasts. “You can't love me.”

“Why not?” Veren lifted his chin, his blonde hair tumbling off his shoulders. “Do you doubt my sincerity and honor?”

“Veren ... you don't know who I am. All I am to you is a healer who saved your life—and you slept with. Lust isn't love. Don't disrespect the emotion by calling it something it's not.”

“But I want to know you.” He took a passionate step forward. This time, she didn't back up. “I want to know you, Shaiandral of the Sharteka, in every possible way.”

She shivered, chills running up her spine despite the heat from the bath. “I don't.”

“You speak the words, but you know they're not true. You want me, just as I want you.” Veren's mouth twisted into a strange, almost grim, smile.

Shaiandral wanted to protest, but she couldn't. On some level, she knew he was right—and she wouldn't lie. *I have more honor than that.* “Our peoples would never allow it.”

He arched an eyebrow. “I'm the Dragonlord. My people may not like it, but they *will* accept it. As for yours, I'm sure they would, too.”

“I wouldn't be too sure of that.” Shaiandral cursed herself. *Don't listen to him. You can't trust yourself, not now.* “I just want you to leave. Go away. While you still have a chance.”

About then, she wished she'd been in jaguar form and could fluff up her fur and hiss at him. Even if it probably wouldn't do much to intimidate him, it would make her feel better.

He laughed.

She bared her teeth in a grimace, backing up against the warm ragged stone edge of the pool, water streaming down her back from the falls above. “Why are you laughing at me?”

Veren didn't answer as he moved close enough he could touch. She snarled and clawed at him. He ducked, lost his footing, and fell into the water. She laughed as he came up, sputtering.

“What, dragons don't like the water?”

“We like water just fine. Especially when beautiful young jaguars are with us.” He kicked her legs out from under her.

Shaiandral yelped as she tumbled forward into the water with a splash. Strong hands squeezed her shoulders. She blinked water out of her eyes and found herself staring into Veren's. They captivated her, and she held her breath for a moment.

He's your enemy. Stop this. “Let go of me.” She grimaced, baring razor sharp fangs.

He grinned up at her, stroking the side of her face. “I don't think I want to.”

“I'd leave if I were you.” Shaiandral realized suddenly that her hands were on his strong muscled chest, balancing herself. She dug them in, feeling a few layers of skin give way. “Before Zeltzin comes out here and finds you.”

“You're worried for my safety? I thought you said you didn't care? I'm touched.” Veren's eyes sparkled with mischief.

“Very well, then. Stay. Let her kill you. I don't care. At least then I'd be rid of you.” She was painfully aware of Veren's hard cock pressing against her abdomen. Raw animal need screamed through her, wanting him more than anything else.

Veren's strong hand grasped the back of her neck and pulled her down to him effortlessly. Warm lips pressed against hers, and silky tongue licked at the corners of her mouth, sending pangs of longing lancing through her whole body. He nibbled at her lips when she didn't open for him.

Almost against her will, Shaiandral opened her mouth, letting him enter her. He flicked his tongue against hers. Shudders passed through her, and her claws flexed, tightening into his chest.

Veren withdrew from the kiss and breathed into her ear, sending goosebumps rising all over. "You want it rough, do you, my little jaguar?"

She growled and closed her hands into fists, sinking claws deep into chunks of his flesh. "You presume too much."

He met her gaze and ran a skilled finger from her cheek down her neck to tweak her nipple. "Do I?" Intense sensation lanced through her body, and her hips thrust against him involuntarily.

"Let me go," she said through whimpers, but her body moved in response to him.

"I don't think you want me to." Veren bit into her neck, holding her as he pressed her against him with one strong arm. Hot tongue flicked against her sensitive neck flesh, and she trembled. He rolled her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, and Shaiandral felt like she'd explode. Pleasure ran through her, electrifying her entire body.

"Please—just let me—go..." Shaiandral struggled feebly against him. Her body wanted him, but her mind told her that she was wrong for wanting this, that she should be disgusted. *I should call for Zeltzin. She isn't that far; surely she would hear if I screamed.* But she couldn't make herself. "Let me—go..."

"I could. But you'd fall, probably underwater." Veren licked the tip of her nose, quickly. "I don't think you'd like that."

She couldn't argue. "You—do—have a—point."

"Yes, I do." He grinned and crushed her breast in his hand, making her gasp. "And I want it inside you."

"If I don't?"

"I think you do." Veren kissed her again, this time hard and violent, shoving his tongue into her mouth, deep, touching the back of her mouth, caressing its roof, sending waves of delight through her. He lifted her out of the water, holding her in his strong arms, and pressed her against the stone wall. Water rushed down her hair and over her shoulders, streaming down her body and his.

Shaiandral moved her hands from his chest and put them around his neck, pulling him close into the kiss. She battled his tongue with her own, moaning as her body felt like it'd implode from pure ecstasy.

Veren withdrew and met her eyes, his blue ones gazing at her, intense with pure lust. "You want it, don't you?"

She jerked her head into a clumsy nod. She didn't have the coordination for anything more.

He chuckled, reaching down to tear away his loincloth. He bit down on her throat again as he lowered her down a couple inches, holding her still with his teeth, sucking hard. Shaiandral let out a whimper. "Veren..."

Veren slammed his cock deep inside of her. Her muscles constricted around him tight, and pangs of joy flowed through her with every thrust. He held her against the wall

as he fucked her, pounding into her over and over, making her writhe. Shaiandral raked her claws down his back as she came, screaming out with pure pleasure.

He released her throat as he reached climax, arching his back, thrusting into her one last time, mouth gaping open in a soundless cry. Withdrawing, he fell against her, breathing hard.

They rested together for a few minutes, just breathing, basking in the afterfire of their lust. Then Veren spoke. "You'll come back with me, won't you?"

That shocked her. "What?"

"I—I want you, Shaiandral."

"You had me." She wiggled around slightly. He wasn't paying attention and was giving her room to move. "You've had me many times. Isn't that enough?"

"No. It's not." Veren fingered her cheek, looking at her with a strange emotion that she didn't quite trust. "I want you for more than just a quick coupling. I want you for life."

His words sent stark terror through her. Shaiandral reacted on pure instinct. She shoved Veren away from her with all of her strength.

He splashed backwards into the pool, away from her into the deep end.

Shaiandral jumped out of the water and sprinted towards the jungle.

Chapter Thirteen

Veren sputtered as his feet scrabbled against the pool bottom, trying to get purchase. Water splashed around him as he stood, taking in a deep gulp of air. His throat burned like hellfire. Narrowing his eyes, he noticed a shadow disappear into the jungle.

“Oh, no,” he whispered to himself intensely. “You're not getting away from me that easily. Not when you're so close.”

He waded toward the pool's edge, glad that he had shifted away his wings, because now they'd be wet, useless, and slow his transformation. One look at the densely forested jungle told him that he wouldn't be able to follow her winged—he'd have to go on foot. Veren swore under his breath and sprinted into the jungle after her, shifting his senses just enough to heighten them. He might have to stay in his human form, but he'd be damned if he'd hunt her blind like a petty human.

Hunt her? She's not my prey, I'm not going to kill her. I don't want her dead. Veren's thoughts raced as he followed her scent and the sound of crashing brush ahead of him. *She must be frantic; she's not thinking enough to move silently.* The Sharteka were jungle-born creatures; if she'd concentrated enough, she could easily lose him.

Unless that's not what she wants.

Jungle brush cut into Veren's bare thighs and calves, stinging as his legs pumped against the ground. He ignored the pain, focusing on Shaiandral, his raw need for her, not just the sex, *her*, pounded through him. More than anything else, he wanted his shifter woman, and he would do anything to get her.

She might've had a head start, but Veren was larger, stronger, and faster—and he was closing in. Downside, she knew the terrain, and he didn't. *I just hope she's not leading me into a trap... but even if she is, it's worth the risk. I can't lose her now.*

The jungle began to thin out, turning to mossy underbrush punctuated by numerous trees, but not the mess he'd been running through. A small dark form with flowing black hair ran into the distance. Shaiandral. Strength welled within and he took a sudden breath, surging forward, shifting now that he had room. Wings sprouted from his back, and he flapped them down, lifting himself into the air.

Shaiandral stopped and turned back towards him, her face slack with shock. Then she grimaced and snarled before running again.

Veren swooped down and snatched her into his arms. Shaiandral's body shifted, molding under his hands. He clutched her hard. “I'm not letting go.”

“That's what you think,” she growled under her breath in a guttural tone. Fur grew on her skin rapidly as she formed away from human towards jaguar.

“I said, I'm not letting go.” Veren tightened his hands on her and shot upwards into the sky, beating down with his strong, powerful dragon wings. He burst through the canopy and flew higher.

“If you fall, you'll die. I don't think that's what you want.”

Shaiandral let out a furious roar. He didn't understand jaguar tongue, but he didn't need to in order to get the meaning. *I'll kill you as soon as I can.*

Veren chuckled under his breath as he continued to shift to dragon. “You can try.”

* * * *

I'm going to kill him. No. I'm going to torture him first, then I'll kill him. Shaiandral yowled, flexing her claws as they came within view of the Dragonlord's palace.

Veren's strong hands clutched her shoulders as he flew down towards the obsidian turrets. He lifted her into his arms as he landed, holding her tight so she couldn't escape. She snarled and began shifting back towards human. As soon as she was able to speak, she did. "Let me go! *Now!* Or I'll rip your head off!"

A chuckle reached her ears and a hand squeezed her breast. "I think you'd miss it if you did that."

"Maybe I would. Maybe I wouldn't. Let's find out, shall we?" She tried to yank away from him, but he held fast.

"Let's not." Veren tugged her closer and breathed hot air into her ear, his serpentine tongue flicking out to tickle her earlobe.

Shaiandral gasped as her lust rose, making her tighten between her legs. *I have to escape from here, before ... before he bespells me more than he already has and I cannot escape.*

"How many times must I tell you that I love you? I want to know you, the deepest parts of you ... in every way." Veren whispered the words as he held her, his hand brushing over her nipple. He squeezed her breast, sending a wild surge of passion through her.

Gods, I want him again. Once off Sharteka land, the tiny shreds of self-control she'd managed to gain over her lust had completely disintegrated. *I have to stay in control, else...*

Veren's stiff cock pressed against her back, and all she wanted was it inside her. She gasped as his other hand reached down between her legs. He cupped her mound, tapping her clit with his fingertip.

Shaiandral arched against him and moaned. Her breath came out in pants as she spoke. "Veren ... let me go."

"I'm not letting you go. You aren't going back."

The hair on the back of her neck rose, and she hissed. "Who are you to stop me?"

He sighed. "I love you, and I'm not going to lose you again"

"You don't even know me. I told you that." Shaiandral tensed. "What makes you think you can keep me? If I want to escape—I will. I'll find a way."

Veren hugged her close and nuzzled her shoulder. "Please don't go."

For some reason, his soft words touched her, and she melted against him.

Shaiandral's head rocked back against his strong muscled chest. "Maybe I'll stay for a bit."

He didn't say anything, but released her and spun her around to face him. "You mean that?"

"Yes. I do." She met his eyes steadily. *For how long, though, that remains to be seen.*

Veren's face broke out into a huge grin. He kissed her, wrapping strong arms around her, caressing her, fingertips brushing across her back and down to squeeze her ass. Warm velvet tongue licked against her lips, and she let her mouth fall open. He entered, flicking it against her own. Shivers of delight passed through her whole body, meeting up between her legs. Her hips thrust against his bare cock.

He lifted her off the ground and she wrapped her legs around him, shoving herself onto him. Joy shuddered through her as he pressed her against an onyx wall, slamming against her. She threw back her head and screamed as she came, her hips thrusting against him uncontrollably as she scratched claws up his back.

Veren groaned and collapsed against her, his heavy weight holding her up against the wall. She twined her hands in his hair, sighing happily.

He spoke first. "It's cold. Let's go into the palace."

"No." Shaiandral shook her head and laid it against his shoulder. "I'd rather stay here awhile, just with you."

Veren didn't answer, just let her, and the two of them lay there, the chill wind blowing against their bare skin.

Chapter Fourteen

The scent of soft smoke wafted up to Shaiandral's nose. She murmured and rolled over, scrunching her sleek velvet pillow as she drifted toward consciousness.

Her sleep-crusted eyes blinked open, and she stared up at the bottom of a black satin canopy. Chills shivered over her skin and her stomach roiled as Shaiandral remembered what'd happened the night before. Veren's warm, smooth hands sliding over her skin, exciting her with every touch ... the memory alone made her go wet between her legs. At the same time, her face burned red with shame.

I've taken Dragon into me. Oh, Tezca, forgive me. Shaiandral sat up in bed, throwing aside ebony satin sheets and soft coverlet. Cold air prickled her naked breasts, making her nipples harden with the shock.

The large bed was empty. She breathed a sigh of relief. *Thank gods he left. I don't want to wake up next to him.* Shaiandral bit her lip at the memory of falling asleep in his huge encompassing arms.

She slid her legs over the side of the bed, her eyes sliding toward the candle, burnt down near to the base. *Tezca's blood. How am I going to get out of here?*

A loud creak pierced through the room, echoing off stone onyx walls. Her head jerked toward the huge ebony door. Veren strode in, tall and proud, crimson velvet robe floating around him, held closed by a woven cord. Blonde curls fell against pale cheeks, framing his intense deep blue eyes.

"You're awake." Veren stopped only a couple feet from the bed, watching her.

"No, I'm sound asleep. In the middle of a nightmare." Shaiandral pushed herself off the bed and came to her feet.

A wicked grin spread across Veren's face. "Why don't we just forget the nightmare?"

"I've got a better idea. How about I just forget you?" Shaiandral bared her teeth at him.

He laughed. "I don't think you could forget me."

"Stop the flirtation. I'm sick of it." She put her hands on her hips. "Now."

The smile faded from his face, and concern filled his eyes. "Shai, what's wrong?"

"I told you, don't call me that! I'm not 'Shai' to you." Her eyes narrowed, watching him closely. He didn't move. "Let me go. Do you understand me?"

"You agreed to stay here." Veren's eyes met hers, unwavering.

"For a little while. I'm leaving."

"Give me a week." His eyes burned, and he took a step forward.

She tossed her hair. "Why should I give you anything?"

Veren reached out to touch her, but she pulled away. "We could end the hate between our peoples. You cast a demon out of me. How many more others are there, and what have they been doing while they possessed me?"

Shaiandral blanched, and a gasp escaped her. "I—I didn't think of that."

"You're a healer. A master healer. You have the power."

"I might have the power, but I'm not going to sleep with every single Dragon in your realm in order to save your race. No."

"You don't have to." Veren grinned and closed a hand around her wrist. "Strike at

them through me.”

“Maybe I don't want to.” She yanked her hand away.

“You do.” Veren tweaked her nipple, causing a shock to run from her tit to between her legs.

Shaiandral snarled. “You presume too much.”

“And you presume too little.” He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her, his tongue diving for her mouth, pushing its way between her lips. Large hands rubbed her back and trailed down to squeeze her ass.

She wanted him. Gods, she wanted him. But ... *He's a godsbedamned Dragon!*

Another thought tickled at the corner of her mind, the memory of what he'd just said. *He was possessed. It could have been the demons causing all the problems between our peoples. Maybe ... maybe it doesn't have to be this way ... maybe we don't have to be enemies...*

One hand caressed up her bare skin to her breast. He crushed it in his hand and thumbed the nipple. A mew escaped Shaiandral as her hips thrust against him involuntarily.

He broke away from the kiss and grinned at her, his hair shadowing his face, eyes filled with wickedness. “Oh, and I thought you were just saying you didn't want me?”

“Sure I want you.” Shaiandral hissed. “How about filleted on a stick?”

“Hmm.” Veren looked thoughtful for a moment. “I'll pass on the filleting, but sticks could be fun...”

Her eyes narrowed and her nose scrunched up as she stared at him. Veren met her gaze and didn't look away. “Sticks could be fun, huh? Maybe I'll beat you with one, how'd you like that?”

“Why don't we play with some other things before we move on to sticks?” Veren grabbed her hand and pressed it to the velvet robe covering his hard cock.

“What, you want me to beat you with *that*? It'd be a mite difficult, don't you think?”

He laughed and pressed her to him. “That wasn't what I was thinking.”

“Then what *were* you thinking? I'm not a telepath. Wait a minute. Never mind. I don't want to know.” Shaiandral tried to pull away, but he held her. She hissed, and started to say “Let me go, dammit,” but something stopped her. Something deep and alien inside that confused the hell out of her ... *I don't want to go. I want him...*

What the hell is wrong with you? He's a Dragon, and he's kidnapped you. And you want him? Who knows what he'd do to you next?

Actually, she had a very good idea of what he wanted to do to her next...

Veren reached down to her groin and pressed his large hand against her, tapping her clit as he rubbed slowly. “I want you, Shaiandral. I want you now.”

She moaned, her hips moving against him, her self-control completely gone. Desire burned within her. For now, that was all that mattered. Nothing else—not her people, not his, just the two of them. There, alone, together.

He leaned into her body, his muscled chest against her soft breasts. One of his nipples brushed hers, sending a wave of pleasure through her. A gasp escaped her. Veren brought his other hand up the side of her hip, rough masculine fingertips making her shiver with delight. He didn't stop playing with her cunt. A single finger dipped within her well, tasting her wetness, as his other hand made its way up her side to caress the edge of her breast.

Shaiandral whimpered as he groped her breast hard, nails digging in. A low growl rumbled in his throat as he licked her neck, moist tongue flicking against throbbing vein. *He could kill me.* The frantic thought burst into her mind, sending chills running up her spine. *He's Dragon—he could take me like this—shift just enough for fangs—slash my throat and kill me—*

But as he rubbed her clit with the heel of his palm, she knew he would never do that. *It's not my blood he wants. Not like that, anyway.*

Human teeth, not draconic fangs, sank into the soft skin of her neck. Shivers danced through her body, her mind spiraling with delight. Him. She wanted *him*. Shaiandral arched her back forward, her head pressing into the polished ebony wall. She brought her hand, which had been clutching the chill surface, up to tighten around his shoulder, nails digging into flesh.

Veren's growl vibrated in her skin. He tightened his jaws as he slid his fingers in deeper, making slow circles deep inside her that felt like ecstasy building upon itself, over and over till she felt like she couldn't take it anymore. Pain mixed with pleasure as teeth bit down hard enough to draw blood. She cried out and raked her fingernails down his chest, scraping through skin.

He tore away from her, snarling, eyes wild with pain and lust. “You want to play rough, do you, vixen?”

Before Shaiandral knew what was happening, he'd grabbed her by the waist, lifted her into his arms, and tossed her into the air. She hit the bed, rolling on satin sheets. A strong hand gripped her ankle and pulled her back towards the edge of the bed. Something warm and hard rested against her wet folds, sliding back and forth over her clit into her mound of hair. She mewed, clutching at the sheets, his cock against her clit driving her wild.

“Please...” Her breath came in pants as she arched against him. “I want you...”

“*Now* you want me.” Veren slid himself up and down, from her clit to her entrance. She wriggled downwards, trying to force herself onto him. She *wanted* him, dammit. Lust tore through her body, throbbing in her core, till she couldn't think of anything else. Just him.

He positioned himself but didn't enter. And didn't let her, either. He put a hand on her mound, palm pressing against curled hair. “Shaiandral. Look at me.”

She raised her head, looking at him, long raven hair billowing down his shoulders, framing his face. His brow drew, eyes belying concern. “What?”

“You say you want me, but you only want me like this.” He slid his cock into her. Paroxysms of joy exploded, tightening and contracting around him as he thrust deep within, till she felt his hair lightly touching her clit. Veren leaned forward and put one hand around her waist at the small of her back. He slid her forward and lifted her up, his other hand at her shoulder blades. She wrapped her legs around his hips, trying to pull him even closer, whimpering under her breath.

“But the question is, my dear jaguar woman,” Veren said, his lips near hers, breath hot on her skin, “Do you want *me*?”

“I—I...”

“*Me*. Not just the sex, but me, everything I am, man and dragon and ruler. I know I want *you*, Shaiandral.” Veren kissed her, his lips warm against hers. But unlike other kisses, which had been fierce, ravaging, a royal dragon taking what he considered his ...

this was soft, gentle, his tongue lapping at her lips, passion and tenderness together. “I want you. To be yours and you mine. Dragon and cat, united together, strong, facing down the odds.” Dark eyes burned with intensity as he spoke, fervor underlying each word. “We can make it work. I know we can. But I need your answer. Do you want me?”

“I...” Shaiandral pulled back, frantic. She didn't know the answer herself. *What is there to say?* “I...”

Disappointment shone in his eyes and facial expressions—but it was gone so fast she wondered if it'd even been there in the first place. “So that's the way of it.” Veren pursed his lips and withdrew from her body, causing her to shudder as she clenched in reaction. “Are you that adverse to me? Because of what I am? My birth? I can't change the blood that runs in my veins.” He lifted his chin proudly, but she could see the faint quiver of his lips. “You brought me back from the dead. You saved my life, my soul, and yet you have no love for me?”

“I'm a healer.” She scrambled backwards, trying to sit up. “I have to keep an emotional detachment from my patients...”

“That's all I am to you. A patient. And an enemy.” He said the words like they were fact, cold and impassionate. Yet she could *see* the anger rumbling beneath that chill exterior. “You would have your fill of my body, but you want nothing to do with *me*.” Veren clutched his fist to his chest, emphasizing that final word. “Perhaps I made a mistake in coming back for you. Perhaps I should have left you there with that old hag of a priestess, to learn tantric magics from her withered body.”

“Perhaps you should have,” Shaiandral snapped back, coming to her feet, ignoring her nudity. Or trying to, at least. She stood toe-to-toe with him, glaring into those dark eyes that revealed only a hint of his inner abyss. “Did you think I *wanted* you to come from me? I *fought* you. I did everything in my power to stop you. You *took me by force* and you expect me to want to stay here with you? You really are a piece of work. Think that any girl would fall to her knees, just to have that body of yours, just to be your *mate*. Well, I've got news.” She balled her hands into fists, her voice a quiet scream of indignant rage. “You may be the Dragonlord, and you may have the women of your lands fawning over you, but I am Sharteka, and I will *not* be brought down like that. It'll take more than lust, sex, and promises to win *my* heart.”

Veren met her gaze. “Odd, then, that you haven't shown the slightest interest in anything *but* sex—except to rail at me for being Dragon. I don't think you know what you want. You don't know what it'll take to win your heart. How am I supposed to *try* when even *you* don't know what you want?”

She didn't answer right away. Tears threatened to spill, but she fought them back. It would do her no good to show weakness in front of him, in front of the Dragon. She wouldn't do it. Couldn't. And yet ... *He's right. But ... oh, Tezca. I was to be a priestess, a sworn virgin. I dedicated my whole life to that future, only to have it ripped away in an instant. I never thought about any male winning my heart ... how am I to know what I want?*

But she couldn't say that. She drew in a ragged breath and barreled ahead. “I know what I want,” she lied. “And it's not you.”

“Very well then.” Veren pulled his robe closed, giving her one last blistering look, and turned away. “Get your things together. I'll provide an escort back to your mentor's retreat.”

“That won't be necessary. I'll find my own way.”

He snorted, not bothering to turn back to look at her as he opened the door. “Have it your way.” The door closed, the sound reverberating through the room with a finality that shook her to the core.

Her last ounce of strength gone, Shaiandral fell to her knees, quivering. The tears which she'd tried so hard to force back came forth in a burst of muffled sobs. *No ... I do want him ... but it can never be. It cannot happen.* Her people would never understand ... even with the explanation of the demonic possession, it would not excuse the crimes against her people. She remembered her cousin's head mounted in the hall. Gorge rose, making her retch.

I want what I can't have. I must go back ... home. Shaiandral fought to control her tears, rubbing them away. She struggled to her feet, scanning the room for her clothing. *Wherever home is.*

Chapter Fifteen

Once outside the room, Veren took a deep breath, trying to calm his frantically beating heart. He could hear movement in the room behind him. Probably Shaiandral dressing and preparing to leave. *You knew this would happen*, he berated himself. *She's Sharteka. Above and beyond that, she intends to be a healer-priestess. However she chooses to go about it now. Did you honestly expect her to turn away from her life for you?*

But it wouldn't have to be that way. She could learn here, part of his mind argued. *She could even continue her studies with her mentor, if that's what she wished. Transportation arrangements would need to be made, of course, but it wouldn't be impossible.*

Veren ground his teeth, leaning his head back against the door with a slight bang. *Maybe it wasn't before, but it is now.*

Shaking his head, he stepped away from the door and began walking down the hallway. He didn't know where he was going, and it didn't much matter. But it wouldn't do to have Shaiandral step out of the door with her belongings and find him there like that. He wouldn't show that kind of weakness—not in front of anyone, but especially not her.

Gods. I've lost her. That thought only just sunk into him. It sent cold chills up and down his spine. Like it wasn't real. It couldn't be—certainly it wasn't all *over* now. Not this soon. She couldn't be *leaving*. He would have another chance—wouldn't he?

No. You won't, he thought grimly as he paced the hallway, giving no thought to the humans who looked at him oddly as he strode past. *It's over. It's over before it even truly began. Sex ... it may be wonderful and glorious, but it doesn't make a relationship.* He thought back to all the Dragon women he had slept with over the years. How many? He didn't know. He'd never bothered keeping track. Fidelity and chastity might matter to ascetic human sects, but Dragons were not and would never be human, even if they took their shape.

No other woman made him feel like Shaiandral did. Hells, none infuriated him as much as she, but none ever made him feel so *alive*. He'd never felt the need to pursue any woman so arduously. But none other, save Dragonesses in season and that was part of the game, had ever refused his advances. He'd never been rejected—*repeatedly!*—until now.

Is that why I'm besotted with her? Is that why I can hardly sleep for thinking of her? Is that the only reason she matters? Because she turned away from me?

Conflicting thoughts swirled in his mind as he prowled his ebon palace, his domain. Now, without the demon's influences, he could see changes ... slight changes in the atmospheric matrices. Part of him thought he should stop thinking about *her*—after all, it wouldn't change anything—and return to his duties as Dragonlord. And yet ... *There is so little time. I can't lose her. I can't.*

But he already had. Soon, she would be leaving, and there was nothing he could do to stop her. *Nothing*. The thought repeated in his mind, driving him into a downward maelstrom of inner torment. His heart felt like a fragile statuette on a wobbling pedestal—even the slightest nudge would send it shattering to the floor below. It had only

been what, a matter of days since he first met her? And now he could not imagine life without her? Without her laugh, her smile, her witty and talented tongue? Veren smiled at the thought, but it was an expression marked with deep sadness.

I never had the chance to get to know her ... to know who she is, deep down, at her core. And yet ... their souls had touched, in that brilliant moment when she'd sacrificed her virginity, her sanctity by some definitions, to restore him unto the world. He *knew* her, in a way he had known no other woman alive. Even if he did not know the specifics of her life and origins, he'd touched the beauty, the strength and jubilation, the passion and pain, truth and honor and justice and all that was good but also the darkness, the wild bestial lust of her feline self. The second skin, the darker side of her soul.

He'd hunted with her. Brought down their prey, tasted its blood together, shared the joy and rapture of the kill, made love soaked in the remnants of its life force. Partners. Not master and servant, like the humans with their bonds, but equals.

That was the difference. She, in all her dark glory, was equal to him, like no other ever had been.

And he was about to lose it all.

Well? Are you going to stand by and do nothing? a voice deep inside of him said. Not any form of demon, but that of his own soul. *She's your partner. Will you stand by like a spineless craven and do nothing? Pace the halls of your palace like a lost wanderer? Or take a stand like the Dragon you are and try to win back your mate?*

Veren started to protest. *I tried that and it got me nowhere. I tried to take her by force—*

Realization dawned. *Gods above and below.* Trying to force his will on a strong woman, a healer and tantric magician in her own right, perhaps even necromancer, a Sharteka ... *How could I have been so stupid? A Dragon woman would have understood, but she—she would not. She could not.*

"I have to find her." Veren spoke the words aloud, rising from the abyss of his thoughts back to the present. He stood right outside his presentation chamber. One of his human servants was walking in his direction. He started to turn away, to go back to his personal chambers, to find Shaiandral before it was too late...

"Your Lordship." The servant's voice, a high-pitched squeak, caught his attention. He turned back and gave the boy—couldn't have been more than fourteen cycles old—an annoyed glance. "Whatever it is, I haven't the time to deal with it. Be about your business."

Veren started to walk away again when the boy spoke up again. "I—I'm sorry, your Lordship, but there's—there's a man here to see you."

That was odd. He wasn't expecting any visitors. With the state of ruin his land had fallen under during the demon's rule, there hadn't been any of the regular court attendees in ... *Gods. I don't know long.* Raising his eyebrows, he turned back to the boy. "A man, you say? Has he a name?"

"He—he says..."

"Stop stuttering, lad, if I were going to bite your head off, I'd have done so already," Veren snapped.

The boy, tall and lanky, blushed and directed his gaze downward, not meeting Veren's eyes. Appropriate behavior for a menial servant. "He introduced himself as the Archmage Duallan, Your Lordship. He says he's come from a great many leagues away

to meet with you about important affairs.”

“It's always important affairs with these mages.” He grumbled to himself. “Make sure he's kept comfortable. I'll meet with him later.” Veren moved to turn away.

“Pardon my insolence, Your Lordship, but His Grace made it very clear to me it's very urgent. He needs to speak with you at once.”

Veren stamped down his immediate urge to wallop the boy into the wall. It wasn't the child's fault this Archmage had put the fear of the gods into him. *Godsbedamned mages. Always putting their noses into business at the most inopportune time.* He hesitated a moment, thinking. Even if Shaiandral left immediately, in his dragon form, he would be able to catch up with her easily. And he knew the location of her priestess's mountain retreat. *It may be better to let her leave of her own accord and meet her there. She is my mate, not my slave. If it was my abduction that angered her so much, then perhaps this will disarm some of her rage.*

“Your Lordship?” The boy still did not look at him.

He snarled, as close to draconic as he could get in human form, the sound echoing off the walls. The boy about leapt out of his skin. “Yes. I will go. Where is he?”

“In there.” He pointed at the door to the presentation chamber.

Veren nodded curtly. “Thank you. You are dismissed.”

The boy took off running in the other direction.

Calm yourself. It will not do to meet one of the mages with your wings flattened. You must behave as though nothing were wrong. You are the Dragonlord, after all. Veren took a deep breath, steeling himself, and entered the presentation chamber.

It was large enough to house several dragons in their natural form. The ceiling arched above in a bowl shape, phase glass letting sunlight into the massive chamber. Onyx, jet, dark tiger's eye, garnet, and various other stones set into the cross panels above shimmered, sending multicolored rays dancing off ebon walls. Directly ahead lay a majestic throne of dark ebony, intricate patterns carved into the wood, sitting upon a raised dais of pure onyx large enough to support his dragon form. The Seat of Power.

A single man stood in the center of the chamber. He looked ridiculously small there, alone, dwarfed by the chamber's vast space. Veren sniffed. Human form, but certainly dragon. The scent was right. Though there was something ... *more*. He couldn't put his claw on it, but it didn't taste right. *Mages*, he thought to himself disdainfully. *It's probably only the scent of his magic.*

Long silver hair trailed down his back, contrasting with his bright crimson robes. He held his staff in one hand, a tall rod of bone with a brilliant cat's eye crystal mounted at the top. Veren shivered. He'd met mages before, but none of them carried a bone staff. Crafted from the bones of fallen dragon mages long since past, they were nearly legendary amongst his people. *This man is a force to be reckoned with.* A shiver ran down his spine, but he ignored it.

The man turned around as Veren closed the door behind him. While silver-haired, his face was lineless, skin youthful and pale. Deep cerulean eyes focused on him, the gaze penetrating, as if he could see into the deepest reaches of Veren's soul. Lips tightened into a thin smile as he repositioned his staff. The sound of it clanking against stone floor reverberated off onyx walls.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit, Archmage?” Veren spoke loudly, acoustics amplifying his voice. His gut rumbled with discomfort. There was something

wrong about this man ... *He's a mage. That's all.* Mages had always made him uneasy, and *this* was an Archmage, no less.

"Dragonlord Veren." Archmage Duallan tilted his head downward in a gesture of respect. Any other dragon would have bowed; a human would have fallen to his knees. But not an Archmage. They had power in the world. Real power. If all the Draconic Mage Towers, much less those of other races, turned against him ... his empire would crumble, making the denigration he and his people already faced look meek in comparison. "I apologize for the sudden intrusion, but I'm afraid it's a matter of a some urgency."

"I assumed as much, otherwise you wouldn't have come all this way. Alruth Tower, no?" Veren sat on one of the few benches in the antechamber. He didn't have the patience to be overly formal today. *I want to get this over with as soon as possible.*

Duallan took a seat on the bench in front of him. "Yes." He frowned. "We received word that all is not well at Dragon's Heart. Is this so?"

Veren drew in a deep breath, trying to settle his unruly thoughts and banish Shaiandral from his mind—at least for right now. "You would have heard correctly. There has been—an attack on our lands. One ... somewhat magical in nature." He didn't want to admit to this strange man that he had been victim of a demonic possession. Even though he logically knew it wasn't his fault, some part of him felt he should have been able to resist it. He was the Dragonlord, not some petty human, prey to any magical force...

"Oh?" The Archmage raised his eyebrows, leaning forward on his staff. "Please, tell me. We've only heard rumors, no confirmed reports, and there haven't been any unusual disturbances across the magical plane—at least, not massive enough to be detected as far away as Alruth."

Why don't I trust him? He's Dragon. Just because he's Archmage ... Veren tried to push back his thoughts and fears. "It was demonic. They—attacked—in the most insidious way possible. It's why you've heard nothing. They..." He gulped, closing his eyes for a moment, trying to slow his breathing. "One of them possessed me, some months ago. I don't remember everything that happened during that time. I didn't have access to the demon's thoughts or memories. It was like ... like being a sacrifice to Rila, wrapped in bandages for days before, waiting for my destruction, blind, deaf, and dumb, unable to communicate with anyone..." He buried his head in his hands, nausea roiling in his gut as he remembered the few times the demon deigned to let him experience ... anything. "Locked within my own mind..."

"There have always been demonkind, looking to conquer by stealth. Were there more than that one? Alone, they are weak, if they are discovered within their host, but if there are more, then the very balance of power in this realm could be at threat." Duallan visibly shivered, his face paling. "If they took you and enough of your Court ... who knows what fiendish deeds they could accomplish?"

Gods above and below. The thought of his people being taken, like him, used in that manner ... sickened him. But he couldn't *remember. I have no way of knowing if there were more like him. No way at all.* "Than what should we do, Archmage?" He hated to ask for help, but he knew well enough that he was out of his depth. If the threat was truly that great, then he couldn't allow petty fear and pride interfere in his people's safety.

Archmage Duallan hesitated a moment, his eyes losing focus, as though he were

looking within himself. “We must contact the others of the Mage Council. This great a danger cannot be ignored.” He stretched his hand out towards Veren.

Despite the nagging feeling that there was something deeply *wrong*, Veren accepted the hand. He stood—and felt like he'd been punched in the gut. A scream tore from his throat as *something* pushed its way into him. Not a sexual penetration of any sort. It felt as though his soul were being ravaged, raped, over and over again...

Vision started to fade as the grand chamber spun. He tried to move, but his limbs wouldn't respond. Falling to his knees, he cried out a voiceless scream. Light from the phase windows above seared his eyes, but he couldn't look away. *Gods—no—what—demon*, he realized with a start. *Shaiandral—I have to find—*

A small sparrow flew over the chamber, grey wings jerking as it fled. That was his last sight before his vision faded to black.

* * * *

The demon Orell blinked, rolling his shoulders back against the onyx floor. He came to his feet in one swift motion, and then stretched his fingers, smiling at his new body. The host remained tucked away in the deep recesses of the body's mind. And there it would stay.

He chuckled under his breath. Time to find Xalidora and take care of this pesky shifter woman once and for all.

Chapter Sixteen

Great doors creaked as they opened, the sound echoing off the walls. Orell stood in the light, soaking in the warmth. Footsteps scuffled against stone floor, coming closer. Ladies slippers, by the sound of it. He leaned his head back, closing his eyes against the burning sun, ignoring the woman behind him. She didn't have to speak for him to recognize her.

"Hello, Xalidora." The words came out in a deep rumble. Orell's eyebrows arched, and he smirked, pleased. Quite a fine specimen, this body. Such a pity he would have to pass it along to another.

She jumped. Even in her demon form, her movements altered the psychic energy flowing within the room, leaving a mark. In human form, she might's well have entered with an entourage of whining, nattering peasant servants. "You—Your Greatness," she stammered. "I mean no intrusion. Is—is it done?"

Fear clouded the air, like thick smoke from a cedar fire, filling the area. The scent, hot and heady, intoxicated him. He turned around, toned muscles rippling. Xalidora stood, trying to control herself, keep herself still and calm. *Silly girl. Doesn't she know I can read her like a book?* The lesser demons could do no more than penetrate surface human thoughts, but he ... he was far more than a lesser demon.

"Veren is no longer a concern to us." Orell smiled, with one side of his lips, a movement natural to this body, apparently. He strode to her, his body responding like that old fool's never had. "We have prevailed."

"But—where..." Xalidora tried to look past him. Eyes widened as they set on the pile of ash. They snapped back to focus on him, now angry. "You killed the Archmage!? How are we going to explain that to the Mage Council?"

Orell shrugged. "He was old and weak, physical appearance to the contrary. The Council is in too much uproar to begin with, anyway. They likely won't notice till they receive word. And you know how long it can take for word to travel." He smiled tightly.

"Yes. Of course." Her eyes fell to the floor. Xalidora's breath came in quick pants, her heart racing. Delicious, enrapturing apprehension rushed through her body, liquid ecstasy pumping through psychic and astral veins.

Shivers wracked his body, like chill caress. Long dark lashes and downturned eyes entranced him while waist-length hair the color of pale moonlight and skin white as polished ivory beguiled. Fear and awe overshadowed slight movements—the flutter of eyelashes and pursing of rosy red lips. A longing hunger burned deep within him. His body stirred in response, like the old man's never had.

I think I will enjoy this body. Orell took a step forward, growling under his breath. One hand slid forward, rubbing against velvet robe, its cool sensation exciting him. Xalidora's eyes flew open as his hand caressed her skin, fingers sliding across her collarbone.

"My Lord?" The words rolled off her tongue with hesitation, eyes blinking slowly. Her fear washed through him again as a single thought rose above the confused maelstrom in her mind. *What is he going to do to me?*

Orell stepped forward again. "I do believe," he said, extending a single razor-sharp

talon to scrape lightly across her bare flesh, “that you have failed in your duty to protect our—cause.”

“I did everything I could!” Xalidora narrowed her eyes, her anger a hot red pulsing through her aura. “Who could've predicted the Sharteka wench would be late—or that she would be able to fight and defeat Ylé?”

“You took chances you didn't have to take. If you'd summoned a healer sooner, the host would not have been at risk—and Ylé would still be in control. You've always been sloppy.”

Who does he think he is? I—

Orell backhanded her, his fist connecting with her cheekbone. Pain erupted in her face, blurring her vision, as her head slammed back. Not a whimper escaped her. He gave her credit for that. “I am your lord and your master. I *own* you. Never forget that.”

“I—I didn't say anything...” her voice broke, one hand absently rubbing her stinging face.

“You didn't have to.” Orell moved closer, his body touching hers. Warm, firm breasts pressed against his chest, nipples slightly hard. He half-smiled as his body responded again, making its slow ascent towards erection.

“Then...” Eyes shone with sudden realization.

“Yes. You're a book, left open for me to read.” He arched his eyebrows, suggesting at more, as he slid one hand up her hip, trailing over her satin gown. He curved around her breast, then raked claws over her smooth skin, tearing thin lines of crimson blood.

She trembled under his touch, fear and desire dancing a twisted waltz within her mind. His touch both repulsed and thrilled all at once, and her heart rebelled at her body's betrayal. *Gods—I can't—I don't want—this is wrong—*

Orell sank his talons deep into her flesh. Xalidora screamed, sudden agony bursting forth, mixed with panic—and a bit of pleasure, too. He grabbed her hair, yanking her head back to bare her throat. “Never forget,” he hissed. “You're *mine* and bound to do my bidding—or have you forgotten your oaths?”

“N—no,” she whispered.

“Good.” His voice rumbled as he spoke. Pulling her close, he flicked his tongue upward from between her breasts to over her neck. He growled under his breath and bit the side. Light at first, then he tightened his jaw 'till he tasted warm blood in his mouth. Xalidora gasped, and he rubbed himself against her, cool satin exciting him. He wanted her... and she wanted him. *Even if she won't admit it.*

Orell raised her head back up and kissed her, his lips against hers, bringing his taloned hand back to her waist, tightening around slick fabric, nails catching on threads. Hands pressed against his waist, the touch sensual through velvet, as she opened her mouth slightly to receive his kiss.

Her mind warred with itself, an inner battle raging. Contempt ... lust ... fear ... anger ... her emotions swirled around him, psychic ambrosia to his lips. He lapped at her lips, tongue smooth and sleek against her. She whimpered. *I can't be doing this ... I can't...*

You are. Orell touched her mind, projecting his words as distinct masculine thoughts. *Do you really want me to stop?* He kissed her deeper, his tongue entering her mouth, swirling it around sensitive lips and flicking against soft tongue. Hands roamed down her back, claws trailing against satin. He longed to rip it away, baring her flesh to him, but

not yet. He wouldn't take her by force. That would be too crude.

He squeezed her firm, round ass and withdrew enough to nibble at her lip. Xalidora moaned, and he slid one hand around from her back to her front, slowly tracing it up to cup her breast, running a finger over her hardened nipple.

I can't...

Why not?

I ... Xalidora didn't answer. She couldn't. Couldn't think anymore. Her body ran hot with lust. She didn't want *him*—but she did. Wanted him so badly, wanted to feel him inside her, riding her while she writhed against his body till she reached blistering sweet release. But she couldn't—shouldn't—could—

Orell moved himself back and forth against her, slowly, as he continued kissing her and playing with her breast and ass. He flicked his tongue over her lips as he moved down her chin, following the angled line towards her neck. Purposely, he hesitated a moment. When she moved her body against him, he took her earlobe into his mouth, sucking slowly, languidly stroking her flesh with his tongue.

She growled softly and pulled his hips close to her, his hard cock pressing against her abdomen. He didn't stop playing with her ear. Xalidora's nails dug into him through his robe as she drew him closer, moving herself against him. “Gods—please—don't...”

“Don't?” Orell whispered in her ear, his voice low, rumbling. “Do you want me to stop?”

“No!” Xalidora shuddered against him, whimpering. *I can't believe I'm saying this ...* “No ... I don't...”

He repressed the urge to grin with triumph as he drew his talons back up her back. This was how he wanted to take her. Break her down till she begged for it. Till her body overrode her mind and he could *feed* upon her own self-betrayal.

Orell lifted her into his arms, her body surprisingly light. She squealed and wrapped legs around his hips, her warm cunt pressing against him through layers of light fabric. Throwing her head back, she laughed, maddened by her own conflicting inhibition and apathy. She shouldn't do this, she shouldn't ... but she didn't care anymore. Xalidora grabbed on to his shoulders, holding on tight as he carried her back into the light. It shone into her eyes, blinding her. It hurt, but instead of shrinking away, she reveled in the pain.

The depth of his triumph sent excitement through Orell, his skin tingling as he relished the emotions dripping off her psychic skin. “Mine.”

Growling, he shoved her down onto one of the benches. With a quick motion, he tore her dress, the sound of ripping fabric echoing off the walls. He opened his robe and touched his erect cock, moving his hand up and down the flesh, bringing it to full hardness. “You want this?” The words came out in a low, intentional whisper.

“Y—yes.” Hungry eyes didn't leave his cock.

“Beg for it.”

“What?” Xalidora blinked and looked into his eyes. Orell smiled to himself at her confusion. *Poor toy. She's mine now, and I'll use her as I please.*

“If you want this...” he glanced at himself and back to her “—then you'll have to earn it. You can start by begging.”

“I...” She bit her lip. *How dare he? Me, beg for sex? He must be insane.*

“I'm not insane.” Orell grabbed her hair and yanked her neck back again. She breathed hard as he flicked a tongue over the soft flesh at her neck. After a moment, he

ran the backside of his hand over her breast and down her front. “The question is, my dear Xalidora, do you want me to stop?”

No...

“Then I suggest you learn to cooperate.” Orell breathed in her ear, hot and moist. He reached between her legs and dipped a finger into her wet cunt, slow at first, then faster, circling around the entrance. Xalidora let out a cry, whimpering, her hips arching up towards him, fighting to take more of him into her. *I've got her now*. As she moved forward, he drew back, teasing.

Don't stop ... gods ... She closed her eyes, leaning her head back into his hand as he massaged the soft hood of her clit with his palm. Around and around, bringing her close, then backing off, over and over. Not enough to push her over the edge, oh no. He drove her mad with sweet ecstasy. *More...*

Beg. Orell whispered in her mind again as he plunged his finger inside, tightening his hand in her hair. He nipped at her neck as a low cry escaped her. *You want more? Then beg for it*.

“Please.” A single tear rolled down one cheek as she choked out the words. Waves of humiliation spilled over him. *Oh gods I can't believe ... I thought ... I never ... gods...*

“Please what?” He continued to tease as he fed off her emotions, loving every moment as he brought her down the spiral.

“Please—take me—fuck me...” Xalidora forced herself to speak, the word 'fuck' disgusting and shameful in a way it'd never been before. Her body ached with need for him, and yet she wanted nothing more than for him to be away from her ... but she couldn't fight it anymore. She'd go mad if she tried.

Orell let go of her hair abruptly and pushed her back onto the bench. He bent over her, one leg on either side of the thin bench, and positioned himself. He paused, looking directly at her.

“Please...” she whimpered. “I ... I need...”

He thrust himself into her, warmth enveloping his cock, muscles constricting. She screamed, jutting her hips against him, her back arched. Orell leaned over, holding onto the bench, arms near her chest, as he moved in a slow rhythm. Gently, in and out. He stopped with his cock just at the entrance and moved his hips in a circular motion as he penetrated again. Deep, but not too deep. Slow, but not too slow.

Xalidora writhed beneath him, gasping for breath. *Good ... so good ... yes ... don't stop ...* But even then, she wanted him to stop. Couldn't believe she was doing this. Fucking him, of all people. Fucking *Orell*, the demon she feared and despised most. Self-hatred and contempt coursed through her even as she rose to meet him, moaned with each stroke, wanted him and more...

Orell continued his dark dance, penetrating her mind as well as her body, enjoying each shred of twisted emotion he soaked from her. As she fed her hunger, he fed his. He took her down, deep into her own abyss, as he fucked her, pleasure building on a foundation of hate and terror. He brought her to the brink of orgasm, and back, over and over, leaving her wanting, leaving her begging ... until she couldn't take anymore and broke down in hopeless tears.

He shifted nails to talons and raked them down her chest, drawing furrows of blood as he took over the edge. Xalidora screamed, the sound shrill enough to shatter glass. Agony and ecstasy exploded within her all at once, interwoven with her negativity.

Thought and emotion swarmed around him, soaked into his aura, rejuvenating him. As Xalidora came beneath him, he took his release, pleasure flooding his body.

But he didn't focus on it. Instead, he directed his attention towards collecting the tantric energy and pulling it into himself, recharging himself after the battle to take Veren's body once again. Orell thrust one final time into Xalidora and shuddered, body and soul feeling vibrant, alive ... whole, in a way the old man's never did.

Xalidora sobbed. Only then did he notice he'd dug his talons deep into her breasts as he'd come that last time. Oh well. It didn't matter overmuch to him in the first place. *Sniveling, pathetic creature*, he thought as he looked down at her tear-stained face. *She may prove of further use, but she hasn't the spark of courage and greatness in her.* With a sudden movement, he cut the psychic connection to her body and blocked her, having no further use of her thoughts.

He withdrew from her body, sat up, and slid his robe back on. She lay prostrate on the bench for a moment, then rolled onto the floor and retched through tears. After she'd finished vomiting, he shook his head with disgust. "Clean up that mess," he said, "and then recover the Sharteka healer. She must be dealt with at once."

Chapter Seventeen

Shaiandral fled the Dragonlord's palace as fast as she could, sandals slapping against hard stone and then packed dirt. She raced towards thick jungle, her mind spinning with thoughts, but she paid them no heed. *I have to get out of here, before Veren changes his mind and comes after me.* The memory of his talons digging into her feline shoulders as he dove into the sky with her both chilled her with fright ... and excited her.

Ferns caught on her skirt and stickers from underbrush scratched at her ankles. She bit her lip against the pain from stinging cuts, but she didn't slow down. *I can't. I have to get away before I betray myself and my people more than I already have.*

Oh Tezca. She stopped dead in her tracks. Her face burned both hot and cold at once and hands clenched into fists, fingernails digging into her own flesh. Her stomach roiled at her traitorous thoughts, all-encompassing shame clawing at the inside of her skin. A light breeze caressed her. Gooseflesh rose in response, and she shivered, remembering Veren's soft touch. Even now that she'd escaped his grasp, her body still ached for him, deep inside. *Have I fallen that far? Have I lost that much of myself, who I am? I've lost sight—and I've lost my way—*

No. Shaiandral snarled and stomped forward, pushing aside dangling vines and crushing green foliage beneath her feet. *I'd blocked my sexuality when I sought to take the healer-priestess's vows. Veren—the Dragonlord—was the man who awoke it. Of course I'm going to be drawn to him. Zeltzin will teach me to ... control myself.* She took a deep breath. *It's a side effect of the magic. Nothing more.*

But she could still remember his body ... the way he felt when he kissed her, touched her, and when he slipped inside her ... *It's lust. That's all. I want his body. And body—* She sniffed. *I can get that anywhere.*

As yet another branch scraped her leg, Shaiandral swore, only now making the realization that she remained in human form. Even though she had more endurance and speed than a trueblood human, her feline shape would get her there much quicker. *Do I want him to catch me?* Granted, his dragon form would be too large to maneuver in think jungle, and it would take time for him to catch up to her on foot. *Unless he flies ahead to Zeltzin's and tries to catch me there.* She shook her head. *No. He said if I didn't want him, then he didn't want me. And I don't. If he breaks his word ... then I'll deal with it when it happens.*

Shaiandral stripped naked and put her clothes into the satchel she carried. She doubled the linen strap over itself a few times and put it around her neck. It'd fit well enough around her feline self, and then she wouldn't have to go scrounging for clothes when she arrived at Zeltzin's. Drawing in her breath, she began the shift, focusing on the part of her soul that was pure animal. Wild. Untamed. Free. Slipping back towards her other form felt like running in a stream of shocking cold water on a hot summer's day.

But not this time. Halfway from human, with a luxurious fur pelt and a stub of a tail, the hunger burst forth again. Aching, maddening, wanting to be touched and played with, taken and fucked out of her mind.

Shit. She hadn't expected her feline form to *still* be in heat. It shouldn't have lasted that long. *But I'm no more a normal jaguar than I am human.*

Last thing I need is to lose control more than I already have. Shaiandral reversed the change, her fur thinning and tail shrinking. Pain welled in her heart as she remembered the carefully planned life she would never lead. Virgin priestess, respected and revered—even feared by some.

And now what will I be? Some slut who spreads her legs because she can't control her carnal impulses? I don't think so. Shaiandral removed the knapsack from around her neck and took out her clothes. Grumbling, she put them back on. *Nothing else to do but go on foot.*

She sighed. She wasn't looking forward to returning to the old priestess's home. *But it's a better option than trying to figure out how to control this myself. Hells, I might never be able to, if my recent behavior's anything to judge by.* The thought sent chills down her spine. Spending the rest of her life like this ... having sex with anything that would have her just to feel a deep magical hunger ... *No. I won't let that happen. I won't.*

A near-feline growl tore from her throat as she moved forward, tromping through the jungle brush. Insects buzzed and birds squawked in the background, the jungle sounds strangely comforting. The forest was her home, in a way the Dragonlord's palace, in all its luxurious glory, never could be. She shuddered at the memory of the desolate land and the dark stone floors that chilled her feet even through thick sandals. And the few people she'd seen ... *How can they not be cold when they dwell in that land?*

But Veren wasn't, a part of her mind protested, sending her blushing again. No, Veren was anything *but* cold. Fierce and passionate enough to pass for one of her people's own warriors. *But he's not. He never was, and he never will be, so I might as well stop thinking about him.*

But you don't want to do that, do you?

Her face heated again. “Yes. I do.” She felt silly talking to herself—but who was there to hear her? The mosquitoes buzzing around her ears? A thought occurred, and she arched an eyebrow at them. “You'd better just be mosquitoes, now.”

Former thoughts returned as she moved on. *You want him. Him. The Dragonlord. Don't you?*

“No. I don't.” Memories of his body against hers, warm lips, his protective and comforting embrace danced in her mind. She wanted to be there, with him, again ... *No. I don't. It's just my body.*

That's bullshit. You know it. You want him. You've fallen in love with him, and you're too stubborn and proud to admit it.

Shaiandral squeezed her eyes shut, trying to fight—what? Herself? *Hells, I don't know which way is up and which is down anymore. I don't even know who I am anymore, much less what I want.* The sudden realization hit her hard, like a fist in the gut. She leaned against a moss-covered tree, clinging to the bark through green tendrils as she struggled to push back the storm of oncoming tears.

Love? I don't even know what love is ... I've never felt ... never thought I would have the chance to feel ... Images and words from her childhood flooded her thoughts, dragging her back into the past. She'd been only seven years old when they first noticed her innate potential.

“You're exaggerating. Shaiandral is just a child,” she remembered overhearing her mother argue.

“That catling of hers was near death. The injuries she described and the scars that

remain prove it. Even one of our healers would have had difficulty saving it. Many would have failed. Yet your untrained daughter restored her pet's life." The old woman's voice was hard and firm. "She has talent, Rimala. Very few of those who come to the priestesshood have her talent. Most learn it through years of sacrifice and labor. Your daughter could be a greater healer than those twice her age, with half the effort on her part. It would be foolish to waste her."

"She's not a commodity," her mother spat. "You have no right to dictate her life."

"Nor do you," the priestess said, ragged voice cold enough to send chills through Shaiandral from the other room. "You are correct. It should be her choice, and you have no place in denying her that, either."

"She's seven. She can't make that kind of a decision. She doesn't understand..."

"I think you are wrong. You underestimate Shaiandral's intelligence. She's not a normal child."

"Who the *hells* are you to suggest..."

Shaiandral had winced as she felt the wave of indignant anger wash over her. "I am High Priestess. You are nothing but a hunter. I could take this matter over your head to the chief and have your daughter transferred into my care."

"You wouldn't," her mother stated, voice flat with disbelief. "You wouldn't take my daughter away from me."

"If you refuse to give her the choice which she has every right to make, then yes, I will."

Neither woman said anything for a full minute.

"What do you want me to do about it?" her mother finally said. "Just call her in here, like nothing's at all out of the ordinary?"

"Yes. She's been listening to this entire conversation."

Shaiandral's blood went cold. Her mother was going to kill her.

"What!?"

They continued arguing for a few minutes more, but the old priestess brought Shaiandral into the room. "It's a gift," she'd said. "You could be one of the greatest healer-priestesses we've ever known. That potential lies within you. All you need do is reach out and grasp it."

And where is that potential now? Shaiandral cried out and pushed herself away from the tree, running into the jungle, not knowing or caring where she was going. *What has happened to the great healer I would become? I was a healer—one of the best—and now ... what am I? What the hells am I?*

The old priestess had told her that if she kept the sanctity of her virginity, she would be more powerful than any other. "Don't be fooled, girl." She'd fixed her one keen eye on the young child. "Power is not a thing to trifle with. Even a healer's power is intoxicating. We attempt to master the forces which influence both physical and otherworldly bodies. We hold a person's life in our hands, like a thread at the weaver's loom. We can heal—or just as easily kill. This is the power you will learn."

Power I never yet learned to grasp. Bitterness clouded her thoughts. Yes, she'd learned to heal, but not as thoroughly as she would have liked. She still lost patients. People she cared about. People she loved. All the power in her hands ... had never been enough. *And now what will I have? The power to spread my legs for anything that might want me?*

She fell to her knees and let out a keening wail, crying to the sun and the moon and the stars and the gods for something, anything, answers, reassurance, comfort...

Nothing answered.

Shaiandral lay there, huddled in a shivering ball, soaking in her own misery. She'd been *happy* with herself and her life before. Now ... *Who am I? What am I? What will I do? Where will I go?* Even though she knew the answers ... her soul still burned with questions. And even more questions still about her feelings for the Dragonlord. *I don't have them—I don't—*

But deep down, she knew that was a lie. The realization felt like a heavy weight in her stomach. It was about more than just the sex. The way they'd hunted together, like partners, *meant* to be at each other's side ... *No*. She shook her head and rose, slowly. *Even if I do care for him, we can never be together. It's not for us.*

Thoughts still tugged at her mind, trying to convince her otherwise. *No*. She pushed them away and continued walking, steeling herself to make the journey. *It cannot be.*

* * * *

Shaiandral neared the edge of the jungle several hours later. Not long now. She could smell the warm salty air of Zeltzin's hot spring from here—or maybe it was only her imagination. After all she'd been through, she couldn't *wait* for a nice hot soak—

Her foot came down on a patch of old leaves and went straight through. A yelp escaped her as she tumbled forward into a deep, dark pit. Elbows and knees slammed into hard-packed dirt. “What the *bloody* hells?” Shaiandral growled under her breath as she stood. *Damned trappers and their pits. I'll have to complain to the chief as soon as I—*

She stopped half-thought, looking up into the grinning face of Ice Bitch, accompanied by several large, muscled males. *Tezca's blood.*

“Well, look at this” The Ice Bitch smirked. “I think we've caught ourselves a kitty cat.”

Chapter Eighteen

Shaiandral woke in darkness, stale air cold on her face. *Where the hells am I?* Her mind felt muddled, her body weak and slow to react. Vaguely, she remembered something sharp piercing her skin before she blacked out. Then she remembered looking up from the pit into the Ice Bitch's face and growled under her breath. *Wonderful. Where've they taken me?*

Something cold and hard circled her ankle. She held very still as she shifted her eyes enough towards feline that she could see her surroundings. The walls and ceiling were made of heavy stone bricks. Several iron cages scattered the room, and she recognized more than one piece of elaborate torture equipment. A sick feeling rose in her stomach. She looked down at her ankle and saw a single manacle attached to a metal ball by a chain.

I have to escape. Frantic thoughts filled her mind as she examined the dungeon. Only one door, and it was surely guarded on the other side. Even if she managed to get her ankle free, she'd still have to fight. She was only one woman. Even in her jaguar form, she'd be no match alone against a group of dragons. Despair tore at her heart, trying to drag her down into its maelstrom.

I can't give up. I'll find a way. Somehow. Shaiandral sat up, slowly, trying not to make a sound. If they were smart, they'd be listening. At this point, she was well certain that at least the Ice Bitch was one of the demons. Maybe the others with her weren't, but if Veren had been behind her capture, she wouldn't be in the dungeon. She'd be in his bed. *At least it'd be more comfortable.*

She reached down and fiddled with the manacle, examining it. She swore under her breath as she realized there wasn't even a conventional locking mechanism. It was magical. The only way to break it would be for the person who set it in the first place to unlock it—or for her to overload it. *But even that's risky. I could blow my own foot off along with it. Besides which, how would I raise the energy in the first place? It's not like I've got a convenient lover around.* Shaiandral glanced at some of the torture implements hanging on the wall, remembering Zeltzin's ... demonstration.

No. She pushed the thought away, shuddering. *It likely wouldn't work, and it'd draw too much attention.*

As she racked her brain for other ideas, the door opened suddenly. Light spilled into the room. A soft cry escaped her, and she brought her arm up to shield her eyes as they adjusted to the brightness.

“About time you woke up,” the Ice Bitch said. “We were beginning to wonder if you were going to sleep forever. And that would be ... such a pity.”

“Of course, because if I didn't wake up, you wouldn't have anything to play with.” Shaiandral spat the words, curling back against the wall. She lowered her arm. The Ice Bitch was there, with three tall, muscular men she didn't recognize. They'd left the door open. If they gave her any opening, she'd make a break for it.

The Ice Bitch smiled at her, but it didn't reach her eyes. *Is it possible for a smile to do so?* “Indeed. Now.” She snapped her fingers and glanced to the males. “Bring her.”

“Bring me where?” Shaiandral raised one eyebrow, trying to act calm and collected.

She'd be damned if she was going to let them know her fear. "Back to the Dragonlord, I suppose? Lost the courage to take me by force, has he? Has to send his lessers to do his dirty work for him." She growled with contempt.

Ice Bitch chuckled and took another step forward. Shaiandral bit back a gasp as the flickering light from the torches highlighted a creamy white neck covered with deep red bite marks and sick purple bruises. She wore a long-sleeved, high-necked dress, obviously to hide the worst of the marks, but she couldn't hide the ones at the top of her throat, her ears, and chin. Her injuries extended beyond just those. Shaiandral unfocused her eyes, opening them to the metaphysical. Pulsating crimson streaks marred her aura.

What the hells happened to her? She looks like she's been tortured.

"Your precious Veren has nothing to do with this. He doesn't know a thing about it." Ice Bitch smirked, putting her hands on her hips. Her eyes twitched in a wince. A human probably wouldn't have noticed, but Shaiandral wasn't human. She was a trained Sharteka healer-priestess. *Those injuries need treatment.* She recoiled as soon as she realized what she'd thought. *No. She's proven herself to be my enemy. I won't heal her. My oaths do not require it.*

Shaiandral banished her thoughts and stood, the cold manacle on her ankle rubbing against her skin painfully. She held her chin high with pride. "So. Veren releases me to go my own way, and you get it into your head to bring me back? You're some kind of stupid, aren't you?"

"You can think what you like of me." Ice Bitch sniffed, looking down her nose at Shaiandral. "But I'd watch your tongue if I were you. After all, you're the one in chains. Now." She looked to her males. "Didn't I tell you to bring her? Stop screwing around and *do it.*"

They snapped to attention and stepped forward. She held very still while one grabbed her wrists roughly and tied a coarse rope around them. The other bent down and unlocked the manacle. *Now's my chance.* He brought a rope near her ankle. She kicked out, her heel slamming straight into his nose with a sickening crack.

He screamed and fell backwards. Before the other could react, Shaiandral yanked her hands away from him and made a break for the open door. She began to shift, and her growing wrists broke free of the ropes. She leaped through the doorway and made a hard right turn, running into the hallway—

And smack-dab into a group of half-shifted, very fierce looking dragon warriors. Not taking the breath to swear, she spun around to go the other direction. Except that was a dead end.

And I'm probably a dead cat.

Ice Bitch stepped into the hallway, accompanied by one guard and one almost incorporeal *thing* she didn't recognize. Then it hit her. *A demon.* Her heart jumped into her throat. *What are they planning on doing to me?*

"Did you really believe I wouldn't have other guards at my disposal?" Ice Bitch snorted, curling her lip with disgust as she looked Shaiandral up and down. "Stupid girl. I know the fight you put up against His Majesty. I'd be a fool myself if I didn't have a score of guards to provide backup."

"At least I took one of them down," Shaiandral spat back. "One less for me to worry about."

"Yes. You did. He's dead." She glared at Shaiandral. "He's been one of my most

faithful servants for years.”

Shaiandral put her hands on her hips and rolled her eyes. “What? Did you think I was going to stand by and do *nothing* while they truss me up to be dragged off to gods know what fate? If you did, then you *are* a fool.”

“You're a healer,” Ice Bitch said flatly, crossing her arms over her breasts. “Don't your people have some code of law that prevents healers from murdering others?”

“It wasn't murder. It was self-defense.” She fought back the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach that disagreed. While her order didn't have laws requiring its priestesses to remain pacifistic, she didn't want to directly take a life. Binding the demon or refusing to heal someone—that was one thing. Smashing someone's nose up into his brain was another entirely.

Ice Bitch arched her eyebrows. “That's a matter of interpretation. Now.” She gestured to the other guards. “Take our ... recalcitrant guest to the main torture chamber. We should introduce her to the Iron Maiden. I'm sure they'll become close friends.”

Nausea roiled in Shaiandral's gut. She'd never seen Dragon torture devices, but the road-bards were full of stories about their ability to reduce a human body to mushmeal. *I could die here.* The realization struck her for the first time. *I could die here and nobody would know what happened to me. Not my family. Not my tribe. Not Zeltzin. Not ... Veren.* Her heart wrenched with that last thought. *No—I don't care about him at all—I don't care if he knows—*

But that was a blatant lie. And she knew it, even if she didn't want to accept it. *I don't want to die. I want to live ... and I want to see him again ...* She wanted to do more than just see him. She wanted to feel his body against hers, within hers, his hands smooth on her skin, his lips warm against her own ... and she wanted to be with him.

“Are you waiting for something? Bring her!” Ice Bitch interrupted her thoughts.

Guards clustered around her. One grabbed each arm. She started to struggle, trying to get away, but couldn't escape their iron grip.

“Continue to resist and we will knock you unconscious,” the one on her right said.

I'm outnumbered. Fighting won't bring me a bit of good. Best I can do is to take what they give with dignity—and hope like hells I can find a way out.

* * * *

They tortured her for hours. At first, she tried to keep time, using the numbers to fend away the pain, but eventually it broke through. She spiraled downward into the abyss of her own mind as they used every implement at their disposal. Eventually, they brought her to the point where she was weeping, sobbing from the agony blazing through every part of her body. She begged them to stop, she'd do anything, just ... please ... stop...

They didn't. They only continued, while Ice Bitch watched, sneering at her. Hatred accompanied her pain. She longed to kill her, to sink her claws into that silky white flesh and dig her teeth into that tender throat. Make her pay for everything she'd done. Did Veren know that she was doing this? *No, surely not. He said he loved me. He wouldn't do this just because I ran away from him. He wouldn't.*

A metal-tipped cat o' nine tails landed across her chest, ripping into her breasts, one hitting the nipple. She screamed and writhed, trying to get away. Iron manacles held her fast. She couldn't break them.

Veren ... She called out his name in her mind, hoping against hope that he would somehow hear her and rescue her. On her own, bound like this, she stood no chance. He never came.

Where was he? Why didn't he hear? Why didn't he come? Fool. He can't hear your mind-screams. He thinks you've gone back to your people. Back to Zeltzin. He thinks you've left him forever.

That's what she'd intended on doing, after all. Leaving him forever. Going back to her old way of life. No. She whimpered aloud, then screamed as the whip bit into her skin again. I don't want—gods—what do I want? I want him, and he wants me. Why won't he come for me? Even though she knew he had no way of knowing that she was here, in his palace, being tortured, she hoped against hope for him to slam through those doors, put an end to this torment.

But nobody came. She begged and wept for someone, anyone, to come for her. She had no chance to break free. I'm going to die here. Is that what they want? To kill me? Why? Because I healed Veren? No—or they would've stopped me before I ever entered his chambers. Then why? What do they want from me?

They broke her down further, driving her consciousness back towards her spiraling abyss. Agony upon agony soon became too much for her to handle. The bonds between her soul and her body became thin as she dove downwards, walling herself away from her body and the pain it took. Blow after blow became nothing more than an echo. She knew it happened, but she only felt the faintest touch. She immersed in a pool of inner tranquility, surrounded by a mad raging sea.

An insidious presence invaded her calm, pushing, prodding. Slowly at first, then with more urgency. It spread through her consciousness, trying not to be noticed. Except she did.

“Hurry.” In the distance, a hushed whisper. “You've got the opportunity. Take it!”

The presence swept in further, trying to envelop her, push her back ... take her over. Shaiandral's eyes snapped open as full realization dawned. She roared, diving back into her pain-ridden body, forcing the demon out. “So that's the game, is it?” She tried to bite the hand on her shoulder, but couldn't reach. Instead, she spat in his face. “Too much of a threat, am I? Is that why you're doing this?”

“Yes. Actually, it is,” Ice Bitch said, coldly. She stepped forward, where Shaiandral could see her. “You've proven yourself far too much a danger to us and our cause. You trapped my bondmate into a fate worse than death. You freed the Dragonlord, nearly undoing all our hard work.”

“What a pity. I feel for you.” Sarcasm rolled off Shaiandral's tongue. A lash came down on her stomach. Pain exploded and she curled upward in reaction.

*“I'm sure you do.” Ice Bitch raised her chin. “Let me assure you of this. No matter how you struggle, we *will* have you eventually. You might as well give in. You can't fight forever.”*

“I'd rather die.”

She smirked. “That's always an option, too. Of course, we would rather have you alive. A Sharteka healer-priestess under our command could prove invaluable to our plans.” Ice Bitch looked to the guards and nodded. “Keep at it. We'll break her sooner or later.”

* * * *

They followed their mistress's orders, to the letter. But no matter what they tried, she didn't break. She wouldn't let herself. *I'll damned if I let them turn me into some kind of pawn to be used for their plans—whatever those are. I am Sharteka. I won't give in so easily. I won't let them beat me. Not now. Not ever.*

But still it went on. And on. And on. Until one of the guards swore. “We're not getting anywhere with this.”

“You heard what Mistress Xalidora said,” the second guard said. *So that's her name. Xalidora.* Shaiandral made a note to remember that. The second guard, tall with imposing broad shoulders, gestured for emphasis. “We can't stop now. Or she'll have *our* heads.”

“I'm not suggesting we stop.”

“Then what do you propose we do?”

The other guard grinned. “If torture itself isn't working, then maybe we should try a different tactic?”

“Like what?” He sounded suspicious. “We're supposed to break her. Not kill her.”

Shaiandral twitched, a flash of fear shooting through her. What the *hells* were they going to try next? She didn't know how long her body could hold up against their inflictions. Eventually, it would prove to be too much for her body to handle. They might not break *her*—but she wouldn't be much good to them without her body.

“Like this.” Fabric rustled and she tried to raise her head up enough to see. Manacles around her forearms held her down, but she managed to lift herself up enough to catch a glance of him opening his pants. “We can have a little bit of 'fun' with her while we're at it, right? Ah, look, the little minx is interested. Want a piece of this, do you, kitty?” He stroked his flaccid cock, waving the head at her. He smirked in his comrade's direction. “What say we take some pleasure for ourselves?”

Oh gods ... they're going to rape me...

The other guard made a disgusted sound. “Fuck the bitch if you like, but I don't want any of it. Especially not after your cock's been in there.”

“So take her mouth...”

“And let her bite it off? I don't think so.” He shook his head. “Have your fun. I'll be outside.”

Shaiandral heard his footsteps as he walked away. Then the first guard came up to her, close enough that she could see him. He wasn't bad-looking, all things considered. But she didn't want to fuck him—and she didn't want to be fucked *by* him. *But it doesn't seem you have much of a choice in the matter.*

He ran his hand up her thin, hard stomach. She was already naked; they'd made sure to remove her clothes earlier in order to emphasize the pain. Even though she didn't want him, his touch made her shiver. She burned, deep within, her lust, her need, growing. The pain had pushed it back, but now ... now it roared to life. Her nipples hardened. A gasp escaped her, even though she tried to silence it.

Rapist's eyebrows rose with surprise. He half smiled. “Like this, do you?” He pinched her nipple. Hard. Pain arched through it—but this time it was a pain that she enjoyed, shooting down between her legs. Her hips moved upwards, even as she felt sick to her stomach. *I have no choice in this ... he's going to rape me ... and I'm enjoying it? What the hell is wrong with me?*

“Now, you're going to be a good kitty for me, aren't you?” He just about purred the words as he leaned down, breathing hard in her ear. One hand groped her breast,

tightening. “Aren't you?”

Rage boiled in her, but there wasn't a thing she could do. She was tied up, and even if she managed to get free, there were—gods—how many guards? She didn't know. *I'm trapped here. There's not a thing I can do, and Veren will never come for me.* Despair ate away at her heart, trying to drag her back down into its torrent of hopelessness.

“Aren't you?” he whispered and bit her ear.

Shaiandral cried out and whimpered. She'd never felt so helpless in all her life. All she could do was sit here and be ... used ... by this ... *thing*.

Gods. I just hope he gets it over with soon.

He played with her for awhile before releasing the manacles that bound her legs. She contemplated kicking him in the balls, but that would only end her in worse trouble than she was now. And even though she hated the thought ... her body yearned for the release that he could give her. How long had it been? She couldn't remember, but the carnal urges within her had a mind of their own, and they didn't care what she wanted.

She tried to withdraw back deep into herself, but she couldn't. It was almost as though the lust running through her kept her tied to it in a way the pain hadn't. *I shouldn't anyway ... they tried to force me out once before. Tried to take me over. How do I know this isn't just another ruse? Another plan to trap me and take me over?* She could still feel a hand on her shoulder. That guard had never moved, nor spoken; apparently his only duty was to stay there and wait for the moment when he could infect her with his demonic presence.

He climbed onto the iron table himself and positioned himself above Shaiandral. She could feel his erect cock against her cunt, and she wanted to vomit. Wanted to crawl away. Wanted to be anywhere but here ... anywhere. *Gods help me...*

Lips touched her as he held his cock at her opening, not quite penetrating, but waiting ... energy rose up around her. Not enough ... then he plunged into her. She screamed, her voice echoing off stone walls. She wanted to die...

No.

Power surged within her as he thrust himself in and out of her warmth, fast and hard. It hurt, but in a different way than all the torture. This ... this pain she could use. Her body reacted to him and she could feel herself rising towards the brink, intensity building on itself. Tantric energy shot through her, refreshing her, healing her wounds. Raw. Carnal. Power. *Hers.*

She growled, not in anger or lust, but thrill. Exhilaration rushed through her as she gathered the energy. The memory of that night when she sacrificed her virginity and bound the demon returned. *But that was different ... I was a virgin ... I don't have that power anymore ... I can't do anything...*

Shaiandral banished the thought. *No. Even if I fail, I have to try. I can't just give up without a fight. I won't. I am Sharteka. I will not dishonor myself by surrendering my body and soul to the enemy. Never.*

His breaths came short and his cock hardened even more the closer he got. *Not long now. Not long at all.*

A thought occurred to her. She gathered up the tantric energy, but she also reached out and *drew* ... from him. She drew his power into her, took it, mixed it with the tantric threads she held—and drew down from the hand on her shoulder, swirling the energies together in an elaborate weave.

“What the...” The man holding her shoulder spoke for the first time. Then a thought projected into her mind. *You little bitch. You think you're going to try that? You can't win. You might as well just give up.*

That presence returned again, trying to force itself into her as the other man continued to fuck her. Shaiandral screamed as she came around him, trying to control the various energies. She tried to push the demon back, get him out of her, but the harder she pushed, the closer he got.

You can't fight me. It sneered. *You can't fight any of us. You'll lose in the end, puny human.*

Shaiandral snarled at it as she felt the man above her start to come. *You forget something.*

What's that, host?

Power raged through her, searing her metaphysical veins as she twisted the energies together, drawing the demon closer into herself. *I'm not human.*

The man above cried out as he came inside her, triggering another set of multiple orgasms. Shaiandral roared, bucking against him, taking that one last surge of raw energy.

What?

“I'm not human.” She pulled the demon through her, her body barely able to contain the energies she housed, and forced him into the man collapsed onto her body. Demon, man, and demon screamed in horror and agony combined as she sent energy searing through the body. *One last stroke.* Shaiandral directed a surge of energy at the manacles binding her. They broke. She shoved the body off her, sending one final blast of condensed powerful rage into it.

She rolled to the side and ducked off the table, taking cover behind it. Just in time. The body exploded, blood and organs splattering against the walls.

The door opened. “What the hells—oh my gods.”

Shaiandral stood. The first guard stood there, face pale as a ghost. He stared at her for a second.

She lifted her hand. It crackled with the remnant energies. She'd used most of it ... but she could take this one down if need be.

He turned and ran. For a moment, she considered pursuing him and killing him, too, but she shook the thought aside. *No. Ice Bitch would find out soon enough anyway. Going after him would only take valuable time.* Shaiandral grabbed her clothes from where they'd been tossed in the corner. She dressed quickly. *I have to find Veren and tell him what's happened, before it's too late. If Ice Bitch would do this to me ... who knows what they have in store for him?*

Chapter Nineteen

Shaiandral raced through deserted corridors and empty hallways, bare feet making no sound against the stone floor. Her pulse pounded in her veins and sweat trickled down her face, despite the palace's chill air. *Gods. Where is he? I have to find him! It won't be long until Xalidora realizes I've escaped...*

No. She couldn't think about that. No *time* to think about it.

What if I don't find him? What if I'm too slow? What if she catches me? What then? The thought sent her heart barreling up her throat. *I can't fight them off again. I can't. Maybe I should just leave—*

Gods.

Would she leave Veren alone to fend off an attack from those he trusted most? Xalidora was a member of his household. Without the demon's memories, he would have no reason to suspect her. *If I leave, regardless of what happens to me, he will have no one to warn him. No one. I'm ... the only one.*

A sick thought came to her mind as she slowed, checking around corners and behind her to make sure she didn't run into anyone. What if she was too late? What if the demons had already taken him?

Shivers ran down her spine. *Then I best run from here as fast as I can.*

Her heart rebelled at the thought. She thought of leaving Veren to whatever fate he might find and started crying, salty tears dripping in rivulets down her cheeks. An almost physical pain burned in her chest. *No ... I can't ... even if it costs me my own life ... I cannot leave him. I can't abandon him to the demons. I ... I love him...*

That realization hurt just as much as the thought of Veren's death.

I've gone and fallen in love with a Dragon. She repressed the sudden urge to laugh—why? It wasn't like there was anything humorous about the situation. *I've gone and fallen in love with my people's worst enemy. I've betrayed my clan and my family, my upbringing and ... myself.*

And yet, in the depths of her heart and soul, it didn't feel like a betrayal. It felt all at once like coming home after a long absence ... and setting forth on an adventure into the great unknown. It comforted and frightened her.

But none of this is going to matter if you don't find him before the demons can get their grubby paws on him. Shaiandral growled under her breath as she continued to wander the great corridors. *This is ridiculous. It'll take me forever to search the entire palace for him. There's got to be a better way.*

After a moment's thought, she shifted her nose enough towards feline to gain the heightened sense of smell. Sniffing the air, Shaiandral tried to filter out Veren's scent, his individual thick musk.

There. Faint, but a trace. She followed it, staying close to the wall.

“She's got to be around here somewhere.” A gruff male voice echoed off stone walls. Shaiandral stopped dead in her tracks, heart pounding.

Don't panic. That'll only get you caught again.

“We've searched over half the bloody palace. She must've fled into the jungle again. We're wasting our time,” another whined, his voice at an irritatingly high pitch.

Shaiandral longed to rip his throat out.

They were too close. She had to get away, but where?

“Don't be a fool. We haven't searched that far yet. Who knows, she could be right around the cor—hey!”

Oh hells.

Two Dragon men charged her, daggers drawn. Instead of turning and running, she leapt at them. They didn't expect that. She slipped between their bodies and tumbled forward, somersaulting across the floor to jump to her feet and run down the hall.

“Imbecile!” the first man snapped. “Don't just stand there—run!”

Shaiandral didn't waste time looking back. She concentrated on running, her legs pumping, trying to follow Veren's scent. It was getting stronger, but could she make it before they caught up with her? Their sandals slapped against the stone behind her. Close. Too close.

Gods. Is this how it's to end? With me so close to him? No—I can't—I can't let this happen—

So close. So damned close.

She ran, focusing on nothing more than keeping ahead, not looking back. Two of them, armed ... what chance did she stand?

“Got you!” the second man cried out, triumphant, as he caught a strand of her hair.

Pain ripped through her skull. Shaiandral ignored it. She'd suffered worse in the torture chamber at the demons' hands. She tore away, ripping the hair from her scalp.

I can't keep running. I can't outrun them. Even though she was a Sharteka woman used to traversing the jungle at high speeds, in chase of her prey, these were trained Dragon males twice her size. *So what do I do? Surrender?*

Her blood boiled at the thought. *No. Never that. If they're going to take me anyway ... then I'll go down fighting. Like a Sharteka.*

Instead of continuing to flee, she leapt into the air and executed a spin, landing lightly on her feet. Momentum carried the Dragon men forward. They skidded to a halt and turned around to face her.

She snarled at them. “You want me? Fine then. Come and take me.”

They were about to launch themselves at her when a distinct male voice boomed, “*What is going on here?*”

Veren came around the corner, dressed in a black silk tunic and trousers, his steps slow and purposeful, sleek, almost like a cat. *Or a Dragon.* Shaiandral's body burned just at the sight of him. She wanted him, badly, but it was more than just the animal need now ... she wanted him to hold her, to love her, to take her...

He looked at her and raised his eyebrows. “Shaiandral! I'd thought you'd—left?”

“I had. But—I—I need to talk to you alone.” She looked at the two men and then back to him. “Please.”

Veren nodded, curtly. He waved a hand at them. “Leave us.”

“But sir...” the second protested.

He narrowed his eyes. “Do you dare defy my command?”

The man's eyes about bugged out of his skull. “N—no, Your Majesty—not at all.”

“Then it would behoove you to leave. Now.”

The two men turned and walked the other way as fast as they could without breaking into a run.

Veren looked back to Shaiandral. “Why did you return?”

I—I—oh gods, I never thought this would be so hard. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to control her breathing. Warm hands touched her shoulders. Her eyes flew open, looking into Veren's.

“Why?” he said gently, putting a finger under her chin.

Something was wrong. His touch ... it felt wrong. The expression on his face, in his eyes ... *But it's Veren ... isn't it?* “I—There's something very important I must tell you,” she blurted out, before she could convince herself to say otherwise.

“Oh?” Veren tilted his head to the side. “Do tell.”

“You're in grave danger. Xalidora—she's a demon. They all—are...” She choked on the words. “We have to stop them. Somehow...”

Veren chuckled, a slow smile spreading across his face.

Her gut sunk to the floor. “Why are you laughing?” But she knew the answer.

They've taken him. They've taken my precious love from me—

“Your 'precious love' is no more. And never will be again.” The demon wearing Veren's body smirked at her, reveling in her despair.

Shaiandral tried to break away, tried to run, but he pulled her back against him. Shoving her against the onyx wall, he ground himself against her, his hardness pressing against her. “You're mine,” he hissed. “Mine.”

She snarled and spat in his face. “Never!”

He slapped her, stinging pain spreading through her cheek. She blinked, eyes watering. “You will do as I say. Be what I say. Soon, you will be nothing more than a shell, a host for one of my kind. You might as well give in. You won't escape again. I'll make sure of that.”

I'll rot in the hells first. Shaiandral cried out, trying to pull away. She brought her knee up fast, aiming for his balls, but he moved his hips to the side, as though he'd already known what she was going to do.

He grabbed her hair and pulled her head back. Bringing his face close to hers, he hissed, eyes filled with rage, “You'd best remember your place. We *will* have you. If I were you, I would start behaving. We can always prolong your agony before your shell is taken.”

“Tezca damn you,” she whispered, eyes wide. *I'll never give in. Never.*

The demon shrugged. “Your choice. Xalidora!” he barked.

Within a few moments, the Ice Bitch came from down the corridor, several guards at her heels. “Yes, Master?”

“Take this ... *mortal* down to the chamber again and see that she is appropriately bound. But...” he held up a finger “—don't begin the process just yet. I will be down myself shortly, to see that it is done ... right.” The demon gave Shaiandral a look that sent chills shivering down her spine.

This is it. It's all over. Veren and I ... we are both lost. Forever.

She could do nothing but cry as the demons led her away.

Chapter Twenty

They tortured her for hours. It seemed an eternity. She felt numb as the demons assaulted her body, tearing into her flesh, sending her spiraling ever further into the depths of her despair even as they complained of how long it took. A human would've given in sooner—or died. She, with her shifter strength, could withstand far more.

He's gone. I fought them ... I stayed instead of running towards my freedom, for him ... and he's gone, taken by the demons...

She'd fought them before and had been triumphant, but against these odds? *There's no way I can fight my way out again. They know I'll try. There's too many. I might as well just give in to them now...*

The thought made her feel sick to her stomach; a sudden surge of pain made her retch. They'd been torturing her so long now that she'd become mostly numb to the agony.

Never! she thought fiercely. *I am Sharteka. I won't give in to them. I have to try to escape, if only to warn my people of the threat. I will not let myself be taken over by one of them.*

But how would she escape? The demons weren't stupid. After her escape before, they'd stationed two guards in the dungeon chamber, and two just outside it, along with the demons who continued to torture her. More likely than not, they also had men patrolling the neighboring corridors in case she should manage to beat the odds and escape.

There has to be a way. There has to be.

Hours passed. As her strength and determination waned, Shaiandral's fear and despair took hold. *There's nothing you can do ... they will win in the end. You might as well surrender yourself now. Make it easy on yourself. You're weak and tired. They'll have you soon enough. Give in.*

The seductive thought tempted her. If she surrendered the fight to keep her mind and body, the pain would go away. *Would my thoughts? Would I cease to exist, locked away in a compartment of my own mind?* Maybe that would be preferable. There wasn't anything she could do. She could barely move, let alone gather the strength to fight her way past a half dozen demons in fit Dragon bodies.

I might as well surrender...

No...

Yes...

Oh gods...

She could feel the demon prying at her mind, trying to force its way into her. It clawed at the outer rims of her mind, scrabbling, a constant scratching in her skull. It would be so easy to let it in, let it take hold and force her away into nothingness.

No! The frantic thought echoed throughout her mind. *I can't!*

I could...

Her skull pounded from the conflicting thoughts and the demon's assault. She felt like she was torn in two, each part of herself wanting to go in an opposite direction. Surrender. Fight. Surrender. Fight.

Fatigue drained her body. Shaiandral didn't know how long she'd been awake, but it'd been long past one day's cycle. She wanted sleep, but to sleep was to surrender, and that was exactly what they wanted. *Give in.*

No.

But...

No! I am Sharteka and I will not give in to them so easily! If they want to take me, they will have to fight to do so!

The demon above her hissed. "She's still struggling. We've been at this for hours." He snarled, gesturing wildly at her. "She should've been broken into whimpering pieces by now! We've not encountered this level of resistance with any other we've taken!"

Another demon chuckled under his breath. "We've never tried to take a jaguar healer priestess before, either. It's possible that she's received training to fend off mental attacks."

"The hellsdamned mages were easier than she! You can't tell me that a tribe of primitives barely cognizant of magic has learned techniques that the greatest Dragon mages have not!"

A snort. "I wouldn't underestimate the primitive. She's giving you quite a struggle, as you said."

The demon inhaled sharply, probably about to make a retort, when footsteps caught their attention.

"What seems to be the problem?" Veren's voice echoed through the room. *But it's not him. Veren is dead to me.* "I've given you hours. Are you having so much difficulty with a little girl?"

"She's not just a little girl, my lord. She's..."

"Spare me your excuses." Veren walked to Shaiandral's side. "She'll cooperate. Won't you?"

"Like hell I will," she spat.

"See what I mean?" The demon above waved a hand at her.

Veren smirked down at her. "Don't worry. I'll get through to her." His voice carried a menacing undertone to it that shook her with fear. *What will he do to me?*

He ran a hand over her breast and pinched her nipple, hard. A mew of pain escaped her at the same time her cunt tightened, aroused by the sensations. "She'll cooperate. With enough persuasion."

"Orell..." Veren glared at the younger demon. He blushed and corrected himself. "Sir. With all due respect, that's how Liro ended up splattered against the walls."

Veren leaned on the iron table, glaring intensely at the other demon. "Liro was an idiot and Xalidora a fool for giving him this kind of position. He should've known a tantric magician would take that opportunity to blast him into the ether."

"How do you plan to avoid this?"

He smiled. "You'll see."

Shaiandral breathed hard, fear pounding through her veins. She struggled, frantic, uselessly flailing against iron manacles. She had to escape—but there was no way—

A shadow fell over her face. Shaiandral's eyes widened, and then Veren's face was so close to her own she could feel his hot breath on her skin. But the look in his eyes, cold and menacing ... a sick feeling grew in her gut. *What's he going to do to me?*

"Whatever I want." The demon Orell kissed her, hard, his lips rough against hers. He

forced his tongue into her mouth.

She growled and bit it, tasting blood.

He snarled and yanked away, grabbing her hair tight in his fist. "*Mine.*"

"Never."

Orell didn't reply. He kissed her again. Shaiandral's head spun with dizziness. Her heart jumped into her throat as her vision started to fade. *No ... I can't leave myself open like this ... oh gods...*

Vertigo overtook her and she fell away into the darkness of her own mind.

Ground. Warm grass beneath her feet, rich soil between her toes. Birds chirped. A light breeze tickled her skin. Sun shone down, embracing her with its heat. Shaiandral took a deep breath of pure fresh air, confused. *Where am I? Did he kill me? Or is this what it's like to be possessed by a demon?*

A rough hand grabbed her arm and pulled her backwards. Shaiandral stifled a scream as she fell back against hard muscled chest. Orell held her arms against him and groped her breast with his free hand. "Did you really think you'd escape me so easily?"

She didn't answer. Why should she?

"You'll never escape us," he murmured into her ear as he played with her breast, rubbing the tips of his fingers against her nipple. It hardened, and desire surged through her body. "You'll be ours ... forever."

The thought enraged her. *Never!* With a bestial roar, she lunged forward, trying to break his hold.

Orell laughed, with Veren's voice. He yanked her back against him. "Think you're going to run from me? Where will you go? There's no escape."

He shoved her forward, abruptly. Shaiandral tumbled, falling into the knee-high grass. She glared up at him, laying on her side. "You can't take me." Her voice trembled as she said the words, belying her fears.

"Ah, but I can." Orell spread his hands, and then he was naked, the robes he'd been wearing dissipated into the wind like they'd never existed.

Veren's body. His clean-shaven sharply angled face, deeply masculine, deep blue eyes that longed to devour her, prominent nose. Long light hair that fell to his shoulder-blades, the wind blowing strands across his face. His hairless muscled chest and arms, lightly tanned from the sun. His cock, soft, resting against his balls amongst golden curls.

Gods, she wanted him. She could feel herself growing wetter as her hungry eyes traveled over his body.

But it's not Veren. It's a demon controlling his body. I can't—want— Shaiandral squeezed her eyes shut, trying to force away her unwanted feelings. *It's not him. And this isn't me. I—*

Footsteps crushing grass. She opened her eyes and looked up. Orell stood in front of her, one hand stroking his cock. "You want me."

She shook her head wildly. *No—I don't—oh gods—*

He knelt, placing one hand on her shoulder. "Don't lie to me, Shaiandral. Your body betrays you. Always. Do you think I can't *feel* how your body responds?" A hand snaked out, groping her breast. She gasped as her cunt contracted in anticipation. "You want me."

A roar ripped from her throat. She jerked away from him, lips curled. "I don't want *you*. I want Veren. You might have my body, demon, but you'll *never* have my heart or

my soul.”

Orell shrugged. “Your body's good enough.”

Shit. I have to get out of here. I can't just give in to him—

Before she could react, he'd moved forward. His hand touched her cheek; soft lips grazed hers. Tongue flicked out against her lips, velvet touch sending shivers coursing through her. He smelled like Veren, tasted like Veren, *felt* like Veren ... but he wasn't.

Orell put an arm around Shaiandral's back and leaned her into the tall grass, still kissing her. He rubbed himself against her, his cock stirring to hardness as he ground against her clit.

She tried to pull away, but her own lust surged upwards and took hold. She might not want him, but her body disagreed. The lust she'd been trying to push back burst forth, unwilling to be denied any longer. Wrapping her legs around his hips, she pulled him close, responding to the kiss. Her tongue dove in, sliding against his, sensations nearly overwhelming.

The faintest hint of raised power teased around her. Shocked, she didn't let herself focus on it. It'd do no good to let the demon notice... but he seemed to be too concentrated on her to care. Orell chuckled and bit her tongue lightly. Shaiandral moaned and raked her fingernails down his back. Not hard at first, but as he teased at the entrance to her vagina with his cock, she brought her nails down again, this time clawing through skin and drawing blood.

He hissed, drawing back, reveling in the pain. She tapped the energy from that, starting to weave. Quickly, she grabbed his hair and yanked him back down, digging her teeth into the side of his throat, sucking and licking. Growling, she bit harder, enough to taste blood, still drawing the energy in the back of her mind.

Shai? The sound of Veren's voice echoed in her mind. She jerked with surprise and tried to cover it up by digging her fingernails into Orell's nipples. *Thank the gods. I don't know how long I've got. I've never managed to fight this high before—*

Shut up. Fight. She sent those three words as a directed thought, piercing through the demon's conscious shields.

He yanked back, his eyes narrowed. “What are you...?”

Shaiandral did the one thing she could think of.

She jerked her legs forward, forcing his cock inside her—hard. As she cried out with pain and pleasure alike, and Orell's eyes bulged as he gasped, power rose, a tidal wave that slammed into her. She struggled, trying to channel it into the weave instead of letting it escape her grasp. And hoped like hell that Orell didn't notice.

He kept thrusting into her, fast, sharp, moaning as she circled her hips beneath him. “Hells...”

Right. He wasn't noticing a thing. *Veren?* She reached out, hoping that he'd answer.

I'm here—

Get ready. Not much time— The power flowed, working itself into the weave, singing through her veins as Orell started to come.

What?

Now!

As the demon came inside her, Shaiandral let loose the power, sending it straight into his body. Energy raged as it forced the demon out. Orell screamed and let loose a bolt of magefire. It slammed into her, eating at her skin, pain tearing through her flesh. But she

didn't *dare* lose concentration. She kept forcing her power through, caught the magefire's energy, and sent it back through him.

"*No!*" he screamed, a wail that echoed across the landscape. The body collapsed onto her, spasming. A few minutes later, it stopped.

Oh gods ... have I killed them both? Shaiandral ran a hand through the long golden hair. "Veren?"

He raised his head, blue eyes meeting hers. They held none of the malice that had overtaken them before. Then lips quirked into a lopsided smile. Veren. "I'm back."

She squealed and kissed him.

Chapter Twenty-One

I'm free. The thought reverberated through Veren's mind. He grinned joyfully with the realization. *I'm myself again. No longer the demon's puppet.*

"I thought I'd lost you forever." Shaiandral's soft voice called him back from his thoughts. She curled against him, resting her head on his bare shoulder, her night-black hair tickling his nipple. Something warm and wet trickled onto his chest. *She's crying,* he realized with a start. Her fingernails dug into his skin as she shuddered, the tears flowing harder. *What do I say?*

Awkwardly, he tightened his embrace, drawing her even closer. His mind swam with all the things he wanted to say but could not find the words for. How much he loved her—how much he wanted to be with her—how afraid he had been that he would be trapped within the demon's embrace forever—how he feared she would reject him yet again and return to her people—

Veren pushed them away. "I thought you had, too." He drew in a deep breath, trying to clear his mind. "I tried to fight him, and I made more headway against him than I had with the previous demon, but ... in the end, I could only hope that you would find a way to save me. And as far as I knew, you'd left me for good."

She laughed softly, the sound vibrating into his breast. "That was my plan, to go back to Zeltzin and resume my training. But after Xalidora captured me and I knew the true depths of the demonic infiltration, I couldn't leave you here to fight them. I didn't know if you'd been taken or not, but ..." She sighed. "I had to take the risk."

"Thank you." Veren took her hands into his and kissed them, his heart burning with love. "You have made many sacrifices for me. I don't know how I can repay you."

"You don't have to," Shaiandral whispered. Sitting up, she touched his cheek, pulling him towards her. She kissed him, her lips warm against his. This time it wasn't her uncontrollable lust, but love. A moment later, she drew back, her deep brown eyes meeting his. "I did none of this expecting a prize."

Veren snorted, her words evoking bitter memories. "After ruling a small kingdom, you quickly learn that everything has a cost."

"My love doesn't." Her eyes widened, a slight gasp escaping her.

Shock silenced him. After everything that had happened, he hadn't expected she would admit her feelings for him—if she had them at all. For her to say this ... he didn't have words. Only indescribable joy.

Shaiandral closed her eyes, drawing in a shuddering breath. "I'm sorry. I should've realized..." She opened them, pain shining through. "I will help you battle the remaining demons and return to Zeltzin after your palace is cleansed."

"No—don't..." Veren reached out to stop her. She pulled away. He snarled. "Damn it, woman! Let me get a word in edgewise before you make assumptions and run away from me again." He grabbed her shoulders, making her face him.

She growled and yanked away. "If you don't want me, say so. Don't pity me. I won't have it from anyone, and especially not you."

"Where the *hells* do you come by the idea that I don't want you?" *And I thought Dragon women were infuriating! She makes one of our Matriarchs look calm and*

reasonable! He took her by the shoulders again, holding her close to him, *making* her meet his eyes. “Far from it. I *want* you, Shaiandral. Gods above and below.” It hurt to think of how *much* he wanted her. It was a visceral ache coursing through his body, and far more than mere sexual lust. “I want to *be* with you—your lover, your lord, your partner. Your *mate*.”

“Don't leave me now. Not when we've fought so hard to get this far. Don't give up now.”

Her face softened, and a tear trickled down her cheek. “I thought—after everything—that you didn't want me...”

Veren stared at her, incredulous. *How can such an intelligent woman be so godsbedamned foolish?* “Woman, have you lost your mind? I *told* you before that I want you—remember, it was *you* who ran, not me. I have far more reason to believe you don't want me than the reverse.”

“I know.” She bit her lip. “I—I changed my mind—and I thought you might have as well. After all, you're the Dragonlord. Surely you could have any Dragon woman you want...”

“But it isn't just any woman I want.” He kissed her softly, and then pulled back enough to meet her tearful eyes. “I want *you*, Shaiandral of the Sharteka Clan. I told you I would be here if you returned—and here I am. My heart is yours, and nothing will ever change that—not the feuding between our clans, not demonic possession, not your stubborn-minded nature—*nothing*.” He fell to his knees, hands clasping hers. “I am yours, if you will have me.”

And he meant every word of it. *I never want to lose her again.*

“I...”

Reality wavered, cutting her off. The landscape around them shifted, the ground beneath their feet shaking. Shaiandral cried out, startled. She was on edge, her eyes slitted and teeth bared. “What was that?”

“Without the demon to maintain it, our connection to this realm is fading,” he said grimly. “I'm not a mage; I don't have the knowledge or the training to keep us here. It'll dissipate soon enough...”

“And then we'll end up back in the demon's nest, unable to fight,” she finished.

Veren shook his head. “Not unable. But at one hell of a disadvantage.”

The ground rumbled again. Shaiandral turned to him. “Take me.”

“What?” Normally, he wouldn't object to sex, but ... “Don't you think now is a bad time? We've got to prepare...”

“On the contrary. I think it's the perfect time.” She looked at him seriously. “We know they're vulnerable to tantric energy. So let's raise as much as we can before we're thrown back to the physical plane and send them a message they'll never forget.” Her eyes gleamed with feral anticipation.

Veren grinned as he ran his hand down her breast, her nipple hardening at the slight touch. “Have I ever told you I love the way you think?”

She bared her teeth in a wild grin and trailed fingernails down his chest, not hard enough to scratch—yet. Intense lust-filled eyes traveled his body, and she let out a low growl, her nails shifting to claws. He hissed as her gentle touch turned to a sharp sting of pain. She'd drawn blood.

Shaiandral held his sides, claws digging in but not enough to pierce the flesh. She

lapped her tongue against the shallow cuts, licking up the blood. Veren moaned, his head falling back, her touch making him shiver.

Even the Dragon women he'd been with had never dared to cut him. Beat him, perhaps, but they never drew blood. It was not their place and they knew it. *But she knows nothing of our customs.* That alone sent his cock stirring.

She moved from the cuts to his nipple, her tongue flicking against it as she reached her hand down to his cock. She hesitated, her fingers around the shaft. Veren smiled and guided her, moving her hand back and forth. "Like that," he whispered, thrusting his hips slowly, basking in the pleasure that shuddered through him with every stroke.

With a quick movement, he kissed her, lips meeting hers. She returned it passionately, her tongue licking out against his lips. Her hand tightened around his cock as she dove into his mouth, tongue against his, sensations bursting within his body as she took the initiative.

Shaiandral drew away from the kiss. Before he knew what she was doing, she thrust her open mouth down onto his cock, her lips surrounding the head. Her tongue circled the sensitive flesh, and he gasped. He reined in the impulse to grab her hair and push her down onto him.

He didn't need to. She grasped the base of his cock with her hand and slid her mouth down the shaft till the tip hit the back of her throat. He gasped. "Gods..."

She chuckled, and the vibration against him nearly made him come. But he didn't want to ... not yet, at least.

But she brought her head down again, her lips rubbing against the soft skin, her tongue running against the underside as she moved back and forth. Slow at first, then she increased the speed.

Veren groaned, feeling his cock tingle, pressure building the closer he got. "Slow down..." he gasped, putting his hands in her hair, trying to stop her. "If you keep that up, I'm going to come."

She shook him away and continued, bobbing her head up and down, keeping up speed. He couldn't hold it back anymore. He cried out as he came, ecstasy spreading through his body in a powerful surge as he spilled his seed into her mouth. Shuddering, he enjoyed the sensations as they faded, basking in the afterglow.

But he wasn't through. Not yet. Moving fast, he took her and pushed her back against the grass.

"What..." she started to say, but cut herself off with a gasp as his tongue found her clit. He lapped at her, wanting to give her the same pleasure she'd given him. Shaiandral moaned as he circled, his velvet tongue passing over the soft nub.

He licked downward, between her folds, tasting her sweet nectar as he breathed in the scent of her musk. She whimpered, thrusting her hips against him as he delved his tongue into her opening, pushing as far as he could. Back and forth, in and out. She clenched around him.

When he withdrew, she mewled in obvious disappointment. Returning his tongue to her clit, he slipped his fingers inside her well. He tapped them against the ridged flesh within, rubbing around as he kept licking.

Shaiandral roared as she came, her hips gyrating wildly and cunt spasming. He pressed his tongue against her clit until her thrusts stopped and she fell back against the grass, panting.

Veren crawled up beside her and was about to kiss her when the world fell out beneath them. He slammed back into his physical body, in the demon-filled dungeon, Shaiandral bound to the iron bed.

“Is it done?” one of the demons nagged. “Has she been subverted?”

Veren grinned wickedly as he spun to face the speaker. “Yes. She has.”

Shifting his fingernails into vicious talons, he crushed the man's windpipe. He gurgled as he collapsed to the floor.

Metal exploded as Shaiandral sent a burst of energy through her bonds, shrapnel clattering to the stone floor. The demons burst into action as Shaiandral leapt from the iron slab. They rushed forward, three at him. Veren whirled between them, his years of training taking hold. He didn't think about his moves before he made them. He moved in the moment, time both at once slowed to a standstill and speeding past.

Pain.

Veren roared as agony erupted in his shoulder. Lashing out, he connected with lithe wrist. He grabbed and twisted. A bone crack and a scream.

He didn't stop moving. Yanking the dagger out of his shoulder, he slammed it into the nearest body, to the hilt. A grunt. Veren withdrew it as the attacker fell to his knees. Veren knocked him to the ground, launching himself off the body across the room.

Still surrounded. They converged on him. He was bleeding heavily. *Damn it to the hells.* Three of them, still—*Where are they coming from?*

They sneered as they came closer, brandishing their weapons. They didn't need to speak to make their words known: “If we can't take you alive, then we'll take you dead.”

Shaiandral. Where was she? Veren glanced about the room. No sign of her. Panic. Had they killed her, like they were about to kill him?

No! He snarled with the thought. He wouldn't give in. *Never.*

He launched himself at them, fast. They weren't expecting it. He knifed the center one in the face, slicing through his cheek. The demon screamed. Veren pulled out the dagger, turning around to slash at another as he gouged fingers into the demon's eyes.

Steel pierced his back, driving into his guts. Intense agony combusted through his body. He choked, eyes bulging. *Control—I have to—get—control—*

He tried to push back the pain, tried to force himself to move, but his knees gave way. The demons smirked down as he struggled to regain his dignity. *I can't die—not now—Shaiandral—*

A shadow passed over his face and a feline roar resounded through the dungeon. Shaiandral slammed into the demon, knocking him to the ground. She tore out his throat and turned to face the remaining demon.

He turned tail and ran, feet sliding against the bloody dungeon floor. Shaiandral watched him and began to shift back to human.

Oh gods—no— Veren's head spun. He slumped to the floor, his breathing shallow. His vision blurred, eyes fluttering closed as he shivered. So cold ... *No. I won't—die—on—her—*

Cool hand against his cheek. “All will be well.”

She began chanting and then pressed her hand against the wounds. His flesh tingled as energy coursed through him. But would it be enough? She was a healer, but could she heal the damage that had been done, after expending so much of her own energy?

No ... Veren protested, fighting the tugging darkness waiting to claim him.

But he was too weak. His grip slipped, and he fell away into its embrace.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Xalidora leaned back into the hot tub, wincing as water stung her cuts. It'd soothe them and the bruises eventually—she'd poured a good dose of a healing brew into the water—but for right now, she tried to ignore the pain.

And tried to think of something besides Orell and the Sharteka bitch. Her lips curled into a snarl. *How one creature can cause so much trouble for us...*

She let the thought trail off. *That's of no matter now. She'll be taken—and we'll have a foothold into the Sharteka Clan, ripe for our exploitation.* The thought of her people conquering the fierce were-jaguars as well as the dragons brought a smile to her face.

Soon, everything would be well. The Sharteka bitch would be under control, the Dragonlord's body passed on to a new host ... and Orell would take his leave. *That day can't come fast enough,* she thought darkly.

She'd sunk down deeper into the water when her door slammed open. “Who dares disturb me?” she snarled,

One of her personal guards entered the room. Xalidora cut off the rest of her scathing words as soon as she saw his face. Ruddy, soaked with sweat, and eyes filled with fear. *Something's wrong.* “My lady...” He gasped, trying to catch his breath.

“What is wrong?” Xalidora clutched the sides of the bathtub, apprehensive. She had a sinking feeling...

“Somehow the Sharteka woman banished Lord Orell and freed both herself and the Dragonlord. I only barely managed to escape. They killed all the others.” He looked at her intensely. “We have to go, milady. *Now,* before there's no more time.”

Xalidora nodded and stood, water rushing down her front. She stepped out of the tub, grabbing a length of cloth to dry herself off. “Let me dress, and then we'll go. There's a secret entrance to the catacombs under the palace not far from here.”

“But doesn't the Dragonlord...”

“He knows it exists, yes, but only the Dragonlord and his kin are permitted to know. Even I, as his mistress, would not be permitted the knowledge. That is, if I were truly his mistress and him truly the Dragonlord.” She made a wry smile as she towed her hair and reached for her undergarments.

“And if he realizes where we've gone, what then?”

Xalidora shrugged as she dressed. “He's no reason to think of it, but if he does ... the catacombs are vast. It will take time to find us, if he does at all. Most likely, we'll escape to the surface through one of the tunnels long before they have any comprehension of our location.” She quickly laced up the front of her simple dress and nodded to him. “Let's go.”

* * * *

“Love. Wake up.” Shaiandral caressed Veren's pale cheek. He'd taken one hell of a beating, but she was still charged enough with tantric energy that it hadn't proved difficult to heal his wounds. *Waking him up, on the other hand...*

Veren stirred, his eyelids fluttering. They flew open, pupils dilating to meet the light.

“Shaiandral!” His voice broke as he spoke. Likely it was dry. But—I thought...

She made a wry smile. “You thought you were dead?”

“Yes.”

She brushed away a strand of dark hair that fell into her face. “I brought you back from the dead and banished the second demon. After everything we've been through, do you really believe I would let you die? Or do you doubt my expertise as a healer?”

He blanched and sat straight up, taking her hands. “I would never—!”

Shaiandral laughed, the rich sound rolling off her lips as she crinkled her eyes in amusement. “I'm teasing, love.”

A strange look shone in his eyes. “You've never called me that before.”

Shock hit her. *He's right. I ... I didn't even realize ...* Shaiandral shook her head, tossing her hair. “Do you want me to stop?” she said biting.

“No. I like it when you call me that.” He leaned forward to kiss her, but his eyes flickered to behind her. Veren pulled away with a gasp and scrambled for a weapon that wasn't there. “Get down!”

“What?” She blinked, confused. *What's he so upset about? Oh!* Shaiandral put her hand on his, settling it to the floor. “It's all right. They're safe.”

“They're demons...”

“Begging your pardon, Your Majesty,” one spoke up, “but we aren't. Not anymore, at least. The priestess drove the demons out and healed us.”

“Oh.” Veren looked back to her and bowed his head. “Thank you, my lady. I...” He swallowed hard, choking on the words. “I thought they were dead to me. Not only have you restored my life, you have given me back that of my comrades. I owe you more than I can ever repay.”

“It's a good thing I don't intend on collecting anytime soon, then, isn't it?” Shaiandral winked at him, then sobered. *There's no time for this.* “We've got to get on the move. We have to find Xalidora and stop her, before she has a chance to realize what happened and escape.”

Veren nodded and stood. “She's most likely to be in her chambers, awaiting her superior's instructions.”

Shaiandral jerked her head towards the guards. “Let's hurry, while we still have the element of surprise.”

* * * *

“Milady, we don't have much time.”

Xalidora scowled at her guard as she ran nimble hands over the wall, searching for the switch. The wall was masked by illusion, so it wasn't as if she could just look and find it. “Do you think I'm unaware of that?” she snapped. “If you have nothing helpful to say, then say nothing at all.”

“Yes, milady.” He bowed his head, but the expression in his eyes and face made it perfectly clear that he didn't approve.

“Damn it to the seven hells, where *is* it?” Xalidora growled to herself as she moved her hands frantically. She tried not to let herself think of what would happen should she be unable to find it. *I'll find it. I will.*

Just as she was about ready to give up, her hand passed through the wall. The guard gasped, shocked, and she smiled. “Here it is.” Her finger brushed against a button. She

pressed it, and a swirling mass of energy appeared in the wall.

“What...” The guard trailed off, staring at the portal in wonder.

“This is our entrance to the catacombs. Don't look so shocked, you've seen magic before. Come.” She beckoned with her hand as she stepped one foot into the portal. “We don't have much time.”

* * * *

“Where the hells *are* they?” Shaiandral pounded a hand against the stone wall. It hit harder than she meant to, and she winced. “We've made three sweeps of the palace and our patrols have scanned the immediate jungle. She's nowhere to be found. It's like she disappeared—and she couldn't have. She's not a Mage, right?”

Veren shook his head. “No, she's not.”

“Then she had to have left here by foot or wing. We should've found *some* trace by now!” She buried her hands in her hair, moaning with frustration. “We *can't* lose her now. Where the hell *is* she?” Swearing a Sharteka oath under her breath, she paced the small corridor. “I don't suppose you have any bright ideas?”

Veren didn't answer. Instead, he stared off into space. She tried to get his attention, but still he was lost deep in thought. “Veren?”

“That's it.” A look of amazement passed over his face and he returned his gaze to meet Shaiandral's eyes, his own wide with excitement.

“What?”

“I know where they are.”

She blinked, her jaw dropped slightly. “How?”

“They're in the catacombs beneath the palace.”

“Catacombs?”

Veren took her by the arm and started leading her away, beckoning his men to follow. “Come. I'll explain to you on the way.”

* * * *

They came to a crossroads, where the path forked off in multiple different directions. The guard groaned. “We could be lost in here forever.”

Xalidora hissed. “Don't be ridiculous. There are several exits throughout the catacombs. All we need to do is find one, and all will be well.”

The sound of pebbles falling behind them caught her attention. She spun around, lifting her torch, and her gut trembled as she recognized the forms moving towards them. *This is it ... but I will not appear weak before them.*

“Stop right there,” Veren's voice resounded, echoing off the walls.

Xalidora narrowed her eyes and lifted her chin. *I will take no orders from him.* “So you figured it out, did you, Veren? I wonder how your ancestors would like that you've shown your bloodsworn enemy the secrets of the catacombs.”

“She is my beloved and my betrothed. What my ancestors would think is of no concern to you.” Her jab angered him, but Veren refused to let it show. “You can come with us now, Xalidora, and face your punishment at trial, or we can finish this here and now.”

Xalidora snorted and rolled her eyes skyward. “A trial? Come now, do you think I

would be given a fair trial? I would be put to death. If I'm to die, I'd rather take you down with me!"

With a quick movement, she threw her torch at him. It spun through the air and though he tried to move, the flames caught on his velvet robes. He dropped to his feet, rolling to put out the fire. Shaiandral gasped and dropped to her knees, knocking the torch away.

"No—get her!" They couldn't give Xalidora the opportunity to escape.

Shaiandral stood to her feet, but a laugh echoed through the chamber. "Did you really think you'd take me?" Veren looked up to see Xalidora, a knife in hand. She slashed it across her wrist quickly. His eyes bulged. "*Get her!*" he roared.

His guards jumped to action, but they weren't fast enough. Xalidora screamed a chant in a language he didn't recognize, and slammed the blade into her companion's chest. She disappeared.

Veren groaned and hung his head. *I should have seen it coming.*

"Veren?" Shaiandral's voice. He glanced up to her, then to the guards. He jerked his head at them. "Continue searching the catacombs—but I doubt you'll find her."

As they trudged off, Shaiandral sunk back down to her knees. "I thought you said she wasn't a magician."

"She isn't. Or wasn't." He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "But that doesn't mean the demon isn't. That was—a powerful teleportation spell. She could be anywhere by now."

"So what does this mean?" her eyes scanned his. "That we could be looking forward to the return of hundreds of demons..."

"It means," he interrupted her with a kiss, then drew back enough to speak, "that you and I return home—and prepare for whatever may come."

Epilogue

Shaiandral curled against Veren, luxuriating in the warm featherbed and silken blankets. She laid her head on his shoulder, wrapping her arm around his side. “Do you truly believe this can work?”

“What do you mean?” He looked down, eyes focused on her and only her.

She blushed. “This. You and me. Us. A Dragonlord and a Sharteka priestess. Never before in all of our histories has anything like this happened...”

Veren chuckled and kissed her. “Then let's make history.”

“But ... my training.” Shaiandral fingered his chest, feeling the beast within her stir. “Regardless of what happens between us, I need to gain control over myself and learn to channel this energy. I *am* a healer, and I can never be anything less.”

He smiled. “We can provide transport between here and your priestess's home for your training. Flight is faster than land, after all. It won't be difficult.”

Shaiandral was running out of reasons to say no. Part of her still screamed that she shouldn't do this, that she should return home, be true to her people ... *But if I do that, then I would be untrue to myself—and that is the ultimate sacrilege.*

“Be my queen?” Veren took her hand and kissed it. “I have no illusions about this. It will be difficult, yes, perhaps the hardest thing that either of us has ever done. But I want you. I love you, Shaiandral, and I know you feel the same way about me. Don't you?”

“Yes,” she whispered, lowering her eyes. It should've shamed her to admit it ... but it didn't.

“Then will you be mine? Rule with me as Queen of Dragons, my Consort?” Veren met her eyes, and she knew, without a doubt in her mind, that he meant it. He wanted her. He loved her. *And I love him.*

Time to make the decision. Say no and return to her old life ... a healer-priestess alone. At least she knew what to expect there. But this ... if she said yes, she knew not what would come next. What every day would bring. The prospect frightened her—and excited her all the same.

I love him. I don't want to live without him.

He waited patiently for her answer, but she could see the look of pain in his eyes as she hesitated.

“Yes,” she said, reaching up to caress his cheek. “Yes, Veren, King of Dragons, I will be your wife—and your Queen.”

He kissed her and made love to her slowly, paving the way for a new world and a new life—together.

The End

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