



NO HOLDS BARRED:
A FAMILIAR FACE

By

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Chapter One

Trotting down Newtown's crowded sidewalk on four padded feet, her tail flat with irritation, trade witch Mallory West had sunk to an all new low. Acting as her own familiar, she wrinkled her nose and tried her best to focus on the rank smell of her quarry, rather than the seafood market so tantalizingly near.

Frank, that rat, *would* have to flee before she'd been able to fix dinner, and after a hellish Friday at that. Two more skipped claims, three more orders for restraint spells she couldn't possibly finish without wasting away her weekend, and the little shifter just had to decide he couldn't possibly do his time in Takori prison, not for a 'whole 'nother four months.' Sob sob, yadda yadda.

Pansy-ass. She sighed, a rumbled purr that irritated her whiskers, and followed him past the crowded markets, across the street and into a seedy-looking alley. Hecate's cauldron, but the magically-minded criminals in town weren't even criminals anymore. The clear-cut evil that used to comprise the baddies had denigrated into whining, sniveling scum that took too much effort to catch and afforded little in the way of reward. Serving the greater good seemed to be no more than an unappreciated headache lately.

Her energy bill was past due, her wax lien perilously close to being called—and what witch could perform without wax, thank you--and her super promised to evict her if she didn't pay her late rent by Monday. As it was she'd managed to eek this past week out of him by promising to acquire and return his precious 'videotape', an ancient relic her quarry had stolen for leverage. Leverage against what, she didn't know, and frankly, didn't care. Her super could have screwed the entire police force, disgusting as the thought was. She wanted to continue living in her rent-controlled apartment. And if catching Frank 'the rat' was her only way out, so be it.

She sighed again and skirted a rotting door into an abandoned building. Trash and dead roaches littered the cement floor. Graffiti and hexes covered the walls, and she itched to leave, her feline senses tingling with displeasure. Soon, she promised herself, waiting until 'Ratman' Frank transformed back into his wiry, slovenly self.

A hazy rush settled over his body, and with a quickness she admired, he regained his human feet. She tried not to stare at the natty man still quivering like a rodent. Instead, she mentally prepared her spell and rubbed the silver charm around her left front paw against her scratchy tongue. Narrowing her eyes, and with no help for it, she *meowed* the verbal command. In the seconds it took her to resume her natural form, she'd teleported Frank to Takori. Whipping out her cell phone, she autodialed Sherman Jakes, her best friend.

"Yo, Sherm. Another one coming your way. Yeah, Frank Norton, wanted on extortion and assault charges. He skipped last week. Oh, and do me a favor. The videotape he has on him? Shoot it back to my place, would you?" She paused, shaking her head at his comments. "No, sorry. I'm really not in the mood for The Palace tonight. What? Sheila's coming? Oh hell, okay. I'll see you there at nine."

Hanging up, she muttered to herself and refrained from licking her arm to smooth

down her hair. *Drop the familiar.* She swiped at a descending spider and quickly exited the building, kicking through the decayed door. Well, at least tonight hadn't been a total waste. She hadn't had to expend but the one charm on the capture. And she'd have a check coming—

“Well, well, well. What do we have here? An actual witch on ghoulish territory. Where's your sugar daddy, baby?” Ace MacNafee grinned, his blackened teeth on par with his odious breath. Terrific. He had what passed for his friends with him, four snotty teenagers with more brawn than brain. All undead and rotting from within. Smelly, obnoxious, and unbelievably stupid. She grimaced at the skin and sinew hanging off the tallest man-child. Did his parents have no concept of trimming excess flesh?

“Not now, Ace. I'm leaving. I'll come back to play on Monday.” *Like hell I will.*

“You're leaving when I say you can leave. Now come here and gimme a kiss. We don't get many aristocrats in the alleys, Mal-or-ee. And we sure don't get superfreak ass like yours.” He licked his lips, his gaze lingering over her breasts before opening his mouth wide. He blew out a noxious red gas--dreaded ghoulish toxin that could paralyze if ingested in sufficient quantity.

Mal rolled her eyes and twisted the charm bracelet on her wrist. As her fingers closed over a miniature iron dagger, she lamented the expense of another charm, but knew, without it, she wouldn't be leaving the alley intact, let alone meeting Sherm and Sheila in a few hours.

As a mystic dagger suddenly appeared in her palm, she aimed and threw, chanting under her breath. Though pleased at a ghoulish shrill cry, a bit of the toxin entered her bloodstream, making her slightly dizzy. And in her ensuing weakness, she felt rough hands grabbing her forearms.

“Ace,” she said through gritted teeth, wishing the chief of police would rein in his worthless kid. “I'm not playing. Keep it up and I'll remove those fingers, regardless of your dad's status.”

“Oooh,” he mocked. “I'm so scared.”

Tired of dealing with the literal scum of the earth, she stared hard at his left hand and released the holds on her ‘illegal’ magic. Within moments he was screaming, his friends were screaming, and a squad of police had entered the alley with their guns drawn.

Sherm sipped his beer. “I don't know, Mal. I think you may be the unluckiest witch I've ever met. Your familiar left you. You're nearly flat broke, the only witch I know without a trust fund, and you just maimed the chief's only son.”

Sheila, his fiancée, giggled. “You go girl! You're on fire!”

Several nearby patrons, regulars at The Python Palace, saluted her with drinks. Though she'd only brought more trouble upon herself by roughing up Ace and his goons, she'd actually done the city a real service. Everyone hated the ghoulish gangs that paraded around the wharf. And Chief MacNafee should have retired years ago.

“You know, Sherm,” Mal said, sipping her wine. “You have an amazing tendency to make my life seem even more dour than it is.”

He grinned, white teeth flashing against dark brown skin. “I do have skills, you know.”

"Especially in bed," Sheila muttered, sliding him a wink. He gave her a thorough kiss, what looked like a rousing game of tonsil hockey, and Mal sighed.

"Not more of this lovey-dovey crap. Can't you two contain yourselves for a night, get a room or something?"

Sherm eyed the Palace's second floor, the one off-limits to seemingly everyone.

"What? Don't tell my you're not on 'the list'?" Mallory blinked. "But Sherm, you're so big and handsome, so strong." When Sheila laughed at the chagrined expression on his face, Mal added, "Couldn't bribe Rattler either, eh?"

"No. I swear, I've never met a bartender so close-mouthed. Hell, I'm law enforcement. You'd think he'd accept the bribe, a favor for a favor or some shit. But not Rattler. 'Mr. Python' will not budge." He glared when she would have spoken. "And don't give me any crap about you being special. We both know the only reason you've been allowed to even walk upstairs is because of your 'under the table' part-time status here."

Mal shrugged. "A witch has to eat."

"I still don't understand why you haven't married." Sheila motioned to a waitress for another round. "Even though your parents are total assho--ah, oddballs, they still don't have the authority to prevent you from marrying up."

"Sheila, you and Sherm are in love. Why should I settle for less?"

"Yes, but I can afford to eat, with or without Sherman."

"Good point. But I don't want to marry. I don't want a man telling me what to do all the time. And you know how arrogant warlocks are. You two are different from any couple I know. You're actually in love." She groaned. "I won't marry an *asshole* like my parents, but I admit I'm tired of living claim to claim, of being considered the lowest of the low because I'm forced to *earn* a living." She rubbed at her aching ribs, having suffered several unnecessary 'pat-downs' from the chief's men before the news cameras had arrived. "My rent is due, my energy bill is overdrawn, and I never seem to have time for me anymore."

Sherm looked sympathetic. Sheila captured her hand and squeezed.

"I'm sorry guys. I'm just feeling sorry for myself tonight. I told you I shouldn't have come."

A sudden presence behind her made her still, but the familiar sensation of sheer power pressing against her back told her who neared. "Rattler, what can I do you for?"

"I'm sorry to bother you three, but Mal, I could *really* use a hand tonight." He nodded to the thickening crowd spilling toward the throbbing dance floor a split-level below. "Festival always perks sales, and Becky called in sick. You mind filling in? Double your wages"

Hell, her night was shot anyway. Why not make some much-needed money? Besides, in here, she didn't have to worry about being shot or cursed. No one screwed around in Rattler's Python Palace, not if they wanted to live. The police skirted the place, and Rattler's mysterious otherworldly connections made him a powerful man indeed.

Hairless but for his thin black eyebrows and wicked goatee, covered with multiple piercings and an intricate snake tattoo, which covered him from the back of his neck and around his shirtless, muscular torso and presumably further beneath his jeans, Rattler should have looked too freakish to be attractive. But something about the large male had

always made her feel comfortable, protected. And the grayish tint to his flesh made him almost as unique in the community as Mallory. A snake man running a dance club who answered to no one. A witch without means or a familiar. Two peas in a pod, except Rattler was a success, and Mal simply aspired to be one.

“Okay, you’re on. Sorry guys, I’ll stop by later to chat.”

Sherm and Sheila took her departure easily, sinking back into that couple’s connection that made her both envious and a little sad. She’d been close to that once, or at least, close to that picture. Her relationship with Aaron Floyd Crowe III had been anything but loving, and all about appearances.

“Mal,” Rattler prodded. “I need you now.”

Four hours later, Mal reminded herself how fortunate she’d been that Rattler needed help. *The bills, remember the bills.* Maybe with tonight’s take she could give herself tomorrow off and focus Sunday on the restraint spells. She carried out another order and, subtly glancing toward Rattler, mumbled a curse under her breath at a nearby customer with grabby hands. He’d feel it tomorrow and hopefully wouldn’t associate it with The Palace. She’d tried, she’d really tried to resist using her magic, but enough was enough. The human octopus didn’t seem to understand no.

“Everything okay?” Rattler asked from behind the bar. His fathomless black eyes were narrowed on her and she did her best to appear innocent of any wrongdoing. God forbid he caught her doing magic in his place. She couldn’t afford to alienate Rattler--literally.

Sighing and trying to appear pathetic, she didn’t have to fake her yawn. “Sorry, but it’s been a long day. And I wasn’t prepared for tonight.” She glanced down at her stained jeans, cropped t-shirt and beer-covered flats. Normally when she waited, she wore her snakeskin boots, waterproofed and comfort-lined.

“Damn. I hadn’t thought beyond replacing Becky. I’m sorry, Mal. Your feet are probably killing you. Why don’t you head upstairs and rest a few minutes?”

Her eyes widened and she automatically looked at the imposing, guarded entrance to the Lounge’s stairwell. She’d only once before served drinks in the open, modern loft area, accompanied by Palace security. No one knew what was up there except Rattler and a few select guests. From what little she’d seen, the Lounge sat between the low wall visible to the downstairs and three black doors spaced evenly against the inner wall.

A black floor, hot pink walls, neon lights and a disco ball made the place garishly attractive when active, a rare occurrence in itself. And the lights and hot pink paint made the three ominous looking black doors even more arresting.

She’d been dying of curiosity about those mysterious doors, but damned if she’d ever had a chance to investigate. Exposed to the familiar within her, her feline senses ached to see, to know. But she’d have to use magic to work around Rattler, and she respected him too much to violate his trust. A harmless spell here or there hurt no one. But she’d never violate his one rule to working at The Python Palace—*never, ever go upstairs without Rattler’s express permission.*

“Go upstairs? Sure.” She paused, waiting for him to say more. He didn’t, and the look on his face made her somewhat uneasy. “What?”

“Nothing.” But he was smiling. “Go on up. Don’t worry about it, Mallory. You need some time to regroup, even the ‘slave master’ that I am can see that.”

She flushed. “You heard that, hmm?”

He raised a brow. “You said it loud enough to be heard three blocks down.”

“Yeah, but that was a week ago and to Becky. You have ears like a bat,” she said under her breath as she headed eagerly to the stairwell.

“I heard that, too,” he shouted, laughing. “See you when I see you.” And with that, he turned to help another customer.

The massive bouncers merely nodded her through and as Mallory ascended to the second floor of The Palace by herself for the first time, she wondered why she suddenly had a feeling that facing those three black doors might be a huge mistake.

She paused at the landing and took a deep breath. Nonsense. The Lounge was empty, unless Rattler had a secret passageway through which he smuggled privileged customers. Walking through the entrance, she noted the cleanliness and order in the oversized loft. Magazines tidied, vids scrubbed free of smoke, the black lacquered floor a study in clean. But those three doors captured her eyes like magnets.

Her nose twitched as she stared at them. *What the hell was beyond those doors?*

Approaching them, she studied each one. Of average height and width, black with gold knobs, they looked standard. Normal. The same. So why did the familiar within her guide her to the middle door?

Almost as if in a dream, she watched her hand grasp the knob, felt the cool glide of metal under her palm, and listened to the quiet click as the catch released. She entered the room and a dim light illuminated the space. Huh. A plain, average bedroom. Same lacquered floor as the lounge, white walls. A king-sized bed with black sheets and a white downy duvet. No other doors or windows, and no furniture. Hell, not even a mirror. The door closed with a soft nick, but her eyes were focused on Rattler’s suggestion.

The bed seemed like heaven at the moment, and without thought, she lay down on her back, sighing at the feel of silk under her tired and aching muscles. In seconds she’d sank deep into the comfort of sleep.

Minutes or hours might have passed when a noise interrupted her rest. Shouts and moans, what sounded like fighting and, well, sex, increased in volume until she couldn’t stand it. That curiosity again. But at least she felt refreshed, and mentally thanked Rattler for her small nap.

A loud thunk rapped the wall outside the door, and she heard what she imagined to be cursing and threats in a foreign language. Opening the door, she came face to face with a man who could have been Rattler’s twin. He had shoulder length black hair, gray skin, and a snake tattoo curled around his body and up his neck. What looked like a leather kilt and crossed straps across his chest that behind his back held two crossed swords--their hilts visible over his massive shoulders--made her blink.

She had to clear her throat. Unlike his ‘brother’, nothing about this guy felt comfortable or safe. He easily could have passed for security, as big as an ox and wearing a mantle of menace over those brawny shoulders. Her blood heated and her heart raced, in fear and a surprising arousal, worrying her more than she liked. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d even fantasized about sex.

“Um, Rattler said it was okay to be up here.”

His eyes widened and he stared down at her—way down—his gaze first suspicious, then bolder as he roamed from her face, lingering over her lips, to her breasts

and the slim expanse of abdomen showcased by her cropped shirt. She had an urge to cross her arms over her breasts, doubly so when her nipples peaked under his regard.

“*Cuwenicu*,” murmured throughout the crowd, and she was momentarily distracted by the foreign word.

Without warning he latched onto her wrists and pulled her from the room. The minute the door closed behind her, he let her go, and the Lounge fell into complete and utter silence.

“Hey buddy, what the hell is your prob...lem?” She trailed off as she watched his eyes turn into something she’d never before seen. As a witch, Mallory knew all about the otherworldly creatures in existence—the vampires, ghouls, shifters and mages that wandered her neighborhood. But this guy...he didn’t fit into any category she knew.

She glanced nervously around her, and couldn’t help gaping at what looked like a Rattler family reunion. Every single male in the place had height, muscles, and gray skin. Several had hair, however, and none sported any body piercing that she could see. She turned back to the one responsible for pulling her out of her safe haven. Good night, but his eyes! Moonlight and fairy dust, this guy wasn’t human. Wasn’t otherworldly, either. But what he was, she didn’t yet know.

His eyes, at first a vibrant gray-green, changed, the pupils thinning and elongating as the irises took over the whites of his eyes. His teeth suddenly lengthened, not just his incisors like the fangs of a vampire, but his *entire mouth*, and his skin started hardening, resembling iridescent scales more than flesh. But he didn’t transform into a snake. And no shifter that she knew of could remain between forms. You were either human or animal, but not both. His teeth didn’t look like they belonged to any vampire she’d ever met. Besides, this guy was gray and now shiny, but not white. And the language he’d been speaking hadn’t been anything she recognized.

He hissed at her, and the rumbling all around her returned to normal.

“Look, I’m not sure what all this is about.” She paused, listening to herself, and frowned. She understood the meaning of what she said, but the words themselves were completely foreign. She sounded like *him*.

“*Cuwenicu*.” He scoffed. “I didn’t think so. The Phrellian spy regains her tongue, eh? Perfect, we’ll have so much fun together now.” He smiled, his teeth wickedly sharp.

Phrellian ... spy? And by the look on his face, ‘fun’ might mean something entirely different in this place.

This really was the Friday from hell.

Chapter Two

Mallory swallowed, fingering her charm bracelet and cursing under her breath at the small amount of magic it had left. "I don't know what's going on here, but I want out, right now."

She turned to grab for the doorknob only to freeze in shock. Where there had once been a door now stood a blank wall. She felt the gray guy's hand at her waist but could only stare at where a door should have been. *What the hell?*

By placing that large hand on her waist, he managed to find bare skin under her short shirt. And the instant their flesh met, she felt her third big surprise of the evening. Lust seared her from head to toe, centering in his palm and spiraling outward. Tense, she couldn't move, didn't want to shake the sudden feelings coursing through her blood. Her sex heated, moisture pooling between her thighs until she wanted to cry out in frustrated shock.

Her clitoris throbbed, her nipples bit at the silk of her bra, and she knew had she turned to face the big guy she'd have visibly broadcast her reaction. Until she could handle the strangeness of it all, she refused to—

"Hey!"

Hauled over his shoulder like a sack of laundry, Mal squirmed and tried to free herself, but to no avail. Trapped by a rock hard bicep and forearm, she felt as if she wrangled with steel.

"Hey Core, nice catch," someone shouted. Several deep male chuckles preceded sexual advice and some disgusting perversions she'd rather not think about. One insult led to another, and suddenly another fight broke out.

Pushing up from *Core's* finer-than-fine ass, she saw at least a dozen of the gray thugs engaged in brutal fighting. Punches and kicks flew like water, while right freaking next to them other men started *getting it on*—with men, women, it didn't seem to matter. What little she could see of the females showed an array of hair color, body-types and...*multiple appendages*. She swallowed around a dry throat, her libido nonetheless reacting to so much naked flesh straining and pushing, and she wanted to slap herself.

The family was right. I am sooo not normal. Nothing like an orgy right next to bloody violence to 'stir the pot'.

Stunned that she was even witnessing such a spectacle, Mal closed her eyes tightly and willed herself to wake up. "Just a dream. Only a dream. Come on, Mal."

"A dream, little Phrellian? More like a nightmare, hmm?" Core cupped her buttocks, stirring her loins anew, and she gasped in both anger and arousal when his fingers reached between her legs, touching the damp fabric of her jeans. "That's it, sweet. Let it flow."

His pace quickened as he descended the stairs and headed, not out to the bar, as she'd have expected, but into a dark, quiet room filled with low murmurs and sibilant voices. Completely unnerved, she tried her best to follow their movements, but lost track of the many rights and lefts he took. They should have been somewhere outside Newtown's wharf by now, but instead remained in the dark.

The place smelled musty, and Mal could have sworn they were underground.

Finally, Core entered a smaller chamber and shut the door behind him. He kept his arm tight around her legs, not letting her move in the slightest, and lit several candles. This room looked exactly like the one she'd originally fallen asleep in, and she couldn't understand how this could be anything but a dream.

"Look, *Core*, I'm getting dizzy with all this blood rushing to my head. Put me down or I swear I'll vomit all over you."

He tossed her onto a bed, but before she could roll off, he pinned her under his massive, and *aroused*, body. *Oh crap.*

His eyes and teeth again looked normal, and the intensity of his stare made her want to wrap her ankles around his hips and pull him tight. His nostrils flared and his eyes narrowed. *Pheromones. Has to be pheromones.*

"Tell me, little spy, what you seek here. Surely your lord knew he sent you to your death. A nest of Talians is no place for a Phrellian, no matter how attractive." He nuzzled her neck and nicked her with his teeth, licking at the small spot of blood. Far from being repulsed, Mal moaned under his touch, arching into his cool frame. She ignored the discomfort of his chest straps and his heavy weight.

"If you're some kind of vamp, you should know I'm a witch," she managed on a hitched breath. All vampires knew better than to attack a witch. Mage blood was venomous to a blood drinker, as they well knew. Core, however, smirked and licked at his lips.

"*Vamp?* What manner of creature is this? You know what I am. Tell me what it is you really want, lady. Freedom, perhaps? We all know how terribly the Phrellians treat their females. You're little more than sex slaves, unwilling receptors of deviant behavior. Perhaps you came seeking some pleasure?"

He ground his pelvis into her belly, and she gasped at the strong, thick erection prodding her. He inhaled deeply and closed his eyes, as if savoring her scent. "You want me more than any female has ever desired a coupling." He opened his eyes and frowned suddenly. "Did they drug you?"

"Drug me?" Had Rattler somehow spiked her water during her last break? Muttering a quick spell under her breath, she checked her health and found it to be in perfect order. "No. I don't understand any of this. One minute I walked through the black door. I fell asleep. Then I awoke to the sound of fighting and, ah, sex."

He smiled, his grin full of erotic promise. "Sex, hmm? So you did come here wanting pleasure."

"No. I just wanted a nice, warm bed...." *Oh yeah, great wording there, Mal.* "To sleep in." But apparently Core heard only the word 'bed' because his eyes flashed, snakelike again as he stared down at her. He lowered his mouth and she struggled, not wanting to end up his next meal. But instead of the sharp teeth she feared, a soft, seeking tongue traced her lips and seduced its way inside her mouth.

Rich, alluring scents filled her and she groaned under the sensual onslaught. The exotic, rough yet smooth feel of his tongue as he probed and demanded her response drove her crazy. He thrust inside her mouth, simulating sex before stroking and sucking on her tongue, making her mad with want.

"You see, little spy? Pleasure is here for the asking. Take it." His voice thick, he lowered his mouth again, this time to the pulse point in her neck. Flicking his tongue along her skin, he set her nerves aflame.

Mal should have cast a spell, used one of her remaining charms, did *something* to free herself from this strange and dangerous male. But she couldn't think. She could only feel. It had been so long since she'd last experienced sex, what felt like a lifetime ago. And even then she'd never felt such hunger, such incredible lust for another. The odd feelings Core stoked in her felt all too similar to the rush she experienced working with magic.

His hands stole her breath as they cupped her breasts, and she arched into him, twisting when he rubbed his thumbs over her hard nipples.

"Such treasures, but bound strangely," he murmured. He leaned up from her and frowned, his gaze glued to hers before drifting down to her chest. A quick tug lifted her shirt over her head, and he stared hard at her bra before smiling again. "Ah, but such a tempting package."

"Front clasp," she murmured and pulled his head back to hers. Unable to keep from touching him, she clenched her hands in his surprisingly soft hair, amazed at the silky texture of the dark black stuff. He groaned and slanted his mouth over hers, pressing harder, pushing her for more.

A sudden snap and her bared breasts met his hands, and without wanting or even meaning to, she exploded into a violent orgasm. Core shuddered against her, his body cool against hers as she tensed in pleasure. She barely felt the rest of her clothing being stripped away before he shoved her thighs wide and pushed his head between her legs.

"Mother of Shen," he whispered, his breath caressing her sex like a lover's kiss. "Such a hungry little spy." He glanced up and met her satisfied gaze, and she heard a faint...purring? She flushed realizing it was her. His eyes widened, and he blinked in surprise before returning to study her sex.

After a moment's pause, he thrust a thick finger inside her, making her moan. He added his mouth to her clit, lapping up the moisture pooling between her thighs. As if she hadn't already climaxed, her body began coiling again, preparing itself for another release.

Mal couldn't understand it, but when he added another finger and increased the pressure on her clit, she didn't care if she ever understood it. Her purring grew louder, and he began to rumble, as well. His skin lit like holiday lights, and he craftily slid out of his chest straps and kilt without missing a beat. His mouth promised bliss yet again, but Mal pushed against his shoulders to slow him down.

"I want you in me this time," she gasped, twisting under his talented tongue.

"Yes. Inside you," he agreed, and slid up her body. Watching her, he slowly pushed the head of his penis inside her, his eyes flashing with heat and his purring growing louder the farther in he moved. He kept the pressure steady, and as thick as he was, she felt some pain mingled with the pleasure. But the shocks through her system urged her for more.

She wanted to feel him spurt inside her, wanted to see him reach his peak, to know that she brought him as much pleasure as she'd been given. This stranger, this Core, had given her more than anyone had in years, and she felt a subtle softening in her heart at his unselfishness.

"You see, little one, pleasure is mine to give, and yours to receive," he murmured and pushed harder, seating himself fully inside her. He grunted and began thrusting, as if unable to remain still. "You taste like *sauri* cream, and feel like the finest of *ven* silk."

He groaned as he pummeled harder, his strength an awesome sight as his muscles bunched and tensed under her roving hands. "Yes, *kina*, take me."

Rocking and pushing, he continued to graze her clit, sending her into another bout of cataclysmic bliss. But this time he joined her, his release magnifying her own. He cried out as he spilled, and his climax lasted several *minutes* as he continued to jet inside her. For her part, Mal couldn't contain the spasms of desire that still shook her, each shudder of his body releasing one in her own.

"How," he began, his voice hoarse, "how did you do that?"

"Do what?" she asked in a daze. "I'm swimming in you, Core. Just one big mess of stickiness, and I've never felt so good in my life." She sighed and snuggled into his chest, comfortable at last with his soothing scent.

He said nothing, and when she looked up at him, she saw the concern in his face.

"What's wrong?"

"I released, inside you."

"And?"

"This is not possible."

"How so? I saw you guys sexing it up out there. And there's no arguing you just came inside me." *And all over me.* The thought caused her to squirm with unbidden desire. *Again?*

"No. When we play with others outside of our kind, the sexual bliss we experience is not so ... physical."

Since it seemed important to the big guy, she tried to understand. Shaking off her lethargy, she stared up at him. "You mean you feel all orgasmic, but you don't, ah, release?"

"That is so. But with you, it was different."

"You bet it was." She sighed again, with pleasure. "Don't worry about it, Core. This was great and all, but I have a job to get back to. Rats to hunt, spells to create, and debtors to evade. Such a fulfilling life," she ended sarcastically, only to see him stare at her in sudden confusion. "What?"

"Spells? Debtors?" he mangled the word. "Just tell me the truth, little one. I promise you'll never have to return to them again. We'll keep you safe here. Tell me what you know of the Phrellians, and know that in the doing, you help us all."

She frowned. "First off, my name is Mallory West. And while compared to you I'm little, at home I'm considered quite tall." *A lie. Not tall, just average. But a girl could dream.* "And I'm not, never have been, and never will be a Phrellian, whatever that is. I'm a trade witch."

She waited for some derision, an inkling of distaste. But confusion remained in his gray-green eyes.

"I do not understand. You appeared of sudden in our pleasure house, and you claim you do not know the Phrellians." He scowled down at her. "For all your beauty, you cannot possibly hope to enthrall me into believing your lies. I am the War Leader, which you already know. Play, no matter how enjoyable," he paused to lick his lips and stare at her breasts, "will not sway me from my intent."

She swallowed loudly. "Intent?"

"To destroy your master's kind and, more importantly, the Phrellian stronghold." He leaned close and took her nipple in his mouth, biting softly and making her cry out.

“But I admit, never has a female been so successful in securing my attention. What are you, Mallory? Sernan, Tak? Maybe Geryaan?”

“I’m a witch.” She waited for some response, but could only moan when he suckled her other breast and teased her folds with his hard penis.

“Yes, a witch to have captured my root with no more than your scent.”

He thrust deep and groaned, locking himself within her. “Perhaps you would have more from me than this, hmm?” He rocked against her, levering up so that only the contact of their joined bodies remained. “Answers, locations, perhaps?”

A hard thrust made her see stars as he hit her g-spot, and she arched into him. “Hecate’s staff, what do you want me to say? I came through the black door,” she panted. “Rattler told me to take a break, so I did. I fell asleep, and then you pulled me through the doorway.”

He withdrew and straddled her waist, his cock bobbing, shiny with her juices. And the scent of their mingled fluids made her mouth water and her body itch for ... something more.

“The doorway, tell me about that.” He inched closer to her mouth, and the overpowering urge to taste him clawed at her.

She quickly explained about The Python Palace and Rattler. Her description of her boss seemed to stun him for a moment, and then he was muttering under his breath, a benediction of sorts.

“Very good, Mallory. Very good. Now open wide and swallow your prize.”

Having never performed oral sex on a man, Mallory nevertheless couldn’t wait to taste him. She greedily accepted his thick shaft and licked, stroked and sucked for all she was worth. The taste of him, of their combined scents, made her crazy for more. And having him writhe and moan above her as she fondled his velvety sack and sucked on his shaft made her want to come.

“Yes, little spy, that’s it,” he rasped as he pushed, stretching her lips tight. He gripped her hair, firmly but gently, and pistoned inside her. “Swallow my essence and accept my gift.”

She tried to nod but couldn’t move around his penis. He tasted so good, like ambrosia of the Eternal. She grew wetter the harder she sucked, and when he tensed above her, her vaginal walls spasmed and she came. Closing her mouth tightly around him, she heard his hoarse shout and began swallowing large mouthfuls of his cum.

He tasted pure, like strong magic and warring male, and she couldn’t understand why she felt their connection so strongly. Strangers a short time ago, she nevertheless felt as if she knew him, had always known him.

Slowly withdrawing from between her lips, Core leaned down and placed a soft, loving kiss on her mouth. “That, Mallory, was more than I deserved, and so much more than I could have expected.”

He lay next to her and sighed. “You’re no Phrellian. But what you are, I’m afraid, will not be easy to accept.”

Chapter Three

Core had prayed, and he had sacrificed. But nothing could have prepared him for *her*. He stared at the woman, his gift, and wondered if he would be allowed to keep her once he had done what he promised.

“Okay, big guy. What exactly *am I*?” She humored him, he could see it in her amazingly-colored eyes. Flecks of brown and green co-mingled to produce a color so fantastic it must have been god-sent.

He studied her, noting the slim yet muscular nature of her body, a telling sign she was no stranger to physical exertion. Her breasts, he paused, lingering over her supple perfection. Wonderful and soft, plentiful to satisfy a large male, or a small babe with honey-colored skin.

Thoughts of her with child startled him out of his fantasy and made him focus again on the here and now. What to tell her? That she was indeed the messenger sent by Ratlaharan? Cuwenicu, the one who would show his people that the Talians would again rise to conquer, and to prosper? She looked like a sexual slave, one that made his cock throb and his heart race. But why would his god send a woman when a warrior was needed? His confusion doubled.

“You said his name is ‘Rattler?’”

She frowned and leaned up on her elbow, plumping her breasts in a most distracting manner. Perhaps the Phrellians *had* sent her. Never before had he been so distracted by a woman’s form. “You can’t not know Rattler. He’s the guy you had to go through to use The Lounge.”

“What is this ‘Lounge?’”

“You know. Pink walls, black floor, vids and music and, well, hell, anything you want if you’re tight with Rattler.”

He didn’t understand, but wanted to know more. “This man you call Rattler. He has gray skin, the snake marker, and *piercings*?”

“Metal rods and balls through his skin.”

“Ah.” Holy signs of reflection, and worth. “And they were black, were they not, these ‘piercings?’”

She nodded. “But why ...?”

“You, Mallory, are a gift.” Might as well blurt it out. Hell, from what she said, she’d met Ratlaharan face to face. And who was he to question the reasons of his god? “The creature you call ‘Rattler’ is indeed the father of the Talian race.”

“Well, he does look like you.” She stared at him, and he wondered if she realized how precious were their differences. Despite the hoards of females coupling in the nest, none had her strength, her inner well of purity that he could feel just by looking at her.

“I don’t think you understand. Ratlaharan is the being to whom we pray, the deity to whom we sacrifice.”

“Deity?” She laughed, long and hard. “I’m sorry. It’s just that the thought of Rattler as a god is too funny for words. I mean...” Her mirth slowly faded, and he could almost read her thoughts. “You’ve never been to The Lounge?”

He shook his head, waiting.

“And you’ve never met Rattler?”

“Not personally, but spiritually, I believe, yes.”

She blinked at him and fell back on the bed, crossing her forearm over her eyes.

“This cannot be happening. Frank the rat, MacNafee, a double shift.... And to cap it off with the best sex of my life with Rattler’s twin? No way.”

“His twin?” Core couldn’t help preening at the off-hand compliment, not to mention ‘best sex of my life’.

“Look, I’m in a crisis here,” she barked, and he grinned openly. A woman not only of great beauty, but of fire, as well. While she muttered under her breath, he took his time studying her, his blood heating at the sight of his seed covering her thighs and the delightful gathering of hair over her mound. So succulent. His mouth watered. How would she taste now mixed with him?

“Core!”

“Hmm?” He lazily met her gaze, surprised to see her angry. “What’s wrong, *kina*?” *Sweetheart*. Hell, he really was going soft, just as Fenin had insulted earlier. But what did he expect, having been so long without a fight, or a female?

“I’m trying to talk to you and you’re too busy ogling my ... person ... to pay attention!”

He laughed, amused at her senseless modesty. “*Your person* is very pleasing to me, *kina*. I would know you again,” he murmured, helpless to stop his growing erection. Just the thought that she’d been sent by Ratlaharan made him more than determined to claim her.

“Yes, well.” She stared at his cock and licked her lips, and he groaned, his body humming with need. Her eyes widened, and she blushed when she made a similar sound. “I think I’d like to ‘know you’ again, too, but right now I need to know where I am, and how I got here.”

He started to reach for her, to offer comfort the best way he knew how, when someone triggered the alarm.

“Dress yourself, *kina*. Hurry.”

He hastily threw on his battle dress and boots, pleased when she stood ready, and drew her to his side, placing her hand on his belt. “No matter what we face, you stay behind me at all times. And don’t let go. Understand?”

She nodded, fingering the shiny band around her wrist.

They left the room and walked quickly, silently, down the quiet corridors of the sleepers’ berth. The fighting must have driven his men above. Clenching his teeth, and suddenly disgusted with himself that he hadn’t personally surveyed lockdown before leaving with Mallory, he drew hard on his fury, pleased the anger made him more powerful than he’d been in months.

“Hold tight,” he growled, aware her fingers gripped the *tak* hide fiercely. His teeth itched to tear into enemy flesh, and his sight grew clearer as The Snake within him grew strong.

But for all his battle lust, he wasn’t prepared for what soon met his eyes.

From a dark corner at the top of the stairs, he surveyed the pleasure grounds. The unrestricted area of the nest was covered in Talian blood and entrails. Several Phrellian soldiers effectively wiped a path through his men using crying and helpless Talian females as shields.

What made the Talians strong caretakers and effective warriors also made them vulnerable to the enemy. Since a Talian male was unable to cause harm to a female of the species, his men were powerless against this onslaught.

“Why aren’t they doing anything?” Mallory whispered, looking around him.

“We cannot harm the females.”

She stared, wide-eyed, and whispered, “Why not? I mean, you wouldn’t want to, sure. But this is war. And if you don’t knock them out of the way, those vampy things are going to kill you.”

“Really?” He glared down at her, furious at the truth. “I am truly thankful for your insight.”

“Look, don’t blame me for this. I didn’t”

A loud cry from one of the females caused him to flinch, and he shook as she fell to the ground, a Phrellian hand having pulled her heart through her chest.

“Oh, that is just enough.”

He agreed, and fought through years of conditioning grilled into him from birth. Like it or not, he would have to push the females aside. And thought it would probably kill him to do so, it would be the only way to keep his remaining warriors alive.

But before he could move, Mallory skirted around him into the nesting ground.

“You there, vampire. Freeze!” She pointed her hand at the nearest Phrellian and murmured foreign words. The Phrellian, the Talian female he held, and all the females behind him suddenly froze over, ice forming over their bodies.

The silence was deafening. He stared at Mallory, amazed. He’d never before seen such power, such skill.

“How did you do that?” he rasped, immediately standing by her side, ready to provide cover and/or aid.

“I’m not sure,” she said breathlessly, watching as his men slaughtered the stunned Phrellians suddenly unprotected. “I was just trying to slow that one in the lead, when a surge of power hit me hard.” She swallowed and met his gaze, hers soft and confused. “The power in me felt alien.” She laughed almost hysterically at her words, making little sense. “Like a gray alien, with a big snake on his body.”

“I empowered you?” he asked, amazed. By Ratlaharan’s sword, Mallory had defeated the attack with a wave of her hand and a few words. Think what she could do against a fleet of them?

“Somehow your strength became mine.” She stared at him, bewildered. “This is all so very, very strange. And trust me when I say I know all about weird.”

“What?”

He tried to pay attention to her, but several Phrellians thought to eradicate the woman who had soundly trounced them.

“Go ahead.” She waved him toward the enemy. “I dealt with Frank earlier. You can handle these guys.”

Pleased she wouldn’t be squeamish about the necessity, he beheaded three of the attackers and skewered the fourth. Still writhing on the tip of his sword, the remaining Phrellian hissed and cursed, raking at Core with his venomous talons. Slicing off one of the Phrellian’s offending hands, Core watched with satisfaction as the creature screamed.

“Why attack here and now? How did you know about this place?”

The creature refused to answer, and glared hatefully behind Core at Mallory.

“Abomination.”

“Agreed. You are that.” Core withdrew his sword from the Phrellian’s chest, and watched as the hole in his torso slowly healed. “But you haven’t answered my question.” In a move preternaturally fast, Core bit into the Phrellian’s neck, injecting a painful spurt of venom.

The Phrellian screeched in pain and began to writhe, falling to the ground in a tortured heap.

“Again, tell me how you knew of this place, and I will make your death quick, easy.”

The Phrellian moaned, clutching his stomach, and began crying tears of black blood. “Traitor in your midst. Came to us,” he said almost soundlessly. He tried to yank off his ears, ripping so hard at one pointed lobe that the flesh began to give. “Please,” he begged, wishing for death.

Core beheaded this one as easily as the last, but his thoughts drowned in the Phrellian’s information. A traitor within the nest? It made no sense. He stared down at the dead Phrellian, wishing for more time to think. But their safety had been compromised, and everyone needed to move.

He looked around him, noting the silence within the nest, the utter stillness of his men waiting for his commands. “Luar, Fenin, Blite, gather the others. Go to the underground and await me there. And make sure you take all the women, as well. All of them,” he added, looking to the fallen Talian lying in her own blood. He turned back to Mallory. “We have to hurry. There may be more Phrellians outside.”

She nodded and followed him, saying nothing. Core almost wished she’d protest, or beg for answers. It would have put his niggling suspicions to rest. But Mallory didn’t argue. Instead, she moved like a warrior, making him think she had battled and fought before. But not as a Phrellian spy, he reminded himself. As a tool of Ratlaharan, the *Cuwenicu*. She had to be. Nothing else would explain their connection, his ability to physically release into the woman. And she had just saved his men from death and worse at the Phrellians’ hands.

“Remember, stay”

“Behind you, I know,” she said wryly, but he could feel her violent grip on his belt. Her nerves relieved him, and he begged his god’s forgiveness for having doubted him--and his gift--at all.

Core led them out of the main entrance of the nest into the sandy inner region of his world, Horum Veirus, *the god’s ground*. A small Phrellian shuttle, but one larger than the Talians’ best battle cruiser, waited expectantly for the return of its crew just within sight’s distance. Using his inner eye, Core noted several Phrellian guards patrolling the surrounding wooded area. He tensed, knowing he couldn’t allow the ship the ability to leave and possibly pursue his people. But how to defeat so many? Likely close to a hundred remained onboard.

“Uh, Core? You’re not really thinking about attacking that ship, are you?”

Mallory goggled at the craft, then looked up at the moonspun sky and gasped. “Holy shit, there are four moons up there! Where the hell am I?”

“It doesn’t matter right now. We have more important things to worry about.” He couldn’t help sounding harsh. Looking for vulnerabilities in the vessel, he wished he’d taken Luar with them. His second in command knew a hell of lot more about space craft

than he did.

“Oh, it matters, big guy. But we’ll discuss it later, that and your attitude.” She sniffed and glanced at the ship. “So what do you want to do? Kill all the baddies on board, or disable the craft?”

He turned to face her, staring at her in shock. “You can do that?”

She shrugged. “It’ll use my most expensive charm, and a hell of a lot of magic, but that’s what it’s there for. And seeing as how *nice* you’ve been to me, and how rude your vamp, sorry, Phrellian enemies are, I’d say killing a few will feel just like icing a few ghouls.”

He didn’t understand much of what she said, but he caught her gist well enough. “Will this endanger you?” Funny, but the protective nature his kind felt for their females started kicking in as he stared at Mallory, and he quickly sent up mental guards should the female suddenly develop that unnerving ability to read minds.

“Nah. If you’re here to protect my body, I can astral project my way around the ship to find their gas tank. You take away the fuel, you deaden the ship. But if you’d prefer we kill them all...”

“I’d like to gut them one by one, but we don’t have that kind of time. And if we don’t soon incapacitate their ship, they will kill our surviving nest.”

“Right.” She sighed. “This feels just like what I left. Lots of work, little appreciation.”

Her small breath made him smile. “Oh, no, *kina*. Should this be accomplished, there will be no end to my appreciation. Count on it.”

She blushed prettily and winked at him. “Well then, Core, hold onto your hat. And make sure you don’t damage anything vital while watching over me.” She stared knowingly at three approaching Phrellians armed to the teeth with blades. “Because I want an apology and some heavy duty ‘appreciation’ when this is over.”

“Done,” he growled before launching himself at the enemy. Dispatching the three took little time, but the next oncoming squad would prove a challenge. If only he could have spirited Mallory away with the others. But he was War Leader, and had responsibilities. And leaving this woman with anyone but himself he couldn’t do.

His hormones kicked into high gear at the thought of any vile Phrellian attacking this female, and *The Snake* ascended, his tattoo winding slowly off his body as his true self was made flesh.

“*What the hell?*”

As he systematically destroyed the enemy around him, he only hoped his true self wouldn’t distract Mallory too badly. They really needed to disable that ship, and quickly, before the next few squads reached them.

Chapter Four

Mallory did her best to ignore the living snake slithering off Core's torso. Large, with black and green tiger stripes and a diamond shaped head with gray-green eyes, the snake looked as alien as the landscape surrounding her. *Four moons.*

She shook her head, impressed at Core's ferocity in dealing with his enemy. The Phrellians could easily have passed for vampires at home, save that they all possessed long white hair and had a decidedly pasty, almost sallow complexion as opposed to a vampire's alabaster white skin.

Watching how casually the Phrellians disposed of life, and that nasty trick of thrusting a hand through that woman's heart, Mal had no problem whatsoever throwing her lot in with the Talians. Though they might turn out to be as vicious as the Phrellians didn't quite leave her mind, especially watching Core trounce over a dozen of his enemy. But the Talians hadn't harmed any women that she'd seen, and Core had been more than tender with her.

She blushed, amazed the creature wreaking havoc out there with a giant snake at his side was the same man she'd made love to not half an hour ago.

Hecate's curse, but she wanted him still. Just watching the play of muscles along his back as he hefted his swords, the sheen of color glistening off his skin, the gray now a vibrant off-white mottled with color. His thighs strained under the weight of two Phrellians and she took an unconscious step forward, intending to help.

"Dammit, woman. Stop ogling my ass and project." Core grunted and threw his attackers to the ground.

Ogling his ass. Not quite, but close enough. Geesh, did he have eyes in the back of his head? She glanced quickly at him and blew out a relieved breath to see that he didn't.

Knowing he was right, that they didn't have all that much time and more enemy were on the way, she took a deep breath and concentrated. Leaving her familiar and her corporeal form behind, she flew through time and space into the Phrellians' ship.

Who had suggested to 'cut the fuel line'? *I'm such an idiot. What the hell do I know about alien spaceships?* For all Mal knew, the Phrellians used telekinesis to move. And how did she figure to follow the archaic symbols of the Phrellians' language? Annoyed with her overzealous ego that thought she could do anything, she tried to figure out a way to disable the ship as she hurried through the corridors.

Several Phrellians causing fear and dismay in those they passed caught her attention. The taller one wore epaulets with large red dots on them. An officer, maybe? At the least, a source of information. She trailed him into what had to be the bridge. Several subdued Phrellians, all male, she noted, hovered over small computer stations. The entire room seemed like something out of Star Track, until she realized the odd touch of plant life in the room was so much more.

Green and red tendrils, what looked like branches and odd, black star-shaped flowers, moved through and around the technical equipment. Bursts of light seemed to pulse from the vines into the computers, making her realize the Phrellian ship was not only metallic, but organic in nature. Interesting. Now how to use that to make the ship

stop?

She neared one thick vein of the plant and mumbled a small spell. Placing her insubstantial hand through the wide stalk, she felt for the root of the thing. Sudden flashes of light bombarded the equipment around her, and the Phrellians began screeching, glancing all around.

Obviously the plant sensed an intruder. But thankfully, she remained invisible. Or at least, she thought she had, until a Phrellian wearing black glasses pointed a finger in her direction.

Shit. Flying through the air out of the bridge and through several corridors and down several shafts, she traced the plant's foundation, thinking that in disabling the plant, she might also disable the ship. But what she saw when she came to the ship's center made her freeze with shock.

Within a smaller room of glass lay a bed of dark black soil, almost a liquid pool through which shapes blurred and bumped against the glass. In the middle of the mess stood a huge, almost ten-foot wide dark green stalk with branches and tendrils spiraling over the glass and into the main room. The tendrils probably stretched throughout the ship, to more than just the bridge, as she could see the green and red material plastered to the walls and the ceiling all around.

At the head of the plant sat a flower, a black tulip-shaped bulb. But what struck her most about the flower was the way it shifted and seemed to hiss at the Phrellians perched on a small overhang next to it. To her shock and disgust, the Phrellians were throwing body parts over the top of the plant, and the hissing was in fact a digestive process, as the plant devoured a foot, then a hand and next a head.

Phrellian or Talian, the creature seemed not to care what it devoured, so long as it was fed.

Feeling sick to her stomach, she realized the black soil was in fact a mixture of waste and blood, and the mess pushing against the glass was probably bone and other indigestible matter.

This thing has got to go. In her astral state, Mal, unlike most witches, could perform magic with ease. Though not as powerful as in her corporeal form, Mal could conjure and command the elements. And fire seemed a sure way to rid the ship of its 'soul'.

As she chanted the spell that would spark a fire within the stalk, she thought of Core, wondering if he knew about this creature, and if so, what he thought. Worry for him had her hurrying the spell, and without knowing how she did it, she threw a monstrous blaze at the creature in less time than it normally took her to throw on her boots.

The minute the fire licked it, the plant began to writhe in pain, and the ship buckled, tilting precariously to the left. *Hot damn.* Her intuition had been spot on, and the Phrellians ran around in a panic, not sure how to help their—pet?

But fear for Core made her leave before finishing the monstrous creature. In the time she'd been touring the ship and setting fire to a demon Venus Flytrap, he'd likely been battling scores of Phrellians. For all that he and that snake had strength, even Core was only one man, ah, one Talian.

Whooshing out of the ship and back into her body with a slap, she blinked hazily up at a vision of Core covered in cuts, wavering on his feet as he finished off the last

remaining Phrellian. Bodies littered the ground, dust and black blood everywhere.

“Core?” she croaked, trying to make her body move. She’d left herself standing, and her feet felt numb. Core, however, didn’t move, and the snake at his side turned quickly, eyeing her like its next meal. “Core?” she whispered again, nervous when the snake flickered its tongue in her direction and slithered closer.

The snake was at least a few hundred pounds, its body broad and long, with wickedly sharp teeth and surprisingly intelligent eyes, eyes that looked just like Core’s.

It neared, and she drummed enough energy to take a step back, stilling when it hissed its displeasure. She hesitated to harm it, knowing the snake had a connection to Core. But he wasn’t responding, and she really didn’t want to be its next meal. Before she could conjure a spell, however, the snake wrapped itself around her in a move too fast to be seen.

One minute it glared at her, the next it held her imprisoned as it wound around her body. Her eyes widened, but not altogether with fear. This snake, this creature, felt like a familiar! She sensed raw, untapped power in its body and mind, and relaxed under the recognizable sense of magic.

The snake immediately loosened its coils, now slithering and sniffing at her with curiosity rather than threat. The feel of its tongue against her cheek tickled, and she imagined the sight of them both to be unbelievable. She knew any other witch in the same situation would have screamed bloody murder. But Mal, the poor little trade witch, used to working as her own, gasp, familiar, was used to such ‘lower’ magic. She normally used the form of a cat because it didn’t arouse as much notice as a snake, but she’d once or twice become the reptile, just for the sheer hell of it.

“Mallory?” Core had turned around and stared at her in surprise, his lips curling into a grin as the snake began purring. “You feel very comforting. Very warm.”

She stared at him with concern. His eyes, what were once a beautiful gray-green, now were yellow, an almost sickly color. His skin seemed a pasty gray, and his blood, not black but red, streamed over his skin as if he’d bathed in it.

“Core, you’re hurt. Let me try to heal you.” But when she took a step closer, the snake tightened around her, thankfully saving her from buckling to the ground. She suddenly felt shaky, weak, and knew the powerful spell she’d used in the Phrellian ship had taken its toll.

He hissed at the snake, rumbling foreign words she couldn’t begin to describe, and walked *through* it, taking her in his arms. A soft green nimbus encompassed them both, and then Core once again wore the snake on his body, a body covered in blood....

“Core, you need help,” she said weakly, alarmed at the thready sound of her voice.

“No more than you do. Don’t worry, *kina*. I’ll take care of you. A gift from the gods should always be treasured.” He smiled, his teeth bright white and thankfully flat. “Now close your eyes and conserve your energy. The trek to the Yuka Forest will be long.”

Her body did as bid, and she wanted to ask him how he’d taken control of the situation when blessed sleep enveloped her.

* * * *

Core forced his body to move, ignoring the pain as he drew on his true self's strength. He'd been both relieved and troubled when Mallory finally rejoined her body. He'd dispatched all but a few of the Phrellians, and he'd tired from the many venom bites and stab wounds. The loss of so much blood weakened him more than he'd liked, but The Snake stood strong, no doubt due to Ratlaharan's favor.

Unfortunately, he had only so much control over his true self. And when he'd seen The Snake hug Mallory within its coils, he'd felt frozen with fear, unable to move under The Snake's direction.

Thankfully, his true self seemed to recognize Mallory, for the warning hug had quickly turned into an affectionate embrace, one he himself wanted to share with the woman he intended on claiming. But weakness quickly replaced the strength in her body, and her skin had turned distressingly pale.

Her magic was indeed powerful, and draining, he thought as he took her in his arms and glanced over his shoulder at the tilting Phrellian vessel. He only hoped she hadn't done irreparable damage to herself for having helped the Talians.

He snuggled her closer as he began the long journey to Yuka, the only place he knew of to heal her spirit. He needed her whole as quickly as possible, and himself, as well. He couldn't protect her well enough in this state and any harm to Mallory made him weak in the knees as it was. That in itself should have told him he'd found a worthy mate. But his attraction to the odd *witch*, she called herself, made him take note anyway.

Core had taken other females, even enjoyed their differences. But he'd never been drawn to a woman not of the Talian race for mating. It wasn't that he shared in any prejudice, just that he'd been born and built to procreate the race. Duty and mission instilled by the priests of Ratlaharan himself. Through Core, one day the Phrellians would be a threat no more, and the Talian race would perpetuate and thrive, again living in peace and harmony in the high plains of Horum Veirus. But until he could rid his people of the hated Phrellians, who existed in large numbers and with technology he and his kind barely understood, he knew it would be a long time before peace was anything more than a dream.

He sighed and wiped the blood from his eyes yet again, damning the rush of Phrellians that had managed to knock him to the ground. It had been a split second before he'd been up again, but the damage had been done. Even now he could feel Phrellian poison spreading through his body, making him weak with the need for blood, the need to feed and thus make him one of their own. He'd faced and fought off the poison before, but he'd never been bitten so many times, had never been scoured with Phrellian talons, which injected the poison much deeper into the bloodstream.

Glancing down at Mallory, he suddenly noted the pulse pounding at her neck, screaming at him to sample just a small taste. Remembering how pleasurable she'd been when aroused, how sweet she'd tasted on his lips, he grew hard, making walking uncomfortable.

He paused and tried to control his urges. Bowing his head, he prayed. *Help me, Ratlaharan, to treasure this gift. Protect her from the evils of temptation, and let us begin our journey to freedom.*

A tingling grew in his legs, and power revitalized him. Thanking his creator again, he began walking toward Yuka, more determined than ever to save himself and his woman, and to drown himself in her scent once more.

* * * *

Mal woke to a splitting headache. Groaning, she sat up carefully, aware her surroundings had once again changed. Glancing into the darkened sky, she saw four moons, and marveled at her reality. Soft leaves rustled under her body as she shifted, and she stared in surprise at the forest of trees around her. Considering the short time she'd been here, wherever here was, when not in that underground 'nest', she'd seen sand and more sand. So where the hell did this place spring from?

But more importantly, where was Core?

Her heart began racing when she looked around but couldn't find him. She recalled him bleeding, wounded, and still protective of her. He'd looked pale and ill, his eyes yellow and his skin almost white. He had taken on so many Phrellians, his wounds courtesy of those white-haired demons, and yet he'd been strong enough to bring her here.

Aside from the headache, which even now began fading, her body felt more than fine. The small yellow bed of leaves and moss tingled where it met her skin, and she wondered if the area had medicinal properties. Rising slowly to her feet, she studied the area, looking for signs Core had been near.

Bingo. She spotted large footprints leading away from her, and followed them with haste, unable to stem her worry. She found him several yards away under a large canopy of red and yellow-leaved trees. He breathed deeply, and she thanked Hecate that he lived. He still remained covered in blood, however, and she immediately leaned close to examine him.

To her surprise, he had no more than few superficial wounds. A nice bath and he'd clean up hale, hearty and gray. She smothered a grin. Funny how much his odd coloring now seemed so normal.

She stared over his body, feeling a remarkable possession take hold. This warrior, Core, was hers. *At least until she returned home.* A feeling of restlessness filled her, and she had to remind herself she couldn't stay in this foreign world. Clearly she didn't belong.

He murmured something and shook his head, his soft hair tickling his cheeks. In sleep he appeared human, large and graceful, but with that odd gray skin tone. Hell, he'd fit in with her crowd a lot better than Rattler did. And imagine using his 'snake' as her familiar. She warmed at the thought. No more slumming it, no more having to use herself to do her magic. But more, unlike her other familiars, Core had *so much more* to offer.

As soon as she thought it, she grimaced in self-disgust. Core was so much more than a familiar, than a symbol of wealth and privilege. Here lay a leader, a male who had sacrificed much to ensure the survival of his people. And look at what he was up against. She scowled up at the sky, not surprised by the fact that vamps, be they Newtown vampires or Phrellians, were a pain in the ass in any universe.

"Mallory?" Core rumbled, blinking up at her. "You are well?"

"Great. I think the plants helped me recover faster. At home, it would've been days before I could lift my head after using that kind of magic."

He nodded and closed his eyes, breathing deeply. "I am glad. I was worried at how deeply you seemed to sleep."

“But what about you?” She ran her hands over his chest lightly, tracing the scars that even now were healing. “You’re covered in blood, but you look much better than when I saw you last. I could swear those Phrellians had carved into you like a turkey.”

He frowned. “Turkey? I was injured, but the Yuka trees have speeded my healing, as they have yours.” He sat up and flexed his arms, and she stared, helplessly drawn to the wall of muscle of his upper torso. She was such a sucker for a good upper body. “What’s wrong?”

She shook her head. “Nothing.” Clearing her throat, she tried to sound normal, and not as if she wanted to jump his bones. “Do you think we can find some place to clean up? I feel gross, as if I still have the breath of those Phrellians on me.”

He stared down at himself and grimaced. “I understand the feeling.” He stood gracefully and reached for his weapons belt, not a trace of pain on his face. “Come with me.”

He led her several yards away into a cave. They walked through the darkness in quiet, and Mal wondered at the peace flowing through her. Though she couldn’t see, she knew Core could, and the simple trust she felt in being with him startled her. How had she managed to connect with him in so little time? Again, it was as if she’d known him for years, and that they’d always been close.

“Here we are,” Core said, squeezing past a narrowing in the rock walls.

Mal gasped when they exited the cave into a smaller grotto lit by moonlight streaming through a hole in the ceiling. The condensed, intimate area had a small pool surrounded by rocks, interspersed with the same yellow-green moss she’d seen outside. The walls were smooth, though, making her think the cave had been man-made, and not crafted by nature.

“The healers of my people have come here for years,” Core explained, following her gaze. He ran his hand over a wall. “They found that the spring running below the caves has restorative properties. And in this particular grotto,” he paused to smile, a grin that made her toes curl, “the waters are particularly stimulating.”

His look left little to the imagination, and as he began removing his kilt and boots, she saw clear evidence of his intent.

“Are you sure you’re, ah, okay for this? You looked in pretty bad shape earlier.”

“Trust me. I’m fine. But I’ll be better when you’re as naked as I am.”

Keeping her eyes on his, she gauged his reaction as she slowly stripped out of her clothes. His nostrils flared and his eyes changed, glowing with heat, the pupils elongating. He closed the distance between them, stopping a foot from her.

“You smell so good,” he murmured, staring deeply into her eyes. “I want to bury myself inside you and never let go.”

Her heart raced and she stared, unable to say anything. Had she ever been looked at with such hunger? With such all-consuming need?

“Come here, *kina*, that I might show you my full appreciation.”

She smiled, both amused and aroused that the fierce warrior before her seemed so smitten. Taking a step forward, she let out a small shriek when he grabbed her in his arms and walked into the warm pool behind her.

Chapter Five

They sank into the water, Core up to his neck, with Mal wrapped around him for support. He quickly washed them both, giving her breasts an extraordinary amount of attention.

“Mmm, that’s what I needed. Warm *kina* to cure me.”

She laughed and kissed him solidly on the lips, growing used to the heat he continued to fuel inside her. “I don’t know how you do it, but around you, I’m perpetually in heat.”

He groaned and ravaged her mouth, all but taking her very breath. The feel of his tongue teasing hers, of his lips sucking and sliding over her mouth, her cheeks, and her throat, set her on fire.

“I like the thought of you in heat, *kina*. To know that only I can satisfy you.” Apparently he was as caught in the blaze as she, for he wrapped her thighs around his waist and thrust into her, hard.

She closed her eyes and groaned, wanting more, now, harder and faster. And Core complied, rocking into her, thrusting over and over until she saw stars. He came soon after, filling her with small shocks of bliss that shot her over the edge again.

“I’m sorry, Mallory,” he rumbled, rubbing his forehead against hers as he tried to catch his breath.

She could only nod, wondering what the hell he had to be sorry about.

“I didn’t mean to rush it, but you’re so prime.” He groaned and shifted, sliding out of her before thrusting in again. “Ratlaharan has blessed me beyond all of my kind.”

“Core,” she sighed, feeling him stir within her.

“But I show his gift little value do I not worship properly.”

She squirmed over him, growing uncomfortable at his continued references to her as a ‘gift’. Mallory knew what she was. ‘Gift’ didn’t come close to the description.

“Look, Core. Much as I love what you do to my body,” she moaned as he rotated his pelvis against her. “I’m no gift. I’m a trade witch, the lowest of the low. I can’t afford high quality charms and spells, let alone a familiar. Most of my magic is raw. My life is spent working paycheck to paycheck, and the only reason my super hasn’t kicked me out yet is that he likes having me under my thumb as much as he likes staring at my ass.”

Core stilled his movements and scowled. “This ‘super’, he bothers you? Makes advances you do not return?” His words grew icy, and the passion burning them both began to cool as real rage replaced his ardor.

“Uh, Core? You can relax. I could kick my super’s ass blindfolded.”

He seemed fixated on his anger, as if she needed protecting from Morty the Jerk. “Look, big guy, I’m kind of stuck on you, literally, and I’m hoping for some more of your incredible ‘appreciation’.”

She twisted over his penis, her breasts brushing against his hard chest that had begun to harden into a scaly shell. Oddly enough, his anger stimulated her, causing her to writhe over him.

“Hecate’s cauldron, but you have to be the sexiest man I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

She nibbled his neck, sucking hard on the pulse beating rapidly, and heard him groan. She nipped him, biting to leave a mark, and he stiffened inside her.

"So you like it rough, hmm?" she purred, stroking his chest before clamping her teeth over his nipple. She didn't bite hard, but gave him enough pressure to show she meant business.

He gasped and pushed her back tight against the pool's wall. "Mallory, *kina*, that wasn't nice." He began pumping, as if unable to help himself, and she loved the feeling of fullness he created when he pushed his thick shaft deeper inside her. "And I wouldn't be doing my duty if I didn't worship you properly."

He immediately pulled out and she groaned. "Core, don't stop now."

With a strength she admired, he lifted her in his arms again and walked toward the inclined portion of the pool. Instead of leaving, however, he put her belly down on the mossy ledge, and palmed her ass as if it belonged to him.

"I haven't been devoted enough," he murmured, his voice thick with desire. She felt him spread her thighs before a thick finger skated along the edge of her anus.

"Core," she warned, not sure about this. "That is one place I've never ... ah!"

He pressed his finger deeper, pushing against her sphincter before retreating. "To properly show my devotion, I must fill your vessel with my seed." He slid his fingers into her vagina, soaking them with her cream. Then he placed his finger back on her anus, rimming the outside before slowly pushing in again. "The pleasure here will spiral out, and soon you will be filled not only here, but there, as well." He added a finger inside her vagina, so that he penetrated her dually.

She gasped, feeling stretched and completely unnerved by the heady sensations coursing through her blood. She'd never had anal sex, had never wanted to. But the incredible pleasure pulsing within her made her greedy for more. How could he feel so damned good?

His finger pushed past the slim resistance in her ass, and suddenly she felt him everywhere. Before she could hold onto the feeling, however, he pulled out, leaving her body both empty and bereft.

"You see, Mallory, I have yet to show you my true self," he growled, his passion goading her own. A broader instrument replaced the finger in her anus, and she clenched as he began prodding with his penis. The entry was smooth however, and she knew he'd used her own orgasm to soothe the way.

Thick, burning and then filling, a rhythmic pounding that made her half crazed. And then he stunned her by adding what felt like another shaft into her vagina.

"My true self burns for you, *kina*." He chuckled, the movement thrusting his 'true self' further toward her womb.

"How ...?"

"Shh, feel me inside you, my cocks seeking entry into your grace. Oh, *kina*, you don't know how much I've wanted this." His gritty voice and thickening erections told her plenty. But what confused her was the intense pleasure she felt, no sense of pain at his intrusion, but warm, welcoming bliss.

She could literally feel her temperature skyrocket as first one, and then his other cock erupted within her. And the jet of cum filling her startled her into a climax so incredible she briefly blacked out from the sheer pleasure.

As she groggily rolled her head, startled to realize she now lay on her back, it was

to see Core's penis dripping wet with water, yet still hard as it waved over her mouth.

"Swallow me, *kina*, and let me fill the rest of you."

Confused that she could still want him so much after what they'd just shared, she was nevertheless helpless to resist. Mal opened wide and took him, feeling a brush of what felt like another phallus under her chin, though she had seen nothing there. The erotic undulations as he thrust into her mouth had her body heating again, and the powerful rush scared her as much as it excited her. None of this was remotely normal, and the intensity of her orgasms and the powerful sense of connection to Core had her reeling, as if slightly drunk on his taste.

"That's it, *kina*. Accept me. Let me give you such pleasure as you've never known," he panted, his 'true self' sliding under her chin as he thrust deeper and deeper. Her gag reflex had mysteriously vanished, and she took the whole of him in her mouth, astounded that tasting him could be so arousing.

When a jet of precum hit the roof of her mouth, she dragged her hands from their grip around the pool's ledge to his iron thighs. So tight, so rough, she thought, stroking his flesh as she invited him to come down her throat. Wrapping her hand around his ass, she pulled him closer and stroked her fingers between his cheeks.

At her touch, he shouted and began to climax, gripping her hair when she shoved two fingers in his ass, making him shoot load after load that she greedily swallowed.

"*Kina*," he breathed, still coming. "Oh, Mallory. My Mallory," he repeated over and over, still thrusting. When he stopped moving, his ghostly phallus disappeared, as did his finally flagging erection. He gently withdrew and leaned over her, kissing her fully on the mouth. "You do not know how good *we* smell, how much I continue to need you."

"I don't," she tried to catch her breath, "I can't understand how you can be so...."

"Hard for so long?" he added with a heart-stopping grin. "With you *kina*, anything seems possible. Believe me, this is a first for me, as well. I have some skill with sex, yes. But never to this extent." He stared at her mouth and ran his finger over the small drop of cum beside her lips. He rubbed it over her lips and into her mouth, and that quickly, his gaze turned from somewhat normal to snakelike. "I don't understand how I can still want you after that." He closed his eyes and leaned into the curve of her neck, breathing deeply. "But I do."

When he opened his eyes, she saw the hunger, and not understanding why or how, she returned the feeling.

He saw her need in her eyes, and with a feral grin, moved down her body, spreading her thighs wide.

"It seems these pools truly are invigorating." A long swipe of his tongue along her clit had her moaning and gripping his hair. "That's it, Mallory. Remind me that I'm not done worshipping yet. You're not finished with me, are you *kina*?"

She should have been wrung out, finished, completely exhausted and sore, but her body cried for more of him, more of Core.

"Not yet, big guy, not by a long shot," she moaned, captivated by the tongue that snaked out and made good on his promises.

* * * *

Core groaned and rolled to his side, his body feeling pleasantly used. He rested near the warm bathing pool, and stared through slitted eyes at Mallory as she trickled water over her naked body. The bright light glittering over her told him morning had arrived. But never had he spent so pleasant a time gathering his wits.

Last night had been a dream made real. The black-haired messenger from Ratlaharan had shown him perfection, the true union of soul, mind, and body, a state most Talians fought their entire lives to embrace just once. Core had embraced that state each and every time he shared intimacies with Mallory.

Now more than ever he pledged his undying service to Ratlaharan. Hell, he'd promise his soul to Zernishte and eternal damnation if it would secure Mallory's favor. Never had a female gotten to him on all levels. She had a smart mouth, the strength of mind to do what was right, and the fortitude to see her morality justified. She had decimated an entire Phrellian spacecraft, and had killed his enemy without mercy. Damn, he felt himself growing hard again.

And her body. He wondered if she knew what they had shared last night. If she had any inkling that both times she'd swallowed his seed, she allowed for a chance of pregnancy.

By the moons, he couldn't imagine the joy should she become full-bellied with his young. And with this woman he sensed his luck would bring him no less than twins. Mallory had that something about her, that magic and penchant for right that ascribed to the warrior and leader within him. And with her, he knew his sons or daughters would breed 'true'.

Never before had a female Talian been born with a true self. But Mallory's children would have The Snake, that he knew with a certainty.

Water sluiced over her arms as she scooped it in her palms. And as the sun caressed her golden skin, he knew the time had come to ask the questions he'd feared answered.

"Mallory."

She started with a shriek and turned with a frown. "You scared the piss out of me."

He eyed the pool with distrust. "I sincerely hope you don't mean that literally."

She blushed. "No, I didn't pee in the pool. Geesh." She dunked herself beneath the water, rising like a nereid through sparkling fingers of water. "I still can't believe what we did last night." She smoothed her hands through her hair, the color a shiny black that made him think of the last perfect eclipse during the harvest. "For a guy who's not supposed to come, you sure did, everywhere."

"Yes, everywhere," he said eyeing her mouth, and as she turned, her ass. He wanted a bite of that succulent flesh, and by the wry look in her eyes as she turned, she knew it, as well.

"Okay, I admit, you wore me out. I've never met a man with your libido."

As good an opening as any, he thought. Though an image of Mallory with another man at all made him want to destroy something. "So how many men have you 'met'? And from where? Tell me again how you came to be here, Mallory. And tell me of your world."

She rolled her eyes at his obvious jealousy, but described her world, a place filled with magic and the crime and prejudices that settled in any 'advanced' society.

Pausing in her washing, she seemed a vision, the very ideal of femininity personified. "So you see, every time you call me a 'gift' I feel weird. In my world, I'm at the bottom of the totem pole." *Totem pole?* "I'm not wealthy. I mean, my parents are, they're witches, after all. And had I married the man they chose, I'd be rolling in wealth. Not a care in the world." She sounded somewhat bitter, and he zeroed in on the details.

"This upsets you, that you have little wealth?" He swallowed. "That you have no ... mate?"

"Yes and no. I never wanted to be rich, just comfortable. And yes, I'd like to find a man who'll love and cherish me and all that other happy crap. But to marry for money? To tie myself to a cretin like Aaron Floyd Crowe III? Puhlease. I'd rather die chasing rats."

"What?"

"Well, like I said, since I can't afford a familiar, I act as my own. Witches can call more magic in a form not their own, but the greatest power comes from the grounding of beast and earth. Creates a hell of a zing, especially if you use transport spells a lot. And since I'm currently in the business of trapping the unscrupulous spell-set, transport spells are a must."

He thought about her world, about what she did. Did she live and fight in his world, she'd be considered a near-goddess. A woman who could fight, who wielded the power of spells and such? Hell, she'd nearly defeated an entire Phrellian ship.

"I am confused, Mallory. You consider yourself not worthy"

"No, no. *They*--the people who raised me and those like them--consider me unworthy. I think I'm a queen," she said arrogantly, a sparkle in her greenish-brown eyes. She grinned. "My friends like me just fine. And apparently Rattler, your Ratla-uh, that figure you call a god, must like me. Of course, I could be wrong. He might just really dislike you."

He laughed at her self-deprecation. "I think Ratlaharan wished to help the Talians, and sent us his best. Though I still have trouble believing *he* sent you here."

"He might not have. Only a select few ever enter The Lounge. The only reason Rattler sent me up there was that I'd had a hard day, and I'd saved his ass--uh, royal butt," she corrected at his stern look, "when he came up short-handed."

Core shook his head. "You live amidst such wonders to walk among gods. And we are barely getting by day to day."

"I used to think that way," she mused, staring at him with thoughtfulness, and no inclination her body was causing a definite reaction in his. "But I'm starting to realize I would never have been able to help you if I'd come from a normal family. Witches and warlocks may be rich, but they can't fight worth a damn. It's all about posturing and appearances. To tell you the truth, I'm glad I'm on the 'outs'." She smiled, her eyes sparkling as she glanced over him. "Because being on the 'ins' with you is well-worth everything."

Core stood, wanting her again, and had to pause at the sheer ferocity of need rolling through him. He shook his head and began to pace, trying to enforce some discipline over his unruly body. "Never before has a female made me so hungry," he muttered, distracted and unable to keep from studying her natural sensuality.

Cupping her hands with water, she let the liquid slide over her breasts, beading at

her nipples. "I feel a little stupid for asking, but you're really okay, right? I mean, before we came here, you looked pretty torn up."

"I'm fine. Yuka trees and their leaves possess healing properties that can bring back anyone or anything, even from the brink of death. It's well our enemy is unaware of this fact. Otherwise they'd surely destroy the forest."

"Right. Damned vamps." She sighed and left the water, glancing around. Grabbing her shirt, she proceeded to dry herself with it, then began dressing. "So tell me why the Talians and the Phrellians started fighting in the first place."

He broke off his own sigh, knowing he should have had his fill of her last night. Throwing on his kilt and sword harness, he sat on a boulder to explain. "It's fairly simple. The Talians have lived in this world, and in Horum Veirus in particular, for thousands of years. We knew little of the Phrellians, save for the records of their existence from years past. Only recently have they begun to invade, to fulfill their mission to destroy us all."

"But why? Do you know?"

"Because they can. And because they want what we refuse to give them. The land we would share. We would have, at one time, lived in peace with the fanged *nefrat*. But in killing our women and children, they have brought about a war they will never win." His heart raced, the sudden desire to shed his enemy's blood strong, overpowering.

"Um, Core? Your eyes are doing that snakelike thing again. Which reminds me, I want to know exactly what that snake tattoo is all about, not to mention your 'true self' needs a lot of explanation." She crossed her arms over her chest, blushing a becoming rose.

He shook off his bloodlust as desire once again settled. "You did not like my 'true self'?" he asked innocently.

She pursed her lips, and her cheeks flamed brighter.

He laughed. "All Talians pass a stage in maturity when their spirit grafts itself into their body. It manifests itself in our warriors as a snake drawn into our skin. In the females and the males not warriors, normally a symbol, a direction in which Ratlaharan would have us live, appears."

"What? Like a Yuka tree for a healer, an anvil for a blacksmith?"

He didn't understand what an 'anvil' was, but he nodded at her mention of a healer. "Not those symbols exactly, but something similar. We are all somewhat different."

"Yeah. I noticed a few of the other warriors, but none of them had tattoos as large as yours, or as detailed."

"I'm a bit different than the others." He flushed at the look she sent him, one of pure lust. "If you keep looking at me like that, I'll have you bent over this rock faster than you can take your next breath." She quickly looked away, but not before he saw her naughty grin. He exhaled heavily and continued. "Most Talians receive their true self later in life, in our adolescence. I was born with this mark." He rubbed the back of his neck gently, and felt his true self purr with contentment. "My true self, The Snake, becomes flesh when I've need. To protect that which is most precious, to defend the nest, I fight with my spirit."

"That's incredible." She stared at him with admiration, and not the fear or suspicion other females normally gave him. Even the females who lusted after his sex

usually stared at him with nervous awe. Mallory, however, gave him approval, and more importantly, acceptance.

“Where I come from, we have shapeshifters. But the shifter is either human or animal, never a blending of both.” She bit her lip. “I noticed your teeth get really sharp when you’re aggravated. Do you do that on purpose or is it an adrenaline thing?”

“Adrenaline?” She explained and he shook his head. “No, it’s not hormonal. I control the bite. My eyes, however, are more an ‘adrenaline thing’. When I’m angered or excited,” he murmured suggestively, “you can tell.”

“Mmm-hmm. And about that ‘true self’ when we were making love?”

“That, Mallory, is a part of me that appears when I’m *very* excited.” His gravelly voice hid that one crucial truth, that his ghostly phallus appeared only in the presence of a potential mate, when his spirit needed to bond as much as his physical self. Recalling the experience had him ready to repeat the performance.

She stared at him for several moments, feeling what he felt. The hide of his kilt bothered his erection, and he wanted nothing more than to throw the material aside and plunge back into Mallory. Unfortunately, too much time since the attack had passed. They needed to return to the nest, to assess damages and to find out what the future held.

“I’m sorry, *kina*. Would that we had more time.”

“I know.” She sighed, then her eyes brightened. “But there’s always later.”

He grinned, liking the way she thought. “Definitely later.”

Chapter Six

Mallory continually studied her surroundings, amazed at the varied landscape through which they trekked. From the dense Yuka forest to the white hot sands of Horum Atmas, *the god's kiss*. Through a less arid portion of Atmas into the nest's 'underground', a lush, tropical paradise. It had taken three day's journey on foot, and all the while she contemplated her new circumstances, wondering if she was missed at home.

Home ... her apartment ... her rent. Today was Tuesday. Monday, payment due day, had come and gone. Had Morty rented out her apartment, given away her meager worldly possessions? Had he rifled through her things, touching her most personal belongings?

Oddly enough, she couldn't find it within her to drum up any anger. Through some twist of fate, she'd been thrown from the only world she knew into a life or death journey with a male who couldn't possibly be real. For the past three days and nights, they'd dodged Phrellian patrols, venomous predators that had an appetite for anything on two legs, swarms of *srexia*--noxious gnats that reminded her of zombie toxin, and masses of quicksand and carnivorous plants.

In an environment this deadly, she had come to respect the Talians even more, especially since they regarded their world's eccentricities with tolerance—or at least, Core said they did. Glancing at the taut buttocks of the warrior in front of her, she couldn't help admitting how much she was coming to care for him. Though she'd seen him literally tear out the jugular of a Phrellian, he treated her with the utmost courtesy and respect, when he wasn't screwing her brains out at night. Never had she been so in tune with another, both mentally and physically.

She eyed his muscular thighs, marveling at the latent power in the Talian. The more she was around him, the more she felt his magic. Though he didn't use any and didn't seem to realize he possessed it, she knew he had gifts. Hell, he could have been a warlock with the right training. The few times they'd been forced to kill to survive on this trek, she'd siphoned power from him to quietly and efficiently eliminate any threats. Instead of looking down on her actions, he thanked her with true appreciation.

Core seemed to be proud of her magic, of her raw skills. And the notion he approved made her heart swell with pleasure. She cared what he thought of her, and she began to wonder how she could return to her tired, ordinary world without him.

"You are quiet," he rumbled, his voice carrying in the dim light of early morning. "You are well?"

"I'm fine." She thought wistfully of her bed, of an actual toilet and shower. Then she stared at the writhing snake on his back and shook her head. What did she need those creature comforts when she had *this* creature for comfort? The thought made her chuckle.

He stopped and turned with a puzzled look.

"Just an inside joke. Never mind."

He opened his mouth to say something and froze, his eyes staring all around. Grabbing her by the arm, he quickly pulled her into the shade of a mammoth tree and

covered her with his body. His skin began to harden, changing to scales instead of flesh, and the color shimmered into a dark brown, like the tree into which they leaned for protection.

“Core?” she whispered.

She could see the shine of his eyes through the shadow, and thought he’d never looked more predatory.

“Shh, quiet, *kina*. Don’t move. And don’t talk.”

Mal remained quiet, though she began to feel smothered with his bulk over her. As the minutes passed and she heard nothing, she began to grow irritated. Core’s throat and chest were visible but nothing else, and with a shrug, she traced the dark form of the snake around his ribs.

He tensed and frowned down at her, and the playful familiar within her demanded she accede to the sensual needs flaring at their close proximity.

Running her hands lightly across his chest, she flicked his nipples with her thumbs and then her tongue.

“Mallory,” he warned in a raspy voice.

“Shh, stay alert.” She pinched his nipple and ran her hands down his taut belly, down under his leather kilt to surround his growing arousal. Though his body was cool to the touch, his penis was like fire, hot and hard, sensuality made flesh. He leaned close to her neck and bit hard, startling her.

“Not nice,” she murmured, then squeezed his penis, knowing how much he liked a tight grip. She began pumping him, using the moisture at his slit to ease her way, and soon he was pushing as hard as she was pulling. Need built, to feel him come, to know she made him as crazed as he made her.

She loved the feel of him in her hands, and had she more room to maneuver, she’d have taken him in her mouth. The taste of him was indescribable, and surprisingly addictive.

“*Kina*, finish what you started,” he growled, raising her shirt up to bare her midriff, and pushed against her naked belly.

She reached under his shaft and rubbed his balls, pleased at the tightness of his sack. He neared release. She could feel it. And the hard motion of his hips promised repletion. Her thighs slid with arousal, and she knew her scent drove him as wild as her touch.

Keeping on hand over his penis, she pushed the other in her pants, stroking her fingers in her own cream. Then she lifted those fingers to his mouth, growing increasingly excited when he sucked on her digits hard, lapping her with that raspy tongue.

“Oh yes,” he said thickly, driving against her palm.

She pulled him hard once, twice, and then he came, ropy bands of semen marking her. He continued to shudder as she rubbed his cum all over his penis, pushing his sensitive shaft into another wave of bliss. Hecate’s cauldron, but the man was a walking advertisement for sex. She wanted him so badly she could taste it.

“Core, glad to see you made it back safely.” The male voice from the shadows was filled with humor, and made her freeze with shock.

“Not now, Luar,” Core groaned. “Give me a minute.”

“Of course War Leader.” Luar mumbled something Mal couldn’t make out, and

then *several* male chuckles sounded, embarrassing the hell out of her.

She tried to let go of Core's shaft but he held her hand tightly around him, stroking the last bits of seed as he wiped his penis against her middle. "Why didn't you tell me they were out here?" she whispered harshly.

"And stop you from your sensual play?" One brow rose. "I'm not crazy."

"You knew they were there."

"Of course. This is the underground. Don't worry, *kina*. I'm sure they saw nothing more than me taking my pleasure." He nuzzled her neck and kissed her softly. "Just be glad I held myself in check. It was all I could do not to eat your very delectable 'person,' despite our witnesses."

She blushed to the roots of her hair, amazed at his audacity. Great. Some kind of impression she was going to make by jerking off their leader before their eyes. She wanted to melt into a puddle and disappear.

"Relax, *kina*. Remember the open pleasure you witnessed only a few days past? We Talians are steeped in sexuality. What we did is completely acceptable, and probably a bit disappointing to those hoping for a show."

"Whatever."

He laughed and let her hand go, rubbing his cum into her skin. The touch made her squirm with desire, and only the notion that eyes were upon them stopped her from insisting he finish her too.

"I would like nothing more than to put out your flames, Mallory," he murmured, sliding a hand into her pants and through her curls.

She pressed against him when his finger stroked past her clit into the slick heat between her thighs.

"Yes or no, *kina*? Would you like release, as well? No one can see these small movements of my hand." His voice was like sin itself, his touch a temptation no sane woman could resist.

"Core," she moaned softly, spreading her thighs wider as he inserted a second finger into her sheath.

"That's it, wider." He quickly unfastened her trousers and shoved them down, baring her sex to his hands. "Oh, Mallory. Just a taste, a small lick to sate me." Before she could protest, he knelt before her and covered her sex with his mouth.

His tongue shot up into her vagina, flickering at the g-spot buried in her body, and she lost all thought, open only to sensation. The complete silence all around her meant nothing, nor did the fact that others perhaps watched. In the shadows, in the stark reality of Core's world, she surrendered her body, mind and soul to her lover's touch.

His lips sucked, his teeth teased and pulled on her woman's flesh. Her clit plumped painfully, her arousal a thirst only he could quench. He pushed a third finger into her vagina, then penetrated her anus with his other hand. All the while he lapped her cream, swallowing her scent.

"Core," she cried as she shattered, his fingers and mouth more than she could bear. She rocked into him, her orgasm fireworks inside the once calm state of her spirit. Pleasure pounded, coursed, and filled her until she could see nothing but Core's eyes, feel nothing but his hand on her body.

"That's it, *kina*. Now I truly wear your scent, as you wear mine." He sounded pleased, sensually satisfied as he took his time setting her clothing to rights. With a last

lick over her sensitive clit, he rose and snapped her trousers in place, lowering her shirt as well to cover her stained belly—stained with his seed.

“You did that on purpose,” she gasped, realizing he’d marked her like his possession.

“Of course I did.” He smiled, a large, toothy grin full of smug male superiority that should have irritated. Instead, he tore down more of her emotional resistance to the arrogant though loveable warrior. “I would not have it known I cannot satisfy my ma—my lover.”

She narrowed her gaze at his words. “Your what?”

“Come, *kina*. The nest awaits.”

“I’m not finished with you.” She followed him past several curious warriors now visible in the long grasses and slim trees they neared. How insane was she that she’d just had mind-blowing sex in front of half a dozen men? Crazy in love, Sheila would say. And the thought had her stumbling over a root in the ground, right into Core’s back.

“Easy, *kina*. I know you’re eager for more of me, but wait a little bit longer.”

“Very funny.” She caught his bright grin flashed over his shoulder, and realized how much she liked seeing him happy. Whether it was the incredible sex or the return to his people, Core acted like a man satisfied with life.

As she entered a hidden cave nestled under a ton of vines and the spiky black bark of protective trees, she considered the Talians and what she knew of them. The males couldn’t hurt the females, a notion drilled into them at birth. The warriors lived to serve the nest—a group, like a neighborhood—of Talians. But to Core, ‘the nest’ meant the whole of his people.

And according to what he’d told her during their journey to the underground, the population raised their young, a notion both foreign and welcome to Mallory. She could only wonder what her life might have been like had anyone but her selfish parents raised her. Really, she surprised herself at how differently she’d turned out, when by rights she should have been a spoiled, self-serving rich witch—or bitch—same thing.

They had walked for several minutes in sheer darkness before Core guided her left and into the faintest trace of light.

“Let your eyes adjust,” he said quietly and turned to address the men she hadn’t heard following her.

She could feel their eyes on her while they conversed with Core, but thankfully no one remarked on her candid sexual escapade. Lord, what would Sherm and Sheila say to that? Knowing Sheila, probably “Go girl”. Mal couldn’t help but grin.

Though she missed her friends dearly, she wouldn’t have traded one minute with Core in this place. A certain change from what she was used to, life in this danger-filled land made her appreciate what life should really be about.

“Mallory, I have to see to the wounded. Perhaps you would go with Luar and Blite to tour the site?”

“Let me come with you. I might be able to help.”

He stared at her a minute and nodded, the faint light surrounding them making him appear larger in shadow.

They moved into a larger space and several of the men following broke off, while three remained in trace.

“My second in command Luar, Blite and Fenin. They will keep you in sight at all

times, until we find the traitor the Phrellian spoke of.” Core sounded grim, and she understood. Protecting his people from the technologically advanced and overpopulating Phrellians was one thing. Having to do so at even more an unfair advantage, with a traitor in your mist, was downright wrong.

“The women might not take to you at first,” he warned. “But it’s more a fear of what you represent than who you are. You are a female warrior, and unknown to our kind. Talian females live to breed, to see to their mates’ every whim and need.” He grinned at the look of disgust on her face. “And in exchange, their mates live to protect and revere their women and children. We are an equally serving community. And neither gender is considered superior, only different.”

She thought on his words as they entered a bright room that resembled more a nursery than a cave. The rock walls were smooth. Animal hides lay scattered on the floor, providing comfort and softness for the infants crawling on all fours. Colorful paintings, inspiring and incredibly life-like decorated the walls. Scenes of women and children playing while men hunted and protected from all sides.

Past the ‘nursery’, Mal and Core waded through a sea of gray skinned, robust females. Mal likened it to a harem and had to stifle a sneer at the thought. Imagine living to fulfill some stupid man’s every need. However, a glance at Core made her wonder, for just a moment, what it would be like to cater to his needs. Imagine having Core ‘protect and revere’ her.

A sudden movement to her left shook Mal from her imaginings. A nearby female stepped back the moment Core neared, and she bowed her head in obvious deference. Mal thought her actions interesting, considering most of the non-warriors they had passed had done the same thing.

Core, apparently, was more than just a War Leader. She had a feeling the big guy was more akin to a king. The female made a face at Mal as soon as Core’s back turned, and Mal rolled her eyes. Jealousy--a widespread truth. *Gotta love the universe.*

In comparison, Mallory appeared almost petite next to the gray-skinned she-hemoth. Talian females were tall and voluptuous, their breast size about the only thing Mal and the women had in common. They all had long, black hair and surprisingly pleasing, feminine faces. As pretty as their males were hard, yet both genders had that underlying sensuality to their movements and features that captivated upon first glance. Seeing the women up close, Mal wondered if the Phrellians wanted more from the Talians than just their land. Perhaps they coveted the females, as well.

As she passed, the women eyed her with distrust and even hostility, glaring at her so close to Core. Mal thought their prejudice a bit much at first, but when she heard mutterings of ‘sex’ and ‘pleasure’ she fought the blush threatening to escape.

“Damn. Word travels fast around here.”

“Especially when Luar keeps them informed.” Core sounded almost happy about it, and she wondered if he felt like beating his chest for having conquered the ‘earth woman’. “Fear not, Mallory. No harm will come to you here. No one would dare threaten my mate,” he said in a louder voice, sending a hush throughout the cave.

“Mate?” she whispered.

“We’ll talk about it later. But notice the way they look at you now.”

Indeed, his words had the women bowing their heads to her, as well. Unsettled, not to mention secretly pleased, she tried to ignore the way his words made her feel.

Confused yet happy beyond sense, Mal reminded herself he had good reason to put aside hostilities. The caves weren't all that large, and dissention in so tight a space wouldn't do anyone well.

"The wounded?" she reminded him.

"We're getting there. I have to see to the women first."

"Why?"

He sighed. "Because that's the way we do things here, Mallory."

It made little sense to her, but she nodded and continued to follow him. They wound through several corridors and more caves, each lit and illustrating more of the Talian way of life.

They left the Talian women, only to pass through several caves housing other, 'alien' women. Red- and blue-skinned, with three and more arms. Different varieties of women graced the rooms, and she noted the hungry looks on their faces as the warriors passed. It was all Mal could do not to throw a few ice balls at the greedy schemers eyeing Core.

"These are the many women we have rescued from the Phrellians," Core said in a low voice. "The Phrellians like to pray on races inferior to them in firepower, and they take what they want. They perform perverse, even harmful sexual practices that involve much bloodletting, and think nothing of sacrificing their bed partners for their hunger."

His eyes grew furious, and she could readily see why so many respected his fierceness, his ability to control and lead others. Right now, he reminded her utterly of Rattler breaking up a fight at The Palace.

"They sound like the vamps from my world." She blinked, startled to realize she might never see her world again, but more so, because she didn't think she'd care.

His lips tightened and his gaze drilled into her. "Have you run into many 'vamps' in your world?"

"A few." She shrugged, a hard smile on her face. "But one bite and they left my world, awfully fast."

His expression cleared. "Ah, the poison you thought might render me dead." His eyes strayed to her neck. "Would that I had sampled more." She swore she could hear a subtle purr behind his words, but he turned and she was forced to follow or be prodded by the hungry-looking men behind them.

"Here are the wounded," he said several minutes later.

The large cave in which they stood held at least twenty men and women lying on pallets. Bloody material and buckets of water sat in stages around the room, where several Talian females continued to care for the injured.

Mal fingered the last charm on her bracelet, a small Ankh, the Egyptian symbol of life. With it, she'd always been able to heal anything.

"Let's see the damage," Core said in a soft voice.

They traveled slowly, seeing several severely wounded warriors and three women on the verge of death. The others were recovering, or would recover with time.

"Not Askin, and Hern." Core shook his head, his eyes hard. "Hern's mate is due to bear young in less than the blue moon's pass."

"There is nothing more we can do for them." Luar spoke from behind her. "The Yuka forest is too far. These men and women," he added in a choked voice, "would die before we could get there."

Mal stared from the warriors to the wounded, not surprised the men nearly cried when they spied the dying women. She really needed to help Core and his warriors learn to deal with the 'fairer' sex. She'd bet her last charm any one of those hating Talian females from that second cave could have carved her in two had they the skill and a weapon. Nothing fragile about a woman who weighed as much as a man in muscle.

"I could heal them," she offered quietly.

All eyes turned to hers, but Core's gaze caught and held. "You would do this?"

"If I can. Depends on how close they are to, ah, actually dying."

He stared at her, not decided. "And will this put you in danger?"

"No. Not like before. I'm not going to project, just to use a small charm. And I shouldn't get so tired." Not if the life-forces surrounding the dying weren't overly powerful.

"Please do so," Core asked and bowed his head. "Again, your gift is most welcome, and much appreciated." The glint in his eyes told her he planned to thank her properly, and she gave him a wide grin.

Pinching the charm between her fingers, she healed the three women, surprised at the large drain on her power. She made it through all but two of the men, then simply couldn't continue without a break.

"Thank you so much," Blite said from behind her. "You are truly Cuwenicu. I have believed, and I have been shown the truth." He knelt before her, and she flushed.

"Stand up, dammit," she said under her breath. Others were taking notice, and she dreaded the attention, feeling a lot like the egotistical warlocks and witches at home who reveled in such dramatics. "Core." She nodded her head at Blite. "Will you please tell him to stop?"

"Why? When all he seeks is to praise Ratlaharan's wisdom in his chosen gift, my—our—treasure." His eyes burned into hers, a wealth of emotion Mal couldn't ignore.

"Ah, well then. Just tell him to revere me internally. All this bowing is embarrassing."

"Yes, *kina*." He bowed low, his eyes twinkling, but he murmured something to Blite, who stopped bowing, though the furtive looks at her continued.

She sighed. "Okay. I'll try the last two now, but I could use your help." Core nodded. "I'm going to use my familiar, and if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to use your 'true self' as well, for added strength."

He stared at her, curious, and she motioned for him to free The Snake.

His eyes immediately changed, and she watched as he stepped from the green mist that suddenly enveloped his body. Everyone around them watched in awe as Core's true self emerged, a giant, hissing snake glowering around the room.

Mal closed her eyes and turned in on herself, seeking the familiar playing mischievously with her internal magic. *Come out, come out, kitty. I need you now.* Finding the healing spirit within her, she transformed into the small black cat and stared up at a world in black and white.

Much as she hated the nuisance of a lack of color, the auras around the living provided a much-needed insight into using magic. The men lying before her, the last of the injured, appeared as if already dead. Askin was in the process of making the transition from life to death. But Hern, he fought determinedly to stay in his body. And it was to him she trotted.

Placing a paw over his chest, she glanced back to see Core and the others gaping at her. The Snake, however, stuck out his tongue, trying to taste and smell her being. She nodded at him, encouraging his inquiry. His tongue ruffled the fur between her ears, but he complied when she meowed at him to near.

“*Kina?*” Core’s eyes had never been so wide, and she blinked at him lazily, smiling with a crooked tail.

Hern, however, couldn’t wait any longer. So she turned her attention on the man and closed her eyes. The snake seemed to know what she needed, and curled itself around her and Hern, wrapping her in its muscled body and pulsating magic.

It took some doing, but eventually Hern regained his spirit, and his body began to heal. The wound that had severed an artery in his leg, causing him to nearly bleed to death, scarred and receded. And his gray color slowly appeared less and less white, until he was nearly glowing with good health.

“War Leader?” Hern rumbled and slowly sat up with the help of Luar and Blite. He glanced at Mal and The Snake and froze. “*Cuwenicu.*” He immediately prostrated himself, as did the others, and Mal huffed her displeasure.

Meow.

“I believe Cuwenicu wished us all to refrain from bowing.” Core chuckled and reached through his true self to Mal, lifting her purring body in his arms.

Damn but she felt tired, tired but wonderful cuddled against Core’s solid heartbeat. His scent enveloped her, and she lay next to him, comforted by his presence. The Snake lengthened and seemed to lick at Mal before rejoining Core.

All around them Talians cried out with joy, shouting and laughing and crazed with delight.

Mal flicked her tail and curled it over Core’s arm, too tired to turn back.
“*Meow?*”

“I’ve got you, *kina*. Rest and regain your strength. We’ve much to do these next few days.”

She purred against him, overjoyed at his responsive rumble, and kneaded his scaling flesh with her claws. Marking him, her feline senses determined.

Mine.

Chapter Seven

When Mal next awoke, it was to feel a large, callused palm stroking her fur oh so gently. She stretched under his hand, alerted when he stilled before petting her again.

“You’re awake.”

She blinked to find Core staring at her, his hand gliding over her black silky fur. Seeing him so close, the flecks of green in his large gray eyes like emeralds, brought her to immediate arousal. And without thinking about it, she transformed back into Mallory, skipping the clothing she’d been wearing.

Core stared, his nostrils flaring, and covered her without hesitation. He plastered his mouth to hers, his lips and tongue more potent than any wine. To her surprise, he wore no clothing, and the feel of his heavy erection against her belly was a sweet torment.

“Yes, *kina*. The taste of you has only whetted my appetite. And I did promise to show my appreciation, did I not?”

She groaned and dragged her hands through his hair, pulling him closer into the kiss. Licking at his lips, she pushed her tongue into his mouth, loving the hard taste of her lover. Sex, raw and unbridled, burst on her tongue as she laved the roof of his mouth.

Feeling decidedly aggressive, she rolled with him until he lay under her, plundering his mouth until he groaned. His cock slid between her thighs, gliding easily through her creamy arousal. His hand left her hair to roam over her neck and back, settling on her hips. He pulled her harder against the head of his shaft, teasing her clit with delicious circles of heat. She felt her orgasm rising, like a rushing tide threatening to crush her under its impact.

Not ready to finish, she trembled as his teeth captured her nipple and began sucking.

“Core, baby, that is so good,” she couldn’t help gasping.

He vibrated deep within his chest, a sure sign of his pleasure, and she clenched her jaw to keep from screaming out as he tortured her other breast just as sweetly.

“Fuck me,” she cursed, wishing she had more staying power. But she needed him, now, and spread her thighs wide to take him. Rising up, she settled over his fat penis and sank inch by inch until he filled her tightly.

The heady sensation nearly undid her, as did the sudden, unexpected anal penetration nearly making her head explode with unbearable pleasure. One thrust, just one, and she’d climax. As if sensing her readiness, Core remained still, his eyes shut tightly, his teeth clenched at the effort he exerted.

Mal thought him the most perfect thing she’d ever seen. She bit her lip and began moving over him, not sure how he could possibly be in both holes at the same time, considering the awkwardness of this position for his ‘true self’, but she didn’t question it further.

His eyes shot open and he stared at her as she rode him, his hands cupping and teasing her breasts. Each rocking motion brushed her clit against his pelvis, and the girth in her ass continued to stimulate the erotic sensations deep in her body, building her climax too fast.

She slammed harder, faster, nearly coming when he rolled her nipples through his fingers.

“Ah, *kina*, never have I felt so much,” Core breathed. “Come for me, sweet. Give me what I need, what you want.”

Mal screamed as she came, a waterfall of lust and love so intense it blocked every other thought and feeling from her mind. As she clenched around him, she felt him pulse and shudder inside her, filling her with him. His seed inside her stimulated her anew, and she quaked over his body as she sated herself in him.

Moments, lifetimes passed, and she sat with Core inside her, one entity, one soul joined as intimately as possible.

Staring into a face she felt she knew as well as her own, she sighed with pleasure and leaned over him, conscious he remained buried deep. “I can’t believe just days ago I was worried about making my rent. And now I’m ... here.” *In love with you.*

He smiled, his grin decidedly wicked. “And I’m, here.” He wiggled, reminding her he remained hard as his seed trickled over them both. “In you, *kina*. Deep within you.” He kissed her and she sighed. “I’m keeping you,” he mumbled, nuzzling her neck in that sexy way that turned her to mush.

“What’s that?”

He glanced up, his eyes watery, and she froze. “You, Cuwenicu, are my treasure, my gift. My true self.”

“Is this a snaky way of trying to tell me you love me?” she asked, joy and confusion spinning her already tilting world out of whack.

His penis throbbed hard, and it felt as if he sank deeper inside her. “How could I not love you? You healed my people, destroyed my enemy, and saved me from a lifetime of loneliness?” He grinned, his smile fading when she simply stared. “And you, *kina*? What do you desire? To return to your world?” he asked quietly.

She really could care less about Newtown. But to just leave without saying goodbye? Though she’d never been close to her parents, they were her only family. And Sherm and Sheila, Rattler She definitely wanted to talk to *him* one more time. Already her thoughts swayed toward staying here. She had done good in this world, and by damn she’d been *thanked*. Mal felt as if she made a real difference here. And then of course, there was Core. Despite their short ‘acquaintance’, she couldn’t imagine living without him. His strength, his caring, hell, his giant snake. She had a real thing for power, and the love he gave her made her feel ten feet tall. Did she really have a choice in this?

Staring at the face she’d come to love, she smiled, surprised to feel a tear snake its way down her cheek. “My world is your world, Core. I love you.”

His breath rushed out and he hugged her so tightly she could barely breathe.

“Core!”

“I’m sorry, *kina*,” he said as he rained kisses over her face. “But you had me worried.”

“Okay,” she breathed, needing to gather her wits. “To recap, you love me, want me to stay with you, and we’ll spend the rest of our lives trying to defeat the Phrellians.”

“And you love me, agree to live with me, here, forever, and will cater to my every need like a proper Talian mate.” His lips remained flat but his eyes danced.

“Yes, to the first two, and a definite ‘hell no’ to the last. Cater to your whims?”

You can take that idea and shove it up your”

He cut her off with a hard kiss to the lips, his lips curled in laughter. “I’m joking, Mallory. I love you. The ‘trade witch’ who makes my knees shake and my senses stir by taking a breath. You make me whole, *kina*. And with you by my side, we can accomplish anything. My Cuwenicu.”

“About that. It’s going to take a bit of getting used to, living here. I may try to make some changes, but I’ll do my best to fit in.” *Yeah, like a checker on a chess board.* “But I can’t just leave my world, my friends and family, without saying goodbye.”

He frowned. “You would return to your world then? And what if you cannot come back to me?”

“Who said anything about leaving you?” She smiled, the answer to their dilemma at hand. “You’re coming with me. If Rattler is who you say he is, he’ll be able to shoot us both back here in a jiffy.”

“A what?” He looked distracted but pleased, even awed, no doubt thrilled at the idea of meeting his ‘god’.

“Never mind. Come on, let’s go before I change my mind.” She sniffed in dismay at the small cave. “You guys really need to get on the bandwagon with indoor plumbing.”

* * * *

They returned to the pleasure house in just under two days. This trip felt much different from the last, however. Joy burgeoned through Mal with every step and every beat of her heart. Her future, Core, loped by her side with an easy grace, turning her thoughts most carnal at every glance. For his part, he remained by her side, stealing a feel at every opportunity. They’d made love on their trip, and planned together the best strategies for outing the traitor and beginning the painstaking defeat of the Phrellians. Raw magic, Mal was teaching Core, could be extremely useful against an unsuspecting foe. And, even better, it didn’t require wax.

Core scouted the pleasure house before allowing her entry, an action that amused as well as annoyed her. Now that they’d ‘bonded’, he had started acting all protective. And while she relished the affection growing between them, the caveman tactics had to go.

Ignoring his order to wait outside until he returned, she entered and walked cautiously in the dark. “Screw this,” she muttered, and used a small drop of magic to illuminate a three foot radius around her. This portion of the center would be safe considering Core had cleared a path.

She faltered when she met the second level, aware her chances of returning home hinged on finding that black door again, the one that had disappeared the moment Core had pulled her through. The small illumination around her wasn’t enough, so she waved her hands and increased the area of her spell. She stared at the blank brown wall, noting the black marble flooring no longer stained with blood and bodies.

Someone had cleaned up around here, that much was obvious. But who?

“Cuwenicu, you were told to wait, were you not?” Fenin, one of Core’s trusted men, spoke quietly from her left, startling her into a breathless cry.

“Hecate’s blood, Fenin, don’t do that. You scared the life out of me.”

“Not quite.” He smiled, and the grin put her on guard. His teeth looked as sharp as razors, and the snakelike eyes and shimmering scales told her he meant business.

“Fenin? You’re here to help protect the War Leader, right?” *Please tell me this guy isn’t the traitor.* She knew from Core’s many comments how he, Blite, Luar and Fenin had grown up together, raised in the communal centers like brothers. They had all lost loved ones to the Phrellians, and she herself had watched Fenin take several Phrellians down the last time she’d been in this place.

“I am here to help him, yes.”

Then why the battle armor? “Okay,” she said slowly, wishing she had another charm on her bracelet. She could of course call magic, but she still had yet to recover from healing so many a few days ago. Not to mention she’d grown both stronger with Core’s presence, and weaker without him. Strange magic, but she’d take what she could get.

“You see, Mallory, the legend of Cuwenicu has been long in the making. Several versions describe Cuwenicu, Ratlaharan’s messenger, as our savior. A warrior sent to kill our enemy and keep us in our rightful place in Horum Veirus. Other, darker but no less accepted versions, predict our ‘savior’ to be an alien harlot destined to bring down the line of kings. Our War Leader has already softened. You weaken our strengths, distract our leader, and taint our heritage.”

Fenin scowled and a murky green cloud appeared over his head. Core had yet to appear, and Mal felt sick that something had happened to him.

Fenin’s snake curled off of his body like a fat-bellied leech. The reptile was smaller than Core’s, but no doubt as deadly. Its yellow, triangular head sat atop a yellow and brown speckled body. Five feet in length and most likely a hundred or more pounds. Not good, not good at all.

“I’m not your Cuwenicu,” she said quickly, stepping back as she tried to conjure the best spell to protect herself without overdrawing on her reserves. “I’m a woman who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.” *Or right place at the right time,* she mentally corrected, knowing Core was the reason she’d come. “I’m as much a victim in this as you are to the Phrellians. I didn’t ask to be here. Show me the black door and I’ll leave.”

“Black door?” He shook his head. “I admit you’re an amazing sorceress. But I’ve seen others with your power. None have corrupted our leader like you, however. And for that, you must return to your maker.”

She sighed. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. Find me the black door and I’ll leave.”

“No, Mallory. To the god that created you, you will return, in pieces or whole, your choice.” His snake lunged, and she barely managed to avoid his fangs. *Shit, shit, shit!* She’d prefer ghouls and shifters to this snake any day. Much as she’d been glad to help heal Core’s people the other day, it really wasn’t helping her now. She had no power on which to draw. And where the hell was Core?

“Where is the War Leader?” she gasped as she evaded another strike.

“Safe and protected from your interference. The Phrellians aren’t our enemy, you know. They only wanted the useless metals under our sacred ground. And the power they would give us, the protection and salvation of our race. Our true enemy are the sorcerers to the east. Your kind, I assume.” He sneered, the look not pretty on his

scarred but determined face.

"You know, Fenin, Core and I have bonded. So you can kill me, but your War Leader will kill you for it." He looked disturbed at the news. "And he won't thank you for serving him to your enemy."

"Oh really? How do you think we escaped in such numbers from our last attack? It was my reasoning with the Phrellians that allowed us to live."

"And your scheming that showed them our whereabouts in the first place," Core growled from the dark corner of the room. He stepped into Mal's light, his head bruised and his hands sporting torn rope. "That you, Fenin, my loyal friend, my brother, could turn traitor wounds me more than you'll ever know."

Core bowed his head, and Mal saw an actual tear drop to the ground. But before she could say anything, Core's true self ascended, and the monstrous rage in the creature scared the hell out of her.

With her, Core had exercised caution and restraint. Even with the Phrellians he'd held onto himself. But with Fenin, he let himself go, completely. She watched in awe, power streaming through her being, as The Snake destroyed Fenin's true self. In less time than it would have taken Mal to teleport a criminal, The Snake had devoured Fenin's snake whole.

She swallowed around the lump of fear in her throat when the snake and Core turned on Fenin.

"I only did what I thought right," the Talian tried to defend himself. Mal watched, curious, as Fenin's color slowly leached out of him. The death of his true self seemed to sap his strength. And before long he began wavering on his feet. Core shook his head, his eyes bruised. But he nevertheless flashed his teeth and growled, hissing as he advanced on his old friend. The predator within him came to life as he launched himself at Fenin.

Ripping through the man's jugular with his teeth, Core tore his neck out, spitting out his blood and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He and The Snake shared a glance, and the serpent wound itself around Fenin. When The Snake left him, nothing remained. Not Fenin's clothing, his swords, or his body.

A bright light flashed, making her wince.

"Kina," Core said, his voice subdued. "Behind you."

She blinked in surprise at the black door that had appeared. The knob gleamed, and she waited with baited breath while Core rejoined his true self and returned to her side.

"Let us go."

Concerned at Core's hollow tone, Mallory nonetheless reached for the door, keeping one hand in Core's as she stepped through into the same room she'd seen only days ago.

Hearing her love's deep sigh of regret, she took him in her arms and hugged him tightly, wishing she could wrap her arms all the way around him.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"As am I. Fenin was my brother, my friend."

"Your enemy," Rattler added from behind them.

Core thrust Mal behind him as he turned to face Rattler. But when his eyes met Rattler's he faltered.

“Ratlaharan?” “Rattler?” she and Core breathed simultaneously.
Her ex-boss smiled, sporting a new tongue piercing. “In the flesh.”

* * * *

Core couldn’t help it. He wanted to fall to his knees, prostrate before his god. But something about this ‘Rattler’ felt off, and he didn’t trust the gleam in the man’s eyes when they lit on Mallory.

“You are Ratlaharan, creator of the Talian.” Core waited, his entire being quaking at not showing his god the proper respect. Yet he couldn’t shake the feeling he needed to be on guard.

“Actually, here I’m Rattler, owner of The Python Palace.” Rattler grinned, looking so much like him Core had to force himself not to stare overtly. “Want a tour?”

Rattler opened the door and stepped out into a foreign room, what Core recognized from Mallory’s description. “This, my friend, is The Lounge, a special place for special people.” He winked at Mallory, and Core threw a possessive arm over her shoulder.

“Rattler, tell Core you’re not this deity.” She chuckled. “You, a god? Come on.”

They descended the stairs into a crowded floor filled with people looking like Mallory. The men and women were indeed alien to Core’s world. All had skin in shades of brown and tan. Men and women mingled, no open seduction here, but a good amount of drinking and carousing. A large, long counter took up the far wall of the large room, what in Core’s world would have been the dark, open sleeping berth. From behind the counter two women gave out glasses of liquid. And a deep throbbing noise pounded from a direction off to his right.

“What do you think of my place, Core?” *Rattler* asked, his amusement plain.

“Not a place befitting a god,” Core had to admit. “Though it seems entertaining.”

Mal gasped and flew out of his arms toward a large brown man, heavy with muscle. Core growled, automatically reaching for his swords only to realize they were no longer there.

“Check out your new threads,” Rattler murmured, waving pleasantly to several nearby people.

Core stared wide-eyed at his confining trousers and heavy footwear. The shirt he wore looked much like the shirt Mallory had arrived in, though his was black and much larger.

“Don’t worry. That’s Sherm, Mallory’s best friend.” Rattler stared at Core, as if weighing his worth.

“Why am I here?” Core had to know.

“Because you needed to see Mallory’s world. And she needed to return.”

Core tensed. “To say her goodbyes, yes.”

Rattler shook his head. “No, Core. She belongs here, with her kind. Just as you belong in Horum Veirus with yours.”

Core snarled, surprising himself. “You will not take back what you gave freely. The woman is mine. I have sacrificed, battled, and will continue to live for my people for the remainder of my life. But that life is one I will make with Mallory.”

“So you would choose to live here, then, with her, rather than with your people, War Leader? You were born to serve, yet you would abandon them in their time of need,

for your time of pleasure?” Rattler stilled, bracing his arms across his chest.

Time seemed to slow as Core thought hard on his next words. To live without Mallory? To stay here and help her, loving her, knowing his people would die without him?

He stared at Mallory, drinking in her joy, her vivacity. She glowed with magic, and with the happiness surety afforded. Here, in this place, she was home. And much safer than with him fighting Phrellians day after day.

His heart felt as if it were breaking. For the whole of his life he’d done what was asked of him. He’d lost friend after friend, even Fenin, now. And for what? To give up the part of him that longed for a semblance of normalcy, of family, again, for the good of the Talian race?

“Nothing to say, War Leader?”

Core hissed, and several people surrounding them started, shouting when his Snake began ascending before he drew on his discipline to call it back.

“I will not be the cause of Talian destruction.” His heart cracked and he forced himself to remain stoic. “If I must make a choice, then duty it must be. I would ask, however, that you protect Mallory and see to her happiness.” He swallowed hard. “She deserves much more than that for saving so many.” Feeling betrayed by the god he’d spent his life serving, he knelt and awaited his answer.

Rattler considered, then nodded. “So be it. Return to the Lounge and use the farthest door on the right. No, Core. Don’t bother saying goodbye. There’s nothing more for you here, brother.” Rattler’s eyes clouded, and in the depths Core recognized a deep sadness. “I’m sorry Core, but if it helps, had you taken her back with you, she would have died there.”

With the words, the grief knotting inside him, Core left Ratlaharan and climbed the stairs. He wouldn’t let his emotions tear him apart, and an awful numbness filled him when reached The Lounge and passed through the black door. He spied a bed very similar to the one in the other room, and sitting down on it, placed his head in his hands.

Chapter Eight

Mal hugged Sherm, excited to introduce him to Core. She couldn't believe only a few minutes had passed here while days had passed in Core's world. Must have been some kind of really weird temporal distortion spell. Though she'd didn't know any witch or warlock who'd ever successfully attempted such.

Glancing around, she saw Rattler and Core talking, and wondered how the big guy was handling his talk with his 'god'.

"Check that out, Mal. Rattler has a twin brother. Who knew?"

She grinned and shook her head. "That, Sherm, is the love of my life."

"Huh?"

"Where's Sheila? I'd like to get this out at once."

"Bathroom. Now come on, Mal. You left us four hours ago with aching feet and whiny complaints."

"Whiny?"

"Sorry, bitchy." Sherm grinned. "Then you come downstairs with a big gray guy, who's the spitting image of Rattler without all the metal. Not to mention this guy's got hair. And a helluva lot of muscle." Sherm eyed him warily. "How do you know this dude, anyway?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

He groaned. "One of those magic things, eh?"

She nodded, her mood sobering as she realized she'd probably never see Sherm, Sheila or her parents again.

"I'm leaving Newtown, Sherm."

"About damned time." He grunted. "Move uptown, near Sheila and me, maybe. I know a guy"

"No, Sherm. I'm *leaving* leaving." She took a deep breath, seeing the confusion in his eyes turn to one of comprehension.

"For how long?"

"Probably forever." She sniffed, suddenly consumed with sadness that she might never see her best friend again.

"But why?" He frowned. "If you have the hots for the gray guy, just move him in with you."

"Apparently it doesn't work that way." This was way hard. And she realized if she drew it out, would be almost impossible to leave. "Look. I have to leave to be with him, and I'm really needed there." She didn't have to force a watery grin. "They actually thank me when I wipe out a vamp."

His eyes widened. "Vamps where you're going? Not too far then."

She laughed, shaking her head. "I have no idea how far. Or when, or where. You say I spent ten minutes upstairs, but I know it was more like a week in a desert and a jungle."

He whistled and stared at Rattler. "Wonder exactly who Rattler is, and who he's really working for?"

"Me, too." She hugged Sherm tightly once more, then separated herself. "Look,

if I stay to say goodbye to Sheila, I'll never leave. And I know in my heart this is the right thing for me. I love the big guy, Sherm."

He stared hard, his lips slowly curling into a grin. "Marriage and all that?"

"Yep. And babies as soon as I can get my hands on him again."

Sherm smiled. "I'm going to miss you, Mallory West."

"You, too," she said through tears. "I love you, Sherm. And tell Sheila I'll miss her."

"Will do."

She quickly turned and searched for Rattler. To her surprise, she found him across the club chatting with ... her parents?

"Mother, Father." *What the hell are you doing here?*

"Mallory." Her Mother stared unblinkingly, her nose twitching as she studied the beer and who-knew-what-else stains on Mal's cheap flats. "How distressing to find that this 'gentleman' speaks true. You actually *work* here? *Serving drinks?*"

Wow. Saying goodbye to her parents wouldn't be so hard after all. "Mom, Dad, I'm leaving."

As if she hadn't spoken, her father added. "Aaron has reconsidered his proposal, Mallory. He'd like you to marry him, and he's willing to overlook your venture into trade."

"How nice for Aaron. Again, no. And maybe you didn't hear me before, but I won't be seeing you again, ever." A small pang of sadness hit her, a wave of nostalgia for the once-warm mother who'd wiped her tears and the father who'd taught her her first spell--all long before she'd proven such a disappointment, of course.

"Fine then," her mother snapped. "Gregory, let's go."

Her father glared at her. "This is a huge mistake. And one we won't soon forget."

She watched them leave and surprisingly felt a huge weight lift off her chest.

"I could explain things, if you think it would help," Rattler murmured. He watched her closely.

"Not necessary," she said on a sigh. "They've always been snobs, and always will be. I never fit in there anyway."

Rattler studied her, a new look in his eyes that made her uncomfortably aware Core considered him a deity.

"So are you really a god or what?"

Her bluntness amused him, and he laughed. "Me? The slave master? What do you think?"

She looked into his eyes, really looked for the first time. The deep black of his gaze seemed fathomless, but in their depths she was startled to see what looked like galaxies and worlds beyond worlds. She suddenly felt waves of power emanating from his soul, and from the mottling snake tattooed into the back of his neck.

"I think, maybe, I don't want to know," she croaked and took a healthy step back. "Where did Core go?"

He nodded upstairs. "Guy looked a little tired. And it's a funny thing, but he looks a lot like me." Rattler preened. "I look good with hair, don't I?"

She rolled her eyes, pleased the boss she thought she knew had returned. "Yeah, you do. But the piercings. I don't know."

He frowned. "I'll have you know, these are holy signs, strictures of absolutes and promises rendered." Cupping her chin in his palm, he stared. "You really do love him, don't you Mallory?"

"I really do."

"Good. He's a fine warrior and the first truly decent leader the Talians have had in ages. I could think of no other upon whom to bestow our greatest hope." He stared at her when she would have asked what hope he spoke of.

"I thought I was a treasure," she joked, feeling her face heat.

"Yes." He kissed her softly on the lips, and she jolted at the sheer sexual voltage packed into that simple peck. "A messenger with great tidings. And the power to back up her convictions."

She had so much to ask him, so much she wanted to know. Then he smiled, and he looked so much like Core she could only stare.

"Are you sure you and Core aren't really related?"

"But Mallory, if I'm a god, wouldn't that make Core a god? And if he's a god, why didn't he simply kill all those Phrellians with a glare?"

She opened her mouth but closed it as quickly. "Do you have to answer a question with a question?"

"But doesn't not knowing make everything more exciting, more mysterious?" he rumbled.

"That was a question. And god or not, you're becoming a huge pain in my ass." She scowled at his laughter. "I'm not going to see you again, am I?"

He shrugged. "You never know. If it's allowed, maybe one day I'll be able to find the black door as easily as you did."

Giving her another huge hug, he slapped a heavy knapsack into her hands.

"Take this gift. Call it a wedding present. A ton of spells and charms you can use in the future. As well as an unending spell of wax. It'll do you a world of good." He smiled, his teeth suddenly razor sharp and his pupils long and narrow. "Tell Core never to stop believing, and that he passed his last test."

She frowned. "Test? What does that mean?"

"That only the worthy may live and love in the god's grounds."

"This is so weird," she muttered, shaking her head.

"He really loves you, Mallory." Rattler chuckled and shoved her toward the guarded stairway. "Take the farthest door on the right, and hurry up before it disappears. I don't know if you'll have another opportunity to find him again in this lifetime."

She waved over her shoulder and ran as fast as she was able carrying the heavy sack. Reaching the top of the stairs, she hurried to the third black door, alarmed when her vision of it began to haze.

Mal threw the door open and saw Core sitting dejectedly on the bed. She immediately dropped the bag and sat next to him.

"Core? What's wrong?"

He stared up at her in shock, and when she asked him again what was wrong, he crushed her to him.

"Mallory," he breathed, kissing the top of her head. "You're really here?" Tears began to fill his beautiful gray-green eyes. "I thought I'd lost you forever."

"Core?" She grimaced at Rattler's parting words. "What did he say to you?"

Some final test, hmm? That jerk.” When she heard what had said, she shook her head. “Of course I’ll die there, Core. I’m not immortal, you know. And if I don’t die there, it’s pretty much a guarantee that I’ll die somewhere else. Pretty sneaky of my conniving boss, that”

“*Kina*, hush.” Core kissed her long and hard, his tongue convincing her to let bygones be bygones. “You are my heart, my soul.” He grinned as she began to purr, and his answering rumble made her grin, as well. “My own little familiar.” He stroked her hair. “As soft as that feline fur but far more beautiful.” He kissed her cheek, her throat, the pulse in her neck. “Black hair, dark as night, spread over these sheets while you wear nothing else but me, and my sincere appreciation.”

“I love you, Core.”

“And I you, my treasure.” When Core could catch his breath, he chuckled and began removing her clothing. “Praise to Ratlaharan, and all the sons and daughters we will give him.”

The End