Che Warder Series Book 1

> The Warder's Diinn Viola Grace

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DEDICATION:

To my sister, who didn't freak out when she found out what I was writing.

CHAPTER DRE

Albina Ophelia Warder Lakin was in the middle of restoring a canvas when she got the call. She carefully set aside her tools and wiped her hands on a nearby rag.

She sighed deeply. It was really hard to clean up after those particular curses. They tended to sink into the paint. She needed all of her concentration to pull the residue off the canvas. It was tiring work, but well worth the effort of restoring the masterpieces of centuries.

Her assistant Reginald brought her the phone. "Hello?"

"Am I speaking to Albina Lakin?"

"Yes." She blinked and slid her magnifying lenses out of the way. She put them aside as she waited. A shiver of dread snaked down her spine. This wasn't good.

It was a cold, impersonal voice that had made thousands of these calls before. "Miss Lakin, you need to come to the hospital. Right now. Your grandfather will not last the night. He is asking to see you."

A frozen wave began to course deep in her chest. "I'll be there within the hour. Thank you."

* * * *

One week later...

Alby stood in the opulent office and looked around at the other three faces that had turned out for the reading of the will. Her stepmother and stepbrother were the only family there, and of course Gregg Maccario, her grandfather's oldest friend and lawyer.

He was the only one—aside from herself—that had shed a tear as they lowered her grandfather into the ground two days earlier. Rupert and Emily had seemed to gloat as the dirt was ceremoniously dropped onto the coffin.

"As we gather here today to discuss the last will and testament of Albion Lakin, I would like to take this moment to say that I will miss him, both as a friend and as his lawyer." Moisture pooled in Gregg's eyes. He stopped, clearing his throat, then went on. "He was a hell of a golf player, and one hell of a human being." He took a seat behind his desk and rolled up his sleeves. "Now, with all of the remaining family assembled, let's get down to brass tacks."

"This is the last will and testament of Albion Hector Lakin. Let's dispense with the boilerplate and get to the point. To my daughter-in-law, Emily Morris-Lakin, I leave the sum of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, to be delivered to her upon my natural death, and not before.

"To Emily's son, Rupert Morris, I leave the sum of fifty thousand dollars, which he has no doubt spent already, upon the news of my death.

"And lastly, to my dear granddaughter Albina, who lightened my life and kept me from being an uneducated old man, I leave the remainder of my estate. She will know how I want certain items disposed of, and which of them are heirlooms. I trust her with the history and honor of the Lakin family. My house is hers, and a trust to pay the annual expenses has been arranged. Good luck, Albina, and say hello to Arov for me. He will continue to work for the Lakin family as long as you live."

Gregg concluded his recitation of the will and handed each of them a copy. Alby looked cautiously over at her erstwhile stepmother and brother, shuddering at the fury in their eyes. *They are not going to go quietly.*

Taking the coward's way out, Alby leaned forward to shake Gregg's hand, quickly saying her

goodbyes.

She was out the door and down the hall before Rupert caught up with her. "Albina! Albina, wait a moment." He was not breathing heavily, but was slightly flushed at the effort he had put into catching her. As always, his clothing was impeccable.

"Rupert, how nice to see you again. How is your mother?" She kept things polite while she waited for the elevator. She fidgeted nervously, clutching the copy of the will tightly.

"Furious, but I am guessing that you figured that out already. Finding out that the old bastard had almost cut us out of the will was quite the blow." His handsome features took on a pleasant grin, but Alby wasn't fooled. He had stalked her the entire time that she had lived with him and his mother, while Emily had been married to her father. It was the threat of his unwanted attentions that had driven her to her grandfather's house for refuge.

He had assessed the situation at once and spoken to his son, who then made arrangements for his only daughter to be sent to school near some friends of his. He received updates on her studies on a regular basis and was pleased with her progress.

It was a tremendous shock when her father died in a car accident the summer after she had

Viola Grace

turned eighteen. She had gone home for the funeral, and when Rupert had made a move on her, she left town once again. Regular letters to her grandfather had become daily emails as the years wore on, until his sudden death shook her to the core.

She kept her composure only through an extreme effort of will. "That 'bastard' was my Grandfather. You will excuse me if I am not terribly upset at your mother's anger over money that was never hers to begin with."

"I am not trying to pick a fight with you, Albina. As you may remember, I have always been rather fond of you." He reached out and drew his fingers down one cheek.

She fought the violent nausea that claimed her at his touch and stepped back. The elevator pinged its arrival, and a wave of relief swept over her. "Please keep your hands to yourself, Rupert. I have nothing more to say to you. Goodbye." She slid into the elevator and hit the lobby button. Rupert's smirking face was left swimming in her mind as the doors slid shut and the box descended.

She winced in distaste at the expression that he had been wearing. He was not done with her, that much was certain. The sick lust that had burned in him when she was a teenager had not been banked by the years. The doors slid open on her parking level; she walked quickly to her car and got in, shuddering with the effort to keep her composure.

She drove slowly out of the city to the expansive estate that her grandfather had called home. She swiped her key card through the lock, and the gates swung ponderously open. The stateof-the-art security system was just for looks. The real defense was the wardstones that her mother had placed around the perimeter fence. Renewing the charge had been one of her first chores when she had come to live with her grandfather.

It became a tie to the mother she had never known. One of the first. The acceptance of the Lakin clan, one of the premier warlock clans in Realm, had managed to give her the structure that she needed, as well as great-aunts to dote on her.

Albina lived twenty-eight years of memories as she drove through the park surrounding the house. Each memory had the strong touch of both magic, and her Grandfather. He had seen to her early training instead of sending her to weekend schools in Realm, teaching her to learn to control her gifts.

The warding came easily; it was the alchemy and scientific analysis of varying magical items that gave her some trouble. She eventually mastered enough to please Albion, but not to please herself. It was that early history of analyzing and dealing with badly treated magical objects that had led her into the field of restoration.

With her assistant's help, she 'un-cursed' cursed objects, repaired magical paints and sketches as well as restoring family heirlooms that had faded in power during the centuries since they were created. All skills that she had learned from her grandfather.

Gods, she was going to miss him.

She pulled up to the front doors, her tires crunching the gravel. This was it. He was really gone.

Alby drew herself up, squared her shoulders and left her car in the drive. The gargoyles on duty made wonderful statues, but even more wonderful guardians. The instant that a person with malice in his heart passed the guardians, they would spring to life, defending the Lakin family.

The door swung open at her touch. The interior of the house was immaculate as always. Someone had drawn the curtains back to let the afternoon sun stream into the rooms. She knew who that was.

"Arov? Are you here?"

Of course he was here. It wasn't like he could travel without a member of the family with him.

"Arov?" Her voice broke.

"I am here, Miss Lakin. I am sorry for the

circumstances that have brought you back." The deep, quiet voice emanated from a spot directly behind her. "I will miss him as well. He was a truly great man."

She turned to face him, and when she saw the genuine regret on his bluish-bronze face, she broke. Sobbing uncontrollably, she flung herself into his startled embrace. She let the magic that she had gathered spiral loose, filling the room and causing even the gargoyles outside to shift in discomfort. Her grief filled her and she let it find its way; sparks rocketing around the room, deflecting off the wards that had been set in place to confine magical energy.

Haltingly, she felt his arms come around her, stroking slowly up and down her back. She inhaled deeply, taking comfort from the familiar spice of his scent. It brought her back to the times when he had been assigned to keep her from harm while her grandfather worked. Falling out of trees, opening gateways into Realm in the front yard...all the things that a young witch could possibly get into. It had always been Arov that had been sent out to rescue her.

She needed rescuing now.

"It is the nature of life that it will end, Albina. Albion was old. He had lived his life to the fullest, there were no regrets." His hands continued their soothing motion, letting her come back to herself gradually. "At least you were there with him, at the end. It meant the world to him."

She drew back and tried to smile brightly up at the djinn. "He did seem happy to see me. Even after all this time."

His hands were still stroking slowly up and down her spine, comforting and offering support. "Shall we have something to eat? If I know you, you missed your breakfast." His smile warmed the cold knot that had bloomed when the hospital first called her. She withdrew her hands, noticing for the first time that she had clutched his shirt in her grief. Shaking with emotion, she stepped away.

Food. "Yeah. That sounds nice. Is everything where it was the last time?"

"Not quite. The library is now the kitchen, and the dining room is the lab." A hand on her back steered her to the new kitchen, her head shaking in amusement at her grandfather's penchant for having Arov move the rooms around.

"Your room, however, is still at the top of the stairs, overlooking the apple trees. It is the one room that he would never let me touch." With amusement dancing in his black eyes, he removed a tray from the refrigerator and set it on the sideboard. She peered over his shoulder and laughed.

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Chapter Two

It was the first laugh that she had had in a week. Oh, it felt so good to release the tension with Arov smiling at her delight. She stopped when she felt it edging into hysterics.

All of her favorite foods were represented, and at a snap of his fingers, the hot items steamed gently.

Grabbing a plate, Albina filled it with some of the selections and wandered over to the table. She began to work her way through the hot wings and nachos, then moved on to the tea sandwiches. As the food disappeared, a cup of tea made its way to the setting in front of her.

The gesture made her blink. He never got her tea. Service was not precisely his forte. Arov had been a lot of things to the Lakin family, but a butler was not one of them.

With a hand slightly more steady than ten minutes earlier, she sipped at the cup. "Thank you, Arov."

"It is my pleasure. You seemed to need it."

The heady, aromatic steam soothed her. "I do. Thank you again."

"You are welcome. When you finish your meal, we have much to discuss."

"With a line like that, I think I *am* done." She got to her feet and took her plate to the sink. Under it, as always, sat the tiny gargoyle that acted as the garbage disposal. She put the plate down in front of him, and gave him a little pat on the head. "Nice to see you, Tiny. Have you inherited your name yet?"

The little creature sprang to life under her fingers, tail wagging at her touch. It happily took the plate from her and began to munch quickly at the leftover sandwiches and pickles.

"No, he doesn't have a name yet. It will come soon, though, and you will have to get a new disposal." The voice right behind her caused her to jump, banging her head into the shelf under the sink.

"Ow. Could you not startle me for at least two days?" His arm pulled her upright and she rubbed at the sore spot on the back of her head.

"So you are going to stay?"

"For a few weeks at least, until I get his property straightened out."

His arms crossed over his chest, the serpentine tattoos visible through the soft white muslin of his

shirt. "What are you going to do with the dagger?"

"Dagger?" It took her a moment to remember, "Oh, *your* dagger. I don't know."

She pondered his statement. "Oh, God. I just realized that I, you, the dagger..." She stood silent for a moment. "I thought that when my grandfather died...I mean, he was the last of the Lakin line."

"Not quite correct. You are the last of the Lakin line. Now it is you that I must serve." He didn't look too happy about it.

Frankly, neither was she.

Eight hundred years ago, Arov's father had invited the magus, Arthur Lakin, to rest in his home. Lakin was on the fourth crusade, days after the conquering of Constantinople. Arov's parents were djinn, and helped others with magic within them to flee the city. Lakin caught them opening a gateway to Realm and helped them to evacuate before the rest of the crusaders could reach them. His own powers kept the crusaders at bay until the families had made it through the gate.

His family offered Lakin hospitality, food and shelter. Arov tried to kill him in his sleep, his fury at the destruction of his city boundless. His own father bound him into Lakin's dagger until his family line ended by natural means. If Arov influenced the death of a family member in any way, he would be tied to that dagger for eternity.

The dagger could not be lost, stolen or destroyed, though many generations had tried. It was as much a punishment for the Lakins as for Arov.

Now he was hers.

Oh, hell.

"Uh, you don't have to serve me. You can just go and do...whatever you would normally do. Really." Albina was distinctly uncomfortable. She had no idea what to do with a djinn. Her teenage fantasies had long since worn off.

"Are you sure about that? Normally I sleep."

"In the dagger?"

"Sort of. In the general area of the dagger. More surrounding it, really." Now he was looking amused.

"Oh, um...would you like to help me, then? I mean, to catalogue the stuff that grandfather wanted to send to the Repository in Realm?"

"Certainly. When would you like to start?" His face was getting blurry, the room starting to spin.

She leaned heavily against the counter, shaking her head to clear it. "Uh, now, I guess. Is the room fuzzy or is it just me?"

Large spots of color flew behind her eyes, growing larger. She felt bands of steel around her, then herself being lifted off the floor. Then everything went dark.

Chapter Three

Someone was standing on her head. There could be no other reason for the pounding pulse driving her into awareness. Her eyes cracked open to find a very smug Arov sitting at the end of her bed. He had drugged her.

"Arov, what?" Her voice was a hoarse croak. She tried to turn over and found that her limbs were quite securely fastened to the bed.

"Before your grandfather left for the hospital, he gave me one final order." He stood and began to remove his shirt. "I was to take care of you by whatever means I saw fit. You are to be my woman, and all that it implies."

The swirling tattoos were clearly visible now, black against the blue-bronze of his chest. Twisting and writhing against his muscled torso, alive with magic and the energy of the djinn. He sat back onto the bed, causing her to twist as the mattress dipped in response. One by one, his boots fell to the floor. He unbuttoned and unzipped his trousers, and at that, Albina looked away. She had never seen a naked man up close before. Her inclinations had kept her in her studies for the last decade since she turned eighteen, and her grandfather had been relieved. Her gaze darted back and forth, glancing at the flesh that he revealed, then focusing on the open window behind him that let in the sweet breeze of apple blossoms.

When she felt his weight dip the bed again, her eyes widened in panic as her hands pulled at the restraints.

"Shh. I won't hurt you, but I need to make you mine." His voice tried to soothe her, but she was panicking now. He quieted her struggles by the simple expedience of dropping his full weight onto her.

At the full contact of his warm body against her, she stilled. She whimpered incoherently, then met the warm black eyes above her. A lethargy flowed out of his gaze and into her limbs. She relaxed against him, inch by inch, her body soft against his.

The bindings held her legs apart, and his penis was nudging at the gate to her womb. One of his hands speared through the hair at the apex of her thighs and began to trail around the nerve center to her pleasure. That was the only place that he touched her, his fingers moving faster and faster as her body began to respond.

With his thumb still circling her clit, he worked first one, then two fingers inside her. His eyes widened as he hit her maidenhead. "You are still a virgin?"

Her face flamed. "Yes. I never..."

"Ah, then I will have to take more care with you." With that, he took her mouth in a searing kiss, his tongue stroking hers strongly, then tangling with it. He tasted wonderful, like chocolate and cinnamon. He had always had a sweet tooth. She relaxed under his ministrations and began to welcome the warmth that had started to burn in her belly.

He took his time, gentling her to his touch. Her arms were still trapped above her, arching her breasts into his chest. As her breathing became more rapid, her nipples rubbed against his skin, heating with the friction as her sensations increased.

Each drag of oxygen was both heaven and torture. His chest was smooth and hard; the muscle beneath the skin seemed to be on fire. Her legs began to shift restlessly, searching for release that was only inches away.

"Do you want me now, Albina?" His voice was low, the question asked from his position at the sensitive portion of her neck as he worried it with his teeth. Her breath came out on a sigh as her neck arched in response to his mouth. "Yes, Arov, I want you. I have always wanted you."

At her words, his eyes went hot, and he swiftly drew up to his knees between her thighs. Gripping her hips and splaying her thighs even farther apart, he dragged her body up to meet his.

He examined her sex eagerly, learning every fold and crevice with long, knowledgeable fingers. His exploration was assisted by the slick moisture emanating from her opening.

Two of his fingers returned to her cunt, opening her wide for him. He merely looked at her for a few minutes, heat beginning to build as she saw the approval and lust in his. Obviously he was enjoying what he saw.

His grip shifted to once again cup her hips, and then he was dragging her onto him. Just a few inches of his phallus at first, but rapidly pain began to spiral through her as he pushed against her hymen.

Incoherent protests filled her as he continued to drag her slick passage to cover his erection. His grip shifted for an instant and he drove her onto him, breaking the barrier of the stubborn flesh.

Her scream rent the air, echoing in the chambers of the mansion, waking the gargoyles who were instantly on alert.

With her maidenhead sundered, he lowered

himself on top of her once more and began a rhythm to soothe her devastated flesh. Forward and back, his phallus slid within her; the oceanic tide could not have been more soothing.

Her hands and ankles still bound, she could not grasp at him, nor shove him away. But gradually, with each careful thrust, he was rebuilding what the abrupt entrance had destroyed. She was once again feeling the tension low in her belly, growing with every stroke.

Each pass of his body on top of and beneath hers pushed her closer to the edge. Sweat broke over both of them, coating them with a fine mist of slick dampness. His fingers slid once again between their bodies and across her clit. She flinched in response to the direct touch. With a few circles of his fingers, the coil of sensation snapped, and her back arched up off the bed as the orgasm overtook her.

Her eyes opened wide and her muscles locked, trying to hold onto the joy as long as they could. The side effect was that Arov's cock was both clamped and massaged by the muscles holding him in. He shuddered above her, and at the feeling of heat spurting into her, she guessed that he had reached his tolerance level as well.

His body collapsed against hers. "And so I fulfilled his last wish." It was only a whisper of sound, but it was enough.

So, her grandfather had ordered him. She had wondered. Tears slowly welled from her eyes and she cried for the death of a teenage dream, and the embarrassment of having Arov give her a 'mercy fuck'.

"Uh, could you untie me? This is not really comfortable." The lazy, satiated look in his eyes gave her heart another wrench. This would be the last time that she saw that expression on his face. Damn.

"Oh, of course." The bindings melted into nothing. "You may want to rest now, you have had quite a day."

She rubbed her hands and wrists, bringing them back to life. With him still lying on top of her, she stretched out her feet and rotated her ankles.

"Arov?"

"Yes, Albina?"

"I wish you back into your dagger. Now." Tears continuing to flow from her eyes, she barely saw the wild spiral of energy that he became as he went to reside in his home.

"So, I'll get up, have a shower and get this place sorted out." She rolled to the edge of her bed, wincing at the soreness between her thighs. Well, at least she wasn't a virgin anymore. That ought to cool Rupert down considerably.

It had always been her virginity that he

coveted. Now that was a lost cause.

Slowly, carefully, she made her way into the bathroom. The shower started up without a murmur and she eased the sore muscles of her shoulders and thighs under the pounding jets.

Now what was she going to do? She watched the trickle of blood from between her thighs stain the clear water, and shook her head. She would leave him in the dagger for a few days, then, when she was emotionally no longer a wreck, she could deal with him as an adult.

The first thing she needed was to bring the unfinished commissions that she had been working on to the mansion. She fished her cell phone out of her bags. Wandering around the house naked and unconcerned, she began to make her calls.

"Reginald?" He hated being called Reggie. "Can you send all of the first quarter's commissions to me at the manor? Great. I have a lab to work in here, so I should be fine. Just use a courier. Okay, fine, bring them yourself, but call me when you get to the gate. I have to let you in. See you tomorrow."

She hung up with a rueful grin. The next call was to her best friend, her cousin. She sat in front of a mirror and drew her fingers across it. Anryn's face soon took the place of her reflection.

"Hey, cousin, I am sorry to hear of your loss.

Albion Lakin was a great man and a better alchemist." Her olive-toned features were somber; not a normal expression for her. She was usually obnoxiously cheerful.

"Thank you. I know that he thought well of you as well."

"That is extremely flattering." Anryn paused thoughtfully. "Okay, Alby. What do you need?"

"I'll let you know when you get here. You can come through the mirror in the great room. I'll be there in a minute."

"See you soon." The mirror winked out and once again Albina was looking at her own reflection, her white hair glowing slightly from the magic she had just been using.

It was the legacy of her early attempts at an illumination spell. She had gotten the spell to work, but it had bonded to her hair. Now, every time she was stressed, or used magic, she glowed.

She was glowing now. What was she going to do about Arov?

A peremptory knocking was coming from the great room, and she cursed and hurried down the hallway to touch the mirror over the couch. As soon as her hand came into contact with the silvered surface, a hand emerged from the glass, followed immediately by the rest of her cousin.

Anryn's skin was olive green in color, with flowing black hair. She usually wore a glamour to make herself look more human, but did not bother with friends and family. Her exotic presence lit up the room, her amused gaze reminding Albina that she was still naked.

Anryn's mother had been a dryad; her father, a Warder with environmentalist tendencies. He had been warding old trees to preserve them from the lumber industry, when he met his match in a dryad from one of the trees. Mylawith had been enthralled at the thought of a human protecting trees and was immediately smitten. Thus it was a perfect match, producing Anryn, the most powerful Warder in current history.

Anryn took one long look at Albina, then walked forward to give her a hug. She dwarfed her small cousin by almost a head, taking the willowy description to absurd heights. Most men were not as tall as Anryn, yet she carried the extra height with dignity and grace.

"So it isn't all about your grandfather. Something else is up as well." She got right to the heart of the matter, pulling away from Alby and examining her closely.

Her eyes flared green as she used one of her talents to *read* her cousin. "It's a man. Wait, not quite a man. You have known him a long time, and he has finally shown interest in you, and you don't know what to do. Am I right?"

"What was your first clue?"

The focus came back. "You're wandering around the dining room buck naked, and you have a hickey on your neck. Okay, Alby. Who is he?"

Albina sighed deeply and reached for the dagger. "He's the family djinn. His name is Arov, and my grandfather wished for him to look out for me, so he did. By taking me for himself."

Anryn stood, astonished, as she looked down at the antique metal. Then she began to laugh. "So your first time was with a djinn? Lucky. Mine was a goblin. I'm thinking you got a much better deal."

Alby made a face. "It isn't like I had a choice. He sedated me, then tied me to a bed."

"Ohh, kinky. So where is he now?"

"I locked him into the dagger. Do you think you can help me free him...permanently?" She would take any help she could, and if anyone could figure it out, Anryn could.

"Well, I don't know much about djinn personally, but today is your lucky day."

"How do you mean?"

"It's Djinn Market day in Realm. Get dressed and let's go shopping." She waited until Alby dragged on a blouse, skirt and sensible shoes. Then her hand grabbed Alby's shoulder, and she turned her to the mirror. "Bring the dagger and one of those tacky lamps that your grandfather was so fond of."

Chapter Four

The step through the mirror was always fun. Quicksilver was rushing around them, and then a bright rainbow exploded in their faces. The first time, Alby had been terrified. After that, it was a great ride.

They stepped out into the perpetual clear sky of Realm. Various magical creatures were emerging from the other mirrors surrounding the main transport area. Anryn waved hello to a few of the other patrons of the bazaar, then led the way to the Djinn Market.

Djinns of various ages were shopping for and vending different items of exotic origin. They specialized in the rare and expensive. Contrary to popular belief, the genie in the bottle was a punishment that was only one step above a death sentence. Most djinn lived free as regular magical creatures, like elves, goblins and dwarves.

Albina trailed silently in Anryn's wake, letting her do all the talking. One after another, the djinn vendors shook their heads, amused, but unable to assist them. The bright glass lamp that she held in her hands was causing a great deal of amusement. It was so tacky as to be funny.

Finally one smiled at Anryn, nodded and gestured for her to follow him to the back of the shop. She in turn gestured to Alby, and soon they were both seated on cushions in the spicy, scented dimness of the tent in the back of the stall.

The djinn merely smiled at Alby, served her tea, then sat back with his own cup in his hand. "So, you want to free a djinn from his binding, do you? There are only two ways."

Alby sat forward. "What are they, please?"

He seemed startled by the polite nature of the request. "Do you have the containment object with you?" He knew instantly that it was not the lamp. No glass lamp would be able to contain a djinn, but it was lack of knowledge that they did not spread about. Metal was the only way to contain one. Lead, gold, brass, or fine Damascus steel.

"Yes."

"Put it on the table."

With trembling fingers, she took the dagger out and put it on the table, carefully facing the blade east-to-west.

"How long has it been in your family?"

"Eight hundred years or so."

"The name of the djinn inside?"

"Arov."

The vendor blinked at her. "Did you say Arov?"

"Yes."

"What is his first name?" He seemed eager now, and he leaned forward to carefully examine the dagger. She did, however, note that he didn't touch it.

"What?"

"Arov is his family name. You can't free him until you have his true name."

"Oh. I just thought..."

"The first way to free him is to wish him to die. It is not pleasant, but it is a type of freedom."

She grimaced in distaste. "Not acceptable. What is the other?"

"Is he bound by a bloodline?"

"Yes."

"Then when the last member of that bloodline dies, they must wish him free, with their own blood used to break the bond. If they don't, he will remain bound to the dagger, but be able to be passed from owner to owner. One of those can just wish him free, but that almost never happens."

"So you mean to say that until the last member of the binding line dies, he can't be set free?"

"That's correct."

Alby sipped meditatively at her tea, absorbing the information she had gotten. Anryn sat quietly beside her, eyes alert and attentive, watching every move in the room.

"Well, I guess I'm stuck with him then." If she hadn't been watching closely, she would not have noticed the expression of complete relief that passed over his features. "So if I can't set him free, how do I control him? I owe him a bit of revenge." She heard her cousin let out a snort beside her. One sharp elbow to the ribs, however, and the dryad subsided.

"What do you need him to do?" One eyebrow rose in concern, again, an odd emotion from this stranger.

"I just want to hold him in one position for a while. I owe him something. Plus, I need to get his first name out of him." A blush rose in her cheeks, and thankfully the djinn seemed to get the hint.

"I believe that I have just the thing. Please wait here a moment." With a rustle of silks and brocade, he was gone.

"Are you planning what I think you're planning, cousin?" Anryn looked pleased and scandalized at the same time. Her voice was low, so as to not carry into the other chambers of the tent.

"Nothing of the sort." An evil grin fell over her features. "I just want him to know how uncomfortable being confined to a bed can be. Fair play." "Is it revenge you're after, or something more?" With her usual deadly insight, Anryn had hit it right on the nose.

Alby took a long, deep breath. "For years, growing up in that house, I dreamed of something more with him. But now that I am an adult and can take any man I choose into my bed, I still only want him. Sad, huh?"

She didn't answer, but gently took Alby's hand in her own. "Not sad, but don't do anything to risk yourself. You deserve the best."

They were interrupted by the return of the merchant."Here we are. Just call him out of the dagger and we can get these on him. You may not be able to do it on your own." The djinn came back in with a rustle of silk, holding a black velvet tray covered with writhing silver snakes.

"Wrap them up. We are not going to do this here." Anryn stood up and took the dagger with her, handing it to Alby carefully.

"But it would be so much easier to do it here, where I could help you." He seemed angry now, his bluish face purpling with agitation.

Anryn drew herself up to her full height, greened her body all over in agitation to match his discoloration and stated once more, bearing the full blast of glamour on him. "We are leaving. You have your payment, and we will have the binders." "Yes, of course you will. Please, here they are. Take them with my blessing, and enjoy the use of them." The vendor bowed low. Anryn took the tray of silver snakes and with a jerk of her head, took Albina with her out of the room.

"C'mon, we had better be quick." Anryn strode off at a comfortable pace, dodging other customers at the bazaar with slick ease. "That ain't gonna hold him long."

"Why? Why did he want me to bring Arov up there?"

"I think that he wants your little friend. If he gets you to use the binders on him, then he can convince you to get the true name and take over the dagger, and Arov."

"Oh, my God. I can't believe that I didn't see that. But why are we hurrying?"

"Because as soon as he realizes that we left his tent with the binders he is going to come after us, so we had better get to the mirrors quickly." She looked back over her shoulder and says, "Very quickly."

They were coming. Two large bluish figures were weaving themselves through the crowd, approaching rapidly.

Albina took the lead, sprinting through the crowds, moving faster with every step. As a shout rang out behind them they both propelled their feet at full speed.

"Anryn, start the spell!" They were neck and neck as they hit the mirror station.

There were no spells or chants, only power flaring in bluish light as Anryn powered up the mirror that they had come through."Already done! Jump!"

In a flash of rainbow light, a doorway appeared that would lead them into Alby's living room.

They jumped. Light exploded behind their eyes as the magic engulfed them and threw them through the dimension behind the mirror. Then they tumbled through onto the dining room floor and turned to look into the closing portal.

Laughing as the doorway closed on the djinn's angry face, they sat up from the floor where they had fallen.

"Ow, I think I have carpet burn." Albina checked her elbow, grimacing in mock dismay.

Anryn shook her head and laughed again. "Well, it's been fun. But it's past my dinner time, and we both know you don't have nearly enough food for me here."

"I honestly couldn't tell you. I haven't checked lately. Arov just makes it appear." She sighed heavily. "The longer he is in there, the worse I feel. My grandfather let him come and go as he pleased. It feels wrong to leave him in there."

"Well, you are just going to have to follow your heart. And have me over for lunch when you get it all sorted out." Anryn turned back to the mirror that they had just entered from. "See ya soon, Albina, don't be a stranger."

"Bye, Anryn. Thanks again."

Albina took the lamp and put it into the fireplace behind some logs. If she needed it again, it would be handy to have it where she could find it.

So, now she was left with a djinn in a dagger and a set of bindings in the form of snakes. She looked carefully at them. They seemed to have stilled. Maybe they had to be in proximity to a djinn to be active. That would make sense.

She carefully picked one up, holding it at eye level. The silver was bound in a clear film, and the feel of it was magic. That would make the silver a liquid. This might be why it drained the power of the djinn and made them helpless.

She picked up another, holding one in each hand. Then she took a deep breath and stated, "Arov, come out of the dagger."

One second later, arms were around her and a determined mouth was on hers. His mouth was sweet and warm, and she wondered, not for the first time, if he ate while in the dagger.

"Ah, Albina, I have missed you. I have thought about while we were together and regret only that I could not take more time." His lips drifted softly against hers and she felt her eyes flutter shut. The snakes began to writhe in her grasp and she released one in surprise, then the other. Her arms went around his neck and her head fell back as she relaxed into his kiss.

"What the hell?" Suddenly she could not enjoy the warmth of his embrace; his hands flew from her as he tried to fight the binders writhing against his flesh.

The two that were on the floor were spinning into place around his ankles and as they closed a flash of energy came from them, locking his power within him.

Arov was looking at her in astonishment. "It's only temporary, Arov. Until I get what I want."

A sheen of sweat coated him, and he looked defeated. "And what is it that you want, Albina?"

"I want you on your back, held so that I can learn you. So that I can learn a man's body, period."

"When?"

"Now would be good. Shall we?" She lead the way up the stairs and into her bedchamber.

He followed her in silence; she could feel his irritation at her back.

Chapter Five

The door to her room swung open as they approached. She waited until he had entered the room and closed it behind him.

"On the bed, please, Arov. Legs about a foot apart, with arms wide. I trust that the restraints will hold you?"

"Yes, Miss Lakin." His subservient mode was on full. He assumed the position that she had described and lay there, sullen and not aroused. He was barefoot, but his trousers and shirt were still firmly in place.

She winced at his return to formality. Moments before she had been Albina, now she was Miss Lakin. Considering what she was about to do, this was not the mood she wanted him in. She sighed heavily. "Arov, this is my chance to give and take pleasure from you. Are you sure that you don't want to help me?"

"It is humiliating to be powerless and trapped in this manner." His voice was a sullen grumble. "Now you know how I felt." She climbed onto the bed and sat back on her heels. Their gazes caught and held as she tried to explain her loss of control at his hands, and her need to reciprocate.

Finally, a grudging acceptance flickered through his eyes. An arched brow challenged her to take what she wanted.

"Yes?" Although this was her will and not his, she still wanted his agreement.

"Yes."

"Well, um. I guess I should undress then."

"It usually assists in the process, yes."

She blushed and fidgeted with her buttons nervously. "So you will offer no hindrance, but no help either?"

"Exactly."

"Okay." Quickly, before she could change her mind, she was off the bed and peeling off her blouse. The skirt that she wore pooled around her ankles as she release it. She kicked off her shoes, and Arov laughed as they hit alternate walls in her haste.

She blushed, trembling in confusion as she tried to think of what to do next. Then, closing her eyes in terror, she stripped off her bra and panties. She clambered back up onto the bed and blindly fumbled her way to Arov's shirt.

Her eyes opened a tiny bit so that she could make out his burnished skin in a wavy blur. She wrestled open first one, then the entire row of buttons, exposing his flesh to her eager hands.

She drew her trembling fingers down his chest, trailing over the tattoos. He inhaled sharply at her touch, and she jerked her hands back in surprise. Her eyes flew open and she met his surprised gaze as she tried to still the shaking.

He spoke quietly. "You really are frightened, aren't you? You won't get very far like that. Come up here."

Trembling, her breasts tightening up with the gooseflesh that rippled over her, she crawled up his body, keeping him between her knees. She straddled his hips.

Her hair was flaring violently with power and agitation, almost blinding them both as he whispered, "Kiss me."

Taking a deep breath and slowly letting it out, she lowered her lips to his in a gentle kiss that soon had a soft warmth blooming within her. Between her thighs, she felt his body respond to her nearness and the gentle contact with her body.

It gave her the confidence to deepen the kiss. Slowly, her tongue crept out to duel with his, his lips opening beneath hers and welcoming her into his mouth. Suddenly he took over the kiss, turning it from a gentle exploration to a passionate ravaging in a matter of seconds.

She heard herself moaning and pulled away

from him, blinking in confusion at the heat that was now beginning to beat a pulse in her belly.

He smiled at the look on her face and let the warmth in his own body transmit into his eyes. She smiled tremulously in return, and began the task that she had set herself.

She sat back and her eyes widened even more at the ridge of flesh that had sprung to life beneath her bottom. Alby rocked experimentally against him, feeling his flesh twitch in response. Her hands slowly began to caress his chest, circling, scratching and rubbing lightly. Each reaction that he had to her touch, she catalogued in her mind. Every twitch, shudder and flinch that emanated from him, as well as the increase in hardness beneath her, told her she was on the right track.

A little more confident now, she leaned forward to kiss him again. This time it was her mouth that ravaged his, and his chest heaving when they parted. Arov's lids were heavy with lust and he moved to take her mouth again, so she took his neck instead.

Licking and sucking at the cords that grew taut at her approach, she tasted as much of his skin as she could reach with his arms still bound by the shirt. His skin was smooth, with a hint of sweat and musk. Inhaling deeply, she learned the scent of his arousal. Her tongue traced the spiraling tattoos on his chest, snaking over his nipples and gnawing gently until a groaning shudder passed through him.

Her head drew back sharply. "Did I do something wrong?" Insecurity came flooding back in a rush, quelling the heat that had been rising to a fever pitch.

"No. Please, you are doing fine." He laughed, a harsh sound, as his eyes flashed open.

She watching him for a long moment, carefully watching the flush running under his skin.

Alby resumed her ministrations to his chest, licking a path to his navel. She smiled and paused as the muscles of his abdomen drew tight at her mouth's caress. She blew on the delicate, wet trail that she had left behind, and his skin shivered in reaction.

She scooted down onto his thighs, then hovered over his knees as she drew her fingers to the waistband of his trousers. Gently and carefully, she opened the snap and drew down the zipper. She placed her hands flat on his abdomen, spreading the trousers open wide and freeing his erection.

Her hands moved forward as if of their own accord, one on his shaft and one gently cupping his balls and rolling gently. Arov arched, his heels and shoulders pushing into the mattress.

Albina fell backwards and lost her grip, fortunately for him. She teetered for a moment on

the edge of the bed, then fell to the floor with a thump.

"Albina. Are you all right?" Arov disobeyed her orders and sat up in concern.

She began to laugh. "I knew I wasn't cut out to seduce men. I'm far too clumsy."

"I beg to differ, you were doing fine." His voice was still husky as he viewed her naked form splayed out on the floor.

"Was I? I couldn't tell." She eyed the erection that beckoned her like a lodestone. "I guess I will just have to try harder." She stood, rubbed her sore backside gently, and once again mounted the bed. "As you were, Arov. Please," she added in a husky tone, and he slowly lowered himself back onto the bed. This time, she kept one hand bracing herself on the linens, wrapping the other around the shaft of his cock.

Slowly she worked her hand down, then up. She moved to take him in her mouth, flicking her tongue over the flaring head, licking at the pearly drop that had formed. He groaned in response, and she kept her balance as he shifted and shuddered.

She sucked on him slowly, then shifted to balance on her knees as he held still for her ministrations. She took her time as she began to rub at her clit with two fingers, stroking his shaft with the other. Slowly she built her own orgasm, her folds growing slicker with every moment. Each groan from him drove the flames in her body higher as she approached her release.

She could feel her own heat, and drove her mouth around his cock with worshipful devotion. He was leaking precum almost constantly now, her tongue nipping and removing every drop. He tasted strange, but she found the flavor rather appealing. At least coming from him.

His balls tightened beneath her and she drew her head back. A shout erupted from his throat as his cock spurted in her mouth. She drew back after the first load hit her mouth, so the next few caught her on the chin and throat.

She sat back on her heels, still frantically fingering her clit until a shivering wave of tremors locked her own gasps in her throat. She crawled off him and lay down, using his arm as a pillow. She sighed deeply, "That was nice."

"Yes, it was. Do you have what you need of me?" His voice was flat.

"Oh, the links, of course." She reached over him, her breasts rubbing against his chest as she flicked off the first binder. She gripped the snake in her hand, crawled backward to his other arm and pulled off the other.

She tossed them out into the hall, and they slid into the room across from hers. The bands on his ankles were removed by climbing over him and snapping them off, to launch them in the same manner. "There, all gone."

"I see. Thank you." His voice was rather amused. It suddenly dawned on her that she was straddling his abdomen, he was aroused again and she was still completely naked.

"Uh, yeah. I'm done. I'll just get out of your way now."

His hands caressing her buttocks belied her last statement. She shifted and tried to move off him, but his fingers dug in and held her in place. "Where will you go?"

"Oh, I'm expecting a call. My assistant is dropping off some projects, and needs me to get him through the safety gate."

His fingers were now running up and down her backside, making circles on her buttocks and lower thighs. She realized with shock that she had given him full access to her body, and had no way to rescind it. One of his hands wrapped around her thigh as his deft fingers worked their way inside her. He began to pump them gently.

She moaned and arched her back like a cat, trying to drive them into her and keep them there. He pulled his slick fingers out, and she mewled in protest. Her hips shifted toward him to try and recapture him in her heat.

"Arov, please." It was a whimper; her body had flared out of control at his touch. She could almost smell the magic coming from him now.

Suddenly she was pulled back by her hips, and his thick cock was making its way within her. Air rushed through her lips as she closed her eyes to savor the sensation. Oh, gods, it felt so good to have him within her again.

He slowly began to move, using his grip on her hips to pull her down onto his cock, and then to raise her to the point that he almost slipped from within her. Her eyes closed. The only thing that she knew – that she could feel – was him sliding in her cunt and the power flaring around them.

Faster and harder he drove, his hips arching up to bury himself to the hilt. She could feel the impact of his balls on her clit as she came slamming down onto him. With a buck, a moan and a shudder she came, her body trying to slow his pace and enjoy its own rhythm.

He kept plunging within her until the last spasm eased, then turned her to face him. He moved out of her and she mourned the loss of his heat, until she heard his announcement. Then he had her complete attention.

"Albina Lakin, I would like to fully introduce myself." Arov drew her down to him and kissed her gently. "My name is Imaran Arov, of the House of Nayan Tarak."

"Imaran? But I thought...I mean...you just..." She stopped and shook her head. Her hair fell around them in a glowing cloud of silk. "Did you just willingly give me the power of your true name?"

"I did."

"Why?" She was truly appalled, and she knew it showed on her expressive face. He began to laugh and pulled her onto the bed next to him, then loomed over her in a playful manner. He began to drop tiny licks and kisses on her face and neck. "Because you freed me when you didn't have to, and kept me restrained only to learn to please me. Those are not the acts of a woman that I cannot trust."

"But how do you know that you can trust me?" She wove her fingers through his hair, tugging his head up so that she could look him in the eye.

"Look down." He directed her gaze to her own breasts, which now bore an echo of the tattoos on his chest.

She tried to sit up and examine them further, but he merely leaned some of his weight on her to keep her in place. She frowned. "How did those marks get there? I didn't feel anything!" She was slightly indignant.

Then it was his turn. "Did not feel anything? I know it has been a while since I took a woman, but I never recalled one as referring to my manhood as nothing. Most of them did feel it when it was giving them pleasure." He was scowling at her now, but she could see the humor lurking behind the stern mask. Funny, she had never thought of him as having a sense of humor.

"That isn't what I meant! Of course I felt you...I mean...Damn it, how did those tattoos get there?" She tried to cross her arms over her breasts, but was thwarted in that as well.

"They are the marks of my house, my family. I may be bound to you, but now you are bound to me as well." His head dipped and his tongue slid out to trace the marks on her breasts. She felt the shock of having magic wrapped around her sensitive mounds and gasped as his tongue made the designs come alive.

Magic snaked around her breasts, wrapping and tugging with a will of its own. She shivered as her nipples contracted in reaction and Imaran's mouth engulfed them, one at a time. He exhaled heavily over the wet peaks and smiled at her clutching at his shoulders in response.

He bit gently on one straining nipple and was rewarded with her shriek, wetness flooding her thighs. She had not felt this aroused the other times that he had touched her. He repeated his bite and her hips rocked in response, thighs rubbing together as her clit came to straining attention.

He pried her thighs apart with one knee, sliding his hips between them. Imaran's head remained between her breasts as he began to ease into her seeping pussy. The head of his erection stretched her wide open and she smiled through the sweat that was beginning to coat her as he started to move. She would bet that he had used his magic to prove his point.

But who cared? Alby suspended her sense of time and just enjoyed the sensations of him thrusting slowly within her. All too soon, he was driving harder and faster, moving toward his own orgasm. As he groaned her name and shuddered inside her, she felt the sting of magic in her breasts, running in a burning line to her clit and causing her to join him over the precipice.

She could feel the jets of seed inside her, each causing a new spasm of her own contractions in response.

Her eyes fluttered closed and she lay back, satiated. She flinched as he withdrew. Their joined fluids began to seep from her channel, across her anus and onto the sheets beneath. Suddenly the whole wet-spot problem that her cousins mentioned made a lot of sense. He moved off her body and lay next to her, his head pillowed on her breast, one arm draped over her hips to hold her in place.

Despite her aches and the mild discomfort that she felt, she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Six

Alby woke up in rose-scented darkness. Well, not total darkness. There were candles hovering around her room, casting a golden glow around her, but not disturbing her sleep.

The rose scent was due to the thousands of petals that were strewn across the bed, dusted with gold powder. She raised her hand, and giggled at the shower of flower petals and gold that cascaded to the bed. She sat up and they tumbled from her torso, pooling at her hips. A few tenacious petals stuck to her breasts and belly. She smiled and looked around for her lover.

He appeared in a shimmer of energy with a tray of food in his hands. "Your dinner, Albina. You haven't eaten all day."

"Well, I wouldn't say that." She grinned impishly and left him to figure out her meaning.

It didn't take long. His slow smile caused her stomach to flip. "You are correct. But you still need sustenance." "I agree. What do you have for me?"

"Hmm...I didn't want to leave you too long, so it is mostly a selection of fruits, breads, meats and cheeses. The wine is on the floor behind you."

Alby leaned over the edge of the bed and sure enough, there was the wine and two goblets. It was her favorite vintage. Her own.

"Where did you get this? I thought that Grandfather said that he had consumed the last of it at New Year's."

"He did. This is from the cellar in your house."

"What? How did it get here then?"

"Silhar, I am a djinn." He shook his head. Shooing her to one side, he sat next to her on the bed. He was surrounded by rose petals, but looked not the least bit effeminate. The red of the petals drew the blue out of his skin and caused him to glow in the candlelight.

"*Silhar*? What does that mean?" She watched his hands work at the wine bottle and open the strawberry wine that she had made two years before.

He deftly poured the wine into the two goblets. "It's djinn for beloved."

"Am I?" She sipped delicately at the wine, laughing at her own giddiness. She felt different, somehow, as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

His hand reached out to grasp her chin. Firmly

he tipped her head back until their eyes met. Not an easy task. She wouldn't look at him.

"Albina!"

Her gaze flicked to his, and locked.

"You are my *silhar*, or the magic would not have taken you like it did." His fingers caressed her cheek, and her eyelids fluttered shut.

She opened her eyes once again and touched his own jaw with her fingers, shivering with delight as he turned his head to kiss her palm. "This is a little sudden for me. I don't have a lot of experience with this sort of thing."

He grinned again, "I know."

She sighed deeply and reached for the food. "Yeah, I guess you would."

She ate in silence, noting absently that he did not join her. "Don't you eat?"

Come to think of it, she had never seen him eat.

"I eat when I am alone. It is not appropriate for me to eat with the guardians of the dagger."

"You might have to adapt your reasoning. If, as you say, I belong to you and you belong to me, then there is no reason for you not to have some fruit now?" She bit into a ripe strawberry, catching the juice on her tongue as it tried to run down her chin.

"You are absolutely correct." He had an intent look on his face as he watched the trail of juice she missed run over her chin to drip onto her breast. Her hand came up to wipe it away and was caught by his. He drew her forward by her wrist and applied his mouth to the strawberry juice on her nipple, licking and sucking with fervent attention.

She moaned, almost choking on the rest of the berry, then braced her hand on his shoulder. "That's not what I meant." But she was enjoying his caress too much to put much force behind her protest.

"Perhaps I have been short-sighted in my habits. I think you need to reacquaint me with the social mores of eating with a companion." His eyes danced with mirth again. He moved past her to situate himself against the pillows. Dragging the tray within his reach, he lay with his body exposed to her and his arms crossed over his chest. "Feed me."

With good humor, she scooted up next to his torso and reached for a slice of cheese. She broke it into pieces with her fingers, moving one piece to his mouth. As he parted his lips, she popped it in and drew her hand back.

"I don't bite," was his grumbled response.

She looked down to her breasts and the obvious marks around her nipples, then back to his face, raising one eyebrow in challenge. "I beg to differ."

Next, she selected a piece of apple. It was too large to for him to eat in one bite, so she held it as his strong white teeth bit through the flesh and peel. Juice leaked from the corner of his mouth and without thinking about it, she darted forward to lick it up.

This simple instinct gave birth to one of the sensual kisses that Alby had most ever experienced. Magic flared between them, circling all points of contact, flowing from flesh to flesh at every point that they touched. The djinn magic flowing from him had a wild, musky taste, like a desert spice. She knew that her warder magic had almost pine fresh scent; it was an odd an combination that left her light headed.

Shaking, she broke the kiss, her body screaming in protest. "Wow." She leaned back on her heels and turned back to the tray with studious focus. Unthinkingly, she took the rest of the apple slice and popped it into her own mouth, looking for the next tidbit to feed to her djinn. At his groan she realized what she had done, and glancing over, she saw the pearly drop at the head of his cock that eloquently spoke of his interest.

A tiny piece of bread was paired with a morsel of sliced meat, and as she placed the offering in his mouth, she let her thumb graze the wet fullness of his lower lip. She knew that her own lips were probably just as swollen.

She ruthlessly reined in her lust and began to feed him in earnest. Light caresses ensued, and by

the time the tray was depleted by one quarter, she was lounging on his chest and feeding him with one hand. The other was bracing her against him, her breasts crushed to his chest as she fed both of them, one tiny morsel at a time.

They were both laughing as she tried to manage the food with one hand while keeping her balance against him. He kept one arm around her to keep her from taking another trip to the floor. She licked the juices and crumbs from him, and he did the same for her. Of course, she occasionally missed and had to chase a drop across his chest, but he didn't seem to mind.

She giggled as he lifted her to return the favor for her when she let a morsel slip as well.

As their bodies heated, the smell of the roses grew sweeter. The petals clung to every moist portion of her body, and as the perfume of her body reached her own nostrils, it blended seamlessly into a heady musk that caused Imaran's eyes to heat.

"Enough." He lifted her above him and settled her thighs astride his hips. Teasing the petals of her sex apart, his fingers stroked deeply, his thumb rubbing against her clit. Her eyes closed and her hips began to move in time to capture his fingers as they moved inside her. The wet sounds of their union caused even more of a flush to rise beneath her cheeks and down her breasts. Then in a move that caused her to jump in surprise, his fingers left her moist depths and circled her tightly puckered hole in a slow caress, then pushed inside with gentle insistence. "What are you...?"

With his fingers still buried inside her ass, moving softly, he flipped her onto her back and came down on top of her. She squealed as he pushed insistently into her and as his cock filled her, her body remained clenched around his invading fingers. She went over the edge before he even got fully seated inside her. She screamed and arched, forcing his cock deep and his fingers deeper. Her throat locked as she struggled for air, and she lost consciousness.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The morning was creeping through the window as Alby woke. She had been bathed, her hair combed and braided, and a loose pair of trousers and a tunic made of gauze covered her. She was also not in her bedroom. She was in Imaran's.

The mahogany four-poster bed was hung with blue silk, complimenting his coloring. A wardrobe was against one wall, again in rich, dark wood. A large mirror took up the other solid wall. She wandered over to it, stroking the inlaid wood of the frame. It tingled as she touched it, and an image appeared. It was her house. Her fingers brushed against it again, but was unable to improve the focus.

She went into the bathroom down the hall, the gauzy clothing flowing around her, and attended the call of nature. Oh, gods, she was sore. Everything ached. But nothing was more than sore. All of her tiny bites and scratches had been healed to prevent infection. Only the muscles that were unused to such activities were protesting her movement.

She checked her hair and was amazed by the precision of the braid. It was far beyond her capabilities to tidy her hair in such an efficient manner. Alby wandered downstairs and looked around for her purse. She eventually found it behind the couch and dug out her cell phone.

She had seven calls recorded. Six from Reginald, and one from an unknown number. That one sent a shiver down her spine. She had had the phone for over three years and never gotten a wrong number; it was warded against them. In fact, only Reggie and her grandfather had the number, and her grandfather was dead. That meant that whomever had dialed it knew that it was hers. That was the condition of the ward. They had to know the number, and that she was the owner.

She called Reggie back. "Hey, Reg. Sorry that I missed your calls."

"Where the hell were you? I was forced to take a hotel room in town."

"I was occupied with some details of the estate. I left my cell phone here."

"Can I come now?"

She looked down at herself. She would definitely have to get dressed in regular clothes first. "Sure. Call me when you get to the gate." "Will do, boss." Reg hung up.

She disconnected her phone and ran back up the stairs. She went to her closet and stood amazed at the array of clothing that was hanging there. Beautiful laces, delicate silks and bright velvets and gauzes filled it to overflowing. Her dowdy little suits and blouses were gone.

The town was only a fifteen-minute drive away, and she had no time to lose. She grabbed a loose set of trousers and a matching buttoned sleeveless tunic, flinging them onto the bed. She paused. There was no trace of the debauchery of the day and night before. The rose petals were gone, the sheets changed and a new comforter was in place with bolster pillows.

She opened her drawers and found new bras and panties where her staid white silk and cotton had lain before. She shook her head and remembered the djinn's primary power: Transformation. He could not create matter, but he could change one thing into something else. You would never starve if you had a loyal djinn at your side.

Apparently, Imaran had a fascination with seeing color against her pale skin and hair. She chose an azure blue set to compliment the buttoned vest and trousers that she had chosen. She dressed quickly and checked her reflection in the mirror. Only a hint of the bra showed through the top, and the vague outline of her new tattoos were only visible if you knew to look for them. Alby breathed a sigh of relief.

A pair of sandals that matched her outfit appeared next to the mirror and she jumped, looking around her.

In a contrasting vest of gold and loose trousers of black, Imaran lounged in the chair in the corner. He looked extremely satisfied to see her in his creations. "You look well this morning."

She curtsied with a grimace. "As do you. I see that you have been frolicking in my clothing."

He spread his hands helplessly, "I don't sleep much. It pleases me to see you wear color."

"Where were you when I woke up? In your room, I might add."

"I was arranging the items that Albion wanted sent to the Repository."

"Well, Reg is on his way to the gate, and I need to meet with him to collect some of my work." She sounded apologetic, and she realized that she was. She wanted to be alone with him, and do some more experimenting.

He looked pleased at her expression and began to approach her. It was not her will that stopped him, it was her cell phone that gave him pause.

"Damn, he's here." She rushed to him and gave him a quick, teasing kiss. Before he could grab her, she had slipped from his arms and out of the room, answering the phone as she went.

She ran over to the door and entered the code that would open the gate. She watched the monitor to made sure that the gate closed behind his car as he drove up the driveway.

She stepped between the gargoyles at their posts. Her powers could keep them passive if it came to that. She didn't worry about Imaran, Reg had met those of her non-human association before. He was warded against being able to tell anyone about them, though. It was a vow that he had agreed to before taking on his position in her employ.

His car glided smoothly into the cul-de-sac next to the front steps and he reached into the backseat of his car to fish out the canvas and a small bag that he had stored there. Reg was not very intimidating, and flamboyantly gay. He had met his current boyfriend while on a job for her, and they would be heading for Hawaii in a few months. It was true love, and she applauded them for it.

She escorted him past the gargoyles, though they still shifted nervously, which got her attention. They had tea, as a tray had been set on the table before they arrived. She chatted about any new clients who may have contacted them, and he gave her a number of a woman who needed to have an opal necklace un-cursed. It was an act of will that kept her from rolling her eyes. Opals were always trouble, and the most common item to carry a tiny curse. Unfortunately, the largest curse was the clumsiness of the owners who didn't understand the delicate composition of the gem.

"Quote her the standard," was her only reply.

The rest of the conversation revolved around his boyfriend Michael and their plans to marry. She offered to pay for the cost of transporting friends and relatives for them, and Reg began to weep. That was to be her gift to them, and he was so grateful he hugged her.

"Get your hands off her." Imaran Arov had been lurking in the shadows. Now he walked into the light.

"Dear God, is he real?" Reg was practically drooling at the impressive display of threat and muscle. She knew what he was seeing and couldn't blame him for his admiration. She still didn't believe it herself.

"Yep, a real pain in the ass." She crossed her own arms across her chest and looked over at her lover. Imaran's eyes promised revenge, and she winced as she imagined what was going through his mind. Her mouth had just bitten off more than she could chew.

"I am sorry to have stepped into your territory, but she just gave me the best news I have had all week. My boyfriend and I want to get married, but need to do it out of state or it won't be legal. Alby has just offered to help us bring our friends with us to share our day."

Imaran looked bewildered. Albina decided to explain it to him later, and she saw a dawning light in his eyes. She assumed that he figured it out.

"Reginald, this is Arov, our family djinn."

"Ah, that explains your new wardrobe. It suits you, you should wear color more often."

"Oh, God. Don't encourage him."

Imaran was looking smug. He eyed her carefully, and she could feel him making alterations as he went. When she looked down, a lot more cleavage was exposed, embroidery bordered the garment in a subtly darker shade and the weave had thinned, her tattoos blue swirls beneath the lighter blue of the fabric.

"Stop that!" she hissed at him, and he grinned back unrepentantly.

A few more pleasantries and details of the work that he had left for her were exchanged, but she regretfully had to end the visit. Reginald could talk for hours if allowed.

"Well, I hate to rush you when you have been here only an hour, but you really need to go now, Reg. Just so that I can finish those projects and have you pick them up in a few days." She tried to seem apologetic, but her crossed arms over her breasts and her impatience as Arov kept fooling with her clothes was obvious.

Reg grinned and shook his head. "All right, I'm going. But thank you so much for the offer earlier. I'll try to keep the invites small." With a limp wave and a whisper of expensive cologne, he left.

Albina sighed and flopped back on the couch, a tea sandwich still clutched in her fingers. Deprived of his audience, he left her clothes semisheer. "I know he enjoys playing the gay stereotype to the hilt, but I wish he would relax it when we are alone."

"He prefers men?" He seemed a little puzzled. It was not unheard of across his eight hundred years, but lately he had stayed at home with Albion and not been exposed to modern culture. Well, he had gotten the hang of email, but that was it.

"Yep." She shrugged and finished her sandwich. It had never even entered her mind. It was just the way Reg was. Plus, she knew that he secretly watched football, so it made his affected gestures amusing to watch.

Imaran suddenly looked alert. "Is he coming back?" His body bristled with menace.

She stood and viewed the display of Reg's car leaving the gate and it closing behind him. "No. He's gone. The gate just closed behind him." "Well, someone is here." He moved to put his body between her and the door, and that was when it exploded into black flame.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Trov's body struck hers and knocked her to the ground as the burst that came through the door shattered the magic protecting the house.

Albina struggled to make her way out from under the unconscious djinn, and that's when she saw her worst nightmare.

Rupert. Surrounded by hellish flame, with madness burning in his eyes.

She could feel the evil pulsing off him. An evil that had not been there the last time that they had met, unless he had better protection than she could have imagined.

It was the unwholesome power of an Az demon. He was being propelled by the greed inherent in a bargain with one of their kind. As she struggled out from under Arov, she fought to pull her magic into a protective shielding around him. She warded his clothing, turning the fabric into a cloak of invisibility. It was all she had time for. "Albina. So happy to see you." Rupert knelt at her side, completely oblivious to the djinn lying only three feet away. It was working, thank the powers.

He pulled out a gun and pointed it at her, making it obvious that his burst of power had been only to make his way into the house without challenge. She wondered how the gargoyles were doing.

"Rupert. You could have knocked." She pushed herself off the floor, avoiding his 'helping' hand.

He simply grabbed her arm and hauled her with him as he stood. "I thought that the element of surprise would come in handy." He began to drag her through the house, his gun held before him.

"How did you manage that magical display? You don't have any talents."

He took her to the room that used to be the den. It was currently the pantry. She was not about to assist him in navigating around the new arrangement.

"I made a deal with a demon. If I hand over one of your grandfather's old artifacts, I get a full compliment of powers." His grip on her arm tightened as he hauled her into yet another room that was not where he remembered it.

"Which artifact? There are a few hundred here."

"A lamp. An enameled glass lamp. It is of vital importance to the demon." He was getting frustrated at his inability to find the room that he was looking for.

"Why that lamp?" As if she didn't know. She and Anryn had indeed been spotted when they went to the market. Someone had reported it back to a demon that had an interest in possessing the djinn that was obviously inside.

"There is a genie or something inside. Haven't you wondered why your family has always been wealthy? Why they have always been successful?" Blood began to seep from her arm where his nails were digging into her skin.

"I thought that it was just because we don't gamble and we pay our bills on time. You and your mom should try it." That was the last quip that she got out. He struck her with his fist in his rage. She woke on the floor, dazed and confused, as he'd left her where she'd fallen. She heard him find the lab and begin to ransack it.

Moving slowly, she crept over to the fireplace and retrieved the lamp and the dagger. She swiftly ran to the kitchen, put the dagger in the oven, then moved to the cupboard and slammed it hard.

She didn't have to wait long. She half-heartedly tried to hide the lamp behind her, shoving it toward the sink.

"Give me that damned lamp, or I swear I will

shoot, Albina." Rupert was completely mad, his eyes wild, showing the cracks in his composure.

"What will you do after you shoot me, Rupert? I am the last one of the family able to use the lamp's secrets." She whirled and clutched the lamp, holding it in front of her like a shield. "I am useless to you dead."

"Then I will keep you alive and make you do as I will. I will fuck you when I please and chain you to a wall when I don't." He seemed pleased at his line of thinking, the hard on he suddenly sprouted in his chinos evidence of his less than brotherly feelings for her. Creepy.

"What if I refuse to give up the lamp?" Her heart was pounding in her chest. She was backed up against the kitchen counter. There was nowhere else to go.

"Then I will just call the demon and let him take it. He promised you to me after he gets the lamp anyway. But he might enjoy taking his time with you as well." A smarmy smirk passed over his face, and the sick lust spurred her panic as nothing else had yet done.

"Never! You are not getting anywhere near me!" She threw the lamp at him, and he clutched at it blindly. It tipped from hand to hand, then connected with the gun and shattered.

"Bitch! You vindictive bitch!" The gun swung toward her, and since she had nowhere to go, she was standing when the first bullet hit her.

She felt as if someone had struck her shoulder, slamming her back into the cupboards. A second pop, and a burning filled her left side. She slumped to the floor, meeting Rupert's eyes as it dawned on him what he had done.

She heard the gun clatter to the floor, then his frantic footsteps out the door with a slam to tell her that he had left.

She began the arduous task of crawling to the stove. It took all of her concentration just to remember why she was crawling on the floor, leaving a trail of blood behind her. *Oh, yeah, the dagger.*

After only a few moments that seemed like hours to her, she reached the oven. Her hands gripped the handle, and she let her weight pull the door open. She dragged herself out of the way and reached inside, sighing in relief as the familiar metal shape appeared beneath her fingers. With arms shaking and eyesight going dim, she stroked the steel gently, trailing her blood across the surface.

"Arov, how nice to see you again. I have one more wish for you." Her head fell back and she smiled as a shimmering materialization happened before her. Smokeless fire.

He appeared before her, bruised and battered by the explosion, and knelt in her blood. "Oh, Albina, what happened to you?" One large hand caressed her hair, and he kissed her gently.

"Hey, mister, no distractions." She struggled to clear her head, and as her vision began to fade she whispered her last wish. "Imaran Arov, Djinn of the dagger, I wish you free."

His expression was the last thing that she saw as darkness claimed her, and she smiled. She had never seen him that surprised before.

Chapter Nine

The awoke with light all around her.

)It wasn't heaven.

In heaven, someone was not next to you snoring.

Albina's eyes blinked and widened slowly, taking in the sterile accoutrements of the private hospital room. The snoring was coming from the cot that was next to the bed.

Imaran was lying with his long limbs dangling off the edge of the bed. His skin was now an even bronze, the bluish tint no longer in evidence.

She tried to reach down to wake him and only then felt the searing tug of the bullet wounds and stitches. She groaned, fell back into the embrace of the pillows and tried to be as still as possible.

The sound she made woke him. "Albina! How do you feel?" His black hair was tousled, and she wanted nothing more than to run her fingers through the silky locks.

"Sore. What the hell happened? How did I get

here?" Her voice was hoarse. He quickly got her a glass of water with a straw in it and held it for her while she sipped.

His face grim, he stated, "Rupert shot you."

"Oh, right." She sat up a little, aided by the electronic lift of the bed.

"You wouldn't happen to know why, would you?" His arms crossed over his chest and he scowled down at her.

"He wanted the lamp."

"Yes, that is what he said. In fact, that is why he broke into Reginald's car and stowed away in the trunk. That is why he broke in, and that is why he shot you when he did not find it."

"Well, then you know as much as I do."

"No. You know one other thing that I do not."

"What would that be?"

"Why did he think that there was a djinn in the lamp?" His eyebrow rose and he kept his gaze steady on her, waiting for her to lie about it.

So she didn't. "My cousin Anryn and I took your dagger and the lamp to the Djinn Market in Realm. That is where I got those binders. We carried the lamp to make an obvious target for anyone seeing us. I hid the dagger under my clothes."

She watched in fascination as he almost breathed fire for a moment. His eyes flared red and his skin blued; his hands moved to his sides, clenching repetitively in agitation. He was angry. "You went to the Djinn Market without a djinn escort? You risked your life and safety to bind me for a few hours?" He took deep breath. "You are never to risk yourself in that manner again. You could have been killed, enslaved or worse."

"What would have been worse?"

"You could have been given to Rupert."

"Oh, right. That would have been worse."

They lapsed into silence. He sat next to her bed, taking one of her cold hands in his.

Medical personnel came into the room and checked on her, a few of the nurses smiling at Imaran's grip on her hand. A doctor came in to check on her stitches, notified her that the bullets had been removed and set her mind at ease that Rupert was being held without bail.

When she looked over at her djinn, she was astonished at the harshness of his features. He obviously wanted to engage a more final solution to the Rupert problem, but something had stopped him.

A detective came in to get her statement. She told him that Rupert had broken in somehow; the door had blown in and injured her. She didn't know what he had used. The detective told her that they were looking into it.

She told him about being dragged through the house as he looked for her grandfather's lamp.

Being struck and taking the lamp to the kitchen to hide it. The slight noise that let Rupert know where she was, and the shattering of the lamp that broke his control.

The detective stopped her at certain points to gain details. Having the truth behind all of her statements made it so much easier. She hid nothing, except any mention of the dagger.

If Rupert had not been looking for it, it didn't matter to anyone else.

An hour of questions and answers ensued. She answered everything truthfully, detailing what she knew of Rupert's character and his menacing moves on her on the day of the will reading.

"I believe that Albina needs her rest now. You have enough information, Detective." Imaran met the eyes of the detective, and he suddenly agreed.

"Yes, I can imagine that you are quite exhausted, Miss Lakin. You were lucky that your fiancé was on his way over and was able to call 911 for you, as well as subduing Mr. Morris before he could get away."

"Ah, yes. My fiancé is a special man indeed. I am a lucky woman." She maintained her light grip on his hand, and squeezed gently.

"And I am lucky that I got there in time, *silhar*. You were almost dead." He leaned down and laid a kiss on her forehead.

"According to the ambulance crew, you did die

for a few minutes, Miss Lakin. But they were able to revive you." The detective stood and left the room. "You are one lucky woman."

"I was dead?" She looked deeply into the eyes of the djinn that she loved. She had realized that at the last moment as she lay dying. Freeing him was the most important thing that she could do for him, so free him she did.

"Yes. And in that moment of your death, I was freed." He stood over her and tears welled in his black eyes. "And more terrified than I had ever been."

"I called the ambulance and slowed time at the manor. Rupert had not made it out of the house yet and I restrained myself from killing him, but instead rendered him unconscious and tied him. I opened the gate and waited with you bleeding slowly to death in my arms.

"As the medics entered the manor, time resumed and I gave you over to them. They restarted your heart and stopped the bleeding. The police arrived and arrested Rupert, and I got the car and followed the ambulance."

"So you are completely free now? There are no more restraints on you?" She was wistful. He would leave, and return to his home.

"Only one." He was grim.

"What? Was there another binding on you? The djinn that I spoke to didn't mention that."

"You. You and I are bound together. Until death. You are bound to my life, and I to yours." He kissed her, a slow and thorough meeting of the lips that shared breath and life.

"You kept me alive, didn't you?" She was amazed. At the point at which she died, all ties with him had been severed.

Now he looked impatient, he sighed deeply and explained things to her. "Yes. The magic freed me, but my heart kept me bound to you. I could not let you go."

"Do you really mean that?" She winced at the desperate nature of her plea.

He just sighed and shook his head. "Yes, I mean it. And eventually you will come to believe it. Now rest, you are exhausted."

Her lids felt heavy and she felt fatigue come over her in a wave. She suspected that he cheated, but couldn't figure out how he had caused it. As she drifted off, she felt his lips against hers, once more breathing life and magic into her as she gave herself over to the warm security of his presence.

* * * *

Her recovery astonished her doctors. In only three days she was able to make her way down the halls, and one week later she was on her way out of the hospital. The nurse pushed her wheelchair down the hall and out into the bright sun of the courtyard. Imaran was waiting for her with an SUV that she did not recognize. He carefully tucked her into the seat, easing the seatbelt into place. With a final wave at the staff that had gathered to wave her goodbye, she sat back and watched the novelty of a djinn driving down the highway.

"How long have you been driving?" She tried to make polite conversation; she didn't want to startle him.

"Six years or so. Albion had trouble on long journeys. He asked me if I would be willing to learn and paid for driving lessons for me." He laughed and shook his head. "He could have just wished for me to have the knowledge, but felt that it was better that I learn."

"That was Grandpa. Knowing was one thing, but learning was better." She sighed, then smiled. "Did you know that he made me take weaving lessons? Spinning, sewing, cooking and even car repair. He wanted me to know how everything worked, so that whatever happened I could start over."

"Yes, he told me of your accomplishments."

"He did?"

"Yes, he even kept every single trophy that you won, every award, and every piece of artwork that you created. He was always very proud of you." She was astonished, and not a little embarrassed. "He told me that he was, but I thought that when I started to restore artwork and cursed objects that he was a little disappointed."

Imaran took his eyes off the road for an instant to meet her watery gaze. "He was always proud of you, no matter what you chose to do. Simply because you chose to do it."

She smiled weakly, ignoring the tears that slowly tracked down her cheeks. She turned her head to look at the trees and livestock that they passed. In her life, it had never crossed her mind that what she did was not as important as whether or not she made the choice on her own.

She spent the one-hour drive in quiet reverie, mulling over her place in the universe and in her djinn's life.

When they reached the gate, she sighed in relief. It opened smoothly and she felt the wards close around her as they made their way to the main house.

"Someone reset the wards."

"Yes, your cousin Anryn called your phone and asked if she could help."

"She did it all?" There were several hundred acres involved.

"No. She called in some of your other cousins and threw a warding party. The gargoyles were hiding for days." A single giggle escaped her lips, then another. Seconds later she was guffawing in earnest, only the pull of her stitches keeping her from venturing into hysterics.

"You haven't met many of my mother's relatives before, have you?"

He still looked a little haunted. "No. I had no idea that the Warders were so, enthusiastic."

"Yeah, they love a party." Albina remembered some of the 'family events' that she had attended in Realm. The Warders preferred to hold their festivities there, as there was less of a chance of noise complaints and police being called.

"Then we will have to invite them to the wedding." The truck stopped in the drive and he got out then came around to assist her.

"Whose wedding?"

He was careful to avoid her wounds, but had to grip her suddenly when he answered, "Ours."

"Our wedding? You, and me?" Her head tilted up and she tried to read his face, but it was difficult as he struggled not to injure her. He finally simply swung her off her feet and walked with her into the house, the gargoyles looking sheepish as their mistress was carried past them.

"Yes, you and me. Today we will travel to Realm and get you the healing you need, and then we will see if I can find my parents."

"You want me to meet your parents?"

"It's traditional. They have to approve my bride before we can marry. After that, you are all mine."

"Your parents have to approve me?" Suddenly she felt more lightheaded than she did when she was bleeding to death.

"It is only a technicality. If we can't find them in two hours, we will return home." He carried her effortlessly through the house. She noticed that all traces of the explosion were gone.

"Couldn't we look for them another day?"

He sighed deeply and laughed at the fear in her face. "Today is the day of the Djinn Market. We will have the best luck of finding them today. It will be fine, I promise you."

He walked with her to the mirror, and the magic swirled through it and opened into a doorway. He stepped through, coming out in the bright sunlight of Realm.

Chapter Ten

If he had not been holding her, she would have run. The instant that they stepped into Realm, they both took on their natural appearances. His skin blued in hue, his eyes slanted and ears pointed. She felt her own skin glow and started as the marks that the magic had burned into her flesh began to pulse insistently.

"This is such a bad idea, Arov." She crossed her arms over her chest and hugged herself, using the pain of her injuries to keep herself alert.

"Hush, it will be fine." He started off toward the healer's tent, crossing the field with ground eating strides. "Just relax. And when the healer starts to work, hold still!" He gave her a slight squeeze to drive home his sentence and smiled at her as she nodded in grudging acceptance.

Being healed would improve her disposition. He was right to insist on it. She had refused to enjoy painkillers in the hospital and was using the endorphins to keep herself mobile. The side effect was that she was in an extremely foul temper most of the time, and the littlest thing would send her into tears.

The healer was professional and direct, if you thought that a nagging blue grandmother was professional. Her hands skimmed over Albina's torso, 'reading' the energy that she crossed. "Oh, those humans did make a mess when they tried to repair you. Don't worry, we'll have you fixed up in no time." Her name was Tovah; she was definitely a blooded djinn. Her skin had the same smoky blue tinge as all of the vendors in the marketplace.

She bustled off into the next room and came back with a pot of tea. It was always tea with the djinn. She served Arov, and then settled down next to Albina. "All right, let's see the damage."

Albina moved her fingers to the buttons of her shirt and slowly undid them. "Arov, would you mind leaving the room?" She arched one brow and looked over the shoulder of the healer as she waited for the reaction of the djinn across the room.

"Yes, I would mind. I am not leaving you alone with anyone. Not even a bound healer." At the word 'bound', Albina's eyes searched Tovah's neck and wrists. There it was; a brilliant silver band circling her left wrist. She had been bound to do no harm to any under her care. "Oh, gods. I am so sorry." Her eyes reached those of the healer, and she saw humor in them.

"Don't be sorry. It was a choice that I made, and the only reason my husband has survived all of these centuries." She smiled for a moment, then was back to business. "All right, now let's see those wounds."

Blushing furiously, Albina opened her shirt. This was the first time in over a week that Imaran had seen her without her clothing. Her skin still bore the violent marks of her trips to the floor as well as from the initial blast that had knocked Arov out. None of those marks could cancel out the swirling pattern that crossed her breasts. The staff at the hospital had thought that they were a strange tribal tattoo, and she had tried to keep her gown on as much as possible, not an easy task when she had two bullet wounds in her upper body.

Tovah smiled. "Your magic has marked her, and she still blushes. You must not have been together very long."

"Not nearly long enough." Imaran looked over at Albina's exposed breasts and his mouth tightened. Suddenly Albina realized why she was being healed within an hour of arriving at her home. He wanted her back in his bed. Now.

Tovah laughed and began to run her hands lightly over the bruised tissue. The warm air of the room should have kept her goosebumps at bay, but Alby shivered anyway. It was the fixed gaze of her erstwhile lover on her while the purple tissue faded into yellow and her body flushed the damage away that was causing her discomfort.

Tovah started on her sutured wounds, pulling the stitches free of her flesh. Alby winced as they came out, then sighed as the warmth of the healing took over. The throbbing pain receded, and she fell asleep.

* * * *

Over an hour later the healer finished and gestured for Arov to join her in the other room. He rose from his chair and joined Tovah in the anteroom. He kept his voice down and spoke to the healer. "How is she?"

"She will be fine. But I think that you need some healing as well. There is the stink of demon near you."

"It was a demon's power that broke the wards and caused her injury. Can you heal it?"

"Yes. Sit."

"Thank you." He sat, but kept the curtain to the other room back so that he could see Alby. He had a thought, "Do you by any chance know the Arov family?"

"Yes, of course. They have a vendor tent near

the Great Hall. I noticed that your lady has the markings of one of the Arov clan." Tovah quietly pulled an amulet out of a drawer and placed it against Imaran's chest.

"Yes, she does."

"Then you would be a member of that clan."

"Yes, I am." The amulet was held against his skin while she ran power through it. The energy of the djinn flowed through her hand and into his flesh, scraping the demonic residue from his flesh, then pushing it into the amulet. She finished the healing and sealed the amulet, binding it with her own energy.

He thanked her and gave her a pouch full of coins. Albina was still, her breasts moving gently in the rhythm of sleep. Quietly, he crept into the room and sat next to her, one hand gently smoothing the hair off her forehead. He left her shirt open, admiring the view. Her skin had gone from pale to grey after the wounding, and he was glad to see the bluish veins beneath the cream of her flesh.

She had been so still after she had freed him. Her skin had been chalky white, marred with the brutal red of the blood that was coursing from her. With every heartbeat, more blood had poured out, bringing her closer to death until she slipped away from him.

He had wanted nothing more than to destroy

Rupert Morris in that moment. That was when he knew that he loved her; not when he wanted to kill her attacker, but when he didn't slaughter him. Instead, he paralyzed Rupert and restarted Albina's heart, applying pressure on her shoulder and side with his hands. His magic had kept her breathing and her heart beating while he waited for the ambulance to arrive.

Albina loved that house. Her grandfather's house. She would not be happy leaving the mundane world and living in Realm. He had to do things the human way. That meant making sure that Rupert was taken up by the human authorities, and leaving him alive.

The demon that had sent him was another matter. It had wanted Albina to die, whether she knew it or not. His prison could not be used by anyone who was not a Lakin, unless all of the Lakins were dead. He needed his family to help him find that demon.

Albina stirred, her lashes fluttering. Her clear blue eyes met his, and she smiled. "Hi. I feel better." She reached up with both hands and tugged his head down to hers, scorching his body with a single kiss. "I feel much better." Her hands threaded into his hair and she sifted them through the strands. She arched her breasts against his chest and froze with their noses inches apart. "Is my shirt open?" "Yes."

"Did you know that there is a very upset looking djinn right behind you?" She let him go and her hands flew to her shirt, closing the center button and working her way up, then down.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The older djinn stared at the younger, who leapt to his feet to face him and protect his woman.

"Imaran?" It was a whisper, the black eyes tearing up and flowing freely.

"Father." Imaran executed a formal bow and was caught up in a hug that should have broken bones. Tears flowed from both men's faces as they reunited for the first time in eight hundred years.

Tovah slipped in behind them, crossing over to the pallet where Albina was sitting, tears in her own eyes. "While he was waiting for you, I found his father for him. It is common knowledge that he was imprisoned in servitude to the Lakin clan. But you have Warder blood, which means that you are the last Lakin. I also felt your death, and knew that he was free. He needed to be with his own family."

The implication that she did not belong was palpable. Albina squared her shoulders. She knew that Tovah was wrong. She could feel it in the way that he touched her, looked at her, watched her when she slept. She could feel that he loved her. And she loved him, damn it.

"Father, I would like to introduce you to someone." Imaran pulled away from his father's embrace and gestured toward Albina. "Albina Warder Lakin, this is my father, Artan Arov." He drew her forward.

Albina met Artan's black eyes with her own, keeping her gaze steady. His first look was insulting, lingering on her breasts and hips. "You are the last of the Lakin family?"

"Yes, I was."

"Was?"

"Yes, I died. That ended the family line. And freed your son." She stood firm.

"I thank you for bringing him back to us. It ends our obligation to your family. I am sure that you want to get back to the Warders, then." He nodded toward the curtain where he had entered the room.

"Father, she is my *silhar*. We have bonded and are hoping to get the family's blessing on our union." Imaran moved to put himself between his father and Albina. She stopped him.

"Imaran, it is obvious that something else is going on here." She glared at his father. "How long have you know about the demon hunting him?" *"What?* How could you know about that?" He looked vaguely ill.

"An Az demon paid someone to kill me with magic as the coin. Someone else would have hired the Az demon. They don't work for free." She turned to Imaran. "Were you betrothed to anyone before you were bound?"

"Yes, to Keyah Gal. The betrothal was broken by her father when I fell into disgrace." He looked puzzled. Then the light dawned. "Father, has Zhian Gal been in touch with you?"

"You couldn't just have gone home, could you? You arrogant warlock's brat!" Artan began to build his power, preparing to strike her down.

"Father! Step away!" Imaran began to flare with his own power, tinged with Warder magic. A bubble of energy swelled around him, pushing everyone out of his radius, with the exception of Albina.

"Imaran! Stop it. He's your father, damn it! Calm down." She stepped between them. Not the safest place to be. Her hair flared a brilliant white as she began to pull power from the fabric of Realm itself.

She bound Imaran, then Artan. Tovah was next, and the energy spread outward. The djinn magic that Imaran had blended with hers was heady, and it was the first time she had been able to free it. She bound everyone to the spot that they were standing. Ripples on a pond of magic. Then, just as quickly as it had grown out of control, it flared back into her.

Albina staggered as the magic pulsed back into her. Imaran caught her.

"Father, since I am not welcome, Albina and I will be leaving. You will receive an invitation to our wedding. Please let us know if you will attend."

Artan was blinking in astonishment. No Warder woman had chosen a djinn in over nine hundred years. The talents of the Warders were specific, but powerful. Only when a female Warder truly loved a male of the djinn did their powers blend together like that.

"Son, I am sorry. I didn't mean to lose my temper like that."

"It is not me that you owe an apology to, Father."

Artan faced her and bowed low, raising her hand to his heart. "Albina, I beg your pardon for the insult that I dealt you."

"Why did you?"

"Keyah Gal never married. When her father heard that the last Lakin was a female, he approached me in an effort to get me to reinstate the betrothal."

"And what did you say?"

"That when Imaran returned, I would talk to him about it. Zhian pressed for a date; his daughter was not getting any younger, and he wanted grandchildren."

"Zhian, of course, told Keyah, and she wanted a specific timeline. He could not give her one, and he took matters into his own hands."

"They have a connection with the Az, do they?"

"Yes, one of Zhian's other daughters married an Az."

Albina kept her face straight. She knew a lot of women who had married an ass...uh, Az. "So, why didn't you warn your son?"

"The wards around your home prevented any of our kind from entering unannounced."

"Why didn't you ask one of my clan? They would have been happy to do it."

"The djinn don't have contact with any other clans."

"What about Market Day?"

"Well..."

"In fact, it was one of your clan that told me how to free Imaran, giving me all the options and keeping me from making any mistakes."

Imaran was behind her, wrapping his arms around her. "Was that the one who gave you the binders?" It was a hot murmur in her ear.

"It was." She smiled and snuggled back against him. The power that they shared was resonating between them.

"It was Kassim." Artan was looking a little flustered. This was not going the way that he had planned it. Imaran was supposed to return to him, marry Keyah and move back to Realm. Now, he was attached to a Warder, living in the mundane world and rejecting his family obligations. Moreover, he seemed to be in love with the Warder, and she was sharing his magic. That meant..."Albina? Are you pregnant?"

Tovah gasped at this breach of protocol. She had not checked for a pregnancy, and with the damage that Albina had taken, there was no way to have sensed it.

"No, not yet. But soon." Her eyes closed and she could see the child that she would bear. It would have its father's eyes, and family markings. The rest was covered by a cartooned diaper.

Imaran asked in a husky voice, "How soon?" His hand moved down over her abdomen and his erection prodded against her from behind. Apparently the idea of getting her pregnant was working for him.

"It could start today if we're quick." She turned her head and kissed him. He held her mouth to his, refusing to end the kiss when she tried to pull back. She felt the building of magical energy and in a thunderclap, she and Imaran were making out in front of the mirror station. He picked her up and tucked her under one arm, carrying her through the mirror to the manor and charging all of the wards to full. Then he took her to bed. Not his room, not her room, but the master suite. All of her grandfather's things had been moved to one of the other rooms long before he had died. He didn't want to take up all the space in the house, being an old man.

Their new chambers were huge. Brightly colored silks, mahogany furniture and great silken pillows. He simply flipped her through the air and she slid across the sheets to the headboard, laughing all the way.

She watched him disrobe with rapt fascination. His body was displayed for her in the bright light of day, and it was a wonderful sight. Each inch of rippling muscle made her heart beat a little faster, and the pulse in her thighs was growing insistent as he bent to remove his trousers. At last she was watching him from a distance, and she had seconds to admire his body.

He stood for a moment and she warded him in place, with a smile on her lips. He was held, standing at the foot of the bed, his erection beckoning her with a tantalizing musk.

She rose up on her knees and took the minute that she had before he broke free of her hold and ran her hands down his arms, his shoulders, massaged his fingers and sucked on one or two of them, then ran her hands down his chest to the center of his arousal and wrapped both hands around it.

She stroked his hot flesh, smiling at the moisture building at the tip. Every stroke seemed to get a reaction. She sat next to him, fully clothed, and stroked at his hardness. One hand reached below to tickle at his balls, rolling them and squeezing gently. Then, as a wicked thought broke through her, she snuck one fingertip to his ass, trailing gently around his anus. She brought that evil finger to her mouth, wet it in saliva and returned it to his ass.

Teasing him while he was immobile was a lot of fun. She should have tried it a while ago. Her finger worked into his ass delicately, feeling the soft heat and the grip of the muscle that tried to push her out and take her in at the same time.

She was grinning with evil triumph, stroking his shaft while her finger explored his ass in a persistent way. So wrapped up was she in her tormenting of his conscious body while he couldn't move that she forgot to monitor the ward. It wore off.

"Albina, get your finger out of my ass and let me between those pale, smooth thighs." His voice made her jump and she scooted backward on the bed, hopefully out of his reach.

He stood still for a few moments. The amount

of precum dripping off his cock indicated that he was close to orgasm. She just wanted to be with him when it happened.

He crawled onto the bed, moving like a giant feline. She tried to stay out of his way, but suddenly he pounced, and his reward was her shirt. He grinned, a feral smile, and came back for her skirt, flipping her to her belly and unzipping the clothing that he had helped her don hours before. Her skirt flew off to the side of the bed. She was wearing nothing beneath it; he hadn't brought underwear to the hospital.

With a snarl of triumph, he turned her and rubbed his body slowly against her. She groaned in relief at the contact of his warm, hard flesh. Her thighs parted in welcome, and he slid between them.

With a few thrusts to coat himself in her slick juices, he slid home. She cried out at the feeling of fullness that she had been craving since Realm. As he drew back to thrust within again, she cried out and raised her legs to bring him deeper.

He draped her legs over his shoulders and began to thrust in a slow, heavy rhythm. She relaxed and let him make love to her, purring as his mouth reached her breasts, mewling as he inserted one finger between their heaving bodies, rubbing her clit. She cried out in surprise as his caresses sent her over the edge, and she felt his body wrapped tight in the grip of hers.

She reveled in the reacting pulse within her body to every thrust of his, screaming and laughing at the same time as he poured both himself and his magic into her in one furious burst.

Sparks and pulses flew around the room and caught in the glass balls that decorated every surface.

Imaran rolled to his back. "I want to stay like this all night, inside you all night. Our baby starting within you."

She gave him a passionate kiss, dueling tongues with him for several minutes until she came up for air. "Okay. So, at our wedding. Your family is invited, but the Warders will plan it. Deal?"

"Deal. Now stop wiggling, unless you want to start something, and I believe that you called me a pain in the ass?" He made a move to pull her off him, and she batted at his hands.

"I'll be good, I'll be good. I just want to lie here with you inside me, love, and wake up like this tomorrow."

"Did you just call me love?" He tugged her hair so she'd look him in the eye.

"I did."

"Why?"

"Because, as I was dying, I realized that freeing you was the only thing that mattered, that had to be love. And because you look at me like I'm naked. All the time."

"You *are* naked." He smiled.

"And because seeing your face calms me, makes me feel warm and when you smile, it makes me feel hot." She felt the reaction of his flesh within her and knew that the sleeping plans would have to be altered to include at least one more interlude.

"Ah, I love you as well." His kiss explained a thousand things, and none, and she was all right with that. She had a few hundred years to figure him out. She could wait.

(About the (Author

Viola is a proud Winnipegger living in Manitoba, Canada. A compulsive crafter and sucker for a 'happily ever after', she spends her time avoiding anything related to housework. Her hobbies have included needlework, metalwork, henna tattoos and costume design. Oh yeah, and writing. She loves to write. A rabid sci-fi buff and nerd to the core.