

Python Place 3: Rose and Thorn

Kate Hill

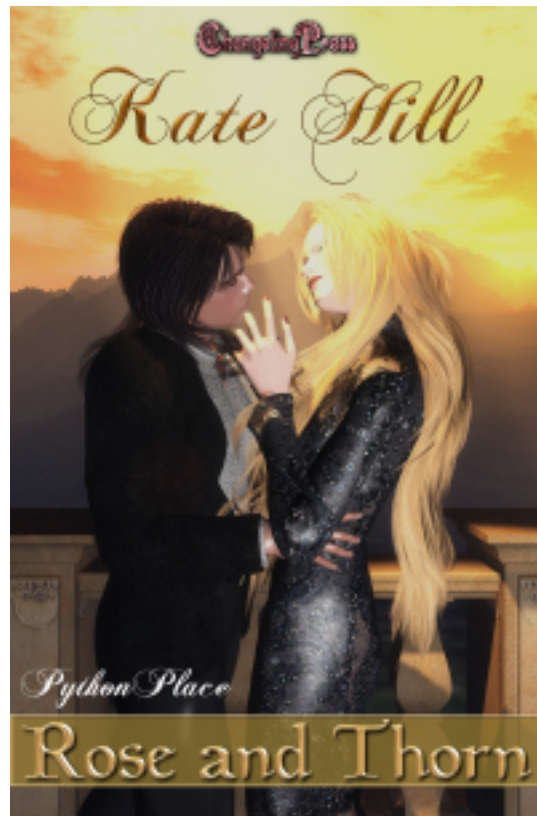
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Python Place 3: Rose and Thorn

Kate Hill

Concerned that her sister might be held against her will at Python Place, Abigail enters the infamous house and finds her strict moral code endangered by irresistibly sexy Tyrus Terence.

The moment Tyrus meets Abigail, he knows the prim spinster is his soulmate. He can scarcely believe the fates would be cruel enough to bind him to a haughty woman with bad fashion sense.

Yet beneath her cool exterior lives a deeply passionate seductress, one who matches him in lust and stirs the handsome daemon's protective instincts. Tyrus will stop at nothing to keep Abigail safe from his dreaded mother, the evil spirit Eris, even if it means tapping into the darkness inside himself.

Chapter One

The day after her father was taken to the madhouse for trying to kill her brother-in-law, Abigail realized something wasn't right with her sister. Abigail couldn't fathom a decent, upstanding woman like Hailey taking up with the likes of a Terence.

Mere days after their father had shot Adrien Terence, a servant from Python Place arrived with a large sum of money and a note from Hailey. Had Adrien kidnapped Hailey, forced his will upon her? Did he hope to avoid further suspicion by paying off the only relative left to care for Hailey's welfare?

Perhaps Abigail had been sneaking too many peeks at the torrid adventure novels Hailey had so loved to read. Still, she couldn't rid herself of the nagging suspicion her sister was in terrible danger. The very idea of setting foot in that filthy house made Abigail shudder, yet she couldn't simply abandon Hailey to a life with Adrien.

Abigail donned her cloak and set out for Python Place.

* * *

Even in broad daylight the house seemed shrouded in a darkness all its own. With its stone walls and many gables, it looked like a house owned by Satan. A shudder rippled down Abigail's spine. Many believed the Terence brothers themselves were spawn of the devil. In spite of the rather warm day she pulled her cloak more tightly around her.

It was strangely silent for early morning and then she recalled that Python Place was most active at night. Using the brass doorknocker in the shape of a devil-eyed ram, she tapped then waited several moments. When no one appeared, she tapped again.

A sleepy-looking servant finally opened the door. "May I help you?"

"Yes. I'm Abigail Watson. I'm here to see my sister, Hailey."

The servant stared at her, his brow furrowed.

"Lord Adrien Terence's wife," she explained, thinking it curious that a servant at Python Place didn't know of whom she spoke. "Surely you know your Lord's wife?"

"Lord Terence and his wife will not rise until this evening. You may return then."

Frustrated, Abigail nearly demanded to see her sister, then thought better of it. She didn't want to risk angering Lord Terence and ruining the chance to see Hailey. She turned away from the door, all sorts of terrible thoughts darting through her mind. What sort of man had Hailey bound herself to that he slept by day and walked by night, like a monster in a legend? Even worse, he had drafted Hailey into his morbid, evil lifestyle.

Her thoughts filled with all sorts of horrors, Abigail turned and headed down the walk, her gaze cast down. She didn't notice the man until she smashed into him. Her hat flew off and she nearly crashed to the ground when one of his large tan and brown dogs jumped on her, its muddy paws on her shoulders.

"Nero, down!" The dog immediately dropped to the ground beside two other equally large beasts, its stubby tail wagging.

"Oh, my dress!" Abigail used an embroidered handkerchief to blot away some of the mud. While not especially fashionable, the dress was the best she owned. Now the pale blue fabric was most likely ruined.

"Your hat." The man offered her the simple blue and white headpiece with one of his black-gloved hands.

Her teeth gritting, she snatched it and faced him, prepared to give him a proper dressing down for allowing his untrained beast to attack innocent bystanders. Instead she simply stared, rendered momentarily speechless by the sight of him.

Abigail had never been impressed by the male sex. From her cruel father to most of the dull-witted, self-absorbed fools who had shown mild interest in her and Hailey over the years, men were little more than a necessity to keep the human race alive.

Long ago she'd dreamed of finding the proverbial "knight in shining armor" to sweep her off her feet and carry her away from her life of drudgery, but that dream had quickly faded. Even if her father had allowed her to marry, she cringed to think of the sort of mate he'd have selected for her. She'd seen the men he'd considered for Hailey.

It wasn't a mere man who stood before her, however, but some flesh and blood rendering of a Greek god. Tall, with long black hair hanging loose about his broad shoulders, he stared at her with eyes of such vivid blue she felt as if she were wading in a crystalline pool. He wore black breeches, boots to the knee, and a white linen shirt, the ties open and exposing a good deal of his lean, sleekly muscled chest covered with a dusting of curly black hair.

A strange, sharp yet delightful feeling struck deep in her belly and while she couldn't quite put a name to it, the sensation surpassed any she'd ever felt before. Beneath the cover of clothes, her nipples tightened and tingled, and her heart leapt.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

Recovering quickly, she cleared her throat. "I'm Abigail Watson and I came to see my sister, Hailey."

His lovely, almond-shaped eyes narrowed and he paused a moment, his gaze sweeping her from head to toe in a manner that made her feel naked. "I see. Did no one answer the door?"

"Yes. The servant sent me away."

"He sent you *away*?" Now he looked irritated. "Come with me."

He and the dogs stalked past her and headed for the door.

"Sir, I understand Lord Terence has retired for the day and I have no wish to get you in trouble with your master for disturbing --"

He paused and offered her a rather forced smile. "Forgive me. I'm Tyrus Terence, one of the masters of Python Place, and if anyone deserves to be disturbed by his new relations, it's my brother Adrien. Please come inside."

Feeling a bit foolish for her mistake, she did as he asked. Still, how could she have known who he was? She'd never met Tyrus Terence and he was dressed like a ruffian rather than master of a home such as this.

Inside, Tyrus rang for a servant and the same sleepy looking young man entered the room. Upon seeing Tyrus he snapped to attention. "Yes, sir?"

"This is Abigail Watson. Did you send her away?"

"I... asked her to return later, when Lord Terence and his wife are prepared to receive guests."

"She's not a guest. She's family and welcome here at any time. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Bring her tea in the parlor of the common wing. I'll inform Adrien of her presence."

The servant hurried to carry out Tyrus' orders.

"This way." Tyrus gestured toward Abigail and she followed him into a richly decorated parlor. "Please have a seat."

"I didn't mean to cause any problems."

"You haven't."

Again they locked gazes and more of those wonderfully strange feelings shot through her. She had the mad urge to remove her corset. She couldn't seem to force enough air into her lungs while facing him. She ached pleasurably in places that made her blush to think about. And that chest of his! If only she could run her hands over it, just to see if it felt as hard and powerful as it looked.

The tip of his tongue flickered across his lips and she realized he looked like a ravenous man staring at a steak dinner. The temperature in the room seemed to rise and she resisted the urge to fan herself with the mud-stained handkerchief.

"Please excuse my dog for ruining your dress. I'll be glad to pay for the damages."

"That won't be necessary. I'm sure with a bit of scrubbing the mud will wash out."

He looked about to speak but instead nodded and left the room. Abigail couldn't keep from staring at his taut backside and steely legs outlined perfectly in the black breeches. She'd never seen any of the Terence brothers up close. If Adrien possessed half the appeal of his brother, Abigail could understand Hailey's attraction.

A short time later, a maid brought tea for Abigail, who sipped it, hoping to calm her nerves. Not only was she anxious to see Hailey, but her thoughts kept drifting back to Tyrus.

The man raised emotions in her she'd never imagined -- or perhaps that wasn't true. There had been times when she'd experienced desire, but she tried to thrust such thoughts from her mind. Occasionally, late at night, her passions overcame her. She would raise her nightgown and tease the damp flesh between her legs until she exploded in waves of physical delight. The experience always left her feeling ashamed, soiled, and almost evil. Most of the guilt derived from her father's teachings, that anything other than prayer and duty were temptations of the devil.

Though in her heart she didn't believe him, it was difficult to completely turn her back on the values she'd been raised with. Now, in this house of ill repute, all she could think about was Tyrus' hands on that wet, tender, secret place, stroking, rubbing, teasing...

"Abigail!" Hailey exclaimed, stepping through the door, her slippers practically sliding on the wooden floor as she hurried to reach her sister.

Abigail could scarcely believe how different Hailey looked, and how wonderful. Her face had a healthy glow and her eyes gleamed with happiness Abigail had never thought to see in her younger sister. Hailey had always been miserable in their father's house. Abigail rose to meet Hailey, accepting her kiss and firm embrace.

"I'm so happy to see you. I've missed you! I wasn't sure if you'd ever want to speak to me again after the way I left home," Hailey said, still holding her hand. The women sat on the couch. "Did you get the note and our gift?"

"Yes," Abigail said, studying her sister carefully. She looked for any sign that Hailey needed help, that she was being held here against her will. It was almost a disappointment not to find any. Yes, she wanted Hailey to be safe and content, but part of her almost envied her sister if she had indeed found such utter joy at Python Place. "In truth I've been worried about you, Hailey. Not that I'm here to make judgments, but you know the reputation of Python Place and the Terence brothers. I want to be certain you're here of your own free will."

"Why wouldn't she be?" came a deep, masculine and very cultured voice. Both women turned to the entrance where a handsome man in a black dressing robe, his long blond hair hanging loose about his broad shoulders, strode toward them. In spite of his pale coloring, he resembled Tyrus, especially through the eyes. He wasn't as tall as Tyrus and a bit more thickly muscled, but Abigail didn't doubt he was a Terence brother.

"Abigail, I'd like you to meet my husband, Adrien." Hailey stood and grasped Lord Terence's arm. Abigail could scarcely believe the look of unabashed lust and affection on Hailey's face. "Adrien, this is my sister, Abigail."

"Miss Watson." Adrien nodded to her.

"Lord Terence." Abigail stood and curtsied respectfully.

"To answer your question, I am definitely here of my own free will," Hailey reassured her sister. "I couldn't have imagined a more wonderful husband."

"It's just that when the money arrived I thought someone might be trying to bribe me into not interfering..."

"Someone?" Adrien interrupted, raising a sleek blond eyebrow.

"May I speak plainly, my Lord?"

He nodded, his piercing blue eyes fixed on hers in a manner that sent a shiver down her spine. This was not a man to be trifled with, yet Abigail would not allow herself to be intimidated. Not when her sister's life hung in the balance.

"Hailey and I were raised by a man of God," Abigail continued.

"Yes, I've met this man of God. He tried to kill me," Adrien stated, his tone chilly.

"I only meant that Hailey isn't the sort of woman accustomed to an establishment such as Python Place and in her innocence she might --"

"I'm not nearly as innocent as you think, Abigail," Hailey said. Though her tone wasn't cold, it was nonetheless stern. "I appreciate your concern and I love you as my sister, but understand that Adrien is my husband. I love him very much. I hope to continue a relationship with you, but to do so you must accept my marriage. If you cannot --"

"I understand," Abigail said. "I just wanted to be certain he didn't send the money to --"

"He sent the money because I asked him to," Hailey assured her, her gaze fixed on Abigail. Her look did more than words could to reassure Abigail that her sister was truly here of her own free will. "I was concerned about you now that Father has been locked away. I wanted to give you the chance to more easily take that which I fought for. The freedom of choice, to live your life as you see fit. Our society dictates how women live. Now you have the financial means to support yourself. I've heard you've asked Mrs. Bradley to live with you, so your reputation is fairly well protected, but I'm offering you the chance to live here instead, if you'd like."

"Live here? At Python Place?" Abigail was taken aback. Though only in her mid-twenties, Abigail was beyond the age most suitors preferred. Unfortunately she was still young enough for it to be considered scandalous to live alone. Mrs. Bradley, an elderly widow with a dwindling inheritance, had been more than willing to move into Abigail's modest though comfortable home. Still. Move to Python Place? She resisted the urge to wrinkle her nose in disgust lest she insult her sister and Lord Terence.

"Sounds to me like she's too far above your kind offer," Tyrus stated from where he stood by the doorway, his arms folded across his chest, a shoulder leaning against the wall. "We're not good enough for her. Even you, *Lord Terence*." He smirked in his brother's direction.

"Tyrus, this is a private conversation," Adrien stated.

"Sorry. Just wanted to be sure our guest was being made comfortable until you arrived, but from what I hear Miss Watson can more than take care of herself."

"Excuse me, sir?" Something in his tone and attitude annoyed Abigail, as did the taunting expression in his eyes.

"I believe you heard me quite clearly."

"Tyrus," Hailey said, glancing at him.

"Ask a maid to prepare a room for Miss Watson," Adrien told Tyrus.

"No!" Abigail said more sharply than she'd intended to. "I won't be staying and had no intention of disturbing your..." she glanced from Adrien to Hailey, who still clung to his arm, her body pressed shamefully close to his, even for a husband and wife, "...sleep. Perhaps we can speak again at a more convenient time?"

"You're always welcome here. Isn't she?" Hailey glanced at Adrien.

"Of course," Lord Terence agreed, though his expression remained rather aloof. Not that Abigail blamed him. They had been more than hospitable and she had made obvious her distaste for their home. She still could scarcely believe her sister had married one of these... whoremasters. By all that was sacred, she wished she could find a more appropriate word, but that was the only one that truly fit. Adrien Terence might have a title and wealth, but his morals left much to be desired.

Hailey left her husband's side to once again take Abigail's hand. She stared at her with a hopeful expression and asked, "Would you come for dinner tomorrow night?"

"I'm not sure I'll be able to get away from Mrs. Bradley. Once she's retired for the night I could possibly slip away --"

"That will be perfect," Hailey said. "We'll make it a late supper. Say nine o'clock?"

Abigail nodded.

"I shall send a carriage for you," Adrien said. "Unless you fear its arrival will awaken your companion."

Abigail nearly protested, then realized the carriage ride would be safer than walking around the countryside after dark. "Thank you, Lord Terence. Mrs. Bradley is quite hard of hearing and it's doubtful she'll be disturbed." Abigail embraced her sister once again. "I must be going now."

"I'll have a servant escort you home," Adrien suggested.

"Thank you, Lord Terence, but that won't be necessary," Abigail said. "I'm looking forward to the walk. It's a nice day and I have much to think about on the way."

She headed for the door where Tyrus stood, his leering gaze upon her and a rather cocky half-smile on his slender lips. He didn't move as she walked by, and her shoulder brushed against his broad chest, sending a jolt of desire through her. She also caught his scent -- fresh air from the fields where he'd walked, sandalwood, and a warm, alluring, virile aroma that was distinctly his own.

Her heart thumped wildly in her chest as she imagined his long, lean body covering hers, that delectable scent filling her while his lips devoured her with kisses. What was wrong with her? Was Python Place possessed by some evil magic that turned God-fearing women into wanton Jezebels?

Five minutes after she arrived home, Mrs. Bradley called her to the garden and asked if she'd like to ride into the village. A short trip was exactly what Abigail needed to get her mind off Python Place, Hailey, and most of all Tyrus.

Chapter Two

The following night at around eight-thirty, Abigail stood outside Mrs. Bradley's door, listening to the old woman's heavy snoring. She slept soundly so there was little chance of her waking before morning.

Abigail's stomach churned more from nerves than hunger. She wondered what dinner at Python Place would be like. Would it be a private dinner with Hailey and her husband, or would there be other guests? Most important of all, would Tyrus be present? Abigail wasn't certain she could endure eating while at the same table as the irritating yet handsome black-haired devil.

She walked to her room, donned her long brown wool cloak, then left the house to wait outside for the promised carriage. A short time later, she heard the rhythm of hooves on the road. In the distance she made out the silhouette of a tall horse and rider. As they neared, she saw Tyrus Terence dressed in black from head to toe astride an ebony gelding.

Her heart leapt in her throat. This wasn't the arrangement. Lord Terence said he would send a carriage.

"Miss Watson." Tyrus offered a wry smile. "I've come to escort you to Python Place."

"But the carriage --"

"Can you not ride?"

"This is highly inappropriate."

"You can't ride," he stated, dismounted and approached her.

A sensation of fear such as she'd never experienced swept her. In the darkness his pale eyes seemed to glow like blue flames and he appeared even taller and bigger

than in daylight. Good Lord, had his shoulders been that broad? His legs, clad in black boots and breeches, seemed to go on forever. His thighs looked chiseled out of granite.

"What's wrong?" he asked and extended his hand. "Come or you'll be late for dinner."

"I've changed my mind. Please tell Hailey I'll make plans with her for another time."

"Why?" he asked bluntly. "Yesterday you seemed eager to see your sister. She's talked about nothing but this dinner all evening. Do you really want to disappoint her?"

"I expected a carriage and a servant."

"I know, but I'm here instead. If it's the horse that frightens you --"

"It's not. But I'm hardly dressed to ride."

"It's a short ride." Again he stepped closer, his hand extended. Something unreadable flickered across his gaze and for a moment he looked almost trustworthy, or perhaps guilty. She couldn't decide.

The idea of sharing his horse, having his body pressed intimately against hers, was almost more than she could handle. Heat flooded her pussy and beneath her dress her nipples spiked. This was so wrong.

"Adrien asked me to see that the servant came for you and I decided to come myself," he admitted.

"Why?"

"If you must know, I wanted to talk to you."

"Regarding?"

"You piqued my curiosity."

"In what way?"

He dropped his hand, narrowed his eyes and tilted his head slightly to one side. "It's hard to say. But if I don't get you to dinner on time Adrien will have my hide."

Abigail lifted her chin, trying her best to look down her nose at him. Difficult since he was so damn tall. "And it would be well deserved."

He shrugged and took another step closer. "Will you get on the horse or not?"

Her desire at war with her common sense, she studied him carefully. Finally she approached the horse and allowed him to help her onto its back. Before she could protest, he mounted behind her. His arms slid around her so he could control the reins and Abigail's body reacted to his closeness. Her nipples and clit tingled, her pulse sped and she nearly forgot to breathe.

Relax. Remain in control even though you're in a completely inappropriate position with an even more inappropriate man. A wickedly handsome man.

At Tyrus' command, the horse moved forward. For several moments they rode in silence. Was it her imagination or had his arms tightened around her? His face brushed her hair and she felt his breath against her ear. Abigail drew a sharp breath, resisting the urge to lean against him.

"Mr. Terence --"

"Tyrus."

"I can't call you that."

"Why not? It's my name. Terence really isn't my name, you know."

Her brow furrowed and she tried to glance at him over her shoulder. "How is that possible? Aren't you Lord Adrien's brother?"

"Half brother. He, Dimitri and I have the same mother. Adrien's father was the former Lord Terence. Dimitri's father was his younger brother and my father was a close friend of theirs. When he died, Dimitri's father was kind enough to take me in and raise me as his own. He allowed me to use the Terence name, but I have no legal right to it."

"I didn't know that. I'm sorry to ask an inappropriate question."

"You worry too much about what's appropriate."

"And you don't seem to worry enough."

He gave a snort of laughter. "I took after my mother in that way."

"She must be an interesting woman."

"Interesting. Yes," he said in a bitter tone that prompted her curiosity, yet she thought it best not to ask any questions.

A short time later they arrived at Python Place. A servant waited to take Tyrus' horse to the stable while he escorted her inside. Rather than use the front entrance, he led her around the house, through a beautiful garden filled with trees and flowers, to a side entrance. He opened the door and she stared up a long, dark staircase. Again fear darted through her. She must be as insane as her father to come to this house late at night escorted by a man thought by some to be a spawn of the devil.

Then Hailey appeared at the top of the steps, carrying a lantern and wearing a cheerful smile. "Abigail. Come up. This is our wing of the house."

"Each of us has a separate wing," Tyrus explained. "Otherwise we'd get on each other's nerves and end up killing each other."

Abigail glanced at him, her brow furrowed.

"I'm joking," he said, his lips curved into a smile. "Has anyone ever told you you're far too serious?"

"No one of consequence."

His eyes narrowed and she couldn't decide if he was annoyed or amused. "I'll be glad to escort you home after dinner, Miss Watson."

She nodded and ascended the steps.

* * *

Watching Abigail climb the stairs, Tyrus felt the same unsettling emotions as on the previous day when they'd first met. He'd specifically arranged to pick her up tonight because he wanted to see if the sensations he'd felt upon meeting her had been a fluke. He'd prayed they were but as usual his prayers had gone unanswered.

The woman was an infuriating combination of purity and temptation. A plainly dressed goddess whose natural beauty outshone that of any painted, bejeweled lady he'd ever seen. Her haughty attitude both aroused and annoyed him. Even beyond these simple feelings was something far deeper, something he'd never experienced and greatly feared.

Like his brothers, Tyrus was a daemon, and when a daemon met his soulmate, he knew instantly by an inexplicable and irresistible feeling. No matter what Tyrus

wanted to believe, there was no denying he experienced that feeling in the presence of Abigail Watson. Unlike most daemons, the Terence brothers desperately needed their soulmates, yet once they found them, until they bonded for life, they were in terrible danger.

The Terence brothers' mother was a wicked, immortal spirit called Eris and their fathers had been human males. Like Eris, the brothers were immortal, but that long life came at a price. In order to survive, they were forced to feed on the sexual energy of others. The mortal world had many names for creatures such as them -- vampires, incubi, demonic spirits.

Evil ruled many daemons, but long ago the Terence brothers had vowed not to be swallowed by their fiendish side, to never become like Eris. They created Python Place, a pleasure house frequented by many so-called "decent" men and women, so they could feed their hunger with willing donors, never taking enough to harm anyone. With their combined power, they fought Eris who constantly tried to lure them into her world of utter darkness.

According to the Terence brothers' close friend, Dion, who was an immortal spirit, the only way to banish Eris' evil from their lives forever was for all three to bond with their soulmates. Only their soulmates could soothe their evil side and sate their daemon hunger. Once united, Eris could never tempt them again.

Adrien and Dimitri had tasted their mother's wickedness on many occasions, but even they didn't know it as intimately as Tyrus. After his father died, she had taken him to live with her. There, in the smoky world of immortals, he had seen and experienced evils no child should see. Even then he'd rebelled against Eris in spite of how she tried to indulge every cruel desire a child could have. His resistance combined with the rigors of raising a child had proved to be too much for her to handle and she'd brought him to Dimitri's father who had taken him in. In spite of the kindness and patience of his foster father and half-brothers, it had taken Tyrus years to trust them and even longer to banish the nightmares of his years with Eris.

Tyrus despised his mother, yet he understood her better than his brothers. As a child he had experienced firsthand the lure of utter indulgence offered by the immortal world. They hadn't traveled there until their teenage years when they were better able to cope with the temptations after being raised with decency, kindness and discipline.

Much of what Tyrus had seen and done still plagued him, and he felt guilt but also desire. Daemons had formidable power and it was so easy to use that power to take whatever they wanted...

"Tyrus."

His thoughts were interrupted by Adrien's voice behind him in the garden.

An irritated smile twitched across Tyrus' lips and he closed the door, blocking Abigail from view. He turned to face Adrien whose piercing gaze held his. One thing about Adrien, he could stare down a starving wolf.

"I'd asked you to send a carriage for her."

"She's here, isn't she?"

"You could have offended her. Hailey said her sister is very --"

"Uptight? Self-righteous."

Adrien narrowed his eyes. "Regardless, she is my wife's sister. She means a great deal to Hailey and we will do what we can to make her feel welcome. You could have ruined the entire evening."

Tyrus gritted his teeth and approached Adrien so they stood chest to chest. "I understand Hailey is your soulmate, but since meeting her, your balls have been in her pocket."

Adrien's eyes turned positively glacial. "Don't push me, Tyrus. You have no idea how powerful the bond between soulmates is, but one day you will."

"I almost hope that day never comes."

"Do you?" Adrien said, his jaw visibly taut. "We haven't fought all these years to lose to Eris now."

"We'll be free of her but bound to other women."

“Hailey is worth a thousand of our mother. I will stop at nothing to protect her, just as I’d stop at nothing to protect you and Dimitri.”

Tyrus sighed, some of his anger fading. The one thing in life he was certain of was the bond shared with his brothers. Adrien took his role as eldest brother very seriously. He’d always cared for his younger siblings, gone out of his way to offer them support. When Tyrus suffered those nightmares as a child, Adrien had comforted him as often as his foster father.

“I have no intention of losing to Eris,” Tyrus stated. “I know her evil even better than you do, remember?”

Adrien sighed and shook his head slightly. “I still don’t understand why you went for Abigail yourself.”

“She piqued my curiosity.”

Studying Tyrus carefully, Adrien’s lips flickered in an almost imperceptible smile. “You’re attracted to her.”

Tyrus snorted. “Don’t be ridiculous. Did you see how she dresses?”

“Rather like Hailey when I first met her.”

“You’re the one who looks past people’s outer package, remember? Dimitri and I are the superficial lechers in the family.”

This time Adrien’s smile broadened. “Perhaps, but that doesn’t mean you can’t change. Or haven’t.”

“You can’t honestly believe the Fates would be cruel enough to mark Abigail Watson as my soulmate? The woman is bookish and unattractive.”

“I wouldn’t call her unattractive. She’s rather pretty in an understated way.”

Tyrus shrugged, not admitting that he didn’t simply find her pretty, but beautiful. If she wore something other than that high-necked tablecloth she called a dress, he knew she’d be absolutely gorgeous. All the better if she wore nothing at all, for even her terrible clothes couldn’t hide the breathtaking curves beneath.

“Aren’t you going to be late for dinner?” Tyrus asked gruffly.

“No. Hailey and Abigail will be dining alone. I thought my presence might intimidate my sister-in-law who is already under the impression I’ve corrupted Hailey.”

“Haven’t you in a way?”

Adrien’s expression darkened and Tyrus felt a twinge of sorrow that he hadn’t chosen his words more carefully. He knew Adrien felt a bit guilty about claiming Hailey. No doubt she had been completely innocent when he’d first taken her. Tyrus knew Adrien had craved that purity yet at the same time felt unworthy of it. That in itself annoyed Tyrus because no one was more loyal and generous to those he cared about than Adrien. If any of the Terence brothers truly deserved happiness, Adrien was the one.

“Whatever you choose to believe, Adrien, she’s far better off with you than she ever was with that mad-dog father of hers.”

“I know that.”

“Don’t ever forget it.”

“Enough of this talk,” Adrien said. “Let’s go to the common wing and get some dinner. I’m starving.”

Tyrus agreed and followed his brother to what they called the common wing of Python Place, where their escorts entertained their guests and all business took place. Tyrus’ thoughts weren’t on food, but on Abigail Watson. He imagined escorting her to his wing and showing her all the pleasures he knew she’d spent her life denying.

Chapter Three

It was close to midnight when Adrien and Tyrus joined Hailey and Abigail in the parlor.

Abigail thoroughly enjoyed the delicious dinner and hours of conversation with her sister. Now she had no doubt left in her mind that Hailey was happy in her new life and passionately in love with her husband.

"Allow me to extend my apologies if I seemed rude yesterday, my Lord," Abigail said as the brothers took seats by the couch where she and Hailey sat.

"The matter is forgotten," Adrien replied. "And please call me Adrien."

"Thank you."

"Why can you call him Adrien yet refuse to call me Tyrus?"

Another little thrill coursed through Abigail when her gaze met Tyrus'. "If you insist, I shall call you Tyrus."

"Oh, I insist," he said in a teasing tone.

"Are you sure you won't stay the night?" Hailey asked.

"I really can't, but another time?"

"Whenever you like."

"If you're ready to leave, Miss Watson, I will take you home," Tyrus said.

She looked hesitant and Adrien said, "Forgive Tyrus for being overly eager, but he sometimes gets that way around lovely women. I will have a servant take you home in a coach, if you prefer."

"Do you prefer?" Tyrus asked. Again his gaze burned into her.

Though she should refuse his offer, something compelled her to say, "I wouldn't want to trouble you."

"It's no trouble." He stood.

The sisters embraced quickly then she slipped her hand into Tyrus'. He wasn't wearing gloves this time and his hand felt warm, the palm a bit rough though his touch was surprisingly gentle. Again she imagined him caressing her, those long slender fingers fondling her nipples and teasing her clit and pussy until she exploded with passion.

As if sensing her thoughts, he smiled at her, the look in his eyes making her feel completely naked.

A short time later, she sat on Tyrus' horse, her body pressed close to his. The ride ended all too soon and before she knew it, she was in her room undressing.

She couldn't keep her thoughts from Tyrus -- his compelling eyes, his lean yet powerful physique, his arousing scent...

Rather than put on her nightgown immediately, she stood naked by her bed and closed her eyes, inhaling deeply. It must have been her imagination, but she thought she caught the aroma of sandalwood.

Her nipples tight and clit aching with need, she locked her door and stretched out naked on her bed. At that moment neither shame nor embarrassment overpowered the need to touch herself, to appease the hunger that had been gnawing at her since the moment she'd met Tyrus.

She closed her eyes and caressed her breasts. Her fingertips stroked between the plump mounds, then she rolled the nipples between her thumbs and forefingers. The already taut flesh tightened even more and she teased the nubs until her touch became almost painful.

She imagined Tyrus pinching and stroking her nipples with his long slender fingers and a thrill coursed through her, making her shiver. Abigail's heart raced as her hand moved lower, caressing the curve of her belly then dipping between her parted thighs.

Her breathing quickened and the tendons in her neck tightened almost painfully when she dipped a finger into her hot, wet pussy then rubbed her clit with slow, tantalizing strokes.

"Yes, oh yes," Abigail whispered. Through parted lips she drew sips of air. Her hips thrust in time with her stroking fingers yet in her mind it wasn't her hands touching her, but Tyrus'. He rubbed faster and her body heated, heart pounded, and it took all her control not to moan and writhe as wave after wave of passion broke over her.

"Oh, heavens. Oh Tyrus. Tyrus!" she whispered, unable to repress a moan as her fingers rubbed faster, pushing her into a second orgasm that was almost painful in its intensity. Her legs trembled and she tingled from head to toe. The scent of sandalwood almost overwhelmed her. A warm breeze seemed to cover her, caressing her naked flesh yet at the same time increasing her lust so much that another climax built quickly after the second.

In the midst of the climax, something compelled her to open her eyes just a bit. When she did she screamed and jumped off the bed, staggering as her body still pulsed in waves of orgasm. She thought for sure she'd seen the smoky image of Tyrus Terence leaning over her. Their gazes had met and most frightening of all she felt like she belonged with him, beneath him, filled by his very essence.

It must have been a trick of the moonlight shining in through the open window combined with her carnal fantasy.

She quickly pulled on her nightgown and dove under the covers, still trembling and weak from fulfillment. Even as she drifted to sleep she caught the fading scent of sandalwood.

Tyrus Terence.

* * *

Standing outside Abigail's house, Tyrus stared up at her bedroom window, his heart racing and cock so hard it felt ready to burst. He'd only intended to drop her at home and return to Python Place. Actually that was a lie.

He had meant to watch her undress, at least down to her shift. Beneath her frumpy clothes lurked the body of a goddess and he meant to see it. Something told him that in spite of her obvious attraction to him, she wouldn't bed him and any

possible seduction could take years. Tyrus didn't have years and he certainly had no intention of courting the woman who was most likely his soulmate. At least not yet. He wasn't ready for the responsibility.

Once he saw the lantern burn in her room, he'd changed to his smoke form, an ability that all daemons possessed, allowing them to escape danger, see other immortals undetectable to the human eye, and most important slip into mortals' beds so they could feed their lustful hunger. He floated to the window and gazed in, watching Abigail undress. To his pleasure and dismay, she'd stretched out naked on the bed and touched herself, pleasuring herself with her own hand. How he wished it was his hands and mouth upon her!

Watching her pinch her berrylike nipples, he could almost feel them between his lips and against his tongue. He wanted to lick and kiss every inch of her, dip his tongue into her pussy and explore her hot, wet flesh until she cried his name in ecstasy.

Even in his smoke form he felt pleasure. Staring as she caressed damp folds of enticing pink flesh, he felt his cock stiffen and he reached down, curling his fist around it and stroking in time with her rubbing fingers.

When the first orgasm took her, she looked so beautiful, her neck arched and pulsing, her breasts taut and quivering, the nipples pebble stiff. Her hips lifted and her hand stroked faster and faster. Her energy filled the room and he could scarcely resist tasting her. Then she called his name. *Tyrus. Tyrus!* The sound of her soft, sweet voice crying his name in lust was almost enough to unman him then and there. She desired him as much as he desired her. The need to touch her overcame him.

Before he fully realized what he was doing, he'd walked through the window in his smoke form and covered her body with his. Drawing upon her sexual energy, he caressed her breasts and tenderly stroked her soft mound until she came again. Quite unexpectedly she opened her beautiful eyes and for the briefest moment their gazes locked before he faded completely and returned to his solid form below her window.

"Damn you, Tyrus Terence," he whispered.

"Why? Because you want to indulge your passion?" a husky, feminine voice spoke close to his ear.

Then he caught the scent of cinnamon and felt Eris' body behind him, her hands roaming over his shoulders.

He jerked away and turned to face her.

Beautiful and seductive with long black hair and brilliant blue eyes, she was the epitome of evil.

"Why didn't you finish the job?" she asked. "You should take her if you want her. Devour her. It would feel good."

"What are you doing here, Eris?"

"Trying to persuade your stupid brother not to make a mistake and bind himself to that woman. One day you boys will understand the value of your immortality and your powers. Then you'll know what I've been trying to teach you all along."

"Don't even pretend that you give a damn about us, Eris. You're talking to me, the one who knows you best."

"Yes." She smiled, a gesture of false warmth. "You are closest to me. Oh, you were a difficult child but there were times when you enjoyed indulging in our power. Why not let yourself go again? Return to the woman in that room and claim her like a daemon should. You'd probably give her the thrill of her pathetic mortal life."

Tyrus wasn't a fool. If Eris wanted him to rape Abigail -- because that's what it would be without her consent, regardless how much pleasure a daemon could give his victim -- then she might suspect the depth of his feelings for her. Perhaps she even somehow sensed she was his soulmate. He couldn't risk harm coming to her should Eris decide to use her as a pawn.

"I probably would," he agreed, meeting her gaze. If anyone could play her game as well, if not better, than Eris, it was him. Yes, he'd sworn along with his brothers to deny her evil ways, but part of Tyrus would always be tainted by his past. She'd tried to make him a fiend and if she'd had a bit more patience she might have succeeded. "However, I've seen enough of her. She's rather dull, don't you think?"

"I do," Eris said, studying him carefully. "But after watching Adrien fall over himself like a fool for her sister, I'm not so sure you haven't the same awful taste as he does."

Curling his lip, Tyrus gave a snort of contempt. "I assure you my taste isn't that bad. I admit this woman held a bit of charm because she's such a prude. Even in an impassioned state she's so dull that I have no desire to waste more time on her."

"Really?" Eris asked, her gaze dropping to the bulge in his breeches.

"What you're seeing is unfulfilled passion because I don't want to waste my time with her. Nor do I want to waste any more time with you."

"What do you intend to do? Return to Python Place and fuck one of your paid whores? Why don't you at least kill one of them, Tyrus? We're meant to kill. It's the only way you can truly fulfill your desires."

"Oh, there's another way. I just haven't found her yet."

"Your soulmate." Eris looked disgusted.

"Yes."

"The idea of eternal happiness with a soulmate is a fairytale spun by Dion to lure you away from me because he's a jealous, vengeful --"

"What exactly happened between you and Dion to make him hate you so much?"

Eris grinned. "Call it a love triangle. He lost."

Tyrus' brow furrowed. Dion never discussed his reasons for helping the brothers in their battle against Eris and until now none had considered asking Eris about it. The less they conversed with her the better.

"Would you like to hear more?" She stepped closer and looped her arms around his neck, her gaze fixed on his.

He removed her arms. "No."

"Still stubborn. But eventually you will come around to my way of thinking. No matter what you say or do, part of me is inside you. The best part. The strongest part. One day, Tyrus, you will admit it."

"Not today." Tyrus flung her an equally sinister smile as he faded to smoke.

She did the same and only when she disappeared from Abigail's property did he return to his horse and ride back to Python Place.

* * *

When Tyrus stepped into his wing, he found Dion in his human form, seated in the main hall. Tall and slender with curly black hair and ebony eyes, the old, powerful spirit studied Tyrus with a discerning expression he found most unsettling.

"What?" Tyrus demanded.

"I understand you've taken a liking to Abigail Watson."

"You understand wrong. I was merely being friendly to an in-law."

Dion stood and approached Tyrus. Both men were tall and stood eye to eye. "You're a liar."

"And you, as usual, have your nose where it doesn't belong."

"Doesn't it? I vowed to help you and your brothers find your soulmates. Is she the one?"

Tyrus hated how everyone seemed to guess his business. "No. She is not. Have you seen her, Dion? Can you imagine me tied down for eternity with a woman like that?"

"Looks can be deceiving."

"Not in her case. If you'll excuse me, I'm tired and want to rest. Go annoy Dimitri."

Tyrus continued toward the stairs.

"When you meet your soulmate you'll know right away," Dion called. "And there will be no denying the bond between you."

"So I've heard."

So I feel. Already Abigail had wound her way into his heart and mind, but he couldn't surrender to their bond. Not yet.

Chapter Four

Over the next week, Abigail and Hailey saw much of each other. Hailey visited Abigail and when she could slip away from Mrs. Bradley, Abigail dined at Python Place. In spite of her wish to avoid Tyrus after the night she'd imagined him in her room, she couldn't help feeling disappointed over his absence when she visited Python Place.

It was nearly two weeks before she saw him again. After exchanging a look hot enough to burn down a village, they responded coolly to each other and Tyrus retreated quickly to his wing. She often wondered what his private corner of Python Place looked like. Adrien and Dimitri's wings revealed their distinct personalities, and since the eldest Terence had wed Hailey, there were some feminine additions to his rooms.

Abigail imagined Tyrus' rooms to be dark and masculine, yet haunting. Perhaps it was best they avoided each other. Her obsession with him wasn't natural and any man who stirred such wanton desires as Tyrus should be avoided. Surely such lust could only be inspired by the devil.

Even Hailey's seemingly perfect marriage raised questions in Abigail's mind. No man could be as perfect as Hailey claimed. There had to be some drawback. That drawback turned out to be more unbelievable, more horrifying, than Abigail had ever imagined.

Nearly a month after Hailey's marriage, she invited Abigail for tea. The sisters saw each other often now. Several times Hailey had asked Abigail to come live with her at Python Place, but Abigail refused. Not only did she not wish to intrude on her sister's marriage, but in her heart she was still a reverend's daughter and couldn't bring herself to reside within the walls of a pleasure house.

Perhaps that was merely her excuse to stay away from Tyrus, for no matter how she tried to forget him the man still haunted her dreams. At one time she'd been able to control her sexual urges. Now she pleased herself almost every night, her explorations longer and far more thorough than ever before as she imagined Tyrus' hands and lips upon her, sucking and licking in places that made her blush to think about. Surely a man wouldn't *really* do such things, but fantasizing about it excited her.

That evening, Abigail and Hailey sat by the fire in the master bedroom of Adrien's wing. Hailey waited until the maid serving tea left them alone before beginning. "Abigail, you've come to know Adrien well and you know how deeply I love him."

"Yes. Of course."

"There's something I must tell you and then a favor I'd like to ask. You're not only my sister, but my friend, so I'm going to trust you with the most important secret in my life."

Abigail's guard rose, but also her interest. Noting the seriousness in Hailey's eyes, curiosity almost overcame her. "Go on."

Abigail soon wished she hadn't agreed to hear Hailey's confession. Her sister spun a tale that both terrified and intrigued her. According to Hailey, the Terence brothers weren't fully human, but mothered by an immortal spirit called Eris. She spoke of the dangers the brothers and their soulmates faced due to Eris' jealous, evil nature. Her greatest desire was to lure her sons into her dark world. To claim Adrien as her own, Eris would stop at nothing, even killing Hailey, to do it.

Hailey's greatest chance for safety was to join her husband in immortality through a ritual that an immortal could share only once in a lifetime. She intended to bond with Adrien in this way.

After hearing this confession, sorrow and horror overwhelmed Abigail, for she felt certain both her sister and Lord Adrien Terence were quite insane. Only when Adrien himself appeared and turned to smoke before her eyes did she realize the truth and fled the house, Hailey close behind her.

"Abigail, listen to me." Hailey chased her sister until they reached the edge of the lake behind Python Place.

"Hailey, that creature you've married has corrupted you," Abigail snapped. "The people of the village were right when they labeled the Terence brothers spawns of the devil."

"Spawns of the devil?" Hailey glared. "That's our father talking. He had more evil in one finger than Adrien has in his entire body. You know it and I know it."

"All I know is your husband is a half demon who turns to smoke and... and..." Abigail's voice faded and she thought she might faint. *Turns to smoke.* That night in her bedroom. The vision of Tyrus in smoke. She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. "Oh Lord, help me."

"Abigail. What's wrong?" Hailey touched her arm.

"That man," Abigail breathed. "That loathsome, lecherous, evil..."

"I will not listen to you insult Adrien," Hailey stated, her voice tight with anger. "He is a good man no matter what you say. You're as self-righteous as Father!"

"I am nothing like Father!" Abigail glared at Hailey, but even as she protested, she knew inside it was true. As much as she hated the reverend, his upbringing had shaped her life and, it seemed, stolen her ability to find real happiness.

"Abigail --"

"I know right from wrong, Hailey. And for your information, I wasn't talking about Adrien."

"Then who *were* you talking about?"

Abigail's lips clamped shut and she felt heat rise in her face. The last thing she wanted was to discuss *that night* with anyone.

"Abigail, I'm happy," Hailey said, her voice almost pleading. "I love Adrien and he loves me. By binding myself to him, I'll save us both and we'll have more years together than I'd ever hoped possible. You're my sister and I love you too. I want you to be part of my life, but if it comes to choosing between you and Adrien, I'm sorry. He and I will not be parted. Not by Eris, you or anyone else."

"I just need some time. That's all. Just some time to think."

Hailey nodded and walked back to the house while Abigail sat under a tree by the water and stared at the starry sky without really seeing it. This seemed like a nightmare. Had their father been right in his strict moral teachings? Hailey did seem happy and free, yet wasn't moral freedom wrong? Still, neither Hailey nor her husband harmed anyone.

Not like Tyrus, who crept into women's rooms and --

"So now you know," Tyrus said and Hailey gasped in surprise, turning to him as he approached, his bare feet silent on the grass. He wore only breeches, his sculpted torso exposed and his long dark hair loose about his shoulders.

"I know you're an evil, lecherous creature, and I know what you did that night in my room." She curled her lip and rose to her feet, anger battling with fear inside her.

She couldn't help the rage she felt knowing he'd invaded her privacy, nor could she stop the fear coursing through her at standing alone in the moonlight with a daemon.

"I didn't do nearly as much as I wanted to," he admitted, his glistening gaze upon her.

He continued walking toward her and she backed up until she felt the tree trunk behind her. When he stood mere inches away, so close that she felt his breath on her lips, she caught the delicious scent of sandalwood and saw the pattern of dark, curling hair on his chest. Her heart leapt.

In spite of her anger, fear and confusion, she experienced an even stronger emotion. Passion. It rushed through her, heating her very blood, dampening her pussy and turning her nipples to stiff, aching peaks of desire.

"I have no idea what you mean, sir," she said with more calmness than she felt.

"Yes, you do. I can practically smell your lust."

"Get away from me." She tried to move but he braced a hand on either side of her head, trapping her against the tree trunk.

"I should. A woman like you can bring nothing but trouble."

"Me? Trouble?" she snapped. "You're the demon. The fiend."

"Daemons aren't always fiends and reverends' daughters aren't necessarily angels."

"How dare you!"

"Yes, I saw you touching yourself, Abigail." He leaned even closer and spoke into her ear, his voice a husky whisper, "I heard you call my name."

"Get away!" She shoved him hard and immediately wished she hadn't. The sensation of his rock-hard, hair-dusted chest against her palms stoked her desire.

He moved back slightly, but grasped her hands and trapped them against his chest. To her surprise she felt his heart thumping against her hands. Why had she thought an immortal creature wouldn't have a heartbeat? His body felt remarkably human and so virile her knees went weak from the contact. Before she realized what she was doing, she tightened her fingers in his chest hair, stroked the steely muscles and relished the warmth of his flesh.

Licking her lips, she tilted her face toward his. If he'd looked at her with his usual arrogant expression, she would have fought him. Instead he wore a look of raw, almost desperate lust.

"I'm going to kiss you, Abigail," he said.

"Are you asking?" she breathed.

He shook his head slightly and bent so his mouth hovered over hers. "No, I'm telling you." His lips claimed hers with a firmness that left no room for protest. Not that she wanted to protest. Everything about him made her tingle from head to toe. With Tyrus she felt more alive than she ever had in her entire boring, sheltered life.

The feelings she had for this *creature* were wrong, yet she could no more control her desire than she could stop her heart from beating.

His tongue traced the shape of her mouth then parted her lips and thrust inside, exploring with rough yet tender strokes. Her tongue met his hesitantly at first. Waves of passion washed over her. She'd never imagined a mating of tongues, of licking and tasting a man so intimately. Of course she wasn't a child and knew all about mating, or

at least she thought she knew. Understanding the steps meant little when faced with actual experience.

No words could adequately describe the sensation of a man's hard, warm body pressed close to hers, or the feeling of his steely arms wrapped around her, embracing her so tightly she forgot where her body ended and his began. Nothing had prepared her for the marvel of his wet tongue stroking and caressing hers.

The ache between her legs became so acute that she needed something to appease it and that something pressed hard and ready against her. As if reading her mind, he took one of her hands and guided it lower until she cupped the enormous bulge in his breeches.

Abigail gasped with surprise and stiffened a bit, but he refused to stop kissing her. His lips and tongue moved against her more aggressively until she relaxed, her mouth open wide, accepting every thrust of his tongue. Lost in sensation, she closed her eyes. Slowly she stroked his cock and for the first time wished to feel it without the restraints of his clothes. Dare she?

She released him only to tug down the waist of his breeches. His thick, hard, satin-skinned cock sprang free and she curled her fist around it.

"Mmm," she purred, scarcely believing what was happening to her. Did this daemon have her under some kind of spell or had all the years of restraint finally caught up with her?

She wanted hands other than her own to touch her and she wanted to keep touching him as well.

Finally he broke the kiss and she leaned against him, gasping, her hand tight on his cock, her cheek resting against his warm, hard shoulder.

"Abigail," he murmured, nuzzling her neck while at the same time wrapping his hand around hers and showing her how to stroke him.

To her surprise he grew even bigger and harder. Now simply stroking him wasn't enough. She wanted to feel every inch of his erection. Her thumb strayed to the head and she found the tip of it wet. She spread the moisture over the crown and along

a prominent vein along the underside. Tyrus groaned, a sound of pleasure-pain, and tightened his arms around her. Inspired by his reaction, she continued her exploration. She alternated between stroking the entire shaft and teasing the head and underside. Touching him increased her desire to a fevered pitch. Her legs felt weak and she knew if he wasn't supporting her she'd probably be on her knees by now. Her pussy and clit felt so hot and aching, so needful.

"Please," she murmured.

"What, love?"

"Please touch me."

With another groan of raw desire, Tyrus pushed her against the tree trunk, knelt in front of her and lifted her skirt. Lost in a haze of passion, Abigail had no idea of his intention until she felt his warm wet mouth close over her clit.

"Ah!" she cried out in surprise and pleasure and buried her fingers in his hair, gripping his scalp tightly.

He didn't seem to mind.

Tyrus' tongue swept over her aroused flesh. His lips tugged upon it then he began licking and sucking in a fast, steady rhythm.

The sensations flooding her were absolutely unbearable. All Abigail could do was lean against the tree, her legs shaking and ass clenching as he lapped and sucked. Thank heavens his strong hands gripped her waist or else she would have collapsed.

Sooner than she expected waves of ecstasy broke over her and she leaned heavily against the tree, panting while her body throbbed with pleasure. She was scarcely aware of him guiding her onto the grass and stretching out beside her.

A half smile on her lips, she kept her eyes closed and allowed her breathing to return to normal. She'd nearly drifted into a light sleep when she felt his lips cover hers in another probing kiss.

Moaning softly, she threaded her fingers through his hair. Only when he covered her body with his and began easing his cock into her pussy did her eyes snap open.

"No, don't," she said, pushing against his shoulders.

His gaze fixed on hers yet he stopped moving, the very tip of his cock inside her. "Why?"

"For one we're not married."

"I don't mind," he said, a mischievous gleam in his eye. "Didn't Hailey tell you that daemons can't have children?"

During their conversation, her sister had explained that daemons, unlike full spirits, could not produce offspring.

"Yes, but that isn't the only reason I don't want to make love with a man I'm not married to."

He looked frustrated, but nonetheless moved away from her. Before he hitched up his breeches, she caught a glimpse of his cock -- long and thick, the ruddy head swollen to the point of bursting. The thought of taking it inside her both unsettled and aroused her. It was truly enormous, yet something told her nothing would feel as wonderful as being filled with it.

"So tell me, Miss Watson," he said as he stood and walked to the edge of the water, "do you intend to bear witness to the ritual that will bind your sister and my brother for eternity, or will you hurt her with your prudish ways?"

"I don't see how it's any of your business."

"It's not, but I'm a nosy bastard and want to know."

Abigail stood, the full weight of what she'd done striking her. Shame washed over her, but strangely it wasn't nearly as bad as usual. Was Python Place corrupting her or was it freeing her like it had apparently freed Hailey?

With her father long since locked away and her frequent visits with her sister, Abigail was finally beginning to explore the world around her and hunger for pleasures she'd buried for years. The desire to be touched by a man, to perhaps even one day marry. Yes, she wasn't a ripe young woman anymore, but Tyrus seemed to find her attractive. If a man as worldly and handsome as he desired her, perhaps she had a chance for love after all.

"Have you --" she began, then paused.

He turned to her. His intense blue gaze seemed to melt her soul. "Yes, Abigail?"

"It's a silly question and I must be going."

"There are no silly questions and if you would like an escort home --"

"No. Thank you. I'm not going home just yet. I must speak to Hailey first."

His lips flickered in a slight smile. "I'll be seeing you at the ritual then?"

What was it about him that annoyed her as much as aroused her?

Without replying, she smoothed her skirt, turned on her heel and walked toward the house.

* * *

The ritual that bound Hailey and Adrien for eternity was strangely beautiful. She exchanged vows and blood with her husband. Then with a kiss deeper and more magical than any Abigail had ever seen, Adrien gave Hailey a portion of his life's essence and made her immortal, his lover for all time.

It was during the ritual Abigail saw Eris for the first time and as much as she desired Tyrus, she despised his mother. Eris appeared in a smoky haze. Dressed in a transparent gown of black gauze, her long ebony hair a swirl about her exotically beautiful face, she stared at Adrien with such hatred that if looks could kill he'd have burned to ashes then and there. She ranted that their joining was an abomination. Abigail felt certain she would have tried to do Hailey bodily harm, yet it was too late. The ritual was complete and with a flick of his hand, Dion, the strange spirit with hawkish features who had performed the ritual, cast her out of the house.

Hailey's words hadn't fully conveyed the evil and danger of Eris. Seeing her, Abigail finally understood the reason the Terence brothers had made a pact to band together against her.

In spite of her physical desire for Tyrus, the thought of doing battle with an evil creature like Eris was enough to make any woman carefully consider her decision. Still, only his soulmate would be in danger and Abigail knew for certain she was *not* his soulmate. Yes, they lusted after each other, but the attraction ended there. Not only were they complete opposites, but they thoroughly annoyed one another. He constantly

remarked on her prudishness and she considered him an arrogant villain with no sense of responsibility. The way she'd seen him flirt with the scarlet women of Python Place was enough to make her ill.

For several nights she'd gone over every moment of their tryst by the lake, reliving it with such intensity that she'd ended up teasing herself to orgasm. She'd waited in the vain hope that he'd try to see her, had even gone to Python Place under the pretence of visiting Hailey when she'd hoped for a few moments alone with Tyrus. She'd seen him once when he and Dimitri had come looking for Adrien. Other than a casual nod, he'd made no advances upon her.

To hell with him. She didn't need a man like Tyrus Terence in her life anyway. For the first time she was actually glad she'd refused to allow him to mount her, rut her like a ram in heat then forget her just as quickly.

Abigail had been concerned that the ritual would change her sister for the worse, perhaps taint her with the evil she'd seen in Eris and, less intensely, in the Terence brothers. Yet Hailey remained her same cheerful, free-spirited self and though Abigail was happy for her, she couldn't let go of her envy. She wished for a man to share her life and her home instead of old Mrs. Bradley whose only interests were in weekly visits to the village, eating regular meals and snoozing. Abigail shouldn't complain, really. The elderly lady was nice enough and she didn't keep too close a watch on Abigail, giving her the freedom to come and go as she pleased while providing the semblance of propriety.

It was only under the influence of another female friend that Abigail began to truly question her wants and desires. Shortly after Hailey and Adrien's ritual, Dimitri introduced his soulmate to the household. Like the Terence brothers, Pier was a daemon and she used her considerable wealth and power to defy convention. In London she ran a pleasure house similar to Python Place and allowed no man to dictate to her.

One evening when Abigail had a rare few days alone in her house since Mrs. Bradley was visiting her niece, she invited Hailey and Pier for dinner.

Seated at the dining table, they laughed and talked about a variety of subjects, but inevitably the conversation turned to men.

Listening to Hailey and Pier gush over their soulmates, Abigail couldn't help feeling a bit left out.

"Would anyone care for more tea?" she interrupted.

"Dear, would you sit down and stop waiting on us?" Pier said. "Relax."

"I think we're boring Abigail," Hailey said.

"Of course. We've been going on and on about Adrien and Dimitri and not giving her a chance to talk about the men in her life."

Abigail was taken aback. "There are no men in my life. You know that."

Pier sighed. "So you say, but I've seen the far off look in your eyes at times. Hailey?"

Knowing how uncomfortable this sort of conversation made Abigail, Hailey said, "I'm sure if she wanted to discuss a particular man she knows we'd be more than happy to listen."

"Hailey tells me she's invited you to live at Python Place but you've refused. Why?" Pier asked.

"Well, you've only agreed to live there in between trips to London," Abigail pointed out.

"That's because I want to run my business. You have no such business. This house isn't nearly as comfortable as Python Place."

"I find my home quite comfortable, thank you," Abigail said, lifting her chin. If Tyrus was around he'd be teasing her for her haughtiness.

"I mean no insult, but something tells me a woman such as yourself can't possibly be happy living like an old spinster."

"Excuse me?" Abigail enjoyed Pier's company, but sometimes her outspoken nature was a bit difficult to accept.

"You're young and attractive. It's not right that you're living here with an old woman as your only companion and no beau to fulfill your more intimate needs." Pier's

eyes gleamed with mischief and she stood, approaching Abigail. She began removing the pins from her hair so that it cascaded down her back. "Such lovely hair. Why keep it bound so?"

"It's fashionable," Abigail replied, jerking away from Pier.

"Why don't you come to Python Place for the next couple of days? See how you like it there?"

"Why don't we change the subject?" Hailey suggested, apparently sensing Abigail's discomfort.

The last place Abigail wanted to be was Python Place. Not with the chance of crossing paths with Tyrus. While she still thought of their moments together, he had obviously forgotten her.

Chapter Five

Several days later, in the field behind Python Place, Tyrus and Adrien practiced swordplay. Tyrus' thoughts drifted to how much life at Python Place had changed since Adrien and Dimitri met their soulmates.

Dimitri was Adrien's opposite in almost every way. Carefree, usually pleasant and relaxed, he thoroughly enjoyed life. Now that he and Pier had met, he seemed happier than ever.

Seeing his brothers fulfilled by joining with their soulmates, Tyrus longed for Abigail more than ever. Why couldn't fate have bound him to a charming woman like Hailey or an openly lustful one like Pier? He didn't doubt Abigail's powerful sexual appetite, but the woman was too uptight to fully enjoy it. That night by the lake, if she had given in to his desire, he no doubt would have been lost to her. When she refused, he'd taken a long hard look at eternity with Abigail Watson. Would their life be one of sin and repent, at least in her eyes? To him there was no shame in fulfilling sexual needs. As a daemon, he required such escapades on a regular basis.

Perhaps he was using her prudence as an excuse to hide from commitment. Hailey had been raised in the same pious house by the same self-righteous man and look how much she had learned to enjoy life with Adrien.

Once bound to Abigail, they would belong to each other forever and that notion horrified Tyrus, not because he didn't think she could please him but because he knew Eris hadn't lied when she said part of him would always belong to her.

Abigail was truly a good, pure woman and he had been tainted since conception, half his blood belonging to an evil bitch who reveled in the pain of others. But his father had been a good man. He'd instilled decency in Tyrus, given him the kind of love every child deserved.

Then he'd died.

Tyrus had been left to Eris' mercy and she had none. Worst of all, Eris wanted to destroy the brothers' soulmates. If she knew Abigail was his, she'd use her as a pawn, perhaps even try to kill her.

Abigail was safer without him. Yet knowing he'd found his soulmate and denying it was a cheat. His brothers wouldn't rest easy until Tyrus and his mate were bound to each other. That in itself would save them from Eris, but the danger would be during the courting period. He couldn't just say to Abigail, "You're my soulmate. You must marry me or else my evil mother will kill you."

Tyrus grunted in pain as the tip of Adrien's sword pierced his arm.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Adrien demanded, lowering his blade, his eyes glinting with concern. He approached and examined Tyrus' wound then pressed his hand to it to ease the flow of blood. "Your mind has been wandering of late. What's the problem?"

"No problem." Tyrus jerked away and turned, raising his sword arm. "Continue."

"Get that wound tended first."

Tyrus growled and headed for the house. He'd ask one of the maids to do it and perhaps ease a bit of sexual tension as well. Thinking of Abigail always stirred his desire. How many times had he considered returning to her house at night, but something stopped him. Respect? Most irritating of all he did respect her. He'd actually felt guilty when she'd looked at him with combined hurt and rage upon realizing he'd slipped into her bedroom uninvited.

The next time he joined her in bed, she'd have to beg him to go there. He gave a snort of irony. It would be a cold day in hell before the ice angel begged the evil daemon for carnal pleasure.

Lately it had been more and more difficult to deny his need for her. One way or another he had to make a decision.

Inside, he called for a pretty young maid whom he regularly bedded to bring water and bandages to his room. She'd just finished wrapping his wound and they were about to engage in some very *healing* activities when Dimitri pounded on his door.

"Tyrus, I must talk to you," Dimitri called. The panicked edge to his voice nabbed Tyrus' attention and he grasped the maid's shoulders, gently pushing her aside before he walked to the door.

He opened it, took one look into Dimitri's wild eyes and knew something was terribly wrong. "What is it?"

"Pier. She still hasn't returned from her trip to London eight days ago. Though I have no proof yet, this situation reeks of Eris' evil."

* * *

Several days after that frantic visit from Dimitri, Tyrus made the most important decision of his life. Though his brothers didn't know it and most likely never would, he had finally found a way to rid them of Eris forever.

The evil bitch had abducted Pier and nearly destroyed her. By the time Dion and the brothers rescued her, she'd been mere moments away from fading into the deathlike state that claimed any daemon unable to feed their hunger for energy. Once lost in that state, there was no resurrection. She would spend eternity unable to talk or move. Though fully aware of her surroundings, she would no longer be able to participate in the world around her. It was a hellish existence Eris had planned for Pier just to lure Dimitri into her world of pure evil.

She'd made a deal with him -- if he killed an innocent mortal, she would give his soulmate back. Luckily Pier had been rescued before he'd committed the act, but Tyrus realized that even if the brothers banded together, even if they bonded with their soulmates, they would never truly be safe from Eris. It was a dream they'd concocted to keep them on the straight and narrow. Now the dream must end. Tyrus knew what he needed to do. It might cost his life and would undoubtedly cost his soul, but he could no longer deny what he was. A daemon with an evil side who had found his soulmate and could no longer deny his raging desire for her.

In his smoke form, he sped across the British Isles to an abandoned castle, little more than ruins but for the dungeon that was home to a spirit so dark, so tainted and so powerful that all others avoided him. For all his physical ugliness, a curse in a world of invariably beautiful spirits, he possessed an unusual gift. A gift that struck terror in the hearts of his peers. Smolder had the power to cage a spirit, to trap it forever so that even in its smoke form it couldn't flee.

Dimitri risked everything by seeking out Smolder. He could be trapped in the spirit's dungeon forever, but it was worth the danger. He was finished playing with Eris and tired of trying to live up to Adrien and Dimitri's expectations. They might be willing to risk their happiness and their lovers to prove they were human, but Tyrus now saw the truth. The only way to fight Eris was to embrace their dark side, not fight it. He would do anything to be rid of her and court his soulmate without the hindrances his brothers had suffered. If it meant protecting his ice angel, then he would indeed make a deal with the devil.

* * *

Upon reaching Smolder's dungeon, Tyrus attempted to pass through the wall yet couldn't. In his smoke form he'd never experienced the sensation of smashing into a stone wall -- until now.

He changed to his solid form and pounded on the metal door leading into the dungeon. "Smolder!" he bellowed.

Moments passed with no response. He shouted again, wondering if the spirit was home. He was about to settle down for a long wait when a figure in black smoke passed through the wall and turned into the solid form of a dark-skinned man even taller than Tyrus' stunning height. Thickly muscled from neck to calf, he was the most powerfully built man Tyrus had ever seen. Scars covered one side of his face. He had one dark brown eye and the other such pale blue it appeared almost white. Beneath the open ties of his black linen shirt, another jagged scar marked his chest.

His appearance surprised Tyrus. He hadn't realized spirits could scar.

"Smolder?" Tyrus asked.

"What do you want?" he replied in a smooth, deep voice. Looking at him Tyrus had almost expected a growl rather than human speech.

"I'm Tyrus Terence and I need something from you."

Smolder studied him carefully. "You're a son of Eris, are you not?"

Tyrus wondered if admitting the truth would help or hinder his cause.

"You have the bitch's eyes."

"It's safe to guess she's not one of your favorite people?"

"She deserves to have her heart eaten by a pack of rabid wolves." Smolder advanced on Tyrus, using his great height and size to advantage.

Tyrus stood his ground. "I agree."

Smolder stopped walking and his brow furrowed. "What is it you want, son of Eris?"

"I want a cage to imprison a spirit."

"The cost for such a cage is steep. Which of our brethren do you wish to imprison?"

"Eris."

An odd expression flickered across Smolder's unusual eyes. "I see."

"What is the cost?"

"What do you intend to do with Eris once you've caged her?"

"Lock her in a place where no one can reach her."

Smolder crossed his arms over his incredibly broad chest. "What place?"

"Below my home."

"Python Place."

Raising an eyebrow, Tyrus asked, "You know it?"

"I do. For how long do you intend to imprison her?"

"As long as possible."

"Why?"

The man's questions began to annoy Tyrus, yet everyone knew better than to cross Smolder and Tyrus had, after all, come to him.

"Tell me or your request is denied."

"I want her out of my life until I've secured my soulmate. I want her away from us forever."

"Then the rumors I've heard about Eris and her sons are true. You are at war."

"I want her out of our lives."

"And you're willing to pay?"

"Yes."

"Any price?"

Tyrus' heart thumped wildly in his chest. *A deal with the devil.* "What do you want?"

"I will build you a cage to hold Eris. It will be delivered to Python Place and will remain there. Only I can remove it. At the end of one month's time, I will claim my payment."

"Which is?"

"I want a woman from Python Place. A companion to serve my needs and appetites. She will be a woman of my choosing. I may take any woman there, except your soulmate and those of your brothers. Agreed?"

Tyrus sighed. He had no right to bargain with the lives of the women residing at Python Place -- servants and employees who had learned to trust the brothers and willingly provide them with the sexual energy they needed to survive. Yet this was the one way he knew to be rid of Eris forever.

"All right. I agree," Tyrus said.

"If you happen to change your mind about paying, you forfeit your life to me and I will claim it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean should you deny me the woman I want, you will be caged in my dungeon forever. And you won't get away from me. Once the deal is made, we're bound as surely as soulmates."

"I said I agree."

“Good.”

With a suddenness that nearly stole Tyrus’ breath, Smolder changed to his vapor form and wrapped him in a firm embrace. Tyrus also changed to smoke and a jolt of energy shot through him.

“It is done,” Smolder said, his deep voice echoing in Tyrus’ ears. “The bargain is made.”

* * *

Luring Eris to the basement of Python Place proved as easy as Tyrus imagined. She usually came when summoned by her children, eager for another battle or a chance to gloat over their struggle against darkness. Wouldn’t she be surprised to learn this time there was no struggle.

“My darling,” Eris purred, approaching Tyrus in the lantern-lit basement. Behind him stood Smolder’s cage draped in black velvet, hidden from her unsuspecting eyes. “Your message sounded urgent.”

“It was.” He grasped her arms and smiled. “You were right when you said part of you would always be inside me. Adrien and Dimitri don’t know you as I do. They didn’t share your life as intimately. That’s why they’ve given themselves so easily to unworthy women.” The lies dripped from Tyrus’ lips.

Her eyes shone with malicious glee. “You’ve decided to return to me?”

“Yes. There’s a darkness in my soul, Eris. Mother.”

Before she could react, he shoved her into the cage and slammed the door shut.

Inside Eris shrieked with shock and rage. Walls enforced with Smolder’s power muffled the sound, yet he heard her pounding against the metal, desperate to free herself. Even in smoke form she couldn’t escape.

“This is Smolder’s handiwork, Eris,” he called and peered into the small glass window on the cage door. Even that had been empowered by Smolder and rendered unbreakable.

Panting, her eyes blazing, she glared at him through the glass.

Tyrus smiled. "Why are you so angry, mother? You should be glad. You've finally won. I've surrendered to my dark side. I'll wager you didn't think you'd be celebrating your victory in a cage."

Tyrus tugged the velvet over the door, concealing the window and Eris' hated face. He left the basement and locked the door behind him.

Chapter Six

Around ten o'clock that night, Abigail sat reading by the fire, yet her thoughts wandered from her book. She thought about how much her life had changed over the past months. Even six months ago, if someone had told her she would be free of her father, consorting with daemons and obsessed by one of them, she would have thought that person completely insane.

How many times had she told herself to forget about Tyrus? They had shared some blissful moments but neither had attempted to take their relationship further, nor had they tried to repeat the carnal indulgence of that night by the lake. Perhaps she hadn't appealed to him as much as she thought. If his physical pleasure had been as great as hers, wouldn't he have pursued her by now?

Of course she hadn't given him much of a chance for physical pleasure. She had selfishly allowed him to stimulate her to climax, and when he'd tried to sate his lust she'd stopped him. Or rather he had respected her wishes, for if he'd wanted to push the issue she hadn't the physical strength to stop him.

So many times since that night she'd imagined what it would have felt like if he had followed through with making love to her. Deep inside she wanted to give him the same pleasure he'd given her. She wanted to watch his face as he soared in ecstasy. Now she would most likely never have the chance. It was probably for the best.

She'd seen the devastation Eris had caused in trying to separate the brothers from their soulmates. If she and Tyrus were lovers, no doubt she would be the wicked spirit's next target. Better to sacrifice pleasure for safety, at least that's what she told herself. However she knew that if Tyrus desired and loved her as much as Adrien and Dimitri loved their mates, she would battle a thousand like Eris to share a life with him.

Sighing deeply, she placed the book aside. So much for such fanciful thoughts.

Someone tapped at her door. Her brow furrowed, she stood and headed for the foyer, wondering who could be calling at this hour.

"Who is it?" she called.

"Tyrus."

Abigail's pulse leapt. It was as if her lustful thoughts had summoned him. Impossible. Most likely he had a message from Hailey. Heavens, she hoped nothing was wrong!

She opened the door and gazed at him. Dressed entirely in black except for his blood red waistcoat, he stared at her with such intensity she was taken aback. His blue eyes burned into her, sending a rush of passion through her. Just looking at him made her belly clench and her nipples tighten. Each time she looked at him he seemed to become more handsome and desirable.

"Tyrus, is something wrong? Is Hailey --"

"Your sister is fine, but there is something wrong."

"What?"

"May I come in?"

She hesitated a moment. Something about him unsettled her more than usual. In spite of his calm tone, he appeared agitated, almost desperate and somehow more dangerous than ever.

"I'm not sure that would be appropriate." She tried to shut the door but he held out his hand, forcing her to keep it open.

"Right now I don't give a damn about what's appropriate. I need to talk to you, Abigail."

A tremor raced down her spine, but she refused to show how frightened she was. "Please come back at another time."

"Don't send me away," he spoke softly, his gaze becoming even more intense. He didn't force his way in, nor did he allow her to close the door. "Please. Hear me out."

Drawing herself up to her full height, which was about level with his shoulder, she said. "All right. You can say what you have to standing right where you are."

"You weren't so unfriendly that night by the lake."

"And if you enjoyed that night so much you would have paid more attention to me by now."

A slight smile touched his lips. "Ah. That's it. I wanted to come to you sooner."

"And you didn't because?" Faced with Tyrus and his self-satisfied grin, all the hurt she felt at being slighted by him burst forth in a scarcely controllable storm.

"First of all you haven't been exactly friendly toward me."

Abigail's mouth fell open for several seconds before she managed to speak. "I haven't been friendly toward you? You pawed me by the lake, practically had your way with me --"

"As I recall the night was very *enjoyable* for you but hardly so for me," he snapped. "For a pious daughter of a reverend, you are a shameless tease and probably the only woman who could so easily get away with leaving me in a state of frustration."

"You're the one who lifted my skirt and --"

"And you didn't stop me until I tried to gain a little pleasure of my own. What are you afraid of, Abigail? Soiling yourself with a daemon's lust before bedding that imaginary husband of yours?"

"How dare you!"

His lips drew back in an expression that might have been a smile or could have been a sneer. Passion blazed in his eyes as he took her chin in his hand, gently tugged her closer and spoke against her lips, "Do you have any idea how gorgeous you are when your temper is up?"

Abigail's face heated and her lips parted. How could he both irritate and arouse her at the same time?

He brushed his lips against hers but she turned and walked away. A slight smile tugged at her lips and her pulse quickened when she heard the door close and the soft click of his boots behind her on the wooden floor.

"What other reason do you have for ignoring me, Mr. Terence?"

"So we're back to Mr. Terence and Miss Watson, are we? All right, I'll play."

Abigail spun and met his gaze. "This isn't a game."

"Isn't it?" His jaw tensed visibly. In two long strides he reached her, grasped her waist and pulled her so close she felt his heart beating against her. "If it's not a game then I'd better tell you the truth."

"It might help." She tried to sound cutting but couldn't keep the quiver from her voice. Being so close to him, all her senses sprang to life. The warmth of his body melted into her and she swam in the crystal blue of his eyes.

"You know about immortals and their soulmates."

Abigail's heart beat so fast she thought she might faint, but she managed to control herself. She had an idea of what he was about to say but could scarcely believe it. Somehow she managed a slight nod.

"You're mine, Abigail."

"No. This is too sudden. It's too --"

"It's true. Search inside yourself. You might be mortal, but you know I'm telling the truth."

She moistened her lips that had gone dry and tried to look away from his captivating gaze but couldn't. By all that was sacred, she knew he told the truth. Perhaps she'd known from the moment they'd met something mystical burned between them.

"I need you, Abigail," he continued, his deep voice rough with passion. "I desire you. I love you."

"No," she breathed and tried to pull away but he refused to let her go. "Lust is one thing, but love --"

"I've tried to keep away from you, Abigail. I know you don't want to be bound to a daemon in spite of your desire for me."

"My desire... you think far too much of yourself."

"No doubt, but I am right, aren't I?"

Again she tried to pull away. "Release me. Now!"

"I will release you if you look into my eyes and swear I'm wrong. Tell me you don't feel anything for me, Abigail, and I will walk away and never bother you again."

She stopped struggling and stared at him, her hands resting against his chest, her breathing ragged as her emotions ran high.

"Tell me and you'll be rid of me forever."

"I can't," she whispered and gripped the front of his coat. "I can't."

His mouth covered hers in a crushing kiss, but it was exactly what Abigail needed. She wanted to feel how much he desired her, wanted to finally be claimed by this gorgeous, powerful daemon.

When the kiss broke, he asked, "Where is Mrs. Brady?"

"Bradley."

"Whatever. Where is she?"

"Visiting her niece again. She left this morning."

"Good. That means we don't have to be discreet." Tyrus kissed her again, even more deeply this time. His tongue stroked hers, thrusting into her mouth until she moaned with need. Little ripples of passion rolled through her body. She longed to feel his hands on her breasts and his mouth on her clit. Just thinking about the sensations he'd roused that night by the lake had her trembling and drenched with passion.

She clung to his back, her fingers kneading the powerful muscles. The need to feel his flesh against hers overcame her and she dragged his coat down his shoulders.

Chuckling deep in his throat, he stepped away only to discard the coat and toss it carelessly on the floor. When he began unfastening the top buttons of his blood red waistcoat, she stepped closer, her heart pounding, and started working the bottom buttons.

"Eager are you?" He grinned.

She glanced up sharply to make a haughty reply, but any words were forgotten upon seeing the raw almost desperate need in eyes. Clearly his desire matched her own and the last thing she wanted or needed was useless conversation.

For the first time in her life, without shame or guilt, she wanted simply to *feel*.

As if sensing her thoughts, his smile faded. He brushed her hands away and tore open the front of the waistcoat. Dozens of tiny red buttons clinked as they struck the floor. She would have protested if she hadn't been so fascinated with watching him. With the waistcoat gone, he ripped open the ties of his shirt and pulled it off, baring his marvelous chest.

She couldn't resist stepping closer and running her hands over it. Her fingertips brushed a nipple and she wondered if it was as sensitive as hers. With a soft moan of desire, she leaned even closer and rolled her tongue over the nipple.

He growled and wrapped his arms around her. One hand tenderly cupped the back of her head while his other worked the buttons behind the neck of her gown.

"Mmm," Abigail moaned, continuing to lick, kiss and stroke his chest. She closed her eyes and rubbed her cheek against it, relishing the cushion of hair over solid muscles.

Once he'd opened enough buttons to accommodate his hands, he parted the fabric of her dress and stroked her back.

Abigail giggled and kissed his chest.

"What?" he asked.

"I'm actually glad you came. With Mrs. Bradley gone, I was wondering how I was ever going to get all those buttons open."

He smiled and moved away just enough to cup her chin and tilt her face toward his. The amused and lustful glimmer of his blue eyes sent a quiver of need down her spine. "Whenever you need help undressing, Abigail, I'll be more than happy to oblige."

"That, sir, is a highly inappropriate thing to say," she teased.

"To hell with appropriate. Tonight is for pleasure."

Without further comment, he pulled down her dress, grasped the shift beneath and tore it down the middle.

Abigail gasped, shocked yet aroused by his action. "Tyrus, that was a perfectly good shift!"

"No longer." He curled his lip in a lustful grin and quickly shed his boots and breeches while Abigail picked up the torn shift, wondering how long it would take to repair it.

"Forget the damn shift." He ripped it from her hand. "I'll get you another one. Come here. I've already waited too long to taste you."

Grasping her waist, he hauled her body so close to his she felt his cock press against her in the most enticing manner. Instinctively she reached down and curled her hand around it, closing her eyes and sighing with pleasure. It felt as thick and hard as she remembered, the skin velvety against her palm. She gently caressed the head. Recalling how much he'd loved the underside teased, she ran her thumb along it.

Then she remembered how good it had felt when he'd licked and sucked her clit. She *had* sent him away aroused that night so she *did* owe him something.

Her heart thrumming with anticipation, she sank to her knees in front of him. Unable to resist, she ran her hands over his steely, hair-dusted thighs though her gaze remained fixed on his magnificent cock, so stiff, well-veined and enticing with its bulging ruby head.

She clasped the shaft in both hands and felt heat rise in her face as she leaned closer. Never in her life had she imagined taking a man into her mouth, but now she wanted to so much it was almost a physical ache. She needed to taste him. She wanted to give him the same pleasure he'd once given her.

Glancing up at Tyrus, she noted his eyes burning into her, his face tight. He seemed to be holding his breath.

She licked her lips then took the tip of his cock into her mouth. Her tongue swirled over the head and she moaned in pleasure, closing her eyes. It felt wonderful exploring him so intimately. Her sensitive tongue licked and teased, allowing her to know him in a way she'd never imagined. When she ran the tip of her tongue along the

underside, he drew a sharp breath and buried his hands in her hair. His body tensed and hips thrust against her, not hard but enough to show his pleasure.

It seemed she'd found the right spot. A slight smile tugged at her lips and she continued lapping the underside, her tongue flicking in a rhythm that his hips soon followed. She stroked his shaft with one hand and cupped his hair-dusted balls in her other.

Touching him was so much fun she could stay here all night if not for the drives of her body. Her clit ached and throbbed and her hot pussy must be slick with need. Even a cock his size could most likely slide in with little discomfort, and something told her once he was inside, he would bring her more pleasure than she ever imagined.

Still they had time and there were other parts of him she wanted to explore. Her hand left his balls and slid around to his backside. Heavens, it was so big and hard, the muscles tightened as he thrust his hips. Abigail purred, her tongue still lapping and sucking his cock head, and slid her fingers between his ass cheeks. She pressed and prodded his sphincter and Tyrus practically growled with pleasure.

He grasped a handful of her hair and gently pulled her away. "That's enough."

"But --"

"Patience," he said, though he looked anything but patient. His chest heaved with every ragged breath and a slight flush marked his high cheekbones. Raw lust seemed to make his pale blue eyes glow.

His hand still curled in her hair, he tugged her toward the stairs. Abigail had no choice but to follow and while his handling of her should have incited anger, she felt only arousal. He guided her to the steps and once she was seated he spread her thighs and buried his face between them.

"Oh, Tyrus!" Abigail gasped, falling back on the stairs. She didn't even care that the rug felt a bit rough and scratchy beneath her squirming bottom. All she felt was the thrust of his tongue into her pussy. Then he lapped and sucked her clit, teasing and tugging the stimulated flesh. That marvelous pressure built and built until heat flooded

her neck and she became aware of nothing except his lapping tongue and her ragged breathing. "Yes, oh, please! Please don't stop."

Several more flicks of his warm, wet tongue and she came, moaning and thrashing so hard she probably would have slid down the stairs if he hadn't held her fast.

Before she fully recovered, he moved up her body and pushed the tip of his cock into her wet, pulsing flesh.

Abigail's eyes remained tightly closed and she clung to him, pain mixing with pleasure. Her fingers gripped his powerful arms so tightly she probably left bruises, but he didn't seem to care.

Ever so slowly he moved deeper inside her then stopped, giving her time to fully accept his length and girth.

Finally Abigail opened her eyes and found him staring at her with such intensity she felt momentarily dizzy with passion and -- could it be love? Had she actually fallen in love with Tyrus Terence in spite of all their differences?

"All right?" he asked. Holding most of his weight on his arms so as not to crush her, he remained motionless, except for the rise and fall of his chest as he fought to control his desire that had obviously reached dangerous levels. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead and upper lip. She could feel the desperate need emanating from him and then she remembered exactly what he was. A daemon. This wasn't merely pleasure to him, but survival.

"You're hungry?" she whispered.

Nodding slowly, he leaned forward a bit and brushed her lips with a kiss. "I can wait."

"You don't have to." She wrapped her legs around him and closed her eyes. Now that the initial discomfort had worn off, her lust rekindled. She wanted to give him pleasure and feel pleasure in return. The thought of sating his daemon hunger no longer seemed like something vile and filthy, but incredibly desirable.

He began thrusting slowly, gradually stimulating her, rubbing her in all the right places. In spite of their awkward position on the stairs, she felt only pleasure that continued to grow with every shift of his hips.

Moaning softly, she wrapped her arms around his neck and caressed the damp hair at his nape. Her feet roamed over his calves and she drew deep breaths, each one filling her with the delicious aroma of sandalwood.

His thrusts quickened, pushing her over the edge. Crying out in ecstasy, she tightened her grip upon him, enjoying wave after wave of climax. As her passion ebbed, she was surprised to find him still hard inside her. His forehead dropped to hers and he rested a moment, his breathing ragged and slight tremors rolling through his body. She could almost feel his hunger, his need, and wondered why he hadn't yet surrendered to his desire.

Before she could comment, his mouth covered hers and he began thrusting into her again, slowly at first, then quicker as her pleasure once again rekindled. His tongue thrust into her mouth in the same rhythm as his cock until she came again, her pussy clenching his shaft and her nails raking his back. He tore his mouth from hers, his neck arched back and his breath coming in harsh gasps. Then she felt an amazing sensation, as if his very soul wrapped around hers. She felt the overwhelming delight of his orgasm, the incredible relief and pleasure to the point of pain. There was no doubt at that moment the daemon had fed upon her and it was the most wonderful experience of her life.

When he pulled out of her, she almost protested. It felt so wonderful lying there, warmed by his body and filled with his cock.

He tugged her into his arms and stood, carrying her up the stairs. She pointed out the door to her room and he brought her to the bed. Glancing down she noted a bit of blood on her thighs and some on his cock.

"I need water and a cloth," she tried to rise, but he gently pushed her back.

"I'll get it. Stay here." He left the room and moments later returned with a basin of water and a fresh towel.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he gently bathed her and cleaned his cock then placed the basin and towel aside.

She thought he might stretch out beside her, but instead positioned himself between her legs, cupped her bottom and lapped her clit.

"Oh, Tyrus," she murmured, threading her fingers through his hair. "I don't know if I can take much more."

He chuckled and continued licking and sucking her. The tip of his tongue found an especially sensitive place along the side of her clit and stroked it, sending little tremors through her.

"Yes, oh, don't move from that spot," she gasped and writhed, but he held her steady, his large hands gripping her bottom. "Tyrus, oh. I can't stand it. I can't! I can't!" Her words ended in a drawn out cry of passion. Wave after wave of pleasure struck her with such force that she thought she might drown in them. His tongue and lips never left her and the orgasm went on so long that when it finally ended she lay, completely spent and scarcely conscious. Still she was aware of him lying beside her and pulling her into his arms.

With a soft, contented moan, she snuggled close to his side and drifted into a light sleep.

Abigail awoke to Tyrus gently shaking her shoulder. "Get up, love. We have a long ride ahead of us."

She moaned, still tired and a bit sore, though pleasantly so, from their lovemaking. Lying on her stomach, she snuggled deeper into the pillow. "Ride where?"

He chuckled and gently slapped her bottom. "Come on."

Abigail turned and faced him.

He stood by the bed in all his naked glory. She watched him pull on his breeches and shirt, disappointed when his gorgeous body disappeared beneath the clothes.

"Where are we riding to?" she asked.

"Scotland. We're getting married in the morning."

Abigail sat up quickly, the sheet falling from her breasts. "Married? But you haven't even asked me."

Fastening his cravat, he glanced at her and raised a sleek black eyebrow. "I thought that was a given. You said you only wanted to sleep with your husband. You've slept with me and I have no intention of allowing any other man a taste of your irresistibly beautiful pussy."

Abigail felt a blush rise in her face, both from pleasure at the compliment and a hint of embarrassment. One would think nothing could embarrass her after what she and Tyrus had just done, but a bit of modesty still remained deep inside her.

His brow furrowed and he paused a moment, "What's wrong? Don't you want to marry me?"

"I do, but I'd still like to be asked."

He studied her carefully, and a hint of guilt passed through his eyes. "You're right. I apologize."

Taking her hands, he tugged her from the bed and knelt in front of her. Something about standing there naked with Tyrus on his knees before her made her feel powerful and feminine in a way she'd never before experienced. Her stomach fluttered with anticipation, though she knew what he was about to ask.

"Miss Abigail Watson, my lover and soulmate, the woman I crave with my very soul, will you be my wife?"

"Yes," she said. "I will."

His grip tightened on her hands. "And will you consent to the ritual that will bind our souls for eternity?"

Though she should have expected that question, it nevertheless took her by surprise. Her religious upbringing tugged at the back of her mind, once again telling her she had no business consorting with daemons -- half spirits, particularly one who carried the blood of the wicked immortal Eris.

Tyrus' eyes glittered with emotion. "Abigail, please. Don't deny me. Let me give you part of my immortal soul."

"I will, Tyrus..."

He smiled and stood, taking her face in his hands and bending to kiss her.

"Wait." She placed her hands on his wrists, loving their thickness and strength and the faint texture of hair over warm flesh. "I need some time before the ritual. I need closure as a human."

"I understand," he said and brushed her mouth with a kiss.

Why didn't she quite believe him? Though he outwardly accepted what she told him, she sensed his disappointment that she hadn't agreed to undergo the ritual immediately.

"Now get dressed. It's time for us to elope."

Chapter Seven

Two nights later, Abigail returned to Python Place as Tyrus' wife. She had arranged for Mrs. Bradley to continue living at her house as a paid caretaker, since the idea of turning the old woman out didn't sit well with her.

She could scarcely believe the strange yet wonderful turn her life had taken. At least she hoped it was wonderful. It would take time before she fully trusted her newfound happiness and until she underwent the ritual, she was still in danger of an attack by Eris.

Tyrus didn't want to discuss his mother in great detail, but reassured Abigail that she shouldn't be concerned about her. There was nothing he wouldn't do to keep her safe.

"It's not only me I'm worried for," she said as they walked to his wing of the house. "I heard what nearly happened to Dimitri as a result of Eris' attack on Pier. He almost became what he hated most, almost killed an innocent mortal to save her."

"I understand why he did it."

"So do I, but can you imagine what it would have done to both him and Pier if he killed to appease Eris? I know you and your brothers have struggled valiantly against her evil. To see that ruined..."

"Is better than losing a soulmate."

Abigail tightened her grip on his hand and stopped walking. He turned to her, raising an eyebrow in question.

"Nothing is worth that burden on your soul," she said, holding his gaze. "Trading one innocent life for another isn't the answer."

"That sounds noble, but you'll find that when those you love are in danger nobility flies out the window."

"You can't let her win. You've come too far and struggled too long. I know in your heart you're a good man, Tyrus Terence."

He chuckled and continued walking. "I thought I was a villain?"

"I did think that when we first met, but over these past months I've changed my opinion of you and your brothers. Adrien has made my sister happy and for that I'm grateful."

"And do I make you happy?"

She smiled, heat rising in her face and her belly tightening with desire. "Yes. You have ways of making me very happy."

He swept her into his arms and she laughed, clinging to his neck, and said, "What are you doing?"

"Hurrying to our wing so I can continue making you happy, preferably in the bedroom."

When they reached the door at the end of a long corridor leading from the common wing, Abigail turned the knob and they entered Tyrus' domain. The first thing that struck her was the heat, as if every fireplace in the wing was alive in spite of the mild weather. The decor was much as she'd imagined -- dark wooden furniture, black carpets and curtains accented by braided gold ties. It had a distinctly masculine feel yet a hint of something wicked.

"It's rather warm, isn't it?" she commented.

He playfully raised his eyes to the heavens. "You sound like my brothers. I tend to like things hot, but I'll keep the temperature to a more --"

"Comfortable level?" she supplied.

"Yes." He brushed his nose against hers. "Besides, with you around I don't need any outside source of heat. We'll make enough of our own."

"You, sir, are incorrigible."

"I do try."

Three dogs hurried down the stairs to greet them.

"I almost forgot you don't like dogs," he said.

"I like dogs. Just not when they get mud all over my best dress."

"That's no longer your best dress. This week you're getting fitted for a new wardrobe."

"Oh, am I?" she said, glancing at him from the corner of her eye. "I suppose you want me to dress in a manner befitting this house of ill repute."

"My ice angel, dress like a woman of Python Place? Never. You'll be elegant and stylish. Never inappropriate." A slight smile tugged at the corners of his lips.

Actually a new wardrobe wasn't a bad idea. Lately, in the presence of Hailey and Pier, she'd started feeling rather frumpy, looking more like their mother than their equal. Not that she wanted to wear anything shameless, but she would like to appear a bit more attractive for Tyrus.

He ascended the stairs, on the way ordering a maid to have a bath brought to the master bedroom. In the spacious room, an enormous bed stood against one wall. A couch and chairs clustered around the fireplace and a breakfast table stood by a balcony overlooking the moonlit fields. A thick black quilt covered the bed and black and red drapes hung on the windows. The other furniture, including an armoire and trunk, were fashioned from dark wood and had polished onyx fixtures.

"Feel free to make our rooms a bit more feminine," he said. "I'll see that you have some rooms entirely to yourself as well."

"Trying to get rid of me so soon after the wedding?" she teased.

His smile faded and he kissed her deeply. "Absolutely not. I want you to be comfortable here. Happy."

"I am happy, Tyrus, just being with you."

He placed her on the bed and sat beside her. His long, slender fingers deftly untied the ribbons of her bonnet and he removed the headpiece then placed it aside. Smoothing wisps of hair from her face, he gazed at her with tenderness she'd never expected from him.

"What?" he asked.

"It's just I never imagined you felt this way about me."

"I didn't want to put you at risk. I thought I could resist you, but it's impossible."

"I wish you'd have come to me sooner," she said. "Do you have any idea how many nights I thought about you? You make me feel things I never imagined before. If we were married, I'd have felt less guilty when I --"

"When you what?"

"You know what. You spied on me, something for which I haven't yet forgiven you."

"Abigail, don't give me that haughty look."

"You deserve it."

"I know." He grinned and kissed her.

This time she threaded her fingers through his hair and massaged his scalp, relishing the silkiness of his thick, dark locks.

When the kiss broke, she said, "We'd better stop. The maid will be bringing the bath soon."

"It's through that door." He pointed across the room. "When it's ready the maid will knock, so until then, let's work up a little sweat to wash off."

Abigail wrinkled her nose but chuckled. "Tyrus, that is an absolutely --"

"Inappropriate thing to say?"

"Yes, but why aren't you getting to it?"

"As you wish." He rolled her onto her stomach and began unfastening the hooks and buttons on her dress.

When he finished, he parted the fabric and once again tore the thin shift beneath.

"You really must stop doing that to my clothes," she scolded playfully, straining to glance at him over her shoulder.

"Ah, but do you really want me to?"

The tip of his tongue ran down her spine and Abigail smiled, pressing her face into the pillow, shivers of delight running through her. She shifted position to accommodate him as he removed her dress and shift. He rolled her onto her back and moved to the foot of the bed to tug off her boots and stockings. With one hand he rolled

the silk down first one leg then the other while using his free hand to caress her thighs. Once she lay completely naked, he sat back on his knees, removed his jacket and waistcoat then tossed them aside. He pulled off his boots and breeches then unfastened his cravat. He crawled toward her like a great cat, his piercing gaze upon her, grasped her arms and tugged her to her knees. Positioning himself behind her, so close that his warm, hair-roughened chest brushed against her back, he tied his black silk cravat over her eyes.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Get on your hands and knees,” he said, gently pushing her upper back until she followed his command.

Naked and blindfolded, she clutched the bedding and waited in anticipation, her bottom thrust toward him. What was he up to?

She heard the scratching of fabric as he removed his linen shirt then felt his large, warm hands on her back. He caressed with broad sweeps of his palm, moving down her back to her ass. Upon reaching the spheres, he curved his hands around them and parted them. At the first touch of his tongue on her sphincter, Abigail gasped and tried to pull away. As wonderful as it felt, it had to be wrong, having her ass licked and teased with his warm, wet tongue.

“Don’t move,” he ordered, his deep voice stern yet incredibly arousing. He grasped her hips, dragged her closer then once again cupped her ass and thrust his tongue against the pulsing ring of muscle.

Abigail moaned and lowered her forearms to the bed, dropping her head until her brow rested against the mattress. This was too wonderful for words.

For several moments his tongue lapped and thrust, then he slid his fingers into her drenched pussy and explored. Slowly he withdrew the digits and began caressing her clit.

Abigail’s heart pounded and she couldn’t control her groans and gasps of desire. The pleasure was almost unendurable. Just when she was on the verge of explosion, he knelt behind her, grasped her by the hips and filled her with a long, forceful thrust.

"Ah!" she cried, her fingers tightening on the quilt. "Tyrus, oh heavens!"

He growled and thrust, his rhythm slow and steady at first then becoming faster and rougher as his passion grew.

Abigail enjoyed the roughness. At this moment she wanted nothing more than to be claimed by him, animal-like. Pure and unfettered passion. She thrust her bottom against him, following his rhythm until he plunged so fast and hard all she could do was cling to the quilt, moaning and shrieking with ecstasy as wave after wave of climax hurled her into a world of carnal bliss. She felt him stiffen and come, heard his groan of release before he withdrew his cock and collapsed onto his back, dragging her with him.

After several moments, Abigail removed the blindfold and smiled at him.

He caressed her cheek, cupped the back of her head and drew her closer for a kiss.

"My cravat looks much better on you than it does on me," he teased.

"You think so?" She grinned and wrapped the black silk around her neck. She wrinkled her nose. "However do you men tie these things?"

He raised himself to a sitting position and she sat back on his thighs. His deft fingers tied an attractive knot in the cravat. When he finished he glanced at his handiwork, paying particular attention to the ends of the silk dangling between her full breasts. "Very fashionable."

"Very obscene." Abigail laughed.

"Very beautiful." He lifted one of her breasts while lowering his head so he could run his tongue over the nipple.

Two taps sounded on the door and Tyrus slowly released her breast. "Our bath is ready, madam."

Abigail stood, took his offered hand and followed him to the bath. Something told her she was going to love being married.

* * *

That night, for the first time since childhood Tyrus had a nightmare about his life with Eris. Screams of tortured mortals filled his mind and he waded in blood while Eris, her usually pale skin glistening red, laughed beside him.

He awoke gasping and glanced down at his chest and hands, relieved to find himself drenched in sweat instead of blood.

"Tyrus?" Abigail sat up and touched his shoulder then rested her hand against his forehead. "God you're soaked. Are you ill?"

"No," he breathed, running a hand through his damp hair. He felt foolish admitting he'd been so disturbed by a dream.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just go back to sleep. I need some air."

"Would you like me to come with you?"

"No. I'll only be a few moments."

She nodded, gazing at him with concern. Unable to bear the sympathy in her eyes, he turned away. As much as he craved her attention, he didn't deserve it.

Long ago he'd watched Eris torture mortals to satisfy her whims. He'd even participated in her fiendish games. He'd been a child then and not truly responsible for his actions. Now he was a man with no one but himself to blame for his crimes. Promising a mortal woman to Smolder against her will was an act of evil. He had no moral right to bargain with any life but his own. The catch was, if he gave himself to Smolder instead of surrendering the woman, Abigail's life would also be affected.

Of course if he asked his brothers to look after her they would, but he'd already married her. Their hearts were already linked.

He strode to the balcony and inhaled deeply, allowing the breeze to cool his heated body.

Part of him expected Eris to appear. She always seemed to know when one of the brothers was torn between good and evil and she never failed to show up, attempting to lure them into darkness. That wouldn't happen now. Tyrus had already succumbed and Eris was locked away forever.

* * *

Two weeks after their marriage, Abigail and Tyrus invited his brothers, their wives and Dion to their wing for dinner.

"I have to admit that since you arrived the temperature in Tyrus' wing is more tolerable," Dimitri said.

The group sat at the dining table, enjoying a meal Abigail and the cook had spent days planning.

"And his dogs have learned not to jump up," Adrien added.

"She's definitely been a positive influence on me." Tyrus glanced at Abigail and they exchanged flirtatious looks.

"I can't say the same about you, sir," she teased. "You have completely corrupted me."

"Never completely," he said.

"As wonderful as things have been lately, I'm concerned," Dimitri said. "Eris hasn't shown her face since Tyrus and Abigail married. Something isn't right."

"I agree," Adrien said. "It's uncharacteristic of her to avoid trying to ruin our happiness. She knows that once Abigail and Tyrus are bound through the ritual, she'll have lost."

"We're here to enjoy dinner," Tyrus said. "Let's not ruin it by talking about Eris."

"I agree." Abigail held his gaze. She knew his sleep had been plagued by nightmares over the past couple of weeks. He'd finally confessed that most involved his years spent with Eris.

The bitch couldn't torment him with her physical presence, but she still managed to haunt his sleep.

"I agree she's up to something," Dion said. "I've looked for her, but she's nowhere to be found. That worries me. I prefer knowing where she is, especially with Tyrus just having wed."

"Has she ever disappeared like this before?" Pier asked.

"No." Dion curled his lip. "She enjoys flitting around in smoke form, associating with the worst of our kind. When not sating her carnal desires, she keeps watch over her sons, waiting for a chance to destroy --"

"This is an old, boring conversation," Tyrus interrupted. "We all know what Eris does and why. We're safe here and happy. There's a delicious meal in front of us and beautiful women to share it with." He smiled at Abigail, hoping he looked more relaxed than he felt. All this talk of Eris made him want to climb out of his skin. "Why not enjoy it and for once not allow Eris to taint our pleasure?"

"All right. But tomorrow we'll have a meeting to discuss what Eris could possibly be up to," Adrien said. He lifted his glass and glanced at Hailey. "And now to happiness and beauty."

The others lifted their glasses and drank.

Tyrus smiled at Abigail but inside his concern grew. He hadn't thought about a possible explanation for Eris' sudden disappearance. Not that it mattered. Eventually they would forget her, or at least the others might. He thought by imprisoning her he'd be rid of her, but now he realized the horrible truth. In succumbing to his dark side, he had ensured her evil would forever mark his soul.

Chapter Eight

Over the next few days, Tyrus' secrets began to more fully take their toll. Lying to his brothers, Dion and especially Abigail affected him more than he imagined it would. Worst of all was knowing that soon one of his servants -- a woman who had trusted him -- would be sacrificed because of him.

To keep his mind off his guilt, he spent much time going over the books for the brothers' businesses. He had little appetite for food and slept less and less, knowing that each time he closed his eyes horrors appeared in his dreams.

Late one night he made the rounds of the common wing, a task the brothers performed in rotation. He thought back to the times when all three would spend night after night in the common wing, dining, drinking and fucking along with their guests.

That was before they met their soulmates, the women who fulfilled them. The charm of a pleasure house faded compared to the deep and beautiful bond between soulmates.

Passing by the ballroom, he caught sight of a tall, dark figure, his face concealed behind a reptilian mask. He grasped the upper arm of a maid and gazed into her eyes.

Tyrus' stomach twisted. He would recognize that tall, muscular form anywhere. Smolder.

The maid stared up into his masked face. She looked compelled yet afraid and he didn't blame her. Employed by the Terence brothers for several years, the woman was a good worker with a pleasant manner and always willing to sate the brothers' daemon hunger whenever necessary. The thought of her being forced to spend her life with the hulking immortal spirit who might very well be as rough in bed as his reputation proclaimed sickened Tyrus.

He strode into the room and headed directly for Smolder. He took the maid's arm and said, "Go about your business, Ruth."

"Yes, sir," she said, casting one last look at Smolder whose unusual eyes raked her curves with the expression of a hungry wolf.

"It hasn't been a month," Tyrus stated.

Smolder took a sip from the glass of champagne in his huge hand. He turned to Tyrus with a hard look. "Is this how you usually approach guests?"

"You're not a guest."

"Am I not allowed to enjoy the pleasures of Python Place like any other man?"

"We had a deal, Smolder."

"And I hope you're not thinking about going back on it."

For a long moment their gazes locked, then Smolder placed his glass on a nearby table. He stepped through the door leading to the garden and disappeared in a haze of black smoke.

Tyrus sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. He stepped out of the ballroom and Abigail approached, wearing her slippers and dressing gown. He noted how beautiful she looked with her thick hair loose about her shoulders. The pink satin material accentuated the rosy glow of her cheeks and made her eyes seem even brighter. Only her look of concern marred her lovely image.

"Tyrus, I thought you were coming to bed an hour ago."

"I'll be there soon."

She held his gaze. "Have you already grown bored with me?"

"What?" Her question startled him. All this time he'd been obsessed with his own problems and hadn't given a thought to her.

"I know I'm not as exciting as the women you're accustomed to --"

"Abigail, to me you're the most beautiful, arousing, exciting woman in the world. I love you." He took her face in his hands and kissed her. "I've just been --"

"Busy?"

"Yes."

"I think you're more worried than you let on about Eris trying to destroy our happiness. That's why you've been having nightmares."

Another twinge of guilt struck him, but he forced it aside. "You know what?" He tugged her into his arms. "I'm going to bed right now. I can't have my beautiful wife feeling neglected."

"No, sir, you cannot." She smiled.

Their bodies pressed close, they left the common wing. No sooner had they reached their bedroom than Tyrus swept her into his arms, carried her to the bed and dropped her upon it.

She quickly shed her robe and pulled off her nightgown while he discarded his clothes then covered her body with his. When she reached for him, he grasped her wrists and pinned them beside her head.

"Keep your hands there. Don't move."

Abigail smiled and drew a deep breath. In spite of how they argued outside the bedroom, during moments like this she loved obeying his orders since they usually brought irresistible pleasure.

He released her wrists, but she didn't move. After several seconds of gazing at her intently, as if tempting her to disobey, he seemed satisfied that she intended to do his bidding. He kissed her brow, then her eyelids, cheeks and lips. Ever so slowly he covered her with kisses.

Abigail closed her eyes and her breathing deepened. His lips pressed against her palm then trailed down her arm and over her shoulder. He licked her underarm then covered her breast with devouring kisses, taking as much of the soft flesh into his mouth as he could. His teeth gently scraped her skin and his tongue lapped and teased. Finally he took her nipple between his lips and sucked hard.

With a gasp of pleasure, Abigail arched her back.

"Don't move," he reminded her.

Heavens, that order was hard to follow, especially when his kisses trailed down her stomach and his mouth hovered over her clit. Abigail's hands tightened into fists

but she didn't change position. His breath warmed and teased the sensitive flesh, but he didn't lap it as she wished he would. Instead he continued kissing her, down one leg and up the other. He licked her belly, dipped the tip of his tongue into her naval and finally took her nipple between his teeth. He rolled his tongue over it again and again until she could scarcely endure another moment of teasing, then kissed his way up her breast and arm. He opened her fist and sucked each finger, his tongue swirling over them.

Abigail's entire body tingled with delight. Her breathing quickened and her heart pounded with desire. More than anything she wanted him to fill her with his cock and thrust until she exploded in ecstasy.

"You want this badly, don't you?" he purred, a tempting smile on his lips. For the first time in what seemed like ages his eyes glowed with passion.

"Yes. Oh, yes."

"Turn over."

She did as he commanded and he continued kissing her from nape to heel. When he'd finished, he returned to her buttocks and bit her, not enough to break the skin but with enough force to make her gasp with pleasure-pain.

Tyrus rolled her onto her back and mounted her. Their gazes locked and Abigail gasped with pleasure, arching her neck and gripping his shoulders tightly. He captured her lower lip between his teeth and bit gently then sucked upon it.

This biting aroused Abigail and she decided to see if he liked it just as much. She nuzzled his shoulder then bit it. Heavens his muscles were so rock hard. She licked the smooth flesh and nipped again, reveling in his groan of desire.

He thrust faster and harder, pushing her closer to the edge. Just before she shattered, he kissed her again, absorbing her cries of fulfillment. Twice more he brought her to writhing orgasms, made even more intense when he drew upon her sexual energy. Strange that he fed off her yet brought such breathtaking pleasure. Finally he tore his mouth from hers, crying out in rapture, his body surging into hers as he came long and hard.

Tyrus collapsed upon her, his body practically crushing hers, but she didn't care. He remained there only a few seconds before moving aside, allowing her to breathe freely.

Turning to him, Abigail smiled, thinking how adorable he looked with his eyes closed and face relaxed in the aftermath of passion.

She had truly begun to believe he was bored with her in the bedroom. It hurt deeply to think he might not find her as thrilling as she found him, but she was far less experienced than Tyrus. Since moving into Python Place she'd seen the sort of women he was accustomed to and could scarcely believe he had chosen her.

Yet in spite of their clashes, he never failed to make her feel loved and respected, nor had he bedded any of the other women at Python Place. If he had, word would have reached her as the servants enjoyed gossiping. Also Abigail kept close watch on Tyrus, concerned by both his avoidance of their bed and his terrible nightmares when he did finally retire.

She began to consider reasons other than a lack of desire. She knew the pressure the brothers felt to protect their mates from Eris. No doubt Tyrus worried for her safety, especially since she was still a mortal and more susceptible to harm.

"Tyrus?" Abigail spoke softly, lifting her head from his chest to look into his eyes.

He caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. "Yes, love?"

"I have to confess I feel guilty."

He narrowed his eyes. "You? Why?"

"I'm the cause of your nightmares and anxiousness lately. If not for me, you wouldn't have to worry about Eris."

"That's not true. Any nightmares I suffer are my own doing. They have nothing to do with you." He buried his hand in her hair, his gaze fixed on hers. How could she think such a thing?

A slight smile touched her lips. "You're saying that to ease my mind."

"No. It's the truth."

"I have something that will in turn ease yours. I want to undergo the ritual as soon as possible. That way we won't need to worry about Eris. We'll be together forever. I know I want that. Only my ties to my past, my strict upbringing, have prevented me from accepting the gift you offer. The truth is I've never been happier than I am with you. My father thought himself a pious man, a good man, but he wasn't. You think yourself tainted, but you're not. You've treated me with kindness and given your love. I'm yours, Tyrus. Body, heart and soul."

Her words touched him more deeply than he imagined possible. He thought he wanted nothing more than to undergo the ritual, and he did want to, but he couldn't accept her expression of love and trust under false pretenses. Before she made such a choice, she needed to hear the truth.

"Abigail, there's something I must tell you," he said, his chest tightening with sorrow and fear that the person he loved most in the world would reject him.

"What is it?"

"I've seen to it that Eris will never harm us, or anyone else, again."

Her brow furrowed. "How?"

"I made a bargain. I did it to save us. Please remember that while you listen to what I'm about to tell you."

"Tyrus." A look of fear crept into her eyes. "What have you done?"

Abigail listened in silence as Tyrus confessed. When he finished, she stared at him for a long moment.

"Will you say something, woman? Anything."

"How could you do this to us?" she murmured.

"I told you I did it to save us."

"But you're destroying yourself. How can that save us? You caged your mother - not that she doesn't deserve it -- made a bargain with this Smolder creature and are willing to sacrifice a woman to get what you want. Worst of all you can't live with what you've done."

"I can live with it. That's why I had to tell you, so you'll know exactly the sort of man you'll be bound to."

"Be bound? I *am* bound. Not just through marriage, but through love. Can't you see what this has done to you, Tyrus? You can't sleep, you scarcely eat. You work all the time and until tonight have avoided our bed. I know you thought you were saving us, but you're ruining us."

"You're right. Damn that bitch!" He stood and slammed his fist into his palm. "No matter what happens, she wins."

"This isn't about her. Stop giving her that kind of power over us," Abigail snapped. "There has to be a way out of this situation. You need to talk to Dion and your brothers --"

"No! This is not their business."

"Of course it's their business!"

"I'll handle it."

"But --"

"I said I'll handle it. You're my wife. If you won't do as I order then at least respect me enough to do as I ask."

Abigail nodded slightly, tears welling in her eyes. "Tyrus, one way or the other I've lost you. I've lost the man I fell in love with."

"You fell in love with a daemon. A son of Eris."

"No. I fell in love with Tyrus and I'll always love him. Never forget that." She stood and donned her robe.

"Where are you going?"

"To the guest room. I love you, but right now I just can't look at you."

He watched her go, resisting the urge to chase after her. This time he didn't blame the ice angel for her haughtiness. He didn't blame her one bit.

* * *

The following night, Tyrus sat in the study of the common wing, a ledger open in front of him though he wasn't concentrating on it. He had other things on his mind, linked to a decision he'd made. The hardest decision of his life.

Adrien and Dimitri burst into the room, Abigail, Hailey and Pier behind them. One look at his brothers and Tyrus knew Abigail hadn't kept her promise. Not that it mattered. He was going to confess to them anyway. He had no choice.

"Dimitri, keep your temper," Pier shouted.

"I am!" Dimitri roared, his eyes aflame and nostrils flared in rage.

"Are you insane?" Adrien demanded of Tyrus. Though the blond appeared calmer than Dimitri, Tyrus knew his eldest brother was at his most dangerous.

"What?" Tyrus demanded, standing abruptly. His brothers might be angry, but Tyrus wasn't in the mood for their attitudes or their advice.

"Are -- you -- insane?" Adrien spoke slowly, deliberately, as if to an idiot. "We have just been informed that you have our mother caged in the basement. We checked. It's true."

"You made a deal with Smolder," Dimitri snapped. "You must be crazy."

"I believe Adrien has already established that," Tyrus said coolly. "The truth is, you both should be thanking me. I did what we should have done long ago. The only way to defeat her is to --"

"Trade her life for a mortal life?" Adrien finished. "That's unacceptable. You had no right to make such a decision without consulting us."

"That would have gotten me nowhere." Tyrus, his temper approaching dangerous heights, stood chest to chest with Adrien. "You and Dimitri are so obsessed with spiting her that you've forgotten about fighting her. She's evil and belongs in a cage."

"And what about the woman Smolder is to claim? Does she deserve such a fate?"

"Adrien, open your eyes," Tyrus said. "The only way to fight evil is with evil."

Adrien punched Tyrus so suddenly he had no chance to defend himself. Blood gushed from his lip and his control snapped. He dove at Adrien. Their fists slammed

one another and neither so much as considered turning to smoke. Their male pride, not to mention their rage, wouldn't allow it.

Dimitri tried to break them up but received a bloody nose. He finally picked up a chair and struck Adrien with it, knocking him to the floor. Then he kicked Tyrus in the stomach, sending him crashing into the desk. The brothers rose to their feet, panting, their teeth gritted.

"That's enough!" Dimitri growled.

"That was a disgusting display," Hailey snapped.

"Fighting among ourselves can't help anything," Abigail said.

"You betrayed me." Tyrus glared at her, wiping blood from his lips.

"No, my love. You betrayed me first. You betrayed us all."

Their gazes locked and he knew she spoke the truth.

"We need to figure a way out of this mess," Adrien said, once again calm and collected. "I will not stand by while one of our servants is sacrificed to Smolder."

"Nor will I," Dimitri agreed.

"I've already figured it out," Tyrus said, taking a step closer to Abigail. "You're right in saying I've made a mistake. I'm sorry, Abigail. Please believe I did this out of love." Tyrus thrust aside his embarrassment at revealing his emotions in a room full of people since he had no time left to consider his pride. There was only one way to rectify his mistake. "I'm giving myself to Smolder to pay my debt. You'll still be free of Eris. Abigail, everything I own is yours."

"I don't want everything you own. I want you." She tried to embrace him but he held her at arm's length.

"This is also an unacceptable choice," Adrien stated. "You can't --"

Dion and Smolder appeared in a haze of smoke.

"I understand there is a problem with our arrangement." Smolder's deep voice echoed through the room.

The brothers and their wives stared at the dark spirit. Dion stood beside him, his usually calm face tense.

"There's no problem," Tyrus said, approaching. "I'm forfeiting my life, as I had no right to offer you a woman from this house."

Smolder drew a deep breath, his massive chest expanding. "I am disappointed in your decision."

Approaching Smolder, Abigail pleaded, "Don't do this. There must be some other way to appease you than the claiming of a life."

"You deny my request for a female from Python Place, yet you haven't asked which one I want."

"It doesn't matter," Tyrus said. "None are to be bargained with."

Adrien stepped forward, his eyes narrowed. "Out of curiosity, who do you want?"

"Eris," Smolder stated. "I want Eris."

Tyrus and his brothers exchanged looks of surprise.

"Why her?" Dimitri asked.

"Look at me. There is no other way she would have me. Now she'll have no choice. No more cruel refusals. She will be mine. And as you requested, she will remain trapped forever in my dungeon. Out of your lives."

"It sounds like a fair bargain," Hailey said.

"Actually, I think you're getting the worst end of it if you take her," Pier said to Smolder.

A slight smile touched his scarred lips. "Perhaps. Well, Tyrus, do you intend to honor our bargain?"

Tyrus looked to his brothers who nodded.

"Take her," he said. "She's yours."

Smolder grunted with pleasure then disappeared in a haze of black smoke.

Dion sighed deeply. "Well, my work is done."

"Why did you help us fight Eris?" Tyrus asked. "She mentioned something about a love triangle."

"Yes," Dion murmured. "She killed my soulmate, Orion, before we underwent the ritual to make him immortal."

"I see," Adrien said.

"I'm sorry," Hailey told him.

"So am I," Abigail added.

"Thank you. Now I'd rather not speak of it anymore. I've gotten my revenge. Eris' sons will never follow in her footsteps."

"And now you're free to find another lover," Pier said.

"Perhaps," Dion sighed. "But one never gets over losing his soulmate."

"I'm sure that's true." Abigail stared at Tyrus. "And I hope to never lose mine. Tyrus, I want the ritual, if you'll still have me."

"My love," he clenched his fists to keep from pulling her into his arms, "if you still want me."

"I want you now and always."

They reached for each other and their lips met in a crushing kiss.

"Well, we're all here if you want to seal the pact now," Adrien said.

Tyrus glanced at Dion. "Will you perform the ceremony?"

"It would be my pleasure," Dion said.

Less than an hour later, Abigail and Tyrus stood in the parlor of their wing as Dion performed the ritual that bound them for eternity.

When Tyrus' lips touched hers in the long, deep kiss during which a portion of his immortal soul passed to her, Abigail knew in her heart they were meant to be together.

Both had traveled very different paths that ended in the same destination -- two souls bound forever in love.

The End

Check out these other books in the Python Place Series by Kate Hill

Python Place 1: Pleasure and Pain

Lord Adrien Terence -- handsome, aristocratic, and enslaved by a hunger that forces him to absorb the sexual energy of others. He and his two brothers made a pact to fight their evil side and created Python Place so they could feed their hunger without harming innocents. Yet it is an innocent who steals his daemon heart. From the moment he sees Hailey, he knows they are soulmates. She is the only one who can save him, but can he convince her that she belongs with him forever?

Tired of her boring life and succumbing to the strict values of her family, Hailey Watson travels to Python Place to experience carnal pleasures with Adrien, a delectable devil of a man who brings out a dark side she didn't know she had. What Hailey doesn't understand is that by falling in love with the roguish lord, she stands to lose much more than her innocence. Because of his ties to a world of evil she cannot comprehend, her very life is in danger.

Python Place 2: Hot and Bothered

Pier knows all too well how controlling Daemon males can be and she wants nothing to do with them. At least that's what she's always believed. Lately she's been bored with her human lovers. Her immortal spirit needs to be challenged and when a friend insists he knows just the man to satisfy her beyond her wildest dreams, she can't resist the challenge. Unfortunately that man is Dimitri Terence, a Daemon with handsome looks, charm, and very specific tastes in the bedroom.

Dimitri Terence and his brothers have sworn to denounce their evil side -- evil inherited by their immortal mother, Eris. Only with the help of their soulmates can the brothers once and for all banish the wickedness inside them. Dimitri enjoys his life at Python Place, surrounded by women ready to serve his every need. Then he meets Pier. After one darkly passionate night with her, he knows they belong together forever, but Eris isn't about to allow them any happiness and his love for Pier might just destroy them both.

Kate Hill

Kate Hill is a thirty-something vegetarian New Englander who likes heroes with a touch of something wicked and wild. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in dozens of publications both on and off the Internet. When she's not spending time with her family or working on her books, Kate enjoys reading, working out, and researching vampires and Viking history. Feel free to drop her a note at katehill@sprintmail.com or visit her website to learn more about her current releases and upcoming projects. You can find Kate online at <http://www.kate-hill.com>.