

Willa Okati

Georgina's Dragon



GEORGINA'S DRAGON

Willa Okati

Loose Id.[®]
www.loose-id.com

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id® e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * * * *

This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (anal sex, homoerotic sex, ménage, violence, voyeurism).

Georgina's Dragon

Willa Okati

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-2924
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

Copyright © April 2007 by Willa Okati

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared in any form, including, but not limited to printing, photocopying, faxing, or emailing without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC.

ISBN 978-1-59632-294-3

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Olivia Wong
Cover Artist: Christine M. Griffin

Dedication

To Kira, my friend and guide.

Chapter One

Plink, plink, plink, plink.

Four quarters got you through the turnstile at the elevated train station. Four coins that signaled the end of another working day and the time to go home. Four tiny bits of metal that most people handed over gladly as the price of freedom.

Gina felt nothing as she fed the machine its required toll. Or rather, she felt an absence of something. The crowds jostling behind her were impatient -- in a rush to get home and cut loose, relax, party, whatever -- or they were giddy, joking with friends and pushing at one another. She felt small and cold and alone in their midst, a lost iceberg in the middle of a swelling sea.

But she wanted it that way. It was far better for her to be by herself. If no one knew her, they wouldn't know who -- what -- she really was. Without that knowledge, no one would be in danger.

Lonely was better than being a walking time bomb.

Gina slipped a hand down to cover her purse as she pushed through the turnstile. If the bag got caught, the few possessions she carried could spill all over the place. They were harmless enough -- a tube of lip gloss, a long-expired prescription for mild sedatives, a small travel hairbrush -- but anything could be used as a weapon against someone.

Out of sheer habit, barely looking up, she walked the path to the waiting platform for her train. She always tried to vary where she got on and got off, but there were only so many ways to stagger a routine.

Gina checked her watch, a plastic case and faux gold with a plain leather band. The time it showed was right, she felt sure, and according to her accounting, the L was five minutes late.

That could be good, though, right? Another little variation. An added piece to the puzzle. If anyone were watching or lying in wait, it'd throw them off. Gina decided she wasn't unhappy with this turn of events, unlike the complaining crowd surrounding her. Trying her best not to be noticed, she stood there quietly with her hand guarding her purse and her eyes fixed on the ground.

In the back of her mind, she wondered what other people saw when they looked at her. Although Gina hoped that she blended into the teeming masses of people, she had a mirror and knew that she stood out when compared with ordinary men and women. Some people prayed for beauty, but Gina yearned for the kind of regular looks that would leave nothing to remember her by: an ordinary chin, a straight flat nose, regular-sized eyes of a plain hazel. Instead, she had a pixie look to her: all huge eyes and full Cupid's-bow mouth with elegant cheekbones and an overall heart shape.

She was small, almost to the point of fragility, but strong underneath, with muscles that she didn't do anything to earn but which wouldn't go away. Long black hair with red highlights that came down to her breasts when loose was currently knotted up in a neat chignon. Businesslike. Professional. Unfortunately, it was a shade that stubbornly resisted any kind of dye except bleach -- and Gina hadn't been able to stand herself as a straw blonde. The coloring hadn't matched her Mexican-European caramel skin tone at all and looked blatantly fake. She'd heard that wigs could change the way a face looked, but the ones she could afford looked horrible even on the mannequin heads. And they *itched*.

A sure sign of someone in hiding.

Gina reached up with one hand, her fingers feeling cold, and lightly touched her cheek. She could feel the delicate bones underneath that shaped the way she appeared, nothing that could be duplicated in nature or that blended in. Damn it.

If she were put in a lineup for whatever reason, anyone would be able to pick her out.

Not safe.

Still, what could she do? Plastic surgery wasn't an option for someone living on a shoestring budget. Makeup could change her a little, but anyone with a sharp eye would be able to see beneath the eye shadow and base to the woman underneath.

So, she tended to keep her head down, all she could do to avoid attention.

Like now.

All around her men and women were wrapped up in their own business, tapping their feet and craning their necks in impatient anticipation, looking for the train's approach. A baby bawled somewhere in the midst of the masses, its shrill cries going up and down the scale.

Gina flinched at the sound. Children unnerved her. They were so delicate, so easy to break. When she was younger and she'd still had a family -- a big, extended family -- she'd been talked into holding an infant once or twice. Freaky. Their bones had been frighteningly

fragile, and their faces, full of trust, made her feel like she had to live up to their expectations of being someone to turn to when things got bad. Mom had always teased her about it... Mom had... before...

She was dead now. Gina bit her lip as a flood of bad memories raced through her mind. Death after death -- her father and her brothers, her mother and her aunts. The rest of the clan moving away, spreading themselves across the nation in an effort to do exactly what she had stayed here and attempted -- hiding.

It was risky to stay put, but moving wasn't an option. Gina lived from paycheck to paycheck, squeezing out enough to hand cash over to her landlord and put food on her table. The paper trail leading from her to the water and power companies was in a fake name, as was the moniker she'd put down on her lease. As far as the post office was concerned, they delivered her bills to "Mary Smith." And, although it was risky, she'd taken her chances with some shady types and changed her ID to reflect that name. She was pretty lucky no one had run a credit check to figure out she was living under an alias.

"Mary" was safe. Gina could pretend to live "Mary's" life and be relatively safe; God willing, no one knew she was still Gina underneath.

There came a rush of air, a roaring, and the train finally thundered into the station, noisy on its tracks, grinding to a stop in front of the waiting passengers. When the pneumatic doors opened with a hiss, hardly anyone got off, leaving the mass of those waiting to crowd in as best as they could.

Gina got lucky. One seat became open as an elderly man wrapped up his newspaper and departed. She made a beeline for the hard plastic chair, still warm, and settled herself in without any expectations of comfort. Her purse went on her lap and both hands on her purse. She did look up then, taking a quick glance at the grumbling commuters hanging on to poles and ceiling straps, a few of them darting evil looks at her for snagging the space.

Just as quickly, she looked back down. *I should have blended in by standing. Damn.*

Maybe she could blame it on the headache that had been building behind her temples almost since she had gotten to work that morning. The pain was beginning to throb, swells of discomfort altering her perception. Getting home, or at least back to the place where she lived -- she wouldn't really call it "home" -- would be a relief.

Painkillers, food, a bath, then sleep. Maybe a little idle TV-watching while she ate. Gina liked to keep an eye on the news, just to make sure nothing out of the ordinary was going on. Occasionally there seemed to be something suspect about what the media called natural disasters, but on the whole, the telecasts were no more exciting than the weekend weather forecast and local business reports.

Mundane. Everyday business. Good.

Gina rubbed her head, wishing the pounding pressure around her skull would ease. Not eating enough sometimes had that effect on her, but she had an uneasy feeling this wasn't due to any lack of food or anything that had gone on at work today.

She temped in a range of jobs. It was a good way to avoid making close contacts, people who might ask too many questions she'd be at a loss to answer. Mostly, all they cared about was whether or not Gina could answer a phone and direct calls, or take dictation and type, or operate a computer to input data.

Today, she'd been assigned to a busy urgent care clinic. Her main task had been filing patient charts and finding stored files, plus putting together new ones for walk-ins. She'd had a desk in the back corner of a room filled with paper, and nothing to do but answer an intercom system, then find what had been requested.

People, when she ran into them, had been friendly. They usually were. Gina had nodded and smiled politely, then retreated as fast as she could into her private domain. Most anyone else would have considered the job mind-numbingly boring, but it suited her just fine.

Rocking in her hard plastic seat, Gina pinched the bridge of her nose and recalled a conversation she'd overheard when getting ready to leave for the day. The regular staff had been all abuzz about a new club where they could go burn some of their wages.

Someone had suggested they take Gina along.

"The Ice Queen?" another office worker had snorted. "As if."

And that had been the last mention of Gina. While she'd been listening, Gina's heart had pounded in her throat. Going out for drinks was a normal, natural thing to do -- good cover -- but exposing herself to people who might ask questions or start suspecting -- bad.

Being shot down as cold and unfriendly stung, but she was better off for it. Gina knew that much to be true.

The stress and rejection sure hadn't done anything for her headache, though. Gina opened her purse and rummaged through it, hoping against hope even though she knew the exact contents, that she had a packet of aspirin. Damn, that was something else to correct. Would she ever get this disguise down pat? She'd bet a lot of women would have a half-empty bottle of water, some painkillers, a few loose coins, and maybe a fuzzy Tic Tac or three. At least.

She cursed herself for being stupid and snapped her pocketbook shut.

"Do you have any gum?"

The question startled Gina into looking up. She met the frank, open face of a young boy, maybe seven, with curly brown hair flying everywhere, as if no comb that had ever been made could tame it. Where were his parents? God, people really did let their kids run wild on the trains these days.

"Gum?" he repeated. "Maybe grape?"

"Joey!" A tall, softly curved woman pushed her way through the crowd; Gina saw where her son got the wild hair from. "Honestly, what have I told you about this kind of thing? Miss, I am so sorry." She turned to Gina with the same open gaze as the boy, laced by

a tinge of amused dismay. "You'd think all those lessons about taking candy from strangers would have sunk in, but this little guy's a fiend for Bubble Yum."

"It's all right," Gina said stiffly, drawing her purse closer to herself. "He wasn't bothering me."

She prayed the woman and her son would go away, no matter how crowded the car was. No luck.

"You know how it is," the woman went on, swaying with the motion of the car. "Kids these days. You tell them what to do, you teach them all the right things, and then they just zoom off on their own little tracks."

The bands of tension tightened around Gina's head. "Kids are something else, all right," she said carefully, dodging the implied question of whether or not she had any. Her ring finger was bare, but she didn't wear any other jewelry, so that might not be a clue. "You never know what they're going to do."

Joey was studying Gina. "You have weird eyes," he said in the frank way children had, pointing out anything from a missing limb to a dangling button as if they were all the same thing. "How'd you get eyes like yours? They're all yellow in the middle. Like sparks." Gina lowered her gaze to her lap.

"Joey." His mother shushed him. "Let's not hassle the nice lady, okay? Come back with me to the doors. You love watching everything zip by, don't you?"

"Yeah, but her eyes are all crazy."

"Kids!" The woman reached out to pat Gina's shoulder. "Hope he didn't offend you."

Gina shook her head without saying a word.

The woman hesitated.

Gina held her breath.

"It was, er, nice to meet you," Joey's mother said at last, sounding confused. She put a hand on Joey's arm and started guiding him back toward the front of the car. "Come on. And no wandering away this time, are we clear?"

"How do you think she got eyes like hers?" Joey persisted.

His mother's answer was lost in the clamor of a dozen voices talking all at once, more than a few pissed off at the pair shoving their way to and fro, others carrying on conversation after conversation. Gina waited until she was sure no one was looking, then sank down in her seat with a carefully exhaled breath. That had been close. She could handle living on a low income, but God, she needed to save enough for tinted contacts. Sunglasses would be a cheaper alternative, but she couldn't wear them at work.

Because, despite the fact that most people didn't comment on it, Gina's eyes *were* strange. Ordinary rich brown on the outside, but with yellow surrounding the pupil like a sunburst. And as large as her eyes were, the effect tended to startle. Yet another reason Gina

tried to avoid much face-to-face contact or speaking with people where she'd have to meet their gaze.

Special contacts have to come out of the next few paychecks, she decided. *I can eat ramen noodles for a couple of weeks if I have to. It didn't kill me back in college, and I can deal with the diet now.* It wasn't as if she ever gained any weight or had to worry about her sodium level. Gina was, and always would be, the picture of health. Heart attacks and high blood pressure weren't the threats she dreaded.

As the train rocketed on, the swaying motion began to make her sleepy despite herself. What with the warmth of the car from all the bodies packed into it, the rising, then lulling waves of their conversational noise, and the weight of a long day wearing her down, Gina found it harder and harder to keep her eyes open.

But she couldn't let go and fall asleep. She'd miss her stop, for one, and for another, dreams weren't her friends.

Bad things came about while she dreamed.

Gina struggled to stay awake, wishing the train would stop and there'd be a blast of cold air coming through to perk her up. The next port of call should be her own, though. Day's work, done. Train ride, almost done. So far, so good. Still safe.

She didn't let go of her tension, though. It kept her on edge, kept her sharp, kept her alert -- despite that she wanted nothing more than to curl up for a nap. If she let herself go for one second out here in the open, who knew what could happen.

One of the things she'd been hiding from might spot her.

The thought brought Gina back to full consciousness. She struggled up from where she'd slipped down a little in her seat, taking a firmer hold on her purse. Plain black, it matched the rest of her outfit. A simple black suit with a jacket and a knee-length skirt, plain low-heeled pumps. Nothing out of the ordinary.

The voice of the conductor came through the intercom. He sounded bored. "Next station, Cross Chapel. All passengers disembarking at Cross Chapel, gather your belongings. Please wait until the doors are fully opened to exit the train. If you have children, hold their hands. Thank you for traveling with us today."

Gina grasped her purse and stood up. The train herked and jerked as it came to a stop, the hydraulics chuffing. There was a pause in which she could hear her heart beating in her ears, and then the doors opened with a burst of sealed air. A cold breeze streamed in, smelling of rain the way it fell in cities -- stinking, miserable, and sticky.

She was one of the first ones out, walking onto the station floor at a carefully measured pace. Not too fast, not too slow. The ordinary tread of a woman who wasn't in a hurry or putting off the inevitable.

Her studio apartment wasn't far. Just down the steps and then two blocks to the converted brownstone she lived in. Once she was there, she could relax and hopefully let go

of all the tension she'd gathered throughout the day. The spot where she stayed was secure, or supposed to be, a haven that she clung to.

It looked as if there *had* been some icy rain while Gina was riding the L. The cold air she'd felt had frozen the precipitation to the metal steps, making them slick. Men in patent leather business loafers cursed as their feet slipped and skidded, grabbing at the safety rail with the hands not carrying briefcases, then laughing about how close they'd come or cursing the transport system for not taking care of this.

Gina took small steps, testing each stair before she went down. In front of her, a woman struggled with the weight of a heavy diaper bag and a toddler, fast asleep, curled tightly against her shoulder. Gina eyed the pair uncertainly, an itching beginning at the base of her spine. There was something... off... about this. A growing sense of unease which made her skin tingle.

Not now. Please, not now.

Her prayer went unanswered. As she watched, the woman's sneaker skidded out from underneath her and she started to fall. Her hand grabbed at the rail, only to miss it by inches. The diaper bag went one way, and the toddler went another, leaping out of his startled mother's arms.

Gina couldn't have stopped herself. She darted forward faster than any human could possibly have done, grabbing the baby before he had a chance to hit the steps. He flailed in her arms, wiggly as a worm on a hook, but safe. The woman's ass landed on the stairs with a painful-sounding *thump*, her head coming back in a sharp jerk which almost knocked her skull into the cold metal above.

An instant buzz of concern went up around them, the crowd pressing in to see if the mother was okay, or just plain nosy about what had happened. The woman sat dazed for a moment, then automatically reached out for her child and her carrier.

"Here," Gina said, quickly passing over the toddler, who grasped his mother and hung on, starting to cry now that the danger was over. "He's okay. Take him home."

The woman's gaze was still muddled, but growing sharper. She shot out her hand and snatched Gina by the wrist, holding her hard with the strength of the mentally agitated. "He could have been killed," she said clearly. "You saved him."

Gina shook her head. "I got lucky."

"That wasn't luck. That was a miracle," a burly man behind them opined, joined by a rolling murmur of agreement. "How'd you move so quick?"

"Instinct," Gina said, tucking her purse firmly against herself. "I have to go."

The woman didn't release Gina's wrist. "You saved him," she repeated, deadly serious. "You're a hero. A heroine."

Gina went as cold as the icy air. She scrambled up from the stairs and took several steps down, her feet sure, not slipping once. "I'm nobody's hero," she said, her voice shaking. *Have to get out of here.* "Leave me alone."

She heard the crowd talking as she fled, their sound questioning and confused, but she deliberately ignored them. What she needed to do was get inside, where she could hide.

Where no one would look at her too closely and possibly see what lay underneath.

Where she would be safe from herself, and everyone else would be safe from her.

Chapter Two

The temperature had also grown much chillier while Gina was on the train. Although there wasn't any moisture falling at the moment, that patch of icy rain had taken the temperature down by at least fifteen degrees. The warmth of the day's light had completely faded as well. Gina's neatly pressed, utterly ordinary business suit was definitely not living up to its "all-weather" advertisement. Cold seeped in through the cotton blend, sending goose bumps skittering down her arms and up her spine.

God. Getting indoors would be a good thing for more than one reason.

Gina clutched her pocketbook and took quick, sweeping glances from left to right and back again as she walked down the cracked and broken sidewalk. This definitely wasn't the best part of town and not a smart location for a woman to be walking alone after dark... but then again, the things most people feared in a place like this weren't what bothered her.

"Hey, lady, you got a dollar?" Gina stopped at a gap in the pavement and cut a quick look down at the man who'd asked. His few teeth were black with decay and the lines on his face seamed with dirt. The smell of cheap booze wafted off him in waves along with his blatantly fake bonhomie. "Just a li'l dollar? I'm hungry and I wanna buy a hamburger."

Gina doubted any money she gave the man would go toward food. "I don't have any spare change," she said shortly, turning away.

The man spat, a deep and phlegmy sound. "You so fancy in your big business suit, got those shiny shoes on, and you ain't even got a dollar for a man who needs food? Fuck you, bitch."

"I told you, I don't have anything for you," Gina said in a low voice, glancing back at him. "Don't call me names."

The man struggled against the wall where he'd propped himself up. The stench of unwashed skin, filthy clothes, and garbage slapped Gina in the nose, making her wince.

"What if I just took your bag you got there?" he demanded belligerently. "Bet you got enough in there for a burger and somethin' to drink."

"I can't help you." Gina's lips felt numb. "Leave me alone."

"Hell if I will." The bum fished in his pockets and came out with something short but gleaming and sharp. "You hand over your purse like a good girl, and we ain't gonna have any trouble, okay?"

"No!" Gina acted on instinct, kicking the man's legs out from underneath him. The knife fell from his hand as he went down, and another quick jab with her leg sent the blade skittering into the darkness beyond them. "Don't you touch me."

"Damn you! Why you gotta go an' cause trouble?" The bum swore as he started rummaging through garbage, looking for his weapon. "All I wanted was a fuckin' dollar, cunt."

"And all I said was no." Gina rapidly assessed the man. He was no threat, and he'd never find his knife again, not in one usable piece. She'd felt the metal snap as her foot connected with it. It'd been a strong kick.

Too strong.

Risky.

Time to move along. Stepping quickly over the break in the sidewalk, Gina marched on. She kept an even more careful watch as she moved, scanning for anyone who'd noticed the altercation. No one seemed to have.

Then again, in this kind of neighborhood, it didn't pay to see anything out of the ordinary. Most people minded their own dirty business and turned a blind eye to anything else that didn't concern them. Any incident would have no witnesses, no one who cared, no one who'd talk to the cops if they came around questioning.

Funny how the safest place Gina had found was in the middle of a danger zone.

Her brownstone came into view, a welcome sight as she approached. No one loitered in the way except a hooker dressed in a flashy rhinestone top, fishnet stockings run through with holes, and fake leather boots up to her calf.

"Honey," the woman greeted her, voice raspy from cigarettes and hard living. "You too fancy for this neighborhood. You got to learn how to dress down, girl."

Gina eyed the prostitute -- was her name Glitter? If this was Glitter's idea of blending in, Gina figured she'd stick with her business suit. She nodded politely and dodged the woman, who grabbed a street sign and swung around as if it were a pole on a stripper's catwalk.

"You ever have a good time?" Glitter wanted to know. "Every day when you come home, you got this look on your face like you been run over by a car. Not one of those little compacts, neither. Some big kind of truck. What is it you do for a living, mess with dead

folks? You hiding from something? Ha!" Glitter hooted. "Seriously, you need to let your hair down, girl, and not just out of that tight old knot. Learn to have a little fun."

Gina said nothing. Glitter had noticed her enough to form a pattern, had examined Gina's façade, and had gotten way too close to figuring out what she was all about.

Danger. Danger.

"All right, no problem," Glitter sang out in the silence, coming to a stop and posing for the few cars cruising up and down the street. "You don't wanna have fun, I'll have enough for both of us. Yeah, baby," she crooned to a slowing sedan. "That's it. Come to momma."

Gina held her purse close to her heart and moved on, climbing the brownstone steps with a forced effort not to rush. A quick stop on the porch to make sure the runes she'd chipped into the wood were still in place, and, after fumbling to find her keys in the pocket of her suit jacket, she opened the lock, then pushed the wide door ajar to let herself in.

Inside, the subdivided house rang with noise. Children screamed, men bellowed in deep, low voices, and women screamed back in shriller tones. The air reeked of beans and greasy hamburger meat, the oily atmosphere so strong it had coated the walls with a fine sheen. Gina grimaced as she touched her mailbox and found it slightly slick. She had never gotten used to the sliminess.

She fished out her other two keys: one for the mailbox and one for her apartment door; she didn't need any others. Both were held together by a simple metal coil with no colorful chain dangling off the end. Some people collected keys and chains until they had a wild tangle, but Gina liked keeping things simple.

She thrust her key into the mailbox lock and wrenched the metal door open. Nothing. Good.

Better yet, there was no one around to get in her way.

Gina relaxed a little. Things always happened in threes. She'd forgotten herself when catching the baby, her control had slipped with the bum, and Glitter had been a little too keen in her observations, too insightful. One, two, three. If the old superstition held, there shouldn't be anything else out of the ordinary to deal with before she reached her apartment.

In her life, though, you never knew.

Safety. Get to the high ground.

Gina rounded the top of the stairs and faced down her door. Someone had been up there with spray paint again, probably the teenagers who lived in the basement apartment or some of their friends. Gang logos in bold red were interlaced with the word "bitch," the designs going from one side of the wall to the other. Why, she had no idea. She'd never even talked to those kids.

Maybe that was the reason. They hung out on the steps and whistled at any woman who passed by, shouting out rude suggestions about what they could do to the lady if she'd stopped to listen. Gina had always swept past them.

Did their vandalism really matter, though? They probably hadn't singled her out in their rampage. Except for the comments, which everyone got, they left her alone. This was just teens being destructive, and they were the same the whole world over. Nothing to worry about.

But her wards...?

Gina touched the red paint blasted on her door and found it to be dry. They'd coated the protective circle she'd etched in with a sacred athame, but the lines still showed through. A protection spell, one she'd been taught when she was young, used in last-ditch efforts to stay hidden from the enemy.

So far, they had cloaked her through several years of her adulthood. A little paint shouldn't slow the lines down.

Breathing a little easier, Gina pushed her key into the deadbolt lock and cranked it open. The thing stuck in cold weather despite how she oiled it, and the thought of her key breaking off or the tumblers not turning always made her nervous.

Maybe she'd save enough for a new lock, too, and learn how to install it herself. No, two locks. She couldn't be too careful. Things had been going well for a while. She'd gotten complacent, missing out on things like specially tinted contacts and extra locks.

Complacency led to disaster. She'd fix things.

I'll earn some more somehow, Gina swore to herself. *Extra hours. Double shifts. Overtime.*

She pushed her door, wincing when it creaked and groaned, then slipped inside. Reaching for the light switch by feel, she squinted against the harsh glare of the overhead. Fluorescent and ruthless, it showed every flaw in the place from the cracked and peeling paint on the walls to the chipped linoleum on the floor.

Gina reached for a lamp and switched it on, flicking the overhead off. Dizzy relief settled over her as her apartment faded from the slum dive it was into something approaching a welcoming place to rest. The lamp had been left over from the last tenant, though, or she wouldn't even have the shoddy thing to cast a comforting glow.

But she was home, she was warded, she was safe. Gina shook her shoulders, feeling a weight slide off them. She took a deep breath, feeling as if it were okay to relax again. A few precious hours spent by herself, a night's sleep, and then the weekend alone.

As Gina slid out of her jacket and automatically hung it up in the hall closet covered by not a door, but a sheet on a rod, she mentally ran a check on herself.

Tired? Very. That'd be fixed soon.

Sore feet? Yes. Her shoes came off to be neatly stacked beneath her coat.

Hungry? Maybe. Gina didn't eat much, but after no breakfast and a lunch of cheese crackers, her stomach was telling her she needed refueling.

Gina finished undressing in her hallway, putting the suit away with mathematical precision. Two other outfits, one in navy blue and one in charcoal gray, hung next to the black one. Her suitcase rested in the bottom of the closet, ready to be packed at a moment's notice. On the shelves above, she had small, separate stacks of jeans, sweaters, and T-shirts. Below, there were a single pair of well-worn sneakers and a set of broken-in sandals next to her work shoes. Not much, but all she needed -- or wanted.

It hadn't happened since she'd been in this apartment, but she couldn't shake the habit of being able to grab everything and go at a moment's notice. That could be crucial.

Gina selected a pair of clean jeans from her shelf and shimmied into them, leaving her feet bare, even though the linoleum was chilly against her toes, and chose both a white T-shirt and a blue sweater. Heat was expensive; it was easier to layer up.

Into her kitchen, then, where Gina poked her head into the cabinets and found nothing remotely inspiring. Some cereal, oatmeal, granola bars, bread, and more crackers. A box of pasta.

She paused over the spaghetti noodles. Didn't she have half a jar of sauce? A quick peek in her rusted fridge proved her suspicion was correct.

Pasta it was, then.

Tugging open the groaning drawer underneath her stove, Gina fished out a battered saucepan. She carried it to the sink, where she had to let the water run for a long time before it stopped flowing a rusty brown, then partially filled her cooking container. Moving on autopilot, she went back to the stove, turned on a burner, and put the pot down. She neatly lined up her sauce and noodles to one side, ready for adding when they were called for.

Gina found herself faltering as she picked up the container of Morton's salt and poured out a pinch to add to the water. Her hands were shaky, spilling crystals over the stove's surface as she dropped the salt in. A wave of vertigo rolled through her skull, bringing the tension headache back with a vengeance and making her sway.

Aspirin. She should take some aspirin. But in a minute. She needed to rest first. Stop the room from spinning.

You're just hungry, she argued with herself. *Sit down at the table and conserve your strength until you can eat.* But the kitchen chair, a metal foldout, looked both cold and unappealing.

Although she knew she shouldn't leave the kitchen while the stove was on -- that damn thing made her nervous of explosions -- Gina found herself tottering out to the small hole which took up most of the rest of her apartment. There was nothing in there but a TV and a tray she balanced food on while she ate, and a battered sofa where she slept. The sofa was a beast of a thing, probably several tenants old, since she couldn't imagine anyone wanting to cart something so big and bulky up or down the brownstone stairs.

Just then, it looked like the best thing in the world.

Stumbling over to the couch, covered in one of the thin, cheap sheets and a comforter she'd bought at a local discount chain, Gina reached for the stuffing-sprung arm and lowered herself into a sitting position. The room still whirled around her head, making her feel dizzy and sick.

"I'll just close my eyes for a minute," she promised herself, shutting her lids. Her voice sounded odd, tinny and echoing in the Spartan emptiness of her apartment. "Just rest. Put my head between my knees. I got spooked, that's all, and it's catching up with me."

But instead of leaning forward, Gina found herself falling back. The matted couch cushion felt soft as a cottony cloud under her head, cradling her in an embrace as tender as a mother's.

Sleep, she thought hazily. Just a little sleep...

And even as her heart skipped a beat in fear -- what if she dreamed? -- Gina slid out of the conscious world and into what lay beyond, her mind slipping into vivid visions with hardly a hitch.

In her dream, she lay on a cold stone floor. Vast chunks of granite had been hewn with rough edges and laid side by side, fallen apart and broken over time, with dead weeds poking through the cracks. Her hair had fallen down, tangling in her eyes, and her limbs felt weak, as if she'd been running for miles.

Wake up, she told herself urgently. Come on, snap out of this. It isn't real.

"I assure you it is very real," a voice commented, cold and pointed as an icicle. "So here you are. The last of your line. I must say, 'Gina,' I am disappointed."

She dragged the loose hair out of her face and looked up. From her position on the floor of this temple -- or whatever it was -- she had a long way to go to reach the speaker's face.

When she did, though, her heart gave a painful squeeze and she tried to skitter back. "You," she managed to find enough breath to whisper in terror. "How did you..."

The voice's owner waved a languid hand through the air from his throne. His fingers were long and white as salt or death, with curved black nails more like talons than anything else. Webbing stretched between those fingers, delicate in appearance but stronger, Gina knew, than cartilage.

She'd seen men like this before.

Just like the ones she remembered -- from a long time ago -- he had a beauty she found almost ethereal. Hair the color of moonlight flowed down over a hard, slim chest, partially covering the places where his skin began to change from normal flesh to hard blue scales. His legs were strong, knotted with muscle, and though his feet were small they had the same sort of clawlike nails as his hands. His facial structure was the sort of ideal models wept over, although Gina could never imagine this man shedding a tear.

Staring at him and shaking with nerves, Gina dragged air into her lungs. "No trouble," she managed. "No threat. I don't. Not anymore."

The man gazed at her with the tiniest of smirks, as if he were a scientist regarding a barely interesting specimen on a glass slide. "Is that to say, though, that you never will?" His blink looked reptilian, as did the tilt of his head to one side. "That which is in your blood will never die. You try to suffocate it as you would smother a child with a pillow, but it persists. It is no more than a candle's glow, but it can burst into bright flame. You lie to yourself and to others."

"Not lying," Gina puffed. "Just me. Ordinary."

"Hardly." The man reached up to stroke his cheek with a claw. "And not to me. I see you, not as Gina, but as Georgina. Yes, I see you clearly now. And what I find is... potential. I could strike you down this very moment. You are aware of this? It would be easy as pinning a butterfly to a board. But as you currently stand, there would be no glory in your defeat."

"No -- need. Not fighting."

The man shook his head. "Oh, yes, there will be fighting. I am the last of my kind, and you are the last of yours. When we do fight, our battle will be the stuff of legends and told for centuries. But it must be a battle worthy of record. To conquer such a puling creature would hardly be a fitting end to the sworn antipathy of our bloodlines. I crave a worthy foe to vanquish."

He leaned back, tapping a set of talons against his stomach. "I will let you go for now, Georgina. But be prepared. I have finally found a path into your mind and your world, and I have no plans to leave either untouched. I wonder, will you be able to fight back against even the smallest of the things I can do to you?" His smile became pronounced over sharp, pointed teeth, wickedly serrated. "Go back and learn how to be a warrior again."

He flicked one hand at her --

-- and Gina woke up, jumping halfway off her couch with a strangled scream. She stuffed her fist in her mouth on instinct, choking down the cry. Her heart beat fast as a trip hammer in the middle of her chest, and her legs shook. No one could hear her.

The urge to run for comfort was overwhelming. But who did she have? Nobody. Besides, no one could know what was wrong, what was happening. They'd think she was crazy.

But she wasn't. Gina knew with an icy certainty she was completely sane, and her so-called "dream" had been a direct attack. What she'd been dreading for years ever since she'd put her heritage behind her for everyone's safety.

He broke through, Gina thought frantically to herself, the words churning over and over in her mind, beating themselves into a froth. *Not safe anymore. Not safe. Not safe. Not going to be safe ever again.*

Whether it was the baby, the knife, or the paint across her wards, she didn't know. But the sacred spells keeping her concealed had failed. There'd been a crack in her armor, and the thing she'd dreaded the most had slipped inside easy as breathing.

A dragon has found me.

Chapter Three

In the wake of her dream, vision, whatever, Gina's body responded to the stress by thundering into a fit of hysterical reaction. Her breath came in short bursts, arrows of pain arced across her chest, and a sense of doom and dread pressed in around her soul.

Panic attack.

This wasn't a new thing for her. Gina had been prescribed medicine for the condition way back... when things had first gotten bad... but her bottle had long since been emptied, and she didn't have the money to get a refill, even if the pharmacy refrained from laughing their asses off at her for trying to fill a prescription years out of date.

She'd have to ride this out on her own.

Forcing herself to take deep, even breaths, Gina grabbed for something to hang onto and came up with one of the ratty sofa cushions. She hugged it to her chest, rocking back and forth. Her rhythm was too fast until she remembered to match it to her breathing, and then it slowly became comforting.

Her mind still raced. *Maybe it was all just a genuine dream?* she wondered. After getting so worked up on her way home, it would make sense for her brain to start playing tricks on her. It could have summoned up half-forgotten memories from the past and created a nightmare her psyche would have been all too susceptible to.

Ever so gradually, she started to relax. *It couldn't have been real. Just a figment of my imagination.* They... dragons... didn't attack like that, anyway. None of them had ever come after her in her head. They flew in on the solid plane like fiery comets, fully winged and horned, breathing fire in blistering gouts, and ready to use their sharp teeth to kill.

Destroy.

Vanquish.

Gina calmed down a little further. The man, the thing she'd seen in her dream, he wasn't a dragon. Couldn't have been. He'd looked human -- mostly -- and had spoken in clear English she could understand. The vicious lizards she'd fought once upon a time weren't like him at all. Not to mention he'd said he was the last of the dragons, which didn't make sense.

Easy does it, she soothed herself. It'll be okay soon. Just rest. Relax.

Her breathing steadied out into a regular pattern, and her heart settled down in her chest. She still felt a little nauseous, but Gina put her stomach's roiling down to the tension headache that hadn't yet faded.

The thought of aspirin occurred to her again, but Gina's gag reflex tripped at the thought of forcing down some powdery pills. No. At least not yet. Not when there were other things she could do and there were alternate means of relieving her stress.

In the kitchen, she heard the spattering sounds of water over-boiling in the spaghetti pot, splashing against the dented surface of her stove top. *Shit.*

Gina dropped her sofa cushion and struggled up, legs a bit wobbly but carrying her where she wanted to go, and made it into the kitchen. The sight of the noodle box and the half-empty bottle of sauce, thick and clumpy inside its jar, made her already uneasy stomach give a turn.

Hungry or not, no way am I eating this mess, Gina decided. She switched off the burner underneath her pot of water, careful that none of the boiling liquid splattered on her skin, and moved the pot away from the heat. For a moment, she stood basking in the radiant warmth from her stove, spreading her hands out to take away some of their chill.

Thing was, except for her hands, she didn't feel cold anymore. Gina frowned. This wasn't right. Her apartment was always on the chilly side since she kept the thermostat low to save money. But she was beginning to perspire inside her sweater and her legs were prickling with heat in their jeans. Her toes were still icy, but tingling, as if life were coming back into them.

Hot and cold, cold and hot. The feelings began to flash through Gina in waves, leaving her clenching her teeth with the hard freeze and fanning herself with the tidal warmth.

Could this be a leftover from the panic attack? Gina wasn't sure. She didn't remember hot flashes and chills from before, but at the time she'd been blocking a lot of things from her memory. It was a possibility, she supposed.

I need to peace out some more, she decided as she moved automatically to put the box of dried noodles back in her cupboard and the lumpy jar of sauce in her ancient refrigerator. *Can't handle food, can't handle aspirin... I don't want to go back to the couch and risk sleeping, not yet... TV? Maybe if I turn the TV on and concentrate on the evening news... no.* She didn't want to hear any reports to set her back on edge.

Taking in deep breaths again, Gina put her hands on the counter and closed her eyes tightly. There had been lessons on visualization during the few therapy visits she'd been able to make. If she tried hard enough, she could take herself away from all of this into a peaceful, happy place.

Her mind conjured up almost every woman's fantasy, a tropical island lush with palm trees, swinging hammocks, and a clear blue sea stretching as far as the eye could see. And since it was *her* fantasy, Gina conjured up a fruit drink to sip, something served in a coconut shell which tasted of the fruit, plus berries. It was cool and smooth and slid down like nectar.

Was she alone? No. She was always alone in real life. She couldn't risk anyone's safety by letting them get close.

But she could imagine, couldn't she?

A man created by her mind could soothe her, give her a hand.

Years upon years ago, before she'd known better, there had been a real guy in Gina's life. She'd dropped him when she'd abandoned her previous life, but always -- when she let herself -- she wondered what had become of him.

Still deep in her fantasy, Gina took a sip of the fruity concoction she'd envisioned and breathed, "Randall. Where are you?"

"Right here." A large shadow settled over Gina's torso, baking nicely in the sun. Randall's big hand came out to brush tendrils of damp hair away from Gina's cheeks. "I didn't go far. I never have, not once through all these years."

Gina gazed at him, her one and only lover, drinking in the sight of him. Tall, well over six feet, broad through the shoulders with a narrow waist and long, strong legs. He'd played football. Quarterback. But no ordinary jock, Randall. He'd had brains as well as brawn, using his sports scholarship to pay his way through a zoology degree program.

A smile tugged at her lips. Randall had always loved animals. On more than one date, they'd gone to the zoo, with Randall excitedly pointing out one exhibit and then another. But through it all, his hand had been held tightly in Gina's, and she'd been able to cling to his warmth.

She'd trusted him with the knowledge of who she was. And he'd *believed*. Trusted her in turn. Stood by her side until --

"Gina, look out!"

Gina dodged a vicious swipe of the dragon's horned tail. "Randall?" she barked, not turning around to face him.

"That was close."

"Not close enough." She bared her teeth. "I always win."

Above them, the dragon let out a screech of pure wrath as it hovered, heavy wings flapping like sheets of leather.

It should have gone for Gina again or flown away.

It didn't.

It went for Randall.

He hadn't even had time to scream.

Gina came back to herself, tears stinging in her eyes. She'd killed the sorry son-of-a-bitch dragon, but oh, God, it'd been the last time she'd gone dragon-fighting. Putting someone in danger the way she had was unforgivable.

After making sure Randall was all right, Gina had promised herself: *No more. This ends here.*

And she'd walked away to become "Mary."

The soothing fantasy she'd conjured tugged at her mind as if in patient reminder. Gina slipped back in, glad to go.

"Randall," she said in relief, drinking in the sight of her past lover, both healthy and whole.

"Hey," Randall replied in a comforting hush, deep voice burring from the center of his chest. His hand was gentle on her cheek. "You holding up okay?"

Gina nodded, feeling the tension ebbing away from her in a gentle, washing motion, just like the waves on the shore. She felt lithe as a gazelle, stretched out in her hammock with nothing on but the smallest of bikinis. So good to be nearly naked and free of her life, her apartment, her disconnection with the world.

Her vision of Randall seemed almost real. In Gina's imagination, the heat of his skin felt genuine against her own. "You've been through a lot tonight," he went on, still placid and soothing. "Always so careful, Gina. I remembered you as being a lot more carefree, but so much has changed since then, hasn't it?"

Gina nodded. "I had to hide," she confessed. "If the dragons found me, if they figured out who I was, then everyone I'd been close to was in danger. They'd taken so much already. I am the last of my family."

"The final descendant of the Georges." Randall stroked her hair, the light brush making Gina want to arch up into his touch. "The only person left in the world who can defeat the dragons."

Gina couldn't deny it, but being reminded of the fact gave her a sharp twinge of upset. "But I wouldn't let legacy rule me. I couldn't. I put down my spear and walked away. I'm just average now."

"Not exactly." Randall's rough hand tenderly cupped her head. "No matter how you try to hide things, you are what you are, Gina. You can hide for years, but the truth always comes out."

This fantasy wasn't exactly working out like she'd planned. Gina took a few deep breaths and sipped at her tart, tangy drink again. She wriggled her toes. "Don't talk about those things," she ordered her imaginary Randall. "I'm here to chill out."

"It's okay. We have a little time." Randall twined one of his thick fingers in Gina's hair. "You can't let this go, but you can relax for a minute."

"I can say goodbye to everything if I want. I have for years. The past doesn't have to come back if you don't want it to."

Randall said nothing but shook his head with a slightly sorrowful smile. Gina ignored his expression and examined her former lover from head to toe, taking her time. She lingered over the hard body she'd once adored, the one that had braced itself over her as she parted her legs to let his hard, thick cock deep inside.

Odd. He should have appeared in her mind as he'd been when she last saw him, young and strong, but her imagination was supplying extra details. She seemed to be picturing him with a few more years on his frame, a couple of gray strands shining in his hair, and smile lines at the corners of his eyes. His brown eyes shone with warmth and compassion, though, and that hadn't changed.

Gina reached for his hand and placed it between her breasts. "You were the only one, ever," she told him quietly. "With you, life was good. I felt confident. I knew what I was back then, and I'd made my peace with it. Before things went bad, I was on top of the world with you."

"You can be again." Randall leaned over to press a kiss to the center of Gina's forehead. He hesitated, then began to kiss the rest of her face, finishing up on her lips in a slow, chaste caress tasting of sea salt.

So real. This was all so real. Gina felt her physical body rocking with the gentle swell of the ocean, while in her mind she heard the waves rushing and felt Randall's light touch as if he were actually there.

Gina gazed at Randall and wondered what things would have been like if they had been able to make it past the catastrophe. The one big fight with a dragon that had nearly killed him, nearly killed Gina, had sent her running away from what she'd always been taught was her destiny.

"I hope you're happy," she said, actually feeling the tears spring to her eyes. When she "touched" him, he was warm, his body moving with the in and out of his steady, even breaths. "I hope you found someone else when I couldn't be there for you."

Randall turned slightly pink, but he didn't let go of her. "I did. Not someone you would have expected, but he's good to me. He took me in when I needed a friend and taught me how to find the answers to all the questions I'd had."

"He?" Gina queried. Something was definitely off with her fantasy. Randall had certainly not been gay when they were together. She laughed quietly. "You're right. Not what I expected."

"Would you like to meet him?" Randall chafed Gina's hand. "He can come here if you want. And you should get to know him. Soon. We both need him to get through this."

Gina shook her head. "There's nothing to get through, Randall. I had a bad dream, nothing more. This here, it's just a way to calm myself with good memories, even if my imagination is being overactive. You're not real. I'm just imagining you, the same as I am this beach and the drink I'm holding."

Randall's gaze was touched with sadness. "I wish I could say you're right, but you're not, Gina. Georgina. You've hidden for so long, but the time to stay undercover is over." He withdrew. "Gina, this is Dakarai."

He beckoned, and to Gina's surprise a man she'd never seen before emerged from the shadows of a coconut tree. She couldn't make out many details, as if the dusky light clung to him, but there was an almost instant feeling of peace spreading out from him in pulsing beams.

"You'll see us both for real soon," Randall promised. "Here." He plucked a frond from a palm branch and laid it in Gina's open hand, curling her fingers around the green strand. "Time to go back now, Gina. Wake up."

Gentle as a breath, Randall touched her forehead.

The beach and the hammock vanished.

Gina blinked at the sight of her dingy kitchen, feeling an odd light-headedness and sense of confusion.

"Whoa," she murmured to herself. Those visualization exercises really worked, huh? She'd completely lost herself in the moment under the bliss of the Caribbean sun, her mind taking off and turning a simple daydream into something nearly as real as her vision -- no, dream -- of the dragon.

She let out a gusty breath and reached up to touch her forehead, testing for warmth, as the heat and cold were still rolling through her.

The rough end of something in her grasp tickled her skin.

Gina jerked her hand down to stare at a leafy frond resting against her palm. It rolled a little, as if blown by some warm tropical breeze, and felt as hot as if it had been baking in the sun.

She dropped the thing with a swallowed cry of dismay. No. No, it couldn't be real. This was a hallucination. Her mind was out to get her, plain and simple. The palm frond didn't exist -- she just thought it did.

Her heart gave another mighty thump beneath her ribs, the skin tightening with pain. Gina shook herself hard, like a dog after a session of jumping through puddles, and clung stubbornly to her belief that this wasn't happening.

Turning blindly, Gina stumbled out of the kitchen. She didn't have many places to go - the hallway, where there was nothing to cushion her fall if her legs gave out from underneath her, the grotty bathroom where mold and mildew were threatening to take over its crumbling tiles, and the room where she slept.

The thought of going back to her sofa made Gina quail. But if the spinning of her aching head kept up, she *was* going to collapse -- she wasn't superhuman, she wasn't -- and it had better be on something soft.

Gina gave in and let her body move as it would. She watched as if from a distance as she walked to the couch and stripped off the well-washed comforter, shook it out, and laid it on the floor. Her flattened pillow went next, placed at the head. Not the couch, but a comfortable place to lie until she stopped shaking.

Hot, she was so hot. The chills had stopped and her blood was boiling, turning her skin slick with perspiration. The material of her sweater itched abominably, as if the fibers of the cotton-wool blend were scraping against her skin. Swearing under her breath, Gina stripped the thing off and flung it carelessly into a corner.

Not enough. The T-shirt chafed as well, too much against her scorching skin. She pulled the light garment off and threw it after the sweater, then undid her bra for good measure. Her breasts, full C-cups, quivered as she uncovered them, her nipples puckering into tight knots.

Her legs were too warm. She felt as if the denim were the heaviest of snowsuits, thick fleece pressing against her skin and scalding her flesh. Acting on impulse, Gina struggled with the fastener and zipper and wriggled out of the jeans, kicking them aside. She removed her panties as well, releasing her suddenly throbbing pussy to the cool air of the apartment.

She felt better -- for a minute. But no sooner had the relief come than it faded, leaving Gina shaking with heat as if she had malaria. If she'd had the strength, she would have shambled back into the kitchen for a glass of water, icy cold, just what she needed to slide down her dry, parched throat and give her some ease.

She couldn't walk, though. The most Gina could find the strength for was lowering herself slowly to the padded comforter on her floor, one shaky leg at a time. She wobbled for a second, balanced in a sitting position, and then collapsed backward in a free-fall.

Her head hit the pillow, but the impact still stung.

As her eyes fluttered, trying their best to stay open, a vivid picture flashed through her mind. The taloned, blue and white man, leaning forward eagerly in his stone chair, a cruel smile on his face.

Look what I can do to you with the merest hint of magic, he hissed. His tongue flickered out, forked like a snake. *Burn with the dragon flame, Georgina. Burn without being quenched, all for my amusement.*

“Hell -- hell with you,” Gina gasped even as her arms twisted and her hands fisted in the nubby fabric of her makeshift bed. “Oh, God.”

The heat -- it was unbearable. The inferno rolled and rippled through her body in spasms, each sheet of fire hotter than the last. Gina fought against the need for a breath of fresh air, when all she could draw in was thick and stuffy. Her lungs began to work harder, seeking more oxygen... and then, in a mixture of panic, she sought something else altogether.

Even if she had no one in her life, Gina was a healthy young woman, with all the natural urges a person could have. On long and lonely nights, she'd given in to the need to touch herself, to bring herself to climax for some ease of mind and to stave off the loneliness. A handful of times, she'd managed to become excited enough she even cried out something that wasn't exactly a name but wasn't a sob of relief, either.

The feelings coursing through her now made her feel as if she were ablaze, but not with regular flames. Her pussy throbbed with the need for a touch, wetness dampening her inner thighs. Both breasts ached, begging for someone to manipulate them, suck them, knead them with a rough caress.

Hands shaking, Gina lowered her fingers to her cunt. They were all but useless, trembling too hard to slip between her folds and start stroking in a pattern designed to bring her some relief. When she tried at her breasts, once again her fingers refused to cooperate, fluttering over the swollen tissue as if they were butterflies, the brushes enough to fuel her flames but not anywhere close to satisfying the deep, aching desire.

Rolling and tossing on her comforter, Gina cried out in frustration. The need for orgasm tore at her, but she could do nothing about it. Her body pulsed, on the cusp but hovering there, tormenting her more and more relentlessly, making her heart race and her muscles shake.

“Help me,” she choked, feeling herself start to black out from the overwhelming demands of her body. “Please,” she begged, not knowing who she was asking even as she was aware there was no one to hear and lend their assistance. “Help me.”

There was a pause in which Gina writhed, helpless against herself.

Then --

Do you really want me to?

The voice might have come from inside her mind. Gina didn't know. She seized at it like a lifeline, though, clinging to whatever hallucination or new madness this was. The voice had sounded real, if whispery-soft, not quite there. "Yes," she begged. "Please."

This is dragon flame. The beast is toying with you, enjoying watching you in the throes of agony.

Gina felt a light pressure of hands on her thighs, but she was too far gone to question their presence.

Will you hold this against me if I help you defeat the attack? A woman like you is not one to surrender herself lightly.

She felt the brush of lips against her inner thigh.

I mean you no harm. Randall is with me. He is not yet strong enough in magic to aid in this, but I am able. Will you let me help you?

None of what she was hearing made sense, but Gina couldn't bring herself to care. "Yes!" she cried out, raising her hips in the hope of some pressure, some friction, anything. "Do what you have to. Just help me."

As the lady wishes.

Gina felt another kiss on the inside of her leg and then the slick glide of a tongue along her skin. This was madness, but having something to fight against the flames made her almost weak with relief.

Almost.

She needed more, though. Moaning, she reached out without thinking -- and encountered a pair of solid shoulders. Mostly solid. If she concentrated on them, they faded beneath her touch, her fingers sinking through as if there were a ghost between her legs. If she just let go and accepted, though, this man was real... and he was helping.

The weight of the spectral man's mouth traveled up Gina's leg, pushing her thighs far apart. She opened them like a wanton, not caring who this was or how he had gotten there.

Good, the voice said, gentling her. Good. Go with this. Let it happen.

"Randall," Gina rasped, struggling after her earlier fantasy of the sparkling white beach and the soft blue ocean. "Where's Randall?"

I'm here, came the familiar voice. Gina felt another presence in the room with her, even more ephemeral than that of the man between her legs who was busy with licking up the dewy moisture on her thighs. Dakarai is pushing as hard as he can. I've ridden in on his stream. I can't touch you, like he said, at least not more than a little, but you can use your mind to help me.

The flow of words skimmed through Gina's tangled thoughts, only a fragment or two making sense. She got the gist of it, though, and in a supreme act of will, even as the unknown being drew closer to her throbbing pussy, she focused on Randall as she'd seen him

in her visualization. When she closed her eyes tightly she could see him, naked, a thick erection hard against his stomach.

"Randall," she breathed.

Here. In her mind, Randall reached out to cup her breasts. She could almost, almost *feel* the roughness of his skin as he laid hands on her, squeezing and kneading, thumbing her aching nipples. *It's been so long.* His head descended, and then his mouth was on Gina's breast, lips sucking at her nipple and biting down lightly with his teeth.

Gina screamed as an orgasm ripped through her, sending her convulsing on the floor. "Randall," she pleaded, "more. Please."

Her envisioned Randall drew up and shook his head. *Leave it to Dakarai. Trust in him. But I'm here, Gina. I'm not going anywhere. Hold my hands.*

Reaching above her head, Gina imagined she felt Randall's strong fingers grip her own.

Hurry, Dak, Randall urged. *Finish it.*

The man between her thighs -- real? not real? -- nodded, the wiry texture of his hair tickling against Gina's weeping pussy. *Only with the lady's consent.*

"Yes," Gina panted. "Whoever you are. Do it. Now."

Remember you gave me permission. Fingers parted the swollen lips of Gina's labia and, finally, finally a tongue began to stroke her in long, soothing stripes.

"Oh, God," Gina panted. "More. Please, more."

The arousal punishing her felt just as intense as the flames, but with someone there to push against, to clamp down on when two long fingers thrust inside her channel, it provided a deep, deep relief. She had something to work toward now, not an endless cycle of ever-increasing torment.

The man's lips and tongue were busy as he thrust his fingers in and out of her pussy. He found a rhythm matching the thrumming beat of her pulse, flicking her clit with the tip of his tongue until Gina thought she would stop breathing altogether.

Close... so close...

Now, the shadow man whispered, his breath warm against Gina's inflamed skin, and bit down on her clit.

Gina's body arched into a tight curve, her hips clearing the comforter, all her weight resting on her shoulders and heels. The man's hands were suddenly there to support her, to keep her from breaking her neck, to hold her as she pitched and tossed through an orgasm that seemed to have no end.

Slowly, though, and with an immense, blessed sense of peace, the madness faded from Gina's body. The man lowered her onto her comforter, then began to stroke the tops of her legs.

You're all right now, he whispered. *The battle is won for the moment.*

Gina's eyes fluttered open. Kneeling between her spread knees was the same man who had stood in the shadows when she'd visualized the beach and Randall. He looked a little clearer to her now, his features serious and face long boned, his hair curly and overgrown. A heavy wooden ankh hung down over his taut chest, balancing directly between his nipples. His expression was still hazy, but Gina thought she could make out both a sense of relief and of urgency.

"Are you... are you real?" she asked, the heady afterglow of climax making her limbs heavy and her mind foggy with drowsiness. "Am I crazy?"

He shook his head. *No. Not crazy. Everything you've seen tonight, the good and the bad, it's all been real.*

Gina couldn't help sobbing. "Then it was a dragon. The last, he said. He really did find me."

The man nodded. *It was, and he did. He filled you with this desperate passion, trying to break your mind and body for his amusement. But it's my job to look after you, Gina. It always has been. Even if you've never seen me before.* He kept up the gentle rubbing on her legs. *This is a vicious foe, one who I sense has a powerful hatred for you. He would not have let anything get in the way of his path until you were dead.* Gina made out a smile on the man's face. *But he didn't count on Randall, or me. We will be your guides and your aid.*

Gina sank more heavily into her comforter. This was all madness, all too much like the past had been, but if it was real... and she had to face it... "Stay with me?" she asked, hearing her voice come out needy and pleading. "In case he comes back?"

The man sighed. *We cannot. I am at my strongest inside the shields I have put around my shop. Venturing out physically would be dangerous, as the wards I have in place could slip. And I dare not maintain this link for fear of bringing more of the dragon's cruel games down on your head. But you are strong enough to find this place and join us in the flesh and blood world. Randall and I are in the shop I mentioned. Dakarai's Place. You can find us without any trouble. Now sleep.* He reached out to smooth his hand down Gina's stomach. *Sleep, and regain your strength. Hunt for us tomorrow.*

Gina found herself yawning. "But the dragon... what's he's going to do while I'm asleep... what if he goes after someone else?"

In the morning, the man -- Dakarai -- insisted. *Rest now. Rest.*

His voice was hypnotic. Despite her best efforts, Gina could not seem to stop her lids from fluttering closed or from slipping into a deep, dead slumber even as the shadow man and Randall's faint presence faded into nothingness...

Chapter Four

The slowly creeping light of day crawling across Gina's face was what woke her up at last. She made a complaining noise in her throat, reaching out for the comforter that usually covered her body, meaning to drag it across her eyes.

Nothing there.

Gina opened up, squinting in the harsh beams coming through her east-facing window with its haphazardly broken blinds. Her mind felt fuzzy, as if she were swimming through a thick soup, not instantly on edge as per her usual when she woke up.

What time is it? And why am I lying on the floor?

Slowly, her legs feeling as heavy as if she'd been running races, her back sore from lying on little more than the hard linoleum, Gina sat up and peered around herself, trying to make sense of things.

Whoa. Why am I naked?

She reached up to rake a hand through her hair. It was still in the remnants of the neat bun she'd fashioned for work the day before, now a tangled mess. Grunting in displeasure, Gina pulled the red-black strands loose and finger-combed them until they fell in waves around her face.

Odd. She felt more natural like this.

Puzzled, Gina got up on her knees and, resisting the urge to wrap the comforter around herself -- she was alone, after all, wasn't she? -- fumbled toward the small table that held her phone and a cheap plastic alarm clock. She grabbed for the clock first, then stared in amazement at the glowing red 10:05.

She'd slept in. How? Gina couldn't remember sleeping past sunrise in... well, ever.

Still dazed, she grabbed the phone and punched in the digits for the temp office where she worked. They were going to be so pissed. She'd never not shown up on time, was usually precisely on the dot, dressed in a suit and ready to face whatever job she'd be tackling that day.

The woman who answered the phone *did* sound annoyed. "Temp-Help, assistance in a flash. This is Marie. How may I direct your call?"

Gina felt absurdly naked. "Marie," she said slowly, trying to remember the woman's face. A vague picture of someone fortyish and plump floated into her mind. Yeah, right, Marie. She wore thick-framed lenses and tangerine lipstick and bore a distinct resemblance to a bulldog, but underneath it all she was a kindhearted sort. "Marie," she repeated in relief. "It's Gina. Gina D'Anglini. I'm so sorry. I overslept."

"Gina?" Marie snapped. "Gina who, again?"

"Gina D'Anglini. I work there. I'm a roaming temp." Gina frowned at the phone, her confusion deepening. She had dialed the right number, hadn't she? She wasn't remembering Marie from a previous job?

"Gina. As if I don't have anything better to do than remember all the faces that walk in and out of here." Marie clicked her tongue sharply, clearly irritated. "What do you want?"

Gina blinked. Given that everything was right and she was calling in to the correct work place, this Marie had never been known to be curt about anything. "I'm sorry," she tried slowly. "It's just my alarm clock didn't go off. I didn't make the morning assignments."

"Are you crazy?" Marie demanded, definitely irked. "It's Saturday, on which, in case you weren't aware, most offices aren't open and we don't provide services. There were no morning assignments. So why I have to abandon my family to come sit here in this empty office and answer calls from pissed-off clients who can't get anyone to help because they keep crazy-ass hours, I don't know."

The puzzle was growing. Marie had gone from pissed to raving mad, barking out her syllables as if she'd have liked to start pushing Gina through a pencil sharpener. "I'm sorry. Saturday." Gina pressed a hand to her forehead. "I should have realized."

"Damn right you should have. Don't call back until Monday." The phone disconnected with a sharp *click* that rang in Gina's ears.

Confused, Gina sat carefully down on her comforter. Why it had been arranged on the floor was still a mystery to her. This wasn't right at all. Marie the Gentle had gone foaming mad, Gina had forgotten herself so far as to think it was still the work week, and there were great big holes in her memory refusing to provide answers to her questions.

What had happened the night before that had left her naked and spread out on her floor? Gina took a careful whiff of herself and smelled the unmistakable scent of female arousal.

Weirder and weirder. What had she had, a woman's version of a wet dream?

Running a hand through her hair a second time, tugging at the strands for comfort, Gina stood up. Her legs shook for a moment and then held firm, balancing her slight weight without any danger of toppling her over. As she moved, she felt her body ache in places where it shouldn't have. It'd been a while, but Gina was able to recognize the pleasant soreness of sexual gratification, which to be frank, even if she couldn't remember, she'd probably really needed.

This made no sense at all.

And, standing up, she was revealed to the world through her broken-down blinds, so she really, really needed to put some fresh clothes on. The garments scattered around her on the floor would need to be laundered before she would be willing to wear them again -- God knew she tried to keep the place clean, but yuck.

Taking slow, shuffling steps, Gina made her way into the shower and washed as quickly as she could under the chilly trickle of water it provided. After drying herself off, she headed into the hall and pulled open the curtain on her closet.

Jeans. Yeah, jeans were easy. No, wait, underwear first. The only thing left in her plastic box of undies was a pair of thigh-cut red panties and a dark crimson bra, leftovers from a time when she'd been a little more daring.

Gina peered at the things, wondering if she should put them on or do without. The thought of going *au naturel* appealed, but she knew her breasts needed the support. And speaking of which, they felt sore -- in a good way, sure, but still tender.

Slowly, as if in a trance, Gina slipped the undergarments on and then hopped into her jeans. She swayed as she searched the top shelf for something suitable to wear, testing the temperature of the air. Her apartment felt warm. Not stuffy and hot, but pleasant, like being on a beach in the early season.

Her hand reached for something else she hadn't worn in a long time -- a baby-doll tee in a rich shade of scarlet. It didn't fit with her image at all, and more than once in the past she'd wondered why she didn't just throw the thing away.

Just then, though, it called to her with a siren song. Baffled, but willing to go with the flow, her mind still too foggy to fight against whatever had it clouded, she reached for the top and shrugged it on. Felt weird to have her belly exposed, but it wasn't such a bad stomach for someone who never had time or money to hit the gym. She didn't have anything to be ashamed about.

Now if she could just clear her head...

Gina wasn't much of a coffee hound, and didn't even know if she had any, but something strong and caffeinated sounded like a good idea. A nice steaming cup should whisk away her mental fog. If she took her time and sipped it, putting her brain to work, maybe the holes in her memory would close and she'd be able to get it back together.

As she moved, though, Gina noticed and was disturbed by the way the risqué clothes felt against her skin. Normally what she wore felt just like ordinary fabric, a thin shield against the elements, not really something she noticed one way or the other. They were just garments.

The tee moved against her breasts with a whisper-soft caress, making them respond by growing fuller and standing up taller, pushing her chest out. Even through the bra -- granted, it was a flimsy thing -- she could see and feel her nipples protruding like small gumdrops, tingling at the slightest sensation. The jeans molded to her skin like they were in love with her legs, clinging but flowing obediently as she walked.

With a start, Gina realized she felt sexy. And since when did *that* happen?

Coffee. She needed coffee.

In the harsh light of day, her kitchen looked worse than ever. Gina made a face at the cabinet drawers hanging halfway off their hinges, the dark red rust stains on her fridge, and the caked-on grime coating her sink's faucet. She'd left a pot of standing water by one of her stove's burners. What the...?

Gina frowned. Yet another gap in her memory, right smack in the middle of a wholly depressing sight. Her kitchen was just another example of why this wasn't a fit place for anyone to live. Why did she stand it?

Oh, yeah. Money. Of which she had barely any.

Gina sighed as she took in the worn-out kitchen and tried to cast it in a good light. It wasn't totally beyond all hope. Maybe she'd use the weekend to splurge on some cleaning supplies and scrub the place down. That would be good. A solid project to work on, a goal to be achieved. The hard labor should settle her mind back into its accustomed grooves.

In the meantime... coffee.

Gina made for her barely used percolator, long since shoved back against the wall and forgotten until then. It had been a Christmas gift from the agency, as she recalled. She'd used it once or twice since. But aside from the dust coating the surface, it seemed clean, and she remembered washing out the carafe after its last use.

Now all she needed were grounds and some water. Gina's mind sharpened as she focused on the task, rooting through her cupboards until, after a few minutes' almost fruitless search, she came up with a sample-sized brick of "Tahitian Vanilla." Sounded kinda frou-frou, but it'd do. A knife from her drawer opened the vacuum on the coffee and released the scent of slightly fruity java.

Gina inhaled in pleasure as she picked up her carafe and headed for the sink to fill it with water. Yep, everything was going to get back to normal soon. She'd attack this day, despite its confusing start, the way she always did. She could handle herself. Things didn't throw her, or wouldn't for long. She'd figure them out.

As she walked, however, her bare foot encountered something that crinkled underneath her toes. She winced, afraid to look down lest she'd stepped on a bug -- when you lived in a dive, bugs happened. But better to know than to wonder...

She looked down -- and saw she'd managed to squash what looked exactly like a palm frond, fresh and green, curling up at the edges.

Palm frond.

Randall.

The shadow man. Dakarai.

The dragon.

Gina dropped her carafe, the glass shattering on the floor. She remembered. Oh, God.

She remembered it all.

* * * * *

Stepping out into the harsh noonday sun of a Saturday made Gina's skin itch. Weekends were for hunkering down in her apartment, maybe with a tub of ice cream if she'd had the cash and remembered to stop by a store, watching TV, and deliberately not thinking about times when the weekends had been something to look forward to. Taking in the news reports with either relief that everything was normal, or easily explained by men in sober jackets who knew what they were talking about.

She hadn't ventured outside on a Saturday in months. Hadn't been outside in the middle of the day in over a year, preferring to take her lunches indoors at the temp jobs or not eating at all.

And she definitely hadn't gone out wearing nothing but a flimsy, bright tee and a pair of worn, second-skin jeans, her hair down and waving around her cheeks. It didn't feel right. The Gina she presented to the world was neat, cold, and professional, not casual or wanton.

Gina checked the address on the scrap of yellow paper she held in one hand, a half-page ad she'd torn from the phone book, and took a deep breath before setting out on what she hoped would be a short walk with little chance for anyone to gawk at her. The location of Dakarai's Place was close enough to make her uneasy. Had the mage deliberately set up shop within spitting distance?

Creepy thought.

Gina's inner musings were constantly interrupted by the people crowding the sidewalks. They weren't paying her any attention, though. Gina found herself alone in the middle of a virtual war zone, staring around herself in amazement. Maybe it had always been this way and she just hadn't noticed, but there was an undercurrent of anger and tension that made the air thick, sticky with more than humidity.

And speaking of which, wasn't it awfully warm out for an area that had had icy rain just the day before? The people were dressed like the temperature was still wintry -- hats, scarves, coats, gloves. Weird. Really weird.

Was it the rising heat which had tempers running high? As Gina watched, she saw women blocking the pathway, squabbling in shrill voices over who had bumped into whom.

Men shouted and jabbed fingers at one another, bellowing about insults and threatening to take one another on.

A knot of children had started a free-for-all fight, shouting playground insults but knocking each other around like adults, who stood by and did nothing.

A senior citizen threatened a menacing teenager with the youth's own skateboard.

It was chaos. Gina had always kept her head down, but the more she watched, the more she was certain this wasn't normal. Something had snaked into these people and turned up their rage, tweaking minor annoyances into full-fledged attacks on their persons.

The dragon's work?

Thinking about it made Gina feel nauseous, but there was no other explanation coming to her mind. The dragon was playing tricks.

And she was a George, or at least she had been once. It was up to her to fix this.

Gina stopped for a moment to gather her bearings, taking hold of an iron railing close at hand to make sure she didn't lose control again. The ferrous bar filled her with an odd feeling of strength, as if the power of the metal were flooding up through her arm into her body. She took another deep breath without meaning to, and energy burst through her system.

It gave her enough courage to close her eyes, then dare to focus on the vision of the dragon man as she'd last seen him sitting on his crumbling throne.

As if he'd been watching and waiting, he popped into life behind her mind's eye. Gina felt the chill of the ruined temple and the roughness of the granite blocks beneath her feet.

The dragon man gazed down at her, no-color eyes filled with venom. "A child's trick," he hissed, his tongue flickering. "Cold iron is a true deterrent only for the fae. This lends you a little might, but it won't last."

Gina took a good, long look at the dragon, taking in every last detail from the length of his flowing pale hair to the talons on his fingers to the scaly blue patches on his skin. He radiated malice and power, but also control, as if he were in charge of everything in his world -- and outside of it.

"You're doing this," she said steadily. "I know why you've chosen me. I'm a George. The last one. The only person you'd have a reason to challenge. But why now? Why this place?"

The dragon snapped his sharp teeth at her. "Why not? It pleases me to upset the careful balance you have wrought. Now you have seen what I can do to you. I choose to play with the other mortals who surround you to amuse myself, and to give you another taste of my power. Stand up and fight, Georgina, if you can." He tapped his talons against those vicious white teeth, chuckling in dark amusement. "While my patience lasts, I will play with you. But be sure of this: Sooner or later, there will be a reckoning."

He snapped his fingers. "Now, begone."

Gina's eyes popped open. Her arm tingled all the way down to her palm where it clutched the iron railing, full of pins and needles as if it had fallen asleep and was just now coming back to life.

Oh, yeah. Gina could see the world around her. She could put a name to every color, count the bars on her railing, feel the growing warmth of the air, and smell the pungent sweat rolling down everyone's foreheads or growing in wet patches beneath their arms. She wasn't crazy.

But she wasn't normal, either.

She was, no matter how hard she'd tried to escape it, extraordinary. From the first George, the Saint who slew the dragon and saved Britannia, down through the ages, her family had gone up against the beasts.

Until her.

For a long time, she'd thought her disguise had worked, but maybe this dragon had just been biding its time. But no matter how surreal he seemed, no matter how he attacked, he existed -- and he was out to cause as much trouble as possible.

She had to do something about this.

The slip of yellow paper torn from her phone book was still clutched in her other fist. Gina uncrumpled it to look at the cheap, two-color printing: "Dakarai's Place -- Magical Supplies, Spiritual Advisors, Star Charts."

Dakarai. There couldn't be two men with such a wild name, and the one that it belonged to had come to her -- along with Randall. Gina wasn't crazy, and so it had to have happened.

They'd told her to come to them, so she would.

Instinct told Gina to stop at every altercation she came across, pull apart the irate parties and stop the fights, but she knew once she was gone, the minor brawls would just start up again. She put her head down and plowed through, ignoring the insults and the comments honed to jerk at her temper.

They were symptoms; the dragon was the disease.

Even if the shop was too close for comfort, at least Gina didn't have to take the elevated train, something she found herself definitely grateful for. She couldn't imagine what it would

be like in those cars, everyone packed together so tightly, tempers flaring out of control. The drivers reckless as they fumed over their schedules, irrational passengers, and the uniforms they wore.

She kept on walking.

Fight after fight went on as Gina made her steady way through the long city blocks, taking a right here and a left there. When she hit the street where Dakarai's Place was located, she looked up to see if she could spot the shop... and blinked in surprise.

This block was calm. Busy, to be sure, but people breezed past one another with barely the time of day exchanged, much less fists coming out or perceived slights setting strangers at odds. Even the traffic, which had been choppy on the previous streets, flowed smoothly here.

Gina's spine tingled slightly with the hum she recognized as magic. Again, she wasn't crazy. She'd felt this in her youth, when magicians were more than men in top hats on stages. From what she could remember to assess this neighborhood with, this peaceful area was the result of a powerful enchantment that spread out like a force field, keeping everything inside its span on an even keel.

Someone with such serious mojo could travel through the astral plane and save the life of a woman at a dragon's mercy.

Dakarai.

And Randall, however he'd become involved with all of this. Gina sensed a slight breeze kissing her skin, making her shiver with awareness of herself, tickling at her nerve endings and making her feel alive, energetic... sexy. Confident.

They had to be near.

Gina swept her glance to and fro until she spotted a stairwell leading below street level, with a sign mounted above it that said, in simple brass letters, "Dakarai's Place." An arrow pointed down the steps. They didn't look well-traveled, still littered with remnants of last autumn's leaves, but this was the place, all right.

She descended the stairs, careful her sneakers didn't skid on anything. There was no railing to hold on to, but Gina felt almost buoyed up, as if whatever protected this block would keep her safe from falling.

At the bottom, a small storefront window held a dusty array of candles and a hokey-looking spell book arranged on faded red velvet. The store appeared dim, as if it were closed, no lights on and no one home.

Gina knew better. She could *feel* the presence of the magician inside. Made her nervous, made her want to run back upstairs, but she couldn't pretend everything was all right. Not any longer.

"Hello?" she called, turning the shop's doorknob and pushing it open. Scarred wood grated over the sill, making a screeching noise. Hinges that hadn't seen much use added their own complaint. "Hello?"

No answer.

Shutting the door behind her, Gina took a look around to get her bearings. Inside, the place was cramped and crowded with shelf after shelf of jars holding herbs she couldn't possibly identify, their smells rising up into a wild, tangled aroma. Competing with the fragrance was the mustiness of old leather books stuffed into rows of cases, some looking as if they'd barely been touched and others falling apart at their spines.

This wasn't the kind of place where you could buy a Chinese finger puzzle. This was a *real* magic shop.

Somewhere a wise person would tread lightly.

Gina took short, careful steps, feeling her way through the gloom. "Hello?" she called out again, wishing someone would answer her. But no luck. Her footfalls, sneakers scuffing against the scratched-up floors, made the only sound besides her breathing.

Or was that the sole noise, after all...?

As she moved closer to the far side of the shop, Gina began hearing the smallest of sounds. Words she couldn't make out. A grunt. A groan. The slap of hands coming down on a hard surface.

Was Dakarai hiding himself? Had he gotten in trouble? Gina tensed, preparing herself for the worst. What she'd be able to do to help him, she didn't know, but she owed the magician.

Getting closer, now. The noises were growing louder.

Gina frowned. They didn't exactly sound like someone in pain. In fact, they reminded her a lot of...

She passed the final bookcase and looked back into the gloom of the shop's far corner. The air there was hazy, as if someone had put up an opaque shield. If she concentrated, though, she could sort of... push... her way through, the milkiess of the air dissipating to give her a clear view.

Her eyes popped open and her lips parted. The magician was definitely not in trouble, not unless you counted the fact he seemed to be fast approaching *la petite mort*. Dakarai was as she remembered him, long and lean of face and curly of hair, but now he was flushed red with exertion and those narrow artist's fingers were tightly gripping the hips of a man bent over a desk in front of him. As Gina stared, she saw Dakarai's stiff, swollen cock plunging in and out of the man he was fucking.

Gina ducked back behind the bookcase, shuddering despite herself. Oh, God. She'd never even imagined... but the sight of those two! Taking a careful peek around despite feeling like a voyeur, she fixed her gaze on the pair and couldn't take it away.

"Oh, yeah. God, yes. Tight. So tight." The magician's voice had roughened from its tenor into a low growl. His hips moved in a relentless rhythm, plowing back and forth. "You and me, baby."

Dakarai's lover said something Gina couldn't make out.

Dakarai nodded, curls tossing over his face. "I know. Almost. Come for me now, though. Hell, yeah." He reached down and hauled the man up a little, reaching beneath his partner's belly to grasp hold of his thick, angry red cock. He began to move his fist up and down, the slick sounds of flesh slapping against flesh filling the air.

He was panting, his harsh breaths mingling with the muted cries and sobs of the man beneath him. "Gonna blow," he warned. "You ready for me? Ride with me." The strokes of his fist quickened. "Together, Randall. For me."

Randall? Gina stared. The crotch of her jeans had grown damp and her clit throbbed -- nothing like when she'd been caught in the dragon's spell -- but she was as sexually excited as she'd been in years. Randall, her big strong Randall, taking it up the ass from another man?

It was an unbelievable turn-on. From her puckering breasts to the ache in her pussy, Gina's body was springing to life as she watched. The men were losing their pattern now, jerking back and forth out of control.

"Randall -- fuck, Randall--" Dakarai choked, shoving forward roughly and gripping his lover's hips hard enough to leave white marks. Randall let out a long, low wail, creamy white semen spilling over Dakarai's hand to splatter on the desk he leaned against.

Gina squeezed her thighs together, let the knot in her stomach uncoil, and came, moisture soaking her jeans.

Oh, God. Her head whirled. How had she lost so much control of herself?

As she steadied herself against the bookcase, the two men clung together, both struggling for air. Randall -- and it was Randall, exactly the way he'd looked in her "visualization" -- turned around to wind his thickly muscled arms about Dakarai. He was taller and seemed stronger, but there was no doubt about who was more dominant. Dakarai stroked Randall much as he had Gina, with certainty and confidence.

"We finished already?" Randall asked, his voice cracking.

Dakarai shook his head. "Oh, no. Not even close." He turned to look right at Gina, nailing her in place with his gaze before she could flinch or jump back. "I think we've only just begun."

Chapter Five

There she was, standing frozen to the spot, smelling so strongly of arousal it reached her own nose, a damp patch between her thighs that left her feeling sticky -- and there they were, two very passionate lovers caught in the middle of fucking one another blind.

And one of them was Randall. Randall wearing a slight blush, but making no effort to cover his swinging genitalia. He regarded Gina with the same dark, hot glance she'd once recognized as the look he wore when he wanted her so badly he couldn't wait for privacy, didn't care who knew what he was thinking, and would do anything to get a taste of her.

Pinned under the weight of his stare, Gina felt herself not growing weak, as she would have thought, but thrilling to it. Her breasts began to ache as she remembered how he had known how to hold them just right, how to thumb her nipples into hard knots and then suck until he brought her off with breast worship alone.

The way he'd done it to her -- and it had to have been him -- the night before.

His partner, the magician Dakarai, had his gaze on Gina, too. His look was heavy with the same lust, sending a pulse of excitement through her belly and down between her ever-dampening pussy. Yet at the same time, he almost glittered with the enchantments he generated like a lamp bulb put out light. He wasn't just a creature who could wield magic -- he *was* magic, a human shell filled with the kind of power most men or women only ever dreamed of.

Still holding Randall in his arms, Dakarai caressed the other man's hard muscles in a soothing stroke, running his fingers across the bulging bicep muscles, brushing the tattoo decorating them. The rest of his attention, though, was directed at Gina.

"You saw," he said, his voice low and heavy with sex. "Did you like looking at us? Me, fucking another man... Randall? Taking him from behind without mercy?"

A thrill ran through Gina's body. Her fears began to melt away like candy floss underneath the heat of Dakarai's gaze. "Yes," she whispered. "I liked it."

And she had. What was she, some kind of pervert? But she couldn't deny how hot it had been to see Dakarai's long, thick cock sliding in and out of Randall's taut ass. How it had made her wet and brought her to a breathless orgasm.

"Mmm." Dakarai sounded thoughtful, yet mischievous. Not wicked -- a man who would protect as much area as he could wouldn't be malicious -- but challenging. "Do you want to see more? I could go down on my knees in front of Randall and take him into my mouth."

Gina moaned softly, the thought almost buckling her legs. Randall broke away from Dakarai and took a step toward her. She waved him off. "I'm fine. I'm... strong."

"And you're turned on," Dakarai responded immediately. "It's a chilly day outside, Georgina. Barely sixty-two degrees. But you felt warm enough to walk around in summer clothes with never a goose bump. The wind didn't tingle on your skin with its cold touch. The fire is low, but it still burns. Dragon flame."

Gina frowned and shook her head. "Last night. You drove him out. Counterattacked. He left."

"He left." Dakarai drew Randall back into his arms. "The poison remained. There's only a little left in your system, but I can smell the sweet taint, like bitter almonds." He spread his hands over Randall's chest, fanning his fingers wide to touch each flat brown nipple, teasing them into peaks. Randall inhaled sharply and tilted his head back. "It's in us, too, because we touched you. The flood of passion had to go somewhere."

"So you absorbed it into yourselves," Gina guessed. God, did she want somewhere to sit down. Extraordinary or not, there were some things that couldn't be faced while standing on your own two feet. And now that she recognized the smell of sex -- the kind of marathon sex that didn't bother to stop long enough to think about showers -- it just about knocked her off her feet anyway. "My God. Have you been going at it nonstop since you drained all the flame away from me?"

Dakarai hummed, kneading Randall's chest. He lifted one hand to tickle the underside of his lover's jaw. Randall moved his head back and forth, sweat glistening in the short strands of his black hair.

Gina guessed that was her answer.

"Here," Dakarai said, never taking his eyes off his lover. "Have a seat." He twitched the fingers of his free hand toward the right, and a long, off-white fainting couch slid seemingly out of nowhere, gliding on the air until it settled behind Gina with a gentle thump.

Gina sat heavily, the cold of the ancient crushed velvet prickling at her thighs. So she *was* hot. Why was she only feeling it now?

"Because you're close to the heart of the flame again," Dakarai answered, seeming to read her mind with ease. "We've almost purged this from our systems. We only need a little more to milk out the poison -- and build up our strength. And then..." He ran his hand down Randall's neck, tracing the strong cords. "You."

Gina's pulse gave a jump. Her wet pussy ached for something to be pushed inside, whether cock or fingers, and Dakarai's offer was beyond tempting, but... "Draining me sounds dangerous. It won't affect you all over again?"

Dakarai shook his head, damp curls tumbling on his neck. "Oh, no. Not now we're properly prepared."

"You weren't last night?"

He chuckled, a masculine yet melodious sound, like a lion who'd learned how to laugh. "You took us by surprise, Georgina."

"We were meditating," Randall put in, speaking up for the first time. He still seemed caught in the bliss of Dakarai's touch, but he managed to form words. "A trance. Our minds were joined. I heard you calling. Dakarai sensed you were in trouble, so we came."

"It is my job to protect you, Georgina," Dakarai murmured, one hand roaming across Randall's pectoral muscles, wandering over every bulge and valley. "You don't know me, but I have always known you."

Gina realized she should have been far, far more freaked out than she was. But with the heat starting to burn in her veins, recognizable now that it had been given a name, she found she didn't care. Couldn't care. Whoever this man was to her, he was what she needed.

"Go ahead," she said huskily. "Do what you have to do."

"Ah, ah, ah," Dakarai chided. "Tell us, Georgina. I want to hear it from your own pretty red lips. Tell me what you really want."

The heat flooded into Gina's cheeks. She hadn't said those kinds of words, not in years. But she could do this. She formed the phrases in her mind and, wetting her lips, gave them voice. "Cleanse yourself of the dragon flame." Then, her cunt throbbing in time with her words, she added: "Fuck each other. In front of me. While I watch."

Dakarai purred. "As the lady desires," he murmured in anticipation. "Randall?"

Gina could see Randall's cock rising between his body and Dakarai's. She remembered, as vividly as if it had been yesterday, what it had been like to grasp his organ as it swelled and grew from soft flesh to a long piece of steel with a satin covering. The way she'd thrilled as it swelled in her palm.

"Yes," Randall breathed. "Burning for you."

"Have me." Dakarai reached down to touch, to hold, to grasp. "Relax, Gina," he directed. "But if the spirit so moves you..."

Gina didn't think she'd require much to coax her along. For someone who'd hardly ever thought about two men together, much less seen them in action, the sight of Dakarai

and Randall before her, naked and gleaming with sweat, had her pulse racing and her groin throbbing.

"Hurry," she goaded, unable to stop herself from sliding her hand across the flat strip of skin her T-shirt exposed. "Show me."

"With pleasure."

And Dakarai began. Randall stood in front of him, quivering as Dakarai moved, his hands balling into fists, but otherwise still. Dakarai hummed low in his throat as he proceeded, his skin bright with the dragon's flame, but his movements lazy, slow, taking his time as if he had all day.

He began with kisses, trailing a deliciously full-looking mouth across the underside of Randall's neck. Randall moaned softly and lowered his head; eyes closed, he blindly sought out his lover's lips. Dakarai gave Randall what he wanted, fusing their mouths together and pushing against the back of Randall's head to force them even closer. They tilted from left to right, ravaging one another's lips. Through their cheeks, Gina could see two tongues battling for dominance, Dakarai winning out in the end and taming Randall into submission.

When the magician drew off, Randall almost whimpered at the loss. "Shh," Dakarai soothed, rubbing the back of Randall's neck. "You'll feel good. You always do. Let me."

"Yours," Randall breathed. "Whatever you want."

Dakarai exhaled a stream of air against Randall's cheek. Gina touched her own face, imagining she felt a wave of sweet breath.

Could she? The way they had?

Half closing her eyes, Gina leaned back into the soft couch. She let all her muscles relax, opening herself up to the wild sensations flooding the room. Her legs clenched together, the burn between her labia flaring to hot life, sending out more juices from her core.

"Yes," she whispered.

Dakarai murmured something she couldn't make it out. The indefinable sensation of magic grew stronger yet, cleansing and purifying, hotter than sin and all-encompassing.

Gina's hand slid beneath the waistband of her jeans, toying with the scrap of red silk some would call underwear. It felt tight, as if she were swelling against the bindings. "Faster," she ordered, her voice breathless.

Dakarai flashed her an amused look, but obeyed. He moved his lips back down Randall's throat, tipping his lover's head back again. From the corner of Randall's jaw down the length of his thick neck, Dakarai applied his mouth time and again, sucking hard enough to raise faint red welts.

Gina could feel the pressure on her own skin. She arched as if it were her own body receiving the attention, bowing into the sensual temptation.

This was just the teasing, though, the stoking of the flames. Dakarai moved on, kissing across the breadth of Randall's shoulders while holding the other man's arms with both hands. Randall groaned in tormented pleasure under the assault, beginning to move, to press himself into Dakarai's touch.

"Yes, yes, yes," Dakarai whispered. "Let it run through your body. It's like a fever. Give it permission to run its course."

Randall's eyes fluttered open. "You?" he managed.

"I'm stronger." Dakarai thrust his hips against Randall's, his equally hard cock rubbing against his lover's. "And loving this. Now let me take care of you."

Yes, Gina urged silently, plucking the strap of red elastic stretched across her hip. *I want to see*. Her pussy was begging for a touch, but she managed to hold off. Not yet... not yet. She could wait. Anticipation would make it all the sweeter when she finally did give in.

We're winning, she exulted. *The dragon's flame is working to our advantage*.

And she got a free show in the bargain. Moistening her lips, Gina watched, enraptured, as Dakarai moved on.

Kissing a line down Randall's chest, using his tongue to swirl around the man's navel, Dakarai slowly began to lower himself to his knees. Gina's breath quickened in time with Randall's as Dakarai neared Randall's cock. The organ strained against Randall's stomach, long and thick, clear drops bubbling from the slit.

Just as he had done with Gina the night before, Dakarai used his talented mouth on Randall's thighs, nibbling at the soft skin until it turned red. Gina's sense memory brought up the feel of those lips on her own flesh, such a blessed relief with what they promised was coming soon.

Dakarai blew another stream of breath up against Randall's balls. The lightly furred, wrinkled skin drew up a bit. "You like all this attention here, don't you?" Dakarai crooned. "You always have."

Randall nodded eagerly. He seemed to search blindly for something to hold himself up and found the edges of the desk he'd been bent across. Grasping tight, he pushed his cock closer to Dakarai's face. "Suck me," he begged. "Please."

"Getting there." Dakarai drew a ragged breath, pausing with a visible struggle to get himself together.

He's close, himself. Gina could tell Dakarai's control, powerful as it might be, was wearing thin. But he wouldn't stop before he'd pleased the one he was with.

A good man. A considerate lover. A master magician, able to fight the dragon flame that had to be burning his loins long enough to see his partner satisfied. Which he did with a rising enthusiasm.

Dakarai cupped Randall's ass, giving the cheeks a hard squeeze. The tip of his tongue flickered out to taste the sac, drawing lines up and down the swollen pouch. His hand moved

behind them, doing something Gina couldn't see but which drew a harsh cry from Randall as he arched his back.

"Good?" Dakarai asked breathlessly.

Randall nodded once more, his face twisting in the beautiful ugliness of bliss. "Again?"

"As many times as you want." Dakarai made his mysterious movement again, sending Randall into a visible paroxysm of pleasure. But then, to Gina's relief, he moved back up where she could see, cupping Randall's balls and rolling them in his palm.

"Dak," Randall panted. "Dak. Careful."

"Never hurt you," Dakarai swore. He gentled his movements until he was only just touching the tightening sac, then finally, finally, he reached up for Randall's cock.

Gina's pulse sped up. This was what she had been waiting for.

Slowly, as if it were rapture, Dakarai drew the tip of Randall's cock into his mouth.

Gina's free hand slid up beneath her crop top to cup one of her breasts, heavy and aching. She squeezed, feeling the nipple lengthen and harden. Her breath quickened, arousal spreading through her. How much was the dragon flame, and how much was from watching the two men together? She couldn't tell.

She didn't care.

Dakarai sucked on the head of Randall's cock, the tip of his tongue peeking out as he circled the tip. He made an appreciative noise. Gina remembered sounds like those coming out of her own throat as she had tasted Randall's salty musk, just a drop or two, but enough to drive her on. Whimpering, she pushed a finger closer to her own folds.

Randall balanced himself on one arm and reached down to push on Dakarai's curly head. "More," he pleaded. "Need."

Yes, Gina echoed inside her head. *More*.

Dakarai's magic burned hotter, setting Gina's nerves alight, as he slowly slid down the length of Randall's cock. Randall groaned and bucked deeper into Dakarai's willing mouth, pushing the man faster and harder. Dakarai took it all, every inch, his cheeks bulging with the size of the monster he had inside. Both men only stopped moving when Dakarai's nose was flush with the wiry dark curls at the base of Randall's cock.

Gina could recall how those curls had tickled her nose, and that she'd never been able to take so much of Randall in her own mouth. She stroked herself once, lightly, and hissed. A lick of flame ran up the seam of her pussy, begging for more.

But patience, patience. She could ride this tiger. This dragon.

The cords in Randall's neck stood out as Dakarai slowly backed off, Randall's shiny cock reappearing as if by -- well, magic. Dakarai kneaded the tops of Randall's legs as he bobbed his head up and down.

Gina didn't have to see. She knew from past experience what Dakarai was doing. He'd be moving his tongue around, circling the tip, driving Randall insane. She'd known Randall well enough to figure out what made him crazy, and Dakarai could be no different.

When Randall let out a loud cry of mixed desperation and need, Dakarai moved up again. This time he worked at a quicker pace, sliding up and down, his lips sealed in a tight ring around Randall's cock. Gina could imagine Dakarai's tongue gliding along the slick skin, pressing down on the veins as he sucked.

She unzipped her tight jeans to give herself the access she craved, slipping a finger beneath her panties and within her pussy. The searing heat inside her folds made her gasp, but once she'd started touching, there was no going back. One finger became two, gliding easily to and fro, the movement slick and smooth with the lubrication she was putting out.

Dipping into her channel, she felt her muscles clench down automatically. Her pussy was hungry for any kind of penetration, and the press of her own digits was close enough she clamped on them with a thrill.

Dakarai sucked on, moving up and down with never a pause. Gina began to pump her fingers in and out of her claspings cunt, matching him stroke for stroke. It felt good, no, wonderful, but it wasn't enough. She needed more. Something else. But what?

Randall gave a strangled sound and thrust into Dakarai's mouth. He seemed desperate, too, searching for the final move that would push him over the edge. Gina saw Dakarai's stretched lips shift into something like a smile. His hand swept over his partner again, raising up to cup Randall's ass cheek. He gave it a rough squeeze, and then slipped further around.

Both Randall and Gina stiffened. *Oh, God*, Gina thought as her pussy muscles clenched and fluttered. *He's putting his fingers inside. Oh... God.*

"Fuck!" Randall burst out, bucking forward. Dakarai's throat muscles contract, jerking hard as if he were swallowing. The magic flared and pulsed, filling the room with such a burst of power Gina felt her whole body begin to shake in a full orgasm. She lost control of herself as she spasmed, her two fingers thrusting deeply enough to bump into her cervix. The slight flare of pain drove her on, sending spear after spear of ecstasy through her nerves, exploding out into the open.

She struggled to focus as Dakarai reached for his own hard cock, grasping it in a fist and pumping hard, maneuvering fast as lightning. Another shock ran through Gina as she saw him begin to shoot over the floor, jets of pearly white come splattering hard.

Gina convulsed again and lay still, dazed. The couch held her upright, but that was all. She realized she was still kneading her breast and carefully let it go, moaning softly at the loss of contact.

Randall shook as Dakarai released him completely, the magician tracing his tongue around his mouth and chin to catch any stray drops of come. Her former lover's gaze appeared unfocused as he reached to brush against Dakarai's glistening skin. "Better," he said, gravely. "Just about to go off. You?"

Dakarai nodded. "Purged. And pleased." He wiped his sticky hand against his belly, heaving with the force of his breath. "Now her. She's almost there."

"Not you?"

"No." Dakarai pressed a kiss to the tip of Randall's cock, still hard despite his climax. "There's a tie. Use it."

Randall turned his head toward Gina. "Can I?"

There was no time for thinking or second guesses. Gina reached out with both arms, beckoning Randall to her. She'd come harder than any woman could possibly, but the hunger was still there, demanding more and more. The sight of Randall, once so beloved, debauched from having his cock down another man's throat, made her wild with lust.

She *had* to have some of what they'd shared.

"Come here," she urged, feeling deliciously wanton. "Take me."

"Gina," Randall said in a rush of breath. "Too long -- but too soon?"

"No." She shook her head. The dragon flame rushed in her, true, but so did the full and rapturous desire for his cock sheathed in her pussy. "I'm burning for you."

The heat of the moment was on her, and she knew what she wanted.

So did Randall. He let go of the desk and began to stagger in her direction. His gaze was full of a frenetic craving. Gina thrilled to know it was all for her, this renewed passion and gathering energy.

Gina beckoned him closer. "Come here."

"You couldn't stop me," he rasped. Finally making it to the edge of her couch, Randall sank to his knees but reached up to tug at her arms. "Smell so good," he said with rabid desperation. "Get on the floor with me."

Gina found it in her to laugh. "Like last night?" She went with Randall's pull, landing softly on the floor as he guided her. "You were really there, with the palm leaf. You held my hands."

"Going to hold more than that." Randall pushed at Gina's top, yanking it up over her breasts. She raised her arms to help him, and between the two of them they got it off. Randall zeroed in on her bra next, quickly undoing the front clasp and releasing her twin mounds, letting them spill out into his hands. He rubbed them eagerly, the same old wonderful touch, dragging a moan from Gina's throat as she pushed up into his palms.

"More," Randall demanded, abandoning his work for a moment to shove at Gina's jeans. She wiggled her hips, as frantic for this as he was, shivering with heated anticipation as the denim slid off her legs. "These something you care about?" He tugged at the scrap of red underwear, soaked through.

Gina shook her head, hair tossing wildly to and fro.

“Good.” Randall gave the elastic a hard tug, easily snapping the fabric. He flicked the sopping cloth aside to cover her pussy with one big hand, cupping it as if it were the rarest treasure to be found on earth.

Gina wailed and bucked into his hand.

“Wish I could take my time. You deserve...” Randall trailed off. “But you’re ready for me. Aren’t you?”

Gina spread her legs without shame, urging him in. “No waiting,” she urged. “Need you inside.”

“Oh, God, Gina,” Randall groaned. He hurried into position, Gina following his lead and wrapping her legs around the small of his back, her ankles locking into place. With the magical protection that was part of her lineage, she never needed to worry about condoms or birth control. No barriers. The tip of his erection pressed hard against her inflamed opening, dilated to let him in.

Slowly, body clearly rattling with the effort to stay in control and not hurt her, Randall pushed into her cunt. Gina gasped and grabbed at his back, scratching his skin as he filled her.

Big, oh, God, he was so big. She’d forgotten that, and how her body stretched and burned as she accommodated him.

It didn’t matter, though. Nothing did. He had to move, and he had to move right away. Arching through the delicious pain, Gina ground her hips against his. “Fuck me,” she ordered, leaning up for a kiss.

The feel of Randall’s mouth against her own was heaven. He was rough, pushing his tongue past her lips, shoving in and out, but it was like coming home. Gina mewled and writhed, desperate for all she could get.

Randall knew what she wanted. He always had. His hips rose and fell as he withdrew and thrust, rushing into a fast, hard fuck that had Gina’s head spinning even as she tried to hold on to the kiss. Her head fell backward, though, and Randall seized on her neck instead, biting and sucking until it almost hurt, but oh, so good.

“Now,” Gina heard a voice, seeming to come from a million miles away, just a faint echo of sound. “Now, Randall.”

Randall loosed a rough growl and reached down between them, his cock still buried in Gina’s clenching pussy, and found her clit as easily as if they’d never been apart for a single day. Pinching the nubbin of flesh between his fingers, he thrust hard and tugged up sharply.

Gina came for a second time with a scream she couldn’t have hoped to contain, feeling it rattle through her bones and push out into the pressing air. Randall’s voice joined her own as she felt pulses of liquid heat gush into her channel, each jet setting off a smaller orgasm, shaking her to her core.

The moment seemed to last forever, and yet not long enough.

Slowly, breathing hard, Randall drew back. Gina stared up at him, her vision clouded with the dark shadows of climax. He looked as if he were worn out, exhausted beyond compare, but still concerned.

"Gina?" He touched her face lightly. "Are you okay?"

She laughed despite herself. "Wonderful," she whispered, stretching up for another kiss.

"Not just this. All of it. What we've done. What you saw." Randall kissed her, the taste of his lips salty with sweat. "And what's coming."

"As long as it's me coming, I don't care," Gina said recklessly, grasping Randall still more tightly with her legs.

"But there's more to this story, I think," said the second voice. Gina turned her head to look at Dakarai, down on one knee beside them. Had he been watching the whole time? Gina thought he might have -- he had the flushed cheeks and dilated eyes of someone who'd been inflamed by what he'd seen.

"Here, let me help you." Dakarai took hold of Gina's ankles and unlocked them, lowering her legs to the carpet. Randall slipped from between her thighs and raised himself until his weight rested on the back of his heels.

Lying between the men, Gina felt suddenly naked and exposed. The last of the dragon flame slipped from her like a wave washing out to sea.

Oh, God. Had she actually done what she thought she'd just done?

"There's more?" she asked, automatically covering her breasts with one arm, her hand coming down to hide her still-sopping pussy. "What now? What next?"

Dakarai indicated his lack of certainty. "The dragon's going to be angry. There's no telling--"

And between one word and the next, Gina snapped into blackness, tumbling away into the depths of her own mind.

Chapter Six

Hands. Gina felt hands grabbing at her as she tumbled through the void of reality to the alternate planes. Some tried to seize hold, as if to pull her back from wherever she tumbled toward, and some gave her vicious shoves forward. All of them felt clammy and cold, as if they belonged to men and women long since dead. The feelings of malice, guilt, anger, and helplessness radiated from each set of fingers, creating a maelstrom of emotion as dangerous as the journey from one place to another.

This is only in my mind, Gina told herself even as she struggled against the invading appendages. *My body's safe back in Dakarai's shop. These things I'm feeling, they're not real. I'm safe.*

The last of the hands let go and Gina “felt” herself tumbling down what seemed to be a chute. She landed with a hard thump, jostling every bone in her body as she spread out like a carelessly flung rag doll.

It's not really a stone floor. I can't be hurt.

Gina sat up, shaken but intact, gazing around at what she recognized was the dragon's lair. She hadn't taken the time to look before, but snatched the chance now to drink in the details of where the dragon had hidden himself away.

It looked like a scene out of *Lord of the Rings*. Pillars and arches stretched away in the distance as far as the eye could see, but they looked cold and pale. Grooves worn in the hard paving stones told the story of thousands of feet traveling among the structures, their owners living out their lives... but now, none of them were left.

Piles of ash lay heaped up on the ground in a haphazard pattern, each one a messy scatter of burned debris. Curious, Gina scrambled forward and dipped her hand in one of the mounds.

She came up with a handful of powder, but in the middle, glittering at her, she saw a dragon scale. It didn't occur to Gina what she held could be anything else. Even after the rest of the beast's body had crumbled to ash, this one scale, the Scale Immortal every dragon grew over their heart, glittered with the iridescence only a dragon could have, red fire gleaming on one side and hotter blue flames on the other.

Dropping the scale, Gina stared around herself. *These are all that's left of the dragons,* she realized. *My God. So many of them. What are they, the ones who couldn't break through? Dragons who were incinerated during the effort to dig their way through from this plane to the mortal world?*

"They were a sorry lot," a familiar cold voice informed her. "Not a one was worthy of belonging to our once noble race. I fought each one, and bested them all. Tooth for tooth. Claw for claw. I burned them where they lay beaten and broken, and I lived to fight again."

Gina's back was turned away from where the throne would be, but she could feel the colorless gaze of the dragon man blazing against her skin. She was, she realized, still naked, her body smeared with sweat and seed, although those were drying quickly in the chill of the atmosphere. "And now there's only you left?" she asked without turning around.

The dragon man sniffed. "I am the only one who is needed. But if I willed it, a thousand would spring up from the ashes you see before us. I hold the power of life and death in my hands." He paused. "This will not do. Turn around and look at me, Georgina. No, no, do not pull back. I wish to see you face to face, as enemies should meet."

Gina closed her eyes briefly, summoning up the feel of Randall and Dakarai's touches running over every inch of her skin. Their remembered warmth buoyed her, giving her enough strength to pivot and stand up straight, unashamed.

She stared at the dragon man as he undulated on his throne, his limbs and joints too fluid to be human. Snake-like, that was the word. Curling up like a cobra ready to strike.

Yet he seemed to be holding himself in check. A forked tongue, black and narrow, flickered out as if he were tasting the air. "You reek of sex," he said in definite satisfaction. "How do you like my flame, little human? I designed it especially for you, you who have shut yourself away like a -- what is it? -- a nun." He leaned forward, his face hungry and anticipatory. "I sifted the ether for your aura last night. My, but you were tangled deep in the threads I had woven. Torn in two by lust." He lifted his chin. "All this was at my hands. Mine. You were helpless against my power."

Gina took a breath and then shut her mouth. If the beast didn't know about Randall and Dakarai...

"Why are you doing this?" she asked, proud to hear her voice come out clearly and calmly with no hint of fear. "I've asked you before, but you've danced around the answer. I am the last of the Georges." She cast a glance around her. "And you seem to be the last of the dragons, something you admit is your own fault. When this generation passes, the feud is over. Let it rest."

Those no-color eyes snapped with aggravated irritation. The dragon man's hands curled into fists, talons digging into skin. "The fight will never be over! What George the so-called Saint began, I will finish. I have spent my years fighting for the chance to be the one who faces you, and further years still finding a ground in which we can do battle."

Gina shrugged. "You didn't do a very good job. As far as I know, this is all in my own mind. You can dance around in my thoughts all you want, but head games won't win a battle, much less the kind of war you're talking about."

For some reason, her defiance amused the dragon man enough to make him laugh, a dry, hissing sound that sent chills down Gina's neck. "I have merely invaded your thoughts, you say? Let us suppose this is all I have done. You have seen my power. What if I made you lose your senses? What if you went insane?"

"Then you wouldn't get much of a tussle, would you?" Gina stood her ground. Her thoughts were clicking along double-quick, coming up with answers to the questions that had gone unasked. "And unless you do it now -- which I don't think you can -- your chance is going to be gone. I'm getting my strength back, dragon. Soon I'll be able to build up walls to keep you out. What are you going to do then?"

The dragon chuckled. He leaned back in his crumbling throne and stroked his long, dry hair. "What makes you think this is only in your mind, foolish girl?"

Gina paused, startled.

"Do you think your mind is such a powerful thing as to create all of this?" The dragon waved around them to indicate the crumbling ruins, the heaps of dragon ash, the hard stone floor with its desiccated vegetation. "Oh, no," he said silkily. "This is real, Georgina, last of the Georges. I draw on your mind, true, but also on your body. Believe me or believe me not, what happens in this place is very real."

"How..." Gina struggled to understand. "Where are we?"

"Such a clever wench. Figure it out for yourself." The dragon man stood with a swish. He stretched out his arms, scales swarming up them until they gleamed with adamantium brilliance. "I grow tired of mincing with words. Let us see if you really are as helpless as I believe."

Habits she'd have thought long forgotten brought Gina down into a fighting stance. Her oldest forefathers had used swords, but as time passed and fighting styles changed, they'd switched to spears for their longer reach. She had no spear for herself, no shield, and no magic, but she could brace herself for the attack. "Bring it on."

The dragon snarled, pale lips curving back over those wicked teeth, and launched himself from his throne. He leapt further and faster than Gina would have expected, and by the time she could adjust for the change he was on her, scaly body dwarfing her own fragile shell and pinning it to the ground.

Gina wasn't going down without a fight, though. Desperation lent her the strength to wrestle one arm free. She scratched wildly at the dragon man's face, clawing for his eyes.

He laughed again, a hideous snakelike sound, as he evaded her attack. "Pink and puny," he mocked. "So easy to kill. One bite--" He clashed his teeth together. "-- right here, in your neck, and this will all be over. If you die here, you die there as well."

Gina fought to bring her knee up, wondering if dragons had sensitive genitalia in this form. She'd never known a man who wouldn't collapse after a good solid whack in the balls. "I'm not... very... easy... to kill," she gritted out. "You've got me down, but I'm not out."

"Only because I am but playing with you." The dragon stretched his full weight, easily three times that of Randall, on top of Gina and laid her flat, unable to move. "And I do enjoy this game."

"That makes one of us." Gina tried harder to buck, to gain some kind of purchase, all in vain.

The dragon man grinned, a vicious sight, as his wicked talons delicately lifted strands of Gina's hair off her cheeks. It was a deliberate, sick mimicry of what Randall and Dakarai had done before, whether or not he knew as much.

Gina's skin shuddered at his cold touch.

"I can make you burn again," the dragon man crooned. "If I wanted, I could fill you with such lust you would spread your legs for me and beg me to fuck you. But I would not taint myself by honoring a George with my seed. What did you use on yourself to ride through the first wave of the fever? Some small toy, such as you humans are wont to use?"

Oh, shit. Gina held utterly still.

No good. The dragon man's face tightened. He plunged a scaly nose into the nape of Gina's neck and dragged in a deep breath. His tongue slipped out, the forked ends tickling at her skin.

Then, she felt him bite. Sharp pain blasted through Gina as the dragon man's teeth broke her skin. She felt hot blood running down from the puncture marks -- yet instead of closing his jaws and tearing out her throat, the creature withdrew.

His lips were stained with Gina's blood as he spoke, spitting savagely. "So. You have found your mage and your bodyman."

My mage and my what, now? Bodyman? What's a bodyman? Gina tried taking in a deep breath and found her windpipe was intact. "Didn't see them coming, did you?" she brazened.

"Bah!" The dragon man flung himself away from Gina. He wiped his mouth as if he'd bitten into something disgusting -- and, for all Gina knew, the taste of human flesh might have been abhorrent. "They matter only a little in the long run. And this fight is far from over, Georgina. We will battle on."

Gina struggled to her feet. "I have the men backing me. You have no one. I'm descended from the one who slew your ancestor. Don't count on winning this."

"Idiot child. You still have no idea what you pit yourself against." The dragon man slithered back onto his throne. "Go back for now, and confer with your pitiful human help. If my dragon flame can no longer affect you, then we will see how you deal with a world gone mad." He tapped his claws against the scales of his chest. "I sent the lust through you. I sent, through you, the anger that is infecting the world you inhabit. What, I wonder, will I send next? Do you think yourself capable of defending a city? You, one scrawny excuse for a woman?"

Gina straightened her shoulders. Oh, yes, she knew what the dragon man could do, but memories were flooding back. *Never let them know you're afraid. They'll pounce like a cat on a mouse.* "Do your worst," she challenged. "The city belongs to me."

"So you claim it?" the dragon man asked eagerly.

There was a moment's hesitation, and then Gina knew the answer. "I do," she said, her voice ringing out through the empty halls. "The city is mine. I'll defend it against you if it's the last thing I do."

"And it very well may be, Georgina." The room began to black out around its edges, a sucking sensation pulling Gina back up through the tunnel from which she'd been dropped. "If you live up to half your claims, this could yet be a battle worthy of me, after all."

The lights went out. Gina's last sight was of the dragon man's malevolent eyes, savoring the bolt of tension shooting through her, and then he was gone.

* * * * *

"Gina?" The voice was soft and rough. "Gina, wake up. You're bleeding."

Gina's eyes flew open. She stared up into Dakarai's lean face, one that was becoming ever more familiar. They hadn't known each other for even a whole day, but she was able to read him. Her vision seemed crisper, keener. A warrior's clear sight.

He stroked her forehead. "You're bleeding," he repeated. "Where were you?"

Gina struggled to sit up.

"No, no, lie still." Dakarai gently held her head in his lap -- his very naked lap. She could smell salt and musk and come, each odor sharper and more defined than it would have been before this most recent meeting with the dragon man, than anything she remembered. "Randall's coming with a bowl of water and a cloth."

"I'm here." Randall, still nude as well, knelt by Gina's side. He dipped a clean washcloth into the wooden bowl he held and squeezed out the water. "This might sting."

Gina shook her head despite the pain of the movement. "Wait," she ordered both of them. "I saw the dragon again. He attacked me."

"The bite," Dakarai murmured, touching the edge of it with one finger.

"He had me pinned, but he couldn't take me. There's something about the three of us together that put him off. He retreated." Gina looked quickly from one man to the other, taking in the details of their faces with a battle-hungry eye. They were keen thinkers, strong in body or powerful in magic... and the dragon hadn't been able to stand against their combination.

"It's up to the three of us," she said with certainty, lowering her head back into the hardness of Dakarai's thighs. "He's going to be coming, and it'll be bad, but I swore to protect the city."

Dakarai glowed with satisfaction. "Then you *are* a George. No more hiding?"

"None." Gina reached out, imagining she held a weapon in her grasp. She could feel how the sharp blade would catch against hard dragon scale, then pierce through to the soft meat underneath. Blood would flow, none of it hers, and the city would be safe.

Dakarai's hand clasped Gina's shoulder. Randall laid his fingers on Gina's stomach. With the three of them linked, Gina could feel the strength flowing back and forth in a chain that could not be broken.

"We're the key," she said, determined as if she had spear in hand and was ready for the final blow. "The dragon thinks he can bring each one of us down, but no." She laughed, long and loud, as if the victory were already hers. "We'll be the thorn in his paw. His Achilles's heel.

"We, the three of us, will kill the dragon."

Chapter Seven

“And we will kill the dragon,” Dakarai promised. “Does he now know you’re ready to stand up to him?”

Gina blinked. “He does. And I am. But how did you know I wasn’t before?”

“I told you. It’s my job to look after your well-being. Mine, and my father’s, and his father, and all the fathers before us. We are the line of mages who have assisted the Georges since the first, the Saint. For centuries, the Georges have refused to accept our help, first calling it ‘witchcraft’ and fearing us, then scorning us as shams.” Dakarai lightly touched the skin of Gina’s wounded neck. “I’ve been watching you for years.”

“You what?” Gina again tried to struggle up. Randall pushed her down despite her rediscovered strength, forcing her to lie flat. “How did you get through to watch over me? I had wards!”

“I never pried beyond the boundaries you set. Some mages did in the past, keeping tabs on every part of their George’s life. But my father taught me differently. Just because things had always been done one way didn’t mean it was the right path to take. All I did was monitor your aura.” Dakarai folded his hands. “I knew when you were afraid, and when you were blocking your past. I felt it when the dragon began his attack. I wasn’t...” He hesitated. “I didn’t expect him to assault you the way he did.”

“Who could have?” Gina lay still, the bite marks in her neck beginning to sting and burn now that her adrenaline rush was fading. She inhaled and exhaled a deep breath, glad the teeth hadn’t gone so deep as to damage the pathway to her lungs. “But you knew what to do.”

Dakarai shook his head. “Through sheer luck. The move he made was swift and possibly deadly. I wasn’t paying attention. Not as closely as I should have, anyway. Randall and I were--”

Gina laughed. "Yeah, I can just guess what you were doing." Odd how the thought didn't bother her. In fact, the memory of seeing them together still sent a tickle of excitement through her nerves.

"We were meditating," Dakarai insisted. "Randall was the one to sense your disturbance. He is from the line of bodymen to the Georges, their right hands in battle. Some of your forefathers were too proud to want assistance in battle, and so the tradition was cast aside -- but the lineage of bodymen continued on, ready for the day when they would be needed again. Randall didn't know anything about this when you were together before; he does now. And fate may have played a part in bringing you both together, then as now. I've watched over you, yes, but you've always been in his mind. He honed in on your distress."

"Randall?" Gina turned her head slightly to look at him. Same old Randall -- or rather, the new Randall, aging just fine, with the look of caring concern on his face that she remembered seeing a hundred times. He gazed warmly at Gina, clearly reassuring her he was there, before dipping his cloth back into the bowl.

The gentle sensation of him cleansing the wounds felt cool and wonderful. Gina sighed with relief as the tackiness of drying blood was sponged away. "You always tried to take care of me," she whispered. "What would have happened if I hadn't pushed you away after that attack?"

Randall made a minute, dismissive motion. "The past is in the past, Gina." He stroked her arm with his free hand. "I thought about you every day, but you'd made your choice."

"You could have fought for me," Gina persisted. "Why didn't you?"

"Because I knew who you were. And I know how stubborn you can be." Randall wrung out his cloth. "I had to let you do this your way. But I won't lie -- I hoped you'd come back one day."

"And look at us now. Bet you didn't plan on this happening."

Randall laughed abruptly. "Nope. I had pictured more of a chance meeting on the street, then sweeping you off your feet into a secluded restaurant, a café, somewhere cozy for two, and sweet-talking you into my life again."

Gina's eyes shifted to Dakarai. "Even with him?"

"It's... complicated." Randall looked embarrassed. "Dakarai and I are together, sure, but he's always known about you. Known that I wanted you back."

Confusing. Gina looked at Dakarai again, whose face was expressionless. "You didn't want to keep Randall for yourself?"

Dakarai raised his shoulders. "Sometimes things are just as they are. He gave most of his heart to me, but I knew part of it still belonged to you. You were the one true lady love of his life. Besides," he said, a cunning look developing, "who or what says either of us has to give up anything?"

Okay, even with what all of them had done before, the suggestion was still a mild shock. “You mean the three of us together on a permanent basis?” Gina knew better than to sit up, no matter how much she wanted to. “All of us?”

The mage gave another shrug full of possibilities. “We’ll see, in time. Right now our focus is on healing you.”

Gina reached up to touch the circle of bite marks. “You’ve already cleaned the punctures, and I’m up to date on my tetanus shots. I can’t exactly go to an ER, so what else is there to do?”

“You’d be surprised. Randall, hold her hand.” Dakarai got up and stood still for a moment, his face wrinkling as he concentrated. Gina heard a rattling, then the whooshing of air. A glass jar full of some gray, mossy-looking herbs shot into his grasp. “Dragonsbane. Not just a myth. We need to treat you with a decoction.”

“Decoction,” Gina said dubiously. “You mean like a paste?”

“Exactly.” Dakarai knelt to open one of the desk drawers. Gina could hear his hands rattling around inside. “Aha!” When he stood up, he had a wooden mortar and pestle, ancient-looking but shiny with use. “Lie still while I grind the herbs with water.”

Randall arranged himself closer to Gina’s side. She could feel his ambient warmth and automatically snuggled into it. His fingers came down to stroke her hair, twining through the strands.

“It’s all right,” he soothed. “I’m not going anywhere. Not again.”

Gina nestled her head against his thigh. The movement reminded her of days gone by and times when they’d just lain together, maybe looked up at the stars or made pictures out of clouds. Back when she’d been reveling in her power, confident enough that she’d sense an attack long before it happened and had had the leisure to take afternoons of downtime with her lover.

She butted her head against his skin. “There were moments that I thought about you. Wished things were different. Sometimes I let myself imagine the two of us together again. I dreamed about you and woke up...” She paused. “Well.”

Randall rumbled out a chuckle. “And I did the same with you. Even after Dakarai. Despite the fact that I’d decided to let you live your own life, I wondered. I dreamed. I hoped.”

“We wasted so much time,” Gina said softly. “Do you still have the scars? From the attack?”

He nodded. “On my other leg. Shiny pink skin without hair.” He laughed again. “You gave me a bald spot.”

Gina pushed at him. “I did not! That was the...” She faltered. “God. The thought of you after the dragon attacked. You looked so pale. You looked dead. I was so afraid.”

“Was it you who called for help?”

She nodded.

Randall tugged at Gina's hair. "It's all vague to me. I remember being carried away on a stretcher, asking about you. But you weren't there, and I never did see you again."

"I had to make sure you were safe." Tears pricked at the corners of Gina's eyes. She nestled closer to Randall. "Then I had to leave. I ran away and turned into someone else, a person who'd never ever heard of dragons." She closed her eyes, breathing in the scent of his skin. "But I thought about you. Every night, for the longest time."

Randall's stroking of her scalp grew lighter, the faintest touch. "I missed you, too, Gina."

"Enough of this." Dakarai's voice was clipped and bordering on impatient. Gina turned her gaze in his direction. He tapped the side of his pestle against the edge of the bowl he held. Thick gray sludge dripped down into the container. "As I've said, I've heard one half of this before, and I could sense the other part, even if I didn't pry. The medicine is ready."

Gina didn't like the looks of Dakarai's decoction. "I feel fine," she protested. "My neck's going to hurt when I turn it, but I think it's just an ordinary bite. The dragon man was pissed off enough to act without thinking. If he'd wanted me to suffer, he would have--"

"Would have what? Gina, you know this is a reptile who claims a reputation for destroying people," Randall chided. Professionalism slipped over his expression and into his tone. "Some bites take hours for their poison to spread. The cobra's venom works so slowly you hardly notice it at first. Let Dakarai do his job."

"Thank you." Dakarai nudged at Randall with one bare toe. "Move aside, love? I need to get next to the wound." He knelt, the muscles in his legs bulging as he bent.

Gina noticed, with a mild sense of surprise, he was still naked. All of them were. Yet the shame she'd felt earlier at being exposed was utterly gone. Somehow, it felt natural to be unclothed in the presence of these two men. Then again, after what they'd done together, Gina guessed modesty wasn't much of a consideration anymore.

Randall bent to press a kiss to Gina's forehead. "Promises to keep," he whispered before drawing away toward her feet. He took one in each strong hand, rubbing his thumbs against her ankles. Dakarai cut him a slightly annoyed look -- jealousy? -- then shook his head.

He laid the mortar and pestle down beside Gina's neck. Dipping a forefinger into the muck, Dakarai came up with a gooey fingerful of the gray sludge. "Randall, as long as you're down there, offer her support," he directed. "Channel your energies and focus them on Georgina."

"Please. I've always just gone by Gina."

"But you were born *Georgina*. Call yourself what you like, but never forget -- again -- who you really are. Now, hold still. This will hurt; it's meant to draw the poison out of those punctures."

"Hurt?" Gina asked warily. "It's not like I'm a stranger to pain or anything, but on a scale of one to ten, how much are we talking about here?"

"Probably an eleven. Have you ever wanted a tattoo?" Dakarai looked thoughtful. "Maybe in your younger years; I can't imagine your Mary persona walking into an ink parlor and asking for a skull and some roses on her thigh."

Gina giggled. "Mary wouldn't have dreamed of it, but I always meant to get some kind of design done when I was a kid -- maybe a dragon with a spear through it -- but the kind of classy work I had in mind takes more money than I could save when I was old enough to get it legally done."

"Your family wouldn't have supported you?" Dakarai sounded surprised. "Other mages have recorded brands, inks, other memorabilia marked into the flesh, all with the support of their loved ones."

Gina squirmed a little. "Yeah, but after the dragon took dad, mom sort of had a different perspective on things." It still hurt to think about her father, the memory of his trip to Wales to fight one of the beasts... and never returning. "She didn't... you could say she wouldn't have approved."

"And so it began, all the way back then. Your father was a mighty George, and his passing was marked with sorrow." Dakarai frowned at his dab of magical paste, then brushed it off in crumbling chunks. "Quiet, now. The medicine solidifies quickly. Breathe deep while I put it on you."

Gina nodded and braced herself. All the same, when Dakarai touched a wet finger to the first of her punctures, she couldn't help crying out. The gray mixture stung worse than the original bite.

"Gina?" Randall questioned, holding her feet tightly.

She gritted her teeth. "I'm good. Keep going."

"You *are* strong," Dakarai murmured, reaching for more of the dragonsbane. "Hold on to that strength."

And she did, through each and every dab on her neck, and when she had to rise up for Dakarai to reach the teeth marks behind her shoulder. Sweat broke out on her forehead and her breathing grew labored, but she didn't make another sound. Randall had his eyes closed, whispering words she couldn't make out. Strength and power flowed from his grasp on her ankles up the length of her body. Gina grabbed at his help and clutched it tight, shoring herself against the cure that felt worse than the disease.

"Done," Dakarai said at last, removing his bowl. He narrowly examined the first mark he'd applied his decoction to. "There was, indeed, poison in the bite. I can see the 'bane working already."

Gina tried to peer down. "You can?"

"Oh, yes. Lie quiet for a bit longer. Does it still hurt? The worst of the pain should have passed by now."

"It has." Gina rearranged her limbs, rotating her shoulder. "Feels warm, now, like a compress."

"Then it really is working." Dakarai let out a sigh and stood, moving to put his bowl away. "I wasn't sure. The recipe has been handed down for generations, and the records all show it was a success, but people have changed so. Antibodies, DNA... every little difference in a person's makeup could affect the magic." He set the bowl down and rested the pestle inside. "That's the mark of a true mage, you know. Understanding how to work with shifting variables."

He looked so proud and unashamedly nude with his hair curling over his face that Gina couldn't help grinning. "You're pretty confident, aren't you?"

Dakarai lifted his chin. "I have centuries of knowledge to draw on. As do you." He wiped off his fingers on a tissue from a box balanced precariously on the edge of the desk. "Randall is new, but he's learning. I couldn't ask for a better student. When we first met..."

"Love at first sight?" Gina guessed, her lips curving. "You saw Randall and your magic heart went pit-a-pat?"

Dakarai looked amused. "Close enough. We were in a club; each one of us had come up to the bar."

"Dak turned around, saw me, and spilled his beer all over my shirt." Randall chuckled. "You've never seen anyone so flabbergasted. I thought he was just upset over the mess he made, but--"

"I was tripping over my tongue. Me, the master at words and the power they carry. But when I faced down a man who was the embodiment of every fantasy I'd ever had--"

"After he'd been stuttering for a minute, I was starting to worry about him. I wasn't pissed about the shirt, but he blurted out a promise to pay for my dry cleaning. I told him it wasn't necessary, yet he insisted."

"I had to find some excuse to see him again."

"And he did." Randall lifted his head to gaze at Dakarai. Gina followed his look. She envied it a little. Pure love and admiration. "We got to know each other, bit by bit, and it all unfolded from there."

"It also didn't hurt that I was stubborn as a mule when it came to finding a way to win his heart."

"It wasn't hard." Randall laughed. "Then, suddenly, *I* was hard for the guy, and man, did I have a time coping there."

"But I helped." Dakarai's expression had gone tender. "You let me guide you, never pushing, and you came to me all on your own. I couldn't have been happier."

“Me, either.” Randall leaned across Gina to press a kiss against Dakarai’s lips. Although they weren’t touching in any other fashion, the way their mouths clung together spoke of deep affection with a hint of passion, something Gina suspected was always lingering beneath the surface with these two.

It didn’t make her jealous, as she would have thought. Instead, she smiled. Randall had always deserved the best. When she hadn’t been able to be there for him, five-odd years ago, someone else had come along to give him what he needed. She hoped he hadn’t had to wait long for Dakarai to enter his life.

She owed Dakarai for taking care of the big, gentle man. Impulsively, Gina petted Dakarai’s chest, stroking across the solid muscles. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Dakarai seemed to understand. As he and Randall parted, he brushed Gina’s hand. “Believe me when I say it was my pleasure.”

Gina sighed and stretched. “But you were talking about magic?”

“Magic, yeah. I saw what Dak could do, but then I’d already learned from you the impossible could be real, so I believed him even before he proved he’s a mage -- believed *in* him. Dak taught me everything I know.” Randall rubbed Gina’s feet. He tickled the arch to make her giggle and kick. “I know a little magic, sure, but that’s not my destiny. I’m your bodyman. One George, one mage, one bodyman. That’s the way it was set up to work.”

“You’re the link between Dakarai and myself,” Gina realized. “You’re tied to me, and he’s tied to you. After a lifetime of not interfering, you were the way to build a bridge. That’s not a small thing.”

Dakarai tilted his head. “You’re right,” he said, appearing surprised. “Part of Randall’s duty as bodyman is to serve as a connection for both of us where muscles and magic can cross to meet. He links us together where we might not be able to otherwise.”

“So the mighty magician has a weakness,” Gina teased. Then, she grew serious. “Does that mean Randall has to be a part of all this? The fight, the magic?”

“I can take care of myself,” Randall protested. “And yeah, it’s on me, too. Don’t think I’m not eager to get a little payback.”

The thought disturbed Gina. Hadn’t Randall already been through enough? *I’ll think about it later.* She couldn’t face these kinds of decisions at the moment.

Instead, she prodded at one of the patches of drying muck on her throat and turned the conversation. “We spent so many years apart that everything was beginning to fade. God, was it a shock to see you so vividly, even if I did conjure you up in my first vision.” She hesitated and frowned. “I thought it was all my imagination, though.”

“Imagination is more powerful than you might think.” Dakarai scooted down to kneel by Gina’s other side -- closer, she noted, to Randall. Staking his claim, was he? Gina decided she’d keep a careful eye on them. Any kind of division in the ranks could be deadly.

"The mind opens any number of doors when we let go and dream," Dakarai went on. "If you have the slightest bit of talent -- and Randall has much more strength than he claims -- one can slip through the thin walls of reality to fantasy." He twinkled unexpectedly. "How do you think inventions come to pass? Imagination transmutes into reality. A tea kettle became the inspiration for a steam engine. And so it goes." He brushed Gina's bare shoulder. "Your skin's getting cooler. It's a good sign."

"I don't even feel the dragon flame anymore," Gina agreed. "All his deadly fire and passion, it's gone."

"Is it?" Dakarai's touch deepened. "You feel nothing for us, then?"

Gina glanced from one man to the other. Each was something out of a fantasy, from their chiseled bodies to their strong-boned faces and expressive eyes. "No," she said slowly, laying a hand on both. "It's not like the dragon flame... but I still feel this ache for you two."

"You don't hold it against me, what I did to help heal you, either last night or today?" Dakarai looked a little self-conscious, an odd expression on him. "If I were a woman, I'd be furious at a stranger's invading me the way I did."

She rolled the thought over in her mind. What he had done wasn't rape. The dragon had been the one at fault, driving her out of her senses with arousal that would have reduced her to a whimpering puddle. "No," Gina said after due consideration. "You did what you had to do."

"Yes, but I enjoyed it," Dakarai confessed. His voice dropped to a whisper, teasing her with the warming tenor of his speech. "And I would give anything to be between those sweet thighs again, feasting between your folds and tasting your sweet juices."

Randall stiffened. Dakarai noticed. "Are you jealous, love?"

"No. Yes. No. I want you and I want her." Randall rubbed the palm of his hand against one eye. "Dakarai..."

"It's okay; I understand. As much as I hunger to have my lips wrapped around your cock, Randall, I crave Gina with equal fervor." Dakarai sighed. "It's confusing."

Gina frowned. "You're not completely gay?"

"It's the lifestyle I prefer," Dakarai admitted. "But ever so rarely, there's been a woman..." He kneaded her shoulder. "A lady who lights a spark inside me. When I touched you, it wasn't just the dragon flame I felt. I wanted you as I've rarely desired anyone else."

Gina could feel tension building. She touched both men, trying to defuse an argument that was unfolding its claws. "We have time to talk about this three-way we've gotten ourselves into later. What we don't have is the leisure to wait for the dragon to attack again. We've got to be prepared. God knows what he'll do next." She scratched at the glop on her neck, finding it had dried into a crust. "Am I done baking yet?"

Dakarai shook his head, as if shedding the former conversation and its weighty implications, then moved up to check the state of his magical cure. He sighed in relief. "The

paste's done its job." He rubbed at a spot, peeling away the brittle material. Hovering over the position of that particular wound, he paused and then inclined his head in satisfaction. "No trace of poison or infection. In fact, the skin has knitted back together."

"No kidding? Let me feel." Gina touched the bite mark, and found only the rough skin of a scar where a gash had been. "Pretty swift move there, mage."

He glittered at her. "I do my best. Now, to finish the job..."

Bang!

All three flinched at the sound that was just like a cannon shot.

"What the hell?" Randall asked, looking up and smelling the air. "Sulfur."

Dakarai swore and left Gina to remove the rest of her paste, running around the bookshelves and toward the front of the store. Gina scrubbed at her neck and gave Randall a push. "Go," she insisted. "I'm right behind you."

As soon as he had disappeared, Gina gave her neck one last harsh rub and then scrambled to her feet. She followed the men, her breasts bouncing painfully as she sprinted, reminding her -- damn -- she still wasn't dressed.

Bang!

The second boom rang out as Gina skidded to a stop in front of the window. "What's going on?"

Dakarai looked grim. "The dragon. It's gotten through my shields on this neighborhood. Damn him!"

Bang! A chunk of flaming debris clattered down the steps to the magic shop and lay there, burning brightly, consuming itself with what Gina would have sworn was pure malice.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

"He's hitting the street. The buildings. Oh, God, what if there are people out there?" Gina made a dive for the door, halted when Dakarai caught her around the waist. "Let me go!"

"No." He tightened his grip. "This is my job."

"The hell you say. I swore to the dragon I'd protect this city." Gina struggled against him, but his arms were like bands of iron. "I have to get out there!"

Dakarai held her tight. "Part of the battle is depending on your mage. This is a magical attack. Let me be, allow me to concentrate on casting a shield, and I can deflect the damage."

"Randall," Gina begged. "Make him release me."

Randall hesitated, then moved his head in a gesture of refusal. "It's up to Dakarai on this one," he said firmly, although he moved behind Dakarai to wrap his arms around his lover and hold Gina as well -- but reassuringly she knew, not to pin her down. "Trust in him."

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Gina listened to the sounds of fireballs exploding. Cries of panic were beginning to reach them, the city folk seeing huge fireballs coming from nowhere and scrambling to get out of the way. "Why doesn't he attack us directly?"

"It's a trap," Dakarai said, sounding strained. "He wants you to go out and be crushed. Be patient. Fight when you can."

"I will," Gina swore, watching the fireball burn. "He thinks he can scare me back into hiding. I won't go. This dragon dies." Her hand clenched as if around a spear. "Soon."

Chapter Eight

“So you were down here in the shop when the bombing started?” The police sergeant, ginger-haired and slightly on the plump side, had a bushy mustache he chewed on when he was thinking. He cast a glance around the shop, sharp blue eyes taking in the rows of jars and the ancient leather books. “Looks like you’ve got a lot of... stuff down here.”

“It’s all just herbs.” Gina resisted the urge to twine a finger in one loose strand of hair that had slipped down when she’d knotted her freshly washed hair into a French twist.

She hadn’t wanted to take the time to clean up, but Dakarai had insisted. “There’ll be police,” he said, nailing her eye to eye. “Men with questions. Look at the state of us now, covered in sexual excess and fluids, our hair whipped about as if we’ve been through a hurricane. We’re not fit for visitors. They’re hunting for facts, but our mission is best kept a secret.”

“What we do is our own business,” Randall had added in support. “He’s got the right idea, Gina. We need to look like we’re just casual bystanders, nothing suspicious.” He’d been the one to gently push her in the direction of the shop’s employee-only bathroom. “Please do this. For me?”

Gina had obeyed. The bathroom boasted a small shower, much cleaner than the one in her apartment -- God, her dive of a home seemed a million miles away -- and there were fresh towels hanging on the rack. It’d felt beyond good to wash the sweat from her hair and the drying fluids from her body.

All she’d had available to change into was what she’d worn, the scarlet crop top and her jeans, but they were better than going around naked. Dakarai had rummaged around and come up with a sweatshirt and pants, but they were his size and would have swallowed Gina whole. Not exactly inconspicuous.

So she'd made herself as presentable as possible. The wet hair was a problem, but hopefully, with it knotted back, it wouldn't raise too many questions.

As she replied to the officer, Gina tried to project innocence and the sense of confusion she knew the men and women on the street must have been feeling. "You can't do anything with this stuff but help a cold or the flu."

"Mmm hmm." The sergeant jotted something down in the crumpled notebook he carried. "The guy who owns this place, he's what? An herbalist or something?"

"Holistic medicine is part of what he does," Gina answered. Dakarai had coached her to stick as close to the truth as possible. No talk about magic, dream visions, and least of all, dragons. "He dabbles in magic, too."

"Huh. Like those rings that loop together, rabbits out of hats, that kind of thing?"

"Not exactly." Gina searched for the right words. "More like crystals for meditation. Aromatherapy candles. You know, New Age stuff." She gestured around herself. "It's all pretty harmless."

"Yeah, and if I had a dollar for every time I heard the word 'harmless,' I'd be a damn rich man." The sergeant sucked at his mustache. "Doesn't look like he has much in the way of business."

Gina hid a wince. There was no denying most of Dakarai's bric-a-brac was faded and dusty. The man had the mojo at his fingertips to heal a dragon bite, and he couldn't have done a little cleanup spell? Turned this place into a bright and shiny shop with attractive displays? "I don't think he's the kind of guy who worries about how much money he makes," she cobbled together an explanation. "He does this because he loves studying magic. That's all."

One of the sergeant's eyebrows went up. "Yeah. He really loves the game. This place is just about to fall down. And what are all those books about?"

"Personal research collection," Dakarai said smoothly, coming up behind Gina with barely a sound. He'd changed into a business casual green sweater, which brought out his eyes, and a pair of respectably new jeans, with white sneakers padding his feet. "I research the history of magic. Knowledge is what most of my customers come for. I also run a website serving as a resource for students and teachers."

The sergeant grunted. "Mind giving me its URL?"

Dakarai rattled off the address, which hadn't been on his ad in the phone book, without pause. Gina carefully kept herself from showing any surprise. For all she knew, he *did* run a site for people who wanted to learn more. She committed the information to memory, determined to look it up later when she got a chance. If she got a chance.

"You're free to bring in experts or even dogs to examine the contents of my shop," Dakarai suggested, as if it were no big deal at all. "I'm afraid I'm just a boring Joe with an eye for the supernatural in our history."

"Yeah, you're a real Fox Mulder. How do you spell your name again?"

"D - a - k - a - r - a - i," he said, calm unruffled. "I'm in the *Yellow Pages*."

"And who's this guy?" The sergeant pointed his ballpoint pen over Gina's shoulder. "You're just an innocent customer, and he owns the joint, but neither one of you said a word about him."

Gina turned to look and saw Randall, the last of them to go in the shower, emerging in a brown sweatshirt, loose slacks, and bare feet. He grimaced.

"I was, um... I'm here because of..."

"They're lovers," Gina supplied. "His name is Randall."

"And you know this because..."

"We were talking. Before the explosions." Gina couldn't help her face turning a little pink. "You know. Just conversation."

The sergeant eyed each of them. Gina could see him taking in their freshly washed state and reading between the lines. "Talking. Is that what they call it these days?"

Gina did reach for her strand of hair and tugged at the tip. "It's not what it looks like..." Her voice trailed off.

"Gina, no. Let's not be coy. It's exactly what it looks like, officer." Dakarai beckoned for Randall to come closer, then put an arm around each of their waists. "You understand why we didn't want to come out and say so." His voice was smooth and disarming, touched with the slightest dash of chagrin. "We were, as you might say, otherwise occupied when the explosions started."

"I'll bet you were." The sergeant made another note. "So you heard the noise and you, what, got up and ran to the window to see what all the fuss was about?"

Gina regained her mental footing, even though her cheeks were probably bright red by then. "After, um, extricating ourselves. Yeah."

The sergeant snorted. "And what did you see?"

Dakarai tugged Gina and Randall closer. "Not much. It's fairly secluded down here, and even from the shop window we don't have a good view of the street. But we knew better than to go outside. Especially when one blast landed on our very doorstep." He frowned in an expression of concern. "Do you know what it is?"

Ginger mustache hairs flickered as the sergeant blew out a breath. "Classified."

"We can't even know what someone threw at us?" Gina protested. She felt like she was pushing her limits, but she wanted to know what the cops knew. If the authorities didn't have a clue, then she and her men would be that much safer.

"Classified," the sergeant insisted. He took on the look of a bulldog, his jaws set. Not going to budge, so far as Gina could tell.

But Dakarai, moving too quickly for the policeman to stop him, let go of Gina and Randall and darted to the front door of the magic shop, the door screeching as he opened it. He prodded at the lump that had once been an incandescent fireball. It had retained its circular shape, but when he touched it, it dissolved into a pile of dust under the nudging of his toe.

With nothing but pure innocence on his face, Dakarai turned back to the group watching him. "It's just ash," he said, sounding puzzled.

The sergeant huffed indignantly. "How many times do I have to tell you? Even if I had clearance to talk about it--"

"You're just guessing right now?" Dakarai pried shrewdly.

The bulldog expression hardened as the sergeant snapped his notebook shut. "Look. As far as I can tell, you three were just having a nooner when all this went down. But you've got a whole store full of suspect chemicals--"

"Herbs," Dakarai interjected.

--and powders and flakes and things we're going to be checking out," the sergeant went on, riding right over Dakarai's comment. "I don't want a single one of you going anyplace. I don't care if you're going to miss a meeting or you had plans for a movie or a pride parade, or whatever you threesomes like to do." He gave Dakarai a doubly suspicious look. "Someone *will* be by, Mr. Dakarai. Until then, you stay put. Am I making myself clear?"

Dakarai nodded humbly. "Of course."

"Doesn't make you nervous?" the sergeant prodded. "We'll have dogs down here. If you have the makings for a bomb or drugs, we're going to know about them, and then all of you are culpable."

"I've done nothing wrong," Dakarai seemed totally at his ease. "There's nothing I need to hide. And as for spending more time with these two..." He glanced at Gina and Randall. "It's not what I'd call a hardship."

The comment got him an eye roll. "Yeah, I just bet." The sergeant stuffed his notebook under his arm. "I'm putting tape across the door. If it's broken when we come back, or any of you are missing, I'll put out an APB."

"Your tape will remain secure, and we'll be right here. Now go about your business. I'm sure there are dozens of citizens directly affected who need your help."

A faint glimpse of puzzlement crossed the policeman's set expression, his piercing gaze going momentarily cloudy. He wavered for a moment, then snapped back to attention. "As long as we understand each other," he warned. "I'll be back."

"We'll be waiting for you," Dakarai said pleasantly. "Good luck."

"Yeah, right." The sergeant shot them one last disparaging look and strode through the entrance, past Dakarai's, careful to avoid the remains of the fireball. Once the door squealed

closed behind him, he pulled a roll of yellow police tape from his pocket and blocked the door.

When the cop had walked away and the sound of his feet heavily stomping up the stairs finally faded, Dakarai exhaled a rattling breath and leaned against Randall, pressing his head to Randall's strong chest and waved Gina closer. "I haven't had this much exercise in years," Dakarai muttered. "Talk about a tough customer."

Gina stared. "You were pulling a trick on him!" she exclaimed, surprised. "What, 'these aren't the droids you're looking for' Jedi mind tricks? That kind of thing?"

Dakarai cracked a grin. "Something along those lines. A normal subject would only need a little prompting, but this one..." He whistled softly. "The man had a mind like a steel trap."

"I can't believe you messed with his head." They'd be having a discussion about ethics, but later -- *after* the city was safe. Gina took Dakarai's hand, twining their fingers together. "So he won't be back with sniffer dogs or bringing in the troops?"

"Possibly. But the spell covers everything in this shop. They won't find anything dangerous."

"But there are a whole bunch of things in those jars with the potential to go boom," Gina guessed. "Mix a little of this, a pinch of that, and pow?"

"Of course." Dakarai straightened up with an effort. He winced as he twisted from side to side, popping out a kink in his spine. "I'm a mage. Nothing about magic is safe. Remember, if you please, the dragon is well aware of this himself. He'll use it against us if he can -- and you see how he has." He reached under the neckline of his sweater and tugged out the heavy ankh necklace beneath. "Help me sit down, would you?"

Gina let go, quickly searching the front of the store for anything that would do in a pinch. She found a flattened, taped-together vinyl stool behind the shop counter and rolled it forward, squeaking all the way. "Randall, here," she directed. "I've got one side of him if you've got the other."

Dakarai let himself be manhandled down onto the stool. "Thank you," he breathed, dropping his head between his legs. "This won't do," he muttered. "This just won't do."

Randall knelt beside his lover. "What do you mean?" He squeezed Dakarai's thigh, a movement Gina recognized as his way of lending comfort. "What's wrong?"

The long curls on Dakarai's head waved to and fro as he moved his head in denial. "This isn't normal for me. I should have been able to cloud the man's mind, mulish as it was, without breaking a sweat. Yet here I sit with my heart pounding. Something's wrong."

Gina's muscles tensed. Oh, no. Oh, hell, no. If they had a chance at all against the dragon, her mage, the one who fed her power, couldn't be running on low batteries. She dropped into a crouch next to Dakarai. "What do you think is going on?" she asked urgently.

He made a gesture of uncertainty.

"Not good enough." Gina pushed at him. "Think, Dakarai. What drained you? Was it purifying yourself from the dragon flame? It would make sense. A session like the one you've been through would put anyone down for the count."

"No. It's more than the flame that's eaten... is eating through my magic. I feel... like a sieve." Dakarai spread his hands, fingers wide. "The power flowing through me would normally be contained, a reservoir to draw on. But now it leaks away, trickle by trickle."

"So there's a hole in your bucket. We look for a way to plug it back up." Gina looked expectantly at Randall. "He's been teaching you. Do you know what to do?"

Randall looked alarmed. "We've only done meditation, basic energy transfers, trance states. Crossing over into your dream was like an explosion. I'd never managed anything like that before, and it totally threw me, or would have if I hadn't had Dakarai to hold onto. Which pretty much tells you what kind of magic expert I am."

Most of his answer wasn't helpful, but Gina seized on part of what he'd said. "Energy transfers. Dakarai's juice is low. Can you help boost him back up? Are you strong enough?"

Randall flexed his arms. "I can try."

"No." Dakarai indicated they should wait. "Randall has the power, yes, but he's not skilled enough to fight against this. I think I recognize it for what it is now."

The realization settled heavily as a ball of lead. "A dragon attack," Gina said flatly. "He's come after me with dragon flame, against the city with the rain of fire, and now he's poking holes through your magic. What's next? *Who's* next? Randall? Is he going to shrivel up and collapse?"

"Not if we stop the dragon first." Dakarai looked up with a bit of the vitality Gina becoming accustomed to seeing spark to life in his eyes. "If I have my magic, I can protect my Randall, and you, my -- Gina."

"But how?" Gina argued. "You said you're leaking."

"Rapidly." Dakarai took a deep breath. "Soon, I won't even be able to float a pencil. And I have to concentrate. I was spreading too widely, covering a full city block. The dragon punched through my shield with his fireballs as easily as poking a twig through a tissue."

"You were trying to protect the city."

"Yes, but at what cost? If I'd failed to keep you safe, either of you, the dragon would have won and laughed in the remains of our faces. No. I have to regain my strength, and I must focus it on the three of us."

"While the city suffers?" Gina protested.

"I don't think there'll be another such dramatic attack. It was meant to get our attention and to shatter my concentration. Which it did, admirably, on both counts." Dakarai sat up a little straighter. He arched back, stretching out his muscles. "Movement helps me think," he explained. "A bit like Sherlock playing his violin."

"Whatever does the job for you," Gina urged. "Put your brain to work. Figure out a way to stop the drain and get yourself back in shape."

"I'll do anything I can to help." Randall bent to rub his cheek against Dakarai's. Dakarai turned his head to a side so their lips could meet in a kiss, another lingering embrace glowing with the affection they felt for one another.

When Dakarai drew back, parting reluctantly, he gave Randall a heartbreaking smile. "I know you will. You've always been by my side, giving me everything I need."

"And you, me," Randall replied, cupping the back on Dakarai's curly head. "When I needed someone the most, there you were. And there you've remained."

"We two," Dakarai murmured.

"The pair of us," Randall agreed, tipping their heads together.

Watching them, Gina began to feel very much like an extraneous part of the equation. What these two shared went beyond what she and Randall had had together. Even when they'd been young and she was full of zest for her destiny, she'd hidden the worst from Randall to keep him safe. But Dakarai knew everything, and he shielded both Gina and Randall.

What would life have been like if she'd known how to tap into the resources just now opening up before her? Would she have kept on fighting the dragons? She felt a shaft of resentment. Maybe Dakarai *should* have interfered. But no, she wouldn't have listened to him at the time; she'd been so crazy to get away from it all.

But if she'd stuck around? If Dakarai and she'd been together to guide one another through damage control, shoring each other up with the powers that flowed through their twin lineages, there was no telling what they could have accomplished.

Huddling close to Randall, Dakarai began to speak. "There is a way we can conquer this, I think. Gina? The solution lies in the energy streaming between us. Can you feel it? Open your mind and let yourself sense the cords of power tying our physical bodies together."

Gina felt doubtful, but closed her eyes and let her mind go blank. She saw nothing at first but the back of her lids -- then, suddenly, a whiplash of color that made her flinch. The flickering light solidified into what looked like a cable, a rich dark red trailing off into the distance. It seemed to be solidly anchored in something strong and tough.

"You're seeing Randall," Dakarai encouraged. "It's natural you would pick him out first. Now me. Find the second cord."

Trying to search for another stream of light while holding on to the red one was like attempting to hack her way through a choking tangle of briars. Gina persisted, feeling her body tense with the effort.

At last, she saw it. A thin string, royal purple, floating off. It wavered, as if it were barely attached to whatever held it on the opposite end. "Is that you? The indigo?"

Dakarai sighed in relief. "It is. You see me. Am I as weak as I thought?"

Gina concentrated. "The cord is barely there. Looks like a kite string in the wind. Randall's is holding like a power cable. Am I supposed to look for my own, now?"

"No. You can't see your own, but I see it. Pure white light, slightly singed, but strong enough to repair any damage done to me and fuel my own resources. You can open your eyes, Gina." As she did, she felt Dakarai take her hand. His fingers were cool and dry as he lightly chafed her own. The grin he gave was half-wicked, half-earnest. "You are the champion, Georgina. Our healing comes from you."

Gina felt the truth of what he was saying, a rock-solidness in her heart. "All right. I have what we need. How do we get it to you? And what's going to stop what I feed you from leaking out again?"

"We stop the drain by sealing the holes. A blast of power should cauterize them and let me build up my resources again." Dakarai's hand slowed. "There are powders, there are herbs, there are potions, and there are spells. But, Gina, do you see this ankh I wear?"

She looked at the heavy thing, carved out of some dark, heavy wood. Picking it up, Gina felt the weight, and a surprising tingle of energy. "Is it enchanted?"

"In a way. It's an ancient symbol representing life and death, male and female, light and dark. I wear it as the expression of who and what I am. Of my power. It has the ability to heal."

Gina frowned. "So I channel my energy into the necklace? Is that how it works?"

"No. When the ankh is restored, I will be whole again. But it can't be replenished until the rest of my body is." Dakarai hesitated again. "Gina, look at me now. Do you like what you see?"

Puzzled, Gina examined Dakarai's face. It was sober and pale with concern, but still one she was growing fond of. She touched his skin delicately. "You're a good man," she said after a moment. "Confusing, but good. What do you have in mind?"

"Your willing cooperation and your eager participation." Dakarai drew in a deep breath. "The only way to channel your power directly into me with the force we need is if we share our essences. Randall, too, as an added layer on his shield."

Gina's mouth went dry. "You mean sex," she said after a moment. "The three of us fucking makes a power conduit?"

Dakarai nodded, deadly serious. Randall's hand tightened on his lover's leg. Both of them looked at her, waiting on her answer.

"Are you willing?" Dakarai asked softly.

Gina opened her mouth, then closed it.

She didn't know.

God. After all they'd shared, why didn't she know?

Chapter Nine

As Gina hesitated, Dakarai rose from his stool, weariness making him clumsy enough to stumble against her. “Don’t think,” he ordered. “Don’t question. Just feel.” Awkwardly, he put his arms around Gina and pulled her hard against his chest. “Let it be.” His breath tickled her hair. “This moment is ours.”

Gina searched for her inner equilibrium and, to her relief, was able to find it right away. Talk about a head rush. Two men at once, two hunks ready and eager to do whatever she desired. They’d obey anything she told them, whatever she chose.

Dizzily powerful. It should have put her on top of the world. So why did it make her feel as if she were going to quiver into pieces?

Yes, a voice whispered inside her head. Gina stiffened as she recognized the dragon man. See how shaken you are? You will never be able to overcome my moves in this game. You are a coward. Frigid. They are too much for you to handle. Give up, Georgina. Your mage and bodyman cannot hear us, but you can tell them how I will overpower you. Concede this match to me.

“No,” Gina said, blinking hard. No way would she give in to the dragon, not now. “I can do this.”

“Yes, you can,” Dakarai replied against the top of her head. “You have the strength to face something new. You are a warrior queen. And is it so bad, really?” he teased. “Your aura tells me you want this. Have craved this.”

“Both of us,” Randall said softly, coming up behind Gina and twining his arms around her waist, touching both her body and Dakarai’s. “Even if it weren’t for the dragon, I’d want you. I always have. Now both of us do. Let us in, Gina.” He nuzzled his cheek against her own. “We need you.”

With the three of them connected, Gina felt the strength of the bonds between them. In her mind's eye, Dakarai's fragile violet thread grew a little stronger, taking on power from just a simple embrace.

More, she felt a spark of desire awaken within her. Memories flooded back -- the springiness of Dakarai's curly hair between her legs, tickling her thighs. Randall touching her breasts, his thumbs teasing her nipples until her body shook with orgasm.

She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath, thinking of the two men together. Oh, yes. Randall the strong, the quietly tough, bent over that desk, its contents scattered everywhere in his mad rush to be filled. Dakarai behind him, hands on Randall's hips, plunging a gleaming cock in and out of Randall's body.

The spark grew into an ember, glowing brightly. The firmness of Dakarai's chest against her own and the warmth of Randall at her back no longer seemed frightening, but reassuring. More, exciting.

The dragon faded from her mind. Not forgotten, but temporarily gone, pushed to the background, where he disappeared from this moment.

Gina's heart quickened, the blood racing through her body. Her nipples began to perk up and her pussy started to tingle as she imagined all the things the three of them could do. Just them, two men and a woman, caught in a triangle of love, lust, and desire.

She opened her eyes to see Dakarai gazing down at her, his clear blue gaze watching, waiting for her reaction. "All right," she said through her dry throat. "I'm game."

"You have to be more than 'game,'" Dakarai murmured, beginning to swing her to and fro in a gentle dance. Randall followed, his groin rubbing against Gina's ass. She swayed, caught between the two of them, her heightened senses picking up the shower-fresh, yet still musky, scent of their bodies, the nearly twinned beats of their hearts, and their slow, rhythmic breathing. "You have to want this, Gina. Want it with all your heart."

Gina hummed as she held on. "I do," she said without hesitation. "Only... I don't know where to start."

"Here is good enough," Randall said against her ear. "Look this way and kiss me, Gina. Please."

Dakarai loosened his tight grip, but kept his arms circled around Gina as she turned to face Randall. Her hands went up to touch his face, still so much the young man she'd loved and lost, tracing the changes time had wrought. "I've always loved you," she whispered, and meant it.

"Kiss me," Randall urged, lowering his head to be in reach. "I need to know how much you missed me."

"More than words." Gina put her hands on Randall's shoulders, holding him in place. She raised her mouth to his and placed their lips together, clinging on with all the strength she had in her.

Randall groaned as they were joined. The harbor of his mouth fused to her own, sealing them against one another. He tasted the same way memory painted him, slightly minty, a little bit salty, wholly himself. He felt both soft and hard against her, his lips still closed but, she could tell, eager for more.

An old lover, one never forgotten, and you don't have the courage to open to him, the dragon jeered in Gina's mind. *Give up now.*

No, Gina refused, pushing the dragon back where he belonged. She lifted her hand to stroke Randall's cheek, running her fingers across the bristly stubble he wore, and then down his neck. She parted her lips, silently offering herself up to him.

"Gina," Randall whispered, breath warm against her skin. He fastened their mouths together again, tongue slipping out against her own. Careful at first, he lapped against her. The glowing need inside Gina made her want more. She licked back, encouraging him, and made an involuntary needy, mewling noise.

Randall seized her by the waist and held on tight. His kiss turned frantic and eager, tongue twining around hers and tugging hard. Gina let herself be swallowed by the sensations, her world dwindling down to Randall's touch and the exhilaration of newly awakening desire crashing into her like waves against the shore. That shore where she'd first pictured him again.

Gina imagined them back on their crystalline beach, the fantasy so easy to fall into, she almost felt the heat of a Caribbean sun on her back. Palm fronds and the ripe scent of coconut milk. Randall's hands skating up and down her wherever he could reach, a greedy man who couldn't get enough.

She withdrew slowly, sucking at Randall's full lower lip. "I wish we had been there for each other all along."

"We'll make up for lost time." Randall kissed her again, quickly this time, giving her just a taste, although Gina tried to cling to him. He pushed at her, gently nudging her around. "Are you able to do this with Dakarai along for the ride?"

Gina gazed at the waiting mage, an expression of yearning and hope on his face. She felt a thrill of power at knowing Dakarai, whom most women couldn't touch, was so eager for her. "You want me?" she whispered, giving in to impulse and tangling one of his curls around her fingers. She pulled at the ankh with her other hand, feeling the magic fizzing inside. "Not just because of the power?"

"I would want you even if there were nothing else happening and no one but you and me together in this moment." Dakarai covered her hand, the one over his ankh, with his own. "You make me burn."

"More than the dragon flame?"

"I ache for you." He pressed down on her knuckles. "You have my heart."

"Then have the rest of me, too." Gina leaned in to kiss him tenderly, brushing their lips together. "We belong together, don't we?"

"As we always have, and always will be," Dakarai replied against her mouth. "I would be more than your mage, Georgina. Gina. Do you need me as much as I need you?"

"Do you need me, too? Like he does?" Randall asked hopefully.

The ember of desire began to spread, sending a glow through Gina's stomach. "More. Both of you." Randall had been her lover, and Dakarai had come into her life as a surprise, but there were bonds between her and them that went beyond the magical. She *liked* Dakarai -- his dry sense of humor, his intensity, his power. Thinking about what he could do made her shiver in anticipation.

"Then a real kiss?" Dakarai asked, seeing her reaction, his face intent but eyes glowing darkly with desire. "Let me taste your lips."

He was closer to her height than Randall. Not a short man, but nowhere near as tall as her beloved big ox of a guy. Dakarai only had to bend a little to reach her, although he tipped her chin up with two fingers that seemed to smolder against her soft skin. "And all I ask..." he whispered.

Gina kissed him.

This was different from her embrace with Randall. Dakarai was eager from the start, and the way he moved his lips was like music. They danced over her own, pressing here and gliding there, teeth nibbling at the fleshy underside while he sucked at the top.

Dakarai kissed like no other man on earth. Even if his magic was depleted, he had enough to charge their contact with sufficient power to make her covet more. Chuckling low in his throat, the mage obliged, pressing their faces closer with a hand behind her head. He toyed with her loose strand of hair as he kissed her, tugging in a way that didn't cause pain, but inflamed her senses.

"More," she breathed, curling and uncurling her fists. "Hungry."

"Ravenous." Dakarai deepened their touch, finally bringing his tongue into play. Unlike Randall, he refused to be baited by a combatant, but took complete control, rubbing against her in short strokes like striking a match against tinder.

Gina felt herself sag toward the mage, pressing both fists against the muscles of his chest to brace herself. Randall readjusted his grip, helping her stand when her legs might have gone wobbly.

When Dakarai pulled away, he looked dazed, but his grasp on Gina was firmer. "Clothes," he said, lifting the edge of Gina's crop top. "Too many of them. I want skin to skin."

"My turn, then." Gina took hold of the bottom of Dakarai's warm sweater, sliding it up over his hard stomach. Unable to resist the urge to caress his skin, and then to bend and kiss it, tasting the salty flavor of his skin, she reveled in his moan.

Dakarai tugged at Gina's hair, pulling it free of its French twist. "Don't tease," he rasped. "Do it."

Gina chuckled and did as she'd been asked, yanking Dakarai's sweater up and over his head. He raised his arms so the whole thing could slide off. The muscles of his chest gleamed, but not as if he were sweating. This was power radiating through his skin. Too tempting not to fondle. Gina took her time with touching every ridge of muscle and licking at his nipples, rising up into stiff peaks beneath her tongue.

Dakarai gasped. "Randall," he managed. "Now go to Randall."

Gina turned again in the circle of their arms. Randall was already halfway out of his brown sweatshirt, firm stomach on display as he struggled with the sleeves of the garment. She let him finish stripping the shirt away on his own, focusing instead on lavishing attention on every bit of skin as it was uncovered.

Randall combed his fingers through the now loose waves of Gina's hair. "You'll make me crazy."

Yeah, but what a ride, Gina thought giddily. She moved toward the drawstring on Randall's pants, no longer concentrating on anything but getting him -- no, both men -- naked. One tug and the string came loose. Randall's pants, baggy to begin with, fell down around his ankles. He kicked them off impatiently and stood still, chest out, waiting for Gina's reaction.

The sight of him made Gina's mouth water. When they'd been young, Randall had been enough to take her breath away, and he had been a boy then. Now, honed with muscles and an air of experience, he burned with his own inner light. It wasn't like Dakarai's magic. Randall had pure strength, the might of a bear, held in check by the force of his will.

And his cock...

Gina gazed at the organ, fascinated. She remembered seeing it for the first time and wondering how something so big could fit inside her -- and how, when he'd pushed within, the way her body had stretched to allow him entrance. Her pussy began to throb, recalling how just a little while ago he had been inside her once again. Time hadn't dulled the thrill. And while at first it had all been about the rush, now she had the time to appreciate him.

Going down on one knee, Gina gazed at Randall's cock rising above her. Damned height difference; she couldn't take his prick into her mouth the way she wanted to, but that didn't mean she couldn't work with what she had. Make him feel good.

She remembered how. Knew what he liked.

Raising herself just a little, balancing on the ball of one foot, Gina flickered her tongue across the lightly furred surface of Randall's sac. He flinched and uttered a stifled cry, which almost made her chuckle. His cock jerked, brushing her hair. But it wasn't enough. There needed to be more.

And more was what Gina gave her former lover. Moving carefully, she sucked one ball between her lips and gave the egg-shaped organ a good going-over with her tongue, rolling it back and forth.

"Oh, God! Gina!"

He tasted like heaven, and his musky smell sent Gina floating on a cloud of bliss. She playfully tongued his flavorful skin and then moved to his other testicle, drawing it in quicker. Her handling was a little more rough this time, not enough to cause pain, but enough to let him know she meant business.

"Hey, don't forget me." Gina felt Dakarai brush her head. "I touch you, and I feel the power. But the man in me wants to feel your sweet lips." He pulled her hair gently. "Share."

Laughing, feeling the sparking fire of lust catch into a curl of flame, Gina stood. The men swarmed in, arms around one another, trapping her in the middle. Their chests heaved as they struggled to keep control of their passion, their need, instead of pouncing on each other or on her before she was prepared.

They were ready, though. More than ready. One hard cock nestled against her dampening pussy, and one pressed insistently at the small of her back. Randall and Dakarai smelled of potent men, dark and pungent, frantic to sink their swollen erections into something tight but yielding. They pushed at her, back and forth, sawing her between them.

God, what a thrill. Gina closed her eyes to better savor it as her pussy grew wetter in anticipation. Her body pulsed, eager for what was to come, eagerly awaiting what she knew would soon experience.

She wasn't afraid. She welcomed it.

Exultation flooded Gina's head. A day ago, who would have thought "Mary" would end up like this? But she'd shed her disguise, and now, as her true self, she stood between two men desperate for her, for each other. But no matter how ready they were, Gina knew she could order them to do anything, and they'd obey. Her hands held the reins; she had the authority to lead them wherever they needed to go.

The power made her feel like the warrior queen Dakarai had called her. A woman from a long and mighty line who knew what she wanted and who wouldn't hesitate when it came to getting what she craved.

"Undress me," Gina commanded, her voice coming out husky and laden with sex. "Both of you at once. Let me feel your hands on my body."

"For you, my lady, anything." Dakarai's voice was strained, but urgently willing to do as he'd been told. Randall said nothing, but pressed a hot, biting kiss to the nape of Gina's neck.

The men seemed to come to an unspoken agreement as to who would claim what. Dakarai's nimble fingers went to the fastening of her jeans, unzipping them with a quick tug.

He buried his nose in her pussy, breathing deep, tongue flickering out for a taste of her juices.

"Not yet," Gina scolded, despite the thrill Dak's illicit sampling of her flavor caused. "Randall isn't finished."

"Almost there," Randall rasped against Gina's ear. Caressing her stomach, he pulled the crop top up and over her head. Hair tangled in her eyes, but when she shook her head to clear it, she found Randall's hands helping to smooth the strands away. She purred, leaning back against him, able to feel how primed he was from the quaking through his muscles.

He wanted her. They both wanted her.

And she burned for them. No enchantments, just pure desire, fire licking across her nerve endings. "Now," she bid them, arching into Randall's strong arms. "Hands on me. Both of you."

They were quick to action. Randall cupped Gina's breasts, lifting the twin globes and balancing them in his palms. His touch was gentle as a feather, fingers ghosting over her nipples, which puckered under his caress, rising into hard nubs. Dakarai took Gina by the hips and pushed his face forward into her throbbing pussy once more, taking one light, delicate lick along the seam of her labia.

Not enough. "Harder," Gina insisted. "No holding back."

Her partners exhaled a heavy breath and rushed her with the force of their passion. Dakarai plunged into Gina's pussy, his agile tongue laving her from top to bottom, feasting on her juices and making appreciative sounds. What he lacked in experience at oral sex on females that he might have gained with a little more practice, he definitely made up for in enthusiasm, especially when he found her clit and began to play with the button, teasing and tapping it with his tongue.

Randall clasped Gina to him, rough but not bruising. He rained kisses down her neck, the curve of her throat, her shoulders, wherever he could reach. His hands roamed over her breasts, thumbs rubbing hard tracks down their fleshy length and squeezing from beneath, then rolling her nipples between his thumbs until the nubs tingled and burned.

Caught between them, Gina moaned and writhed, double-stimulated and... more. When she closed her eyes she could see the cords of power rippling among them. Randall's glowed red-hot, as if it were iron in the heart of a furnace. Dakarai's rippled, waving to and fro, but slowly gathering solidity and a glow to its rich purple color.

When Dakarai gave her clitoris a hard tweak, Gina came, the orgasm bursting over her and taking her by surprise -- his purple cord spasmed, then began to shine.

She opened her eyes, head lolling on Randall's huffing chest. He still held her breasts, but loosely, as if he were barely able to concentrate on what he was doing. Dakarai lifted his face, gleaming with Gina's juices, and reached up to take her hands.

"Yes," he urged. "It's working."

"I saw them. The cords of power."

Dakarai shook his head with a soft laugh. "Oh, how clever you are, Gina. Look at how you're growing in your own strength." He fought for every word, obviously struggling against his arousal to be clear. "I can see you, wanting the both of us. Binding us together."

Gina roughed up his hair. "No magic necessary," she replied softly. "Just man to woman to man."

"You are remarkable." Dakarai placed a kiss to her thigh. "Can we go further? Are you willing?"

The question didn't require any thought. Gina blazed with the need to have the men, both of them, inside her. "Oh, yes," she said in a rush. "But how?"

"Let us do the work. Turn around again. Face Randall."

Gina pivoted in the circle of her men's arms. Now it was Randall's cock pressing against her pussy. She felt herself tighten in anticipation, almost drooling at the thought of his fat cock pushing into her again. She lifted her head, neck swaying like a dandelion's stem, and watched him through a lust-clouded gaze.

"Ready for me?" he asked in a whisper.

"Always have been. Always will be."

Gina moved forward, but Randall stopped her with one hand between her breasts. "Wait for Dak. Needs to be in at the same time."

For this first moment since this had begun, Gina felt a frisson of fear. She'd never... not up the ass. Randall had been interested, back in the day, but they hadn't gotten around to it before the dragon that drove them apart. "Will it hurt?" she asked Randall, searching his face.

Randall shook his head. "Dakarai knows what he's doing." He bent to kiss her, a quick tussle of mouth against mouth. "Relax."

Behind her, Gina heard a grunt of satisfaction and the sound of a cork popping out of a jar. Dakarai stroked her back. "Let your muscles go," he requested thickly. "You'll feel wonderful."

Gina hung onto Randall as Dakarai's slim fingers parted the cheeks of her ass. The digits felt slick and oily against her skin, slippery with something she couldn't identify. He probed at her rear entrance, whispered reassuring half-words against Gina's shoulder, and penetrated her with one finger.

"Oh!" Gina bucked against Randall, then back toward Dakarai. The men were right. It didn't hurt. It felt amazing. Magic or lust? She didn't know. But she craved more. "Please?"

Dakarai chuckled. Another finger poked in, stretching her open with a burn that was beyond good. Gina groaned and tossed as he dilated her hole, his touch moving in a harsh dance which sent her hunger for this skyrocketing.

“Now?” she begged, pussy and ass both empty and desperate to be filled. “Say it’s now.”

She felt the blunt pressure of Dakarai’s cock lining up against her stretched anus. “When you say you’re ready,” he managed. “Are you?”

Gina tossed her head, hair flying. “Fuck me.” She said it again, deeper and needier. “Now. Fuck me now!”

The men shuddered simultaneously, and then, as one, pushed their cocks into Gina’s eager channels. She froze for a second at the paired penetration, doubling the intensity she had once been used to. Yet as her men continued their slow, driving entrance, she found her muscles grasping at their pricks, clinging to the intrusions that rubbed against spots she knew were good and ones she’d never known would be so wonderful.

“You like this?” Dakarai asked, nibbling at her shoulder on the opposite side from where the dragon had bitten.

Gina nodded drunkenly. “Oh, yeah.” Energy soared through her, focusing on the two cocks now buried balls-deep in her pussy and ass. “Move.”

“Can feel you through her,” Randall whispered. “So hard.”

“Hard,” Dakarai gritted out. “Move.”

Gina uttered a cry as the men withdrew and thrust forward. They moved in tandem, emptying and filling her. Each pull out left her empty and aching; each push in inched up a feeling of power swelling beneath her skin. She felt like a vessel being filled, not just with sex, but with a mighty burst of mojo her body seemed hardly able to contain.

The thin sac of virile vitality within her began to rupture, spilling over. She rolled her eyes and saw white light pulsing down the length of the two men’s energy cords, shocking them as if with lightning.

“Oh, God, God! Wait-- wait--” Randall rushed to lower his mouth to Gina’s breast, sucking in a nipple. His lips clamped down around the nub as he came, flooding her cunt with strong jets of seed. Behind her, Dakarai held on tightly enough to hurt as he reached his climax, too, hips jerking against the hard-clenched muscles of Gina’s ass.

She was the one to feel him ripple and shake. From a shiver, it grew into a full-fledged, whole-body twitching; only his hands were still as he held on to Gina with a death grip.

“Dakarai?” Gina queried, trying to turn her head, but still pinned between the two men. “Dakarai, what’s wrong?”

He choked out something she couldn’t understand.

“Randall.” Gina turned to him, searching his face. “What’s happening?”

Randall didn’t look worried. Instead, he seemed to glow with pleasure. “Just what we wanted,” he soothed her. “Don’t be afraid.”

She had no choice but to trust him and hung on for dear life as Dakarai spasmed, his cock slipping out and leaving her empty.

"Dakarai," Gina whispered, praying to any unseen force who might be listening that they hadn't done something wrong. That this had been the right thing to do. That they hadn't given Dakarai too much power out of their desire for one another.

Dakarai groaned and fell backward, landing on the floor with a thump. Randall withdrew from Gina and rushed to his lover's side, helping the man up. Although sticky with fluid and, once again, weak as a kitten from her climax, Gina hurried to kneel by the mage as well.

When he looked at them, his gaze shimmered with iridescent color, and then he began to shine. Bright white light mixed with purple surrounded him like an aura, outlining his body, making his form hot to the touch.

"It worked," he said simply. "We worked. We're stronger than ever."

Gina breathed out in thanks. Words of affection sprang to her lips, and, unable to stop them from escaping, she buried them in the damp curls of Dakarai's hair. When she had control over herself, she managed to fix her gaze on the mage's face. "We have the power?"

"In plenty." Dakarai gave Gina a push. "Break through the walls, Gina. Face the dragon now. Let him see how mighty you are."

Gina didn't question him. He was her mage, and he was whole again. He knew what was best.

Shutting her eyes, she breathed in and out, and let herself slip away into the black space where she would find the dragon.

She knew he would be waiting.

Chapter Ten

This time the rush through not-really space was familiar. Gina rode the swells buffeting her through the tunnel in her mind to the place where the dragon lived. No hands tried to stop her as she flew, straight and sure as an arrow, gliding in on the crest of her power -- and the power of her men.

Gina knew the journey had come to an end when she felt rough granite blocks beneath her bare ass. They were cold as ever, grating against her unprotected skin, but solid and real.

Words the dragon man had spoken earlier clicked into place, making sense. "You aren't just in my mind, are you?" she asked, eyes still closed. "This place you call home. It's somewhere both of us can reach. Maybe it doesn't really exist, not physically, but you manifest it as a place where you feel safe."

She lifted her eyelids to look up at the dragon man on his throne. His scales shifted abruptly from color to color, indigo to cobalt to sky blue.

Getting to you, am I? she thought in exultation. *All of us are. We three, Dakarai, Randall, and myself.* "You've got trouble, big guy," she said, confident. "My forces are gathering, and they've got my back. I feel safe here now, too. The playing field's even."

"Is it?" The dragon man snapped his tongue out once, twice, three times in rapid succession. "I have the power to create a dimension out of nothingness, and you feel no fear?"

Gina unfolded her legs from beneath her and stood. She squared her shoulders and stared, unafraid and unashamed, at the dragon man. "It's all magic."

"Yet magic is what you depend on," the dragon man said, his face growing sly. "So dependent on your mage's paltry human skills to defend your tender hide. You put your faith in his so-called power, do you?"

"I've seen what he can do." Gina shrugged. "He's a match for you."

"Can he do this?" The dragon man leaned forward and exhaled a plume of fire, heavy with oily smoke. Gina jumped back before the flame could reach her, her throat automatically retching at the stench. His fire smelled of burning flesh.

Gina struggled to clear the air in front of her. "He can protect me," she insisted. "And you missed."

"On purpose," the dragon man hissed. "A warning shot. Next time you tweak my temper too hard, I will scald the skin from your bones."

"Big talk, little action," Gina scoffed. She could still feel the power pulsating inside her body as she stepped forward onto the scorched mark the dragon fire had left on the stone floor. "If you could do that, you already would have."

"Honestly, you have no comprehension of my battle plan." The dragon man sighed, as if he were trying to teach a particularly stupid child. "There is a game humans play, called chess. I have -- or before I was the only one, we had -- a similar pastime. I was a master. You would barely make it through half a game."

"So?" Gina challenged.

"So," the dragon man replied, leaning forward, "you may have might on your side, but you have no strategy. I am at least two steps ahead of you -- ha! No, more like a thousand! All you and your pitiful forces are able to do is trail along in my wake, applying your fragile human bandages to the wounds I tear open."

Gina paused, a hint of doubt crossing her mind. She sensed he was telling the truth; how, she didn't know. But everything seemed right. She and Randall and Dakarai had first come together to defeat the dragon flame, but they hadn't been able to do anything to block the fireballs. Dakarai's power shields over his neighborhood had been shredded by the dragon attack.

"You see?" The dragon man chuckled, leaning back in his throne. "I am winning, Georgina. Why should you fight any further?"

"Why would I give in?" Gina held her ground. "I am a descendant of the Saint. He was the first to see what kind of danger you and your kind are. We've lived to bring you down." She glanced around herself at the piles of ash. "Thanks for doing a lot of the work for us."

"Sss!" The dragon man shot forward, his taloned hands curling into tight fists. Gina could see fangs dropping from the roof of his mouth, wickedly sharp things gleaming at the tips.

Hit a sore spot, huh?

Gina scooped up a handful of powder and let it trickle through her fingers. "This place is full of decay. It smells like a mausoleum... and you're the only thing hanging on to life."

"Smells, oh, yes, let's talk about those. I can smell what you've been up to. Semen and foul woman's juices and oils to lubricate passages. My, my, imagine the three of you together. Tell me, are you such a whore that you reek of sex every time we meet?"

A dig like that would have shamed “Mary” into cowed silence. Not Gina. Not anymore. She folded her arms under her breasts, displaying them and the marks of passion Randall had left. “You won’t embarrass me. My mage and my bodyman are tied to me. We’re lovers. From what I was taught, it happened sometimes with a George and his helpers. Not always three, sometimes just a mage or just a bodyman, but lovers. There’s no shame in what we do together.”

The dragon man ticked his head back and forth. He unfolded his fists and touched the tip of his chin with one talon. “No, no. A true George would not need the power of a mage or the strength of a bodyman. That you have them is an advantage to your side, but not enough to defeat me.” He puffed up like an adder. “Come, if you think you can. Have a shot, your best shot. No magic, no tricks. We will fight hand to hand and see who comes out on top.”

Gina remembered his easy defeat of her before, and the bite which had left her with a ring of scars. She fingered them, feeling the rough circle of tissue. At the same time, her body tensed for the attack. “Why should I believe you won’t cheat?”

“I? Cheat?” The dragon man placed a hand against his chest as if he were shocked. “You have my word, should you choose to accept it, that whatever passes between us here is no more than honest battle.”

Gina knew she shouldn’t trust him. But the urge to prove herself burned in her heart, the pressure of a lineage trained to fight the dragons egging her on. “You swear?” Gina asked, shifting her weight from side to side on her bare feet. “What do you have that’s holy?”

The dragon man blinked, his no-color irises narrowing as the pupils dilated into a diamond shape. “I have nothing,” he said coldly. “Accept my word or do not. The choice is up to you.”

Gina’s mind whirled. Dakarai had pushed her into this. He wouldn’t have done it if he hadn’t thought she was ready. But what if he’d been high on the power, supercharged and ready to take on the world? Would his judgment have been impaired?

But Randall hadn’t said anything. He was her strong right arm. If he’d had the chance, if Gina hadn’t been so eager to charge, would he have had something to say? He might have advised against this.

Gina knew she had the power, but she also had no idea how to use it. And, of course, the dragon man would be aware of her struggle.

To fight, or not to fight? Could raw strength and a backwash of magic be enough?

“And if I turn down your challenge?” Gina wanted to know.

The question earned her a clicking noise, the sound of a schoolteacher tsking over a student fumbling her lessons. The dragon man let his taloned foot tap the floor, the sound reminiscent of a rattlesnake’s warning.

Gina readied herself for the strike.

It didn't come. Apparently, he wasn't done dueling with words yet. "What kind of a George would you be, then?" the dragon man taunted. "So much bravado under your tender bronze skin. I threaten you with the tips of my claws and the edge of my teeth, and you tremble. Perhaps you are not up to the standards set by your ancestors." He paused, drawing out the silence as if mocking her. "Or are you George enough, after all?"

Was she? Gina felt more prepared than she *had* been. A little more powerful.

But afraid.

Yet wouldn't anyone who wasn't a fool be nervous in this creature's presence?

"I'm ready," she said steadily, balancing herself. "Do your worst."

"To you, a mere woman?"

"Women have the power to change the world." Gina shook hair out of her face, knowing she must look like a barbarian. "Cleopatra? Elizabeth I? Joan of Arc?"

The dragon man curled his lip. "All so-called noble females, named as heroes by your puling race, but cut down in the end by this pitiful disease called humanity. Had they interested me, I could have destroyed them with a thought."

"If humanity's so pitiful, then go ahead and see what you can do," Gina challenged. "No matter what the dragons did to my line, I'm still here, and there must be something about me you're putting off facing or you would have killed me the first time around. If you weren't prepared, well, so much for what you said about being a thousand steps ahead of the game."

The rattlesnake buzz grew louder. "You try my patience," the dragon man warned.

"Good." Gina bared her teeth. "Let's do this."

The dragon man showed off his glistening fangs. "Very well. But look how generous I am! A spear, for you to defend yourself with." He beckoned with one talon. A deadly sharp blade shot through the air toward Gina, point first.

She caught it in one hand and drew in a deep breath as the sense memory of holding one of these washed over her. In practice, in battle. The firmness of the solid wood shaft made her arm feel stronger. "Generous of you, indeed," she said, not trusting him one bit. "What's the catch?"

"Why, none at all." The dragon man stood up, rustling and hissing and clicking. "You are truly prepared, then?"

Gina lifted her spear. "Bring it on."

He cackled. "As you wish. Face *me*, mortal."

The overpowering stench of sulfur was her only warning. An explosion of blinding light and rending flesh knocked Gina out of her battle-ready position. She hit the granite floor hard, scraping the tender skin of her knees and then her rump. Unable to see, she thrust her spear up with one hand and shielded her eyes with another.

As the light dimmed, Gina felt the weight of something massive looming over her. Its shadow, ringed in a halo of luminescence, kept her from getting a good look until her eyes adjusted.

When they did, she wished they hadn't.

No longer cloaked in a male form, the dragon stood above Gina, one massive horned foot on either side of her shoulders and her feet. Titanium-tough blue scales completely covered his body. And his face! God. Only the colorless eyes were the same. His visage had transformed from the features of a man into the thrusting muzzle of a lizard, opened wide to display every wicked tooth, each vicious point three times the size of the ones he'd worn previously.

He was easily the largest of his kind she'd ever seen. The previous dragon, the one that had sent her world flying apart, had been a third of this beast's size. She'd been in the peak of her fighting prime then, prepared for anything -- and look what it had done.

What would this monster be capable of?

Gina stared, frozen, as the dragon spread flapping indigo wings, threw back his head, and roared.

Chuffing, he lowered his gaze to her. The intelligence present there was so much more alien than before, yet keener than the edge of her blade. "Do you still want to fight me, little one?" the dragon whispered, his foul breath blasting into Gina's face. "Do you think a little spear will stop me?"

Gina got a better grip on her weapon's wooden handle. "If I fall, you're going down with me," she brazened.

"I think not." The dragon swiped at Gina, scoring her shoulder with surgical deftness. The slices barely bled. "You are mine."

"Guess again." With all the might she could muster, Gina thrust her weapon up and into the dragon's belly.

Hot damn! Got you, you bastard. The blade pierced what she'd hoped would be softer scales and sank halfway to the hilt. *Big and bad, huh? And you didn't even see that strike coming? Or did you think I wouldn't really have the balls to attack?*

The dragon roared and blasted out a pillar of fire.

"Strategic retreat," Gina said, scrambling out from under his stamping feet. She reached out for Dakarai's power cord and, somehow, managed to push power along her own bond to give his a sharp yank. "I'll be back, and I'll be able to take whatever you can dish out, no matter what shape you take."

The dragon glared, plumed smoke out his nostrils, and lunged for her.

The sight of his razor-toothed mouth was the last thing Gina saw before the safety of blackness swallowed her whole.

Dakarai had heard her call.

Thank God.

Chapter Eleven

“Again,” Gina demanded. She slapped the length of wood, once a dowel rod, in the palm of her hand. “I almost got him that time.”

Dakarai perched on the edge of his cashier chair. He sighed and waved his hand. The remnants of the faux dragon he had conjured up, all light and show, disappeared completely.

“Hey! What’s the idea?” Gina spun on Dakarai, waving her pointless spear at him, then rotated her shoulder joint. The magician had used his special decoction on her latest wounds and healed them. “I have to make up for all the time I wasted. I’m so out of practice it’s pitiful. The dragon knows it, too. And I was getting there. One more in the gut and he would have been mine.”

Dakarai’s look was one of deeply tried patience. “Perhaps. You’re too sloppy in your approach, though. Let Randall help you.”

“He’s my bodyman.” Gina stood firm, defiant. “It’s his job to hand me the spears, make sure my armor is on right, everything else. I’m the one fighting here. Going to be fighting. The dragon’s coming after me, and soon. I can feel it in my bones.”

“Ah, yes. Your bones. It’s interesting how you’ve developed this sixth sense after having been the subject of a truly threatening attack.”

Gina dropped her makeshift spear to the curling linoleum floor, where it clattered and rolled away. “You’re saying you doubt me? You weren’t there, Dakarai. The dragon’s animal form is huge, and I know he can touch this world if it wants. He’s out there somewhere, waiting.”

“It makes sense the dragon would -- could -- have conjured up an astral plane on which to fight. And as his own chosen battle ground, it would resemble the place from which he actually came. But do you actually think he’ll be content to leave the clash and fray there?”

Dakarai reached out and tapped the top of a dusty leather book he'd pulled off one of his shelves without looking, knowing exactly where it rested.

"Why not?" Gina glanced at Randall. "Give me another of those fake spears. Dakarai, make with the mojo. I need to practice."

Randall looked at Gina, then at Dakarai. He hesitated, then shook his head. "Listen to Dakarai, Gina." He sounded quiet but firm. "I'm just the bodyman here. He's the mage."

Gina planted her hands on her hips. "Now you're ganging up on me."

"That's not what we're doing at all."

"Sure seems like it to me." Gina's lips thinned with irritation. "I'm telling you, everything inside my head -- there are all these voices shouting at me -- they're telling me it's time to fight. Soon."

"No. It's time to prepare. These are two entirely different things." Dakarai thumped his book. "This duel will come down to far more than jabbing the dragon with a pointy stick."

"And you have a better idea?" Irritation crawled under Gina's skin like an itch she couldn't scratch. She rolled her shoulders, trying to shrug it off. Being pissed wasn't going to help. Channeled anger, yeah, there was the good stuff. Controlled rage could help fuel her in the fight. She couldn't let trivial aggravations crawl across and under her skin like ants. "Dakarai, I know what I'm doing."

Dakarai stood. He brushed his hands against his jeans, ridding them of the dust his reading had gathered. The calm he radiated irked Gina all over again. God, didn't the man know what was on the line here? The dragon loathed humanity. Would have wiped it out if he could, like the rest of those "weak" lizards. For some reason -- maybe because there was still a George in the world -- he couldn't break through completely. But once she was gone, there would be nothing to stop him from raining down destruction on the humans he despised. "Let's go over it again."

Gina groaned.

"Gina." Dakarai stood firm. "How can I help you if I'm not exactly sure of the details? One more time."

"Fine." Gina gave in to get him off her back. "You pushed me, and I went through the whatever it is, the gateway, to where the dragon faced me down. Full of ashes from burned-up dragons, rough, cold stone, et cetera, et cetera."

"And when he first appeared to you, he was as you've seen him before?" Dakarai persisted. "Shaped like a man?"

"A man with scales. Blue." Gina frowned. "I did notice this time his pupils were diamond-shaped, not round."

"Ah. You see, you left this information out before."

"One little detail."

“Every crumb of knowledge helps!” Dakarai snapped. “You demand I take you seriously as a warrior while you train. I require you give me the same respect as your mage. I can’t help you prepare unless I know everything, down to the last scrap. And you, Gina, are the only one to have seen the dragon. All I have is your word to go on. And if you don’t give me everything I need, how am I supposed to help you fight? Hmm?”

Randall stood up from where he’d been sitting on the edge of Dakarai’s shop counter. He moved between Gina and Dakarai, his arms held out to keep them apart. “Easy, guys. Take five.”

Gina glared at Randall. She couldn’t say Dakarai was *wrong*, just that he was making her squirmy with all his questions. That she was full of fire and ready to go back for a second try. That she wanted to keep the city safe in case the dragon came out of hiding. Dakarai knew all the answers to the questions he asked. She’d told him all she knew.

But careful, careful, careful was his motto, and it had begun to drive her crazy.

Randall didn’t look like he was moving anytime soon. He stood like a tree rooted in the scuffed-up floor of the magic shop, arms outstretched in solid branches. “I mean it. Take five.”

Dakarai eyed Randall, measuring him up, then nodded. He retreated to his desk, where he automatically reached for and then dropped the book on dragon lore, tented his fingers under his chin, and closed his eyes tightly.

Gina huffed and turned her back with her arms folded across her chest. Men! Everything was a problem with a solution. All this logic got on her nerves. Couldn’t they see it was time for action, not contemplation?

Speaking of which, though... Gina couldn’t feel anyone looking at her, but her skin still crawled as if there were thousands of people she couldn’t see staring at her, paying attention. Kind of like when her grandfather -- Grandpa George, of course -- had given her the eye when, as a kid and chock-full of pride, she’d showed him what she’d learned about spears. She shrugged, trying to brush off the sensations, but they stuck firmly in place.

“Okay,” Randall said after Gina and Dakarai had settled into place. He was calm, a mediator between them. “Gina, I know you’re worked up for a fight. I remember all your energy from days gone by. Back then, you hardly ate or slept when you were on the hunt. Everything was about getting to the dragon.” He quieted his voice. “You focused so hard on the thing you were about to fight that you forgot about who might get caught in the crosshairs.”

Gina prickled with indignation, then slumped a little as his words hit home.

“That’s what came between us in the first place,” Randall went on. “Rushing in headfirst spun you into a life as ‘Mary.’ We can’t let that happen again. You are who you are. Who you need to be.”

She heard the soft pad-pad of Randall's gym shoes walking up behind her. A big hand came to rest between her shoulder blades and flexed its fingers. "You don't have to prove anything to us. We're on your side."

Gina lifted a hand to pinch at the spot between her eyebrows. "I don't think you're against me. I... I just wish..."

"We're taking this seriously." Randall moved closer, the warmth of his chest spreading over her back. "It's not just your legacy, you know. It belongs to all three of us. We have to work together as a team."

"I was," Gina protested.

Randall slowly enveloped her in an embrace, arms circling her waist. Gentle as a lamb, big as a bear, stubborn as a goat. "No. You were throwing commands around like we were supposed ask 'how high' when you said 'jump.' That's not working together."

Frustrated tears stung at the edges of Gina's eyes. She dashed them away, aggravated with herself for acting so... God, this wasn't a movie where she was the fair maiden tied to the railroad track while Snidely Whiplash twirled his mustache. She was the hero riding to the rescue.

But if she were being honest with herself, she couldn't call Dakarai and Randall "sidekicks." They *were* a part of this. She might be the pointy end of the stick, but they were the magic and the strong arms behind her thrust and parry.

"Okay," she said. "I give. I'll dial it down from eleven. Good enough for now?"

Randall hugged Gina closer and pressed a kiss to the back of her neck. "It's a start. Don't go anywhere, okay? Dak's next on my hit parade."

Gina snuffled. "Since when did you get so smart?"

"Since I learned, the hard way, what a dragon could do to people." Randall didn't raise his voice or say it accusingly, but the dart went straight to Gina's heart. She shuddered at the pinpoint accuracy, but held on firm.

The warm, comforting arms around her slowly withdrew. Randall kissed Gina again, this time on the top of her head, and then backed away.

"Dak?" Randall was still quiet, calm, the eye of the storm swirling around them. "You ready to listen to me?"

Gina couldn't help turning around to watch the two lovers. She couldn't stop herself from thinking of them as such, with herself the third wheel along for the ride -- and God, that stung.

Why? Did she actually think the three of them were still going to be a thing -- temporarily or permanently? -- if the dragon was done for?

Her hand clenched around an imaginary spear. No. Not if. *When*.

Randall was different in his approach with the other man, kneeling in front of Dakarai. He tapped at the mage's knees, prodding them apart until they bracketed Randall's broad shoulders. Randall circled Dakarai's ankles in a loose grasp, probably just letting the man know he was there. Grounding him.

"You okay?" Randall asked, face to face.

Dakarai hesitated. Emotions twisted across his face, annoyance chasing doubt chasing worry chasing anger, over and over again. "She's impossible," he said at last. "My father, and my father's father, both of them warned me about the Georges when they were in a temper. I never thought, though, that she'd be so... difficult. So stubborn."

Randall thumbed the bony part of Dakarai's ankles. "Not to be sexist, but is it because she's a woman? A Georgina, not a George?"

"What? No. God, no. She could be a hermaphrodite for all that gender matters," Dakarai protested.

"I don't think so. Face it, Dak... you tip pretty hard to the 'gay' side of the Kinsey scale. It's not just the need to get all your magic right. It's your attraction to Gina that's got you worked up. And I'm okay with how you feel." Randall's hands slid further up Dakarai's legs. "You love her. You still love me. I love you both. Nothing has to end. Things are just going to shift."

Gina's eyebrows went up. Dakarai had told her she had his heart, but... love? Great sex, sure, but real, actual love? Last time she'd checked, quick trips around the world didn't equal deep, meaningful connections with guys. But was it possible...?

Dakarai grasped Randall's shoulders. "I never wanted anything to come between us," he said hoarsely, the usual calm preciseness of his voice slipping. "Not a man, not a woman..."

"Not a dragon?" Randall rubbed Dakarai's calves. "We can't control everything, Dak. Not even magic keeps things in line. In everything that goes down, we deal with what we can. For you, that means teaching Gina how to defend herself. But that's only one part of it. The rest means appreciating her as a woman -- and not a threat." He kissed one kneecap. "Can you do what I'm asking?"

Dakarai looked lost for words, but caressed the top of Randall's short black hair. His fingers sifted through the strands as if through wheat grass. "At the risk of repetition, when did you get so smart?"

"With you?" Randall chuckled. "Practice." He let go of his soothing grasp and slapped Dakarai's thighs before scooting over and to a side, out of the way. Not touching, but still reassuring and solid. "We're okay now. Or we will be. You two, work together. But remember, I'm watching you."

Gina couldn't help cracking a smile. Looking at her face, Dakarai grinned as well.

"We were rather going at it like two tomcats on a fence, weren't we?" he asked, clearly amused.

"Claws out and spitting mad." Gina decided she'd be the first to close the distance between them. "Randall's right. About everything. I've lost sight of the small things because I was too focused on the big picture. You lost track because you were intent on the little stuff. Okay, not so little. I mean, you're going along having a great time with the love of your life, and here I come. Big shock, huh?"

Dakarai stood and extended his hand. "Very big. But we'll cope." When their fingers met, his were cool and dry. "Perhaps we should start with something besides dragons and magic." He pulled her closer.

Startled, Gina went. She slipped into Dakarai's arms, her breasts pressed up against his chest. He gave a small shiver -- appreciation, apprehension? She couldn't tell. Her own heart rate, which had slowed down after the stick exercise stopped, began to speed up.

"You sure you want to do this?" Gina lifted her arm to touch one of Dakarai's soft curls. "I mean, I think I know what you have in mind. But you don't have to."

"Nothing's forcing me. But I want to." Dakarai swallowed, his Adam's apple jerking. He licked his lips. "Would it be such a hardship?"

"No." Gazing up at the mage's lean face, Gina realized she'd fallen for him somewhere along the way. He wasn't Randall, but he'd worked his way into her heart.

"Then I can...?"

Gina nodded. "Kiss me."

Dakarai lowered his head and lightly placed his lips over Gina's. She waited, not moving, wanting to see what he'd do next.

The pressure of his mouth increased. He tilted slightly to the left, sealing his lips more tightly over her own. With a deep breath, Dakarai opened his mouth and tentatively flickered his tongue over the seam of Gina's lips.

She opened for him, letting his tongue in to play. He tasted of the ginger beer he'd been drinking, spicy and sharp. When he nibbled at her lower lip, Gina moaned softly and fell hard against his chest.

God, this was good. And strange, considering all they'd done together. How weird that a simple kiss could feel so new and oddly exciting. But then, Gina reasoned, what had happened before was crazed lust or the three of them working against the dragon's attacks. Damage repair.

This was different. Just her, just Dakarai. And there was something between them. Not just the sparkle of magic that accompanied everything Dakarai did, but a thrill of chemistry uniting them at the joining of their mouths. Gina moaned again, feeling her nipples begin to harden. She could feel Dakarai's cock stir.

She wondered which of the two of them was more taken by surprise.

All too soon, or so it felt, their lips parted. Dakarai's eyes were dilated as Gina gazed into them. He trembled once, then gained control of himself and nodded. "You see what you do to me."

"I do." Gina stroked his face, amazed and wondering at the way he automatically leaned into her caress. "Think we can handle it?"

"We can but try." Dakarai covered her hand for a brief moment. When he let go, he offered her a smile and then stood back, but kept a hold on her hand. "Let's go back to the dragon. Calmly, this time."

"Does that mean the books?"

"I'm afraid it does." Dakarai looked apologetic. "It really is true: the more I know, the better I can help you."

"Okay. You got an extra chair around here? If I'm going to be studying, I'd rather not stand."

"Afraid not," Dakarai apologized. "But I could make one."

Gina blinked. "You could?"

He gave her a lopsided grin. "I am a mage, after all. Do you trust me?"

Gina knew he meant more than with the chair. She inclined her head. "Go ahead, Dak. Do your worst."

Dakarai tented his fingers again and stared hard at an empty spot near the desk. There was a strange sound, like two sheets of sandpaper rubbing together, and a simple wooden stool materialized into solidity.

"Good job," Randall said warmly. "But he's had practice. You can't imagine how many times we got caught without lube."

Gina cracked up. "Pays to be prepared, boys. The way you two are, one of you should carry at all times." She rapped the surface of the stool with her knuckles. It felt firm and looked like something you'd buy at a retail chain. "This'll work." She sat down. "Okay. What do you want me to do?"

"Something we should have started with in the first place, only I was too worked up to think about it. I blamed myself for thrusting you into the dragon's plane," Dakarai admitted. "By the bye, I think I know precisely where that might be now. It's a shadow land, not precisely physical or ethereal. An in-between place. There are plenty of them, though in these modern times, few know they exist, much less how to get in. They're secret. They're safe. That which hides them is called a 'reality veil.' They provide easy access to any world someone might want to plunder. It would make sense for the dragons -- those our current foe defeated, and himself -- to make a home there. However, if a mage knows what he's doing, he can find a way *in*. If you know what you're looking for, or who, it's easy to find the path you need, be it through your mind, Gina, or through a mage gate of sorts." He tugged his earlobe. "I must remember that," he said thoughtfully. "It could be useful knowledge. I

had located your essence and was struggling to pin down your location to come and get you--

"While I was yelling for spears and acting like a--"

"A general?" Dakarai gave her a sideways look. "We can take care of this now, though. Here." He handed her a pencil and, after a quick rummage through a desk drawer, pulled out a sheet of what looked like vellum. "Draw what you saw."

Gina hesitated. "I'm not an artist. On a good day, I can do stick figures."

"You're forgetting the magic again. I'll guide your fingers as your brain recalls the details." Dakarai wrapped Gina's hand into position around the pencil. "Try."

It was one of those "trust or don't trust" moments, and Gina knew she had no choice. It was her mage's call. She summoned up the memory of the dragon looming over her, starting with the spear thrust into his belly, and began to sketch.

"Whoa!" Her hand had moved to create basic lines, but a finely detailed rendering emerged.

"I told you," Dakarai enthused. "My magic serves as a guide to the art. As you remember, the details become clearer." He focused on the emerging shape of the dragon. "This is the beast's true form, not the mimicry of humanity you've said he normally wears?"

"Yeah." Gina sketched on. "What's with his charade, anyway? He hates humans. The guy spits more insults than a talk show host. Why would he disguise himself to look like one of us?"

"To make you think he's weaker than he really is? To take you off your guard?" Dakarai suggested. "Or perhaps he's bragging with the appearance he takes. His natural shape would be that of the beast. Mage lore, which he would expect you to know, tells of transformations taking massive amounts of energy. He's the last. No tribe to draw strength from, so this is how he displays his might."

"Figures," Gina said absently, as she continued to manipulate the pencil. She'd finished the dragon's thick hind legs, vicious talons and all, then moved up his trunk -- sticking the spear in for the sake of spite -- before heading toward the beast's front half. His forelimbs were easy. So were the wings, batlike now she'd had a clear view of him. But when she came to the face, Gina faltered.

From his position on the floor, Randall reached out, lending Gina his warmth. "You can do it."

"This feels wrong," she admitted. "It's just this sense of -- I don't know -- dread, maybe? Like if I finish the picture, it'll..."

"It should just be a drawing, but..." Dakarai put his hand over Gina's, stilling it. "This may have been a bad idea. A picture of him could give the dragon focus, give him a gateway through the veil and bring him out into the open."

Gina's first impulse was to roll away and drop the pencil. After a moment's thought, though, she shook her head. "Say you're right, and everything goes boom after I finish this. We're working together. We can handle him."

Dakarai paused, forehead knotting in thought. "The magic is strong right now." He flexed his hands. "If he does appear, I can force him back into the nether plane."

"One hundred percent sure?" Gina had to ask.

"I won't know until I try, but I feel as if I can. Do you think that's good enough?"

"Works for me." Gina tapped the sharp edge of her pencil against the paper. "Randall, will you give me one of those makeshift spears? One with a sharpened edge?"

Not saying a word, Randall got up and headed for the box of dowels. He rummaged among them until he found one which had a pointed end and brought it to Gina. As he passed it over, he inclined his head as if to encourage her.

Gina took the weapon, the cool weight of the wood solid and semi-reassuring in her grip. A dowel, sharpened or not, wouldn't be much use as a weapon if she needed one, say, if the drawing summoned the dragon, but it was better than nothing. "Are you with us?" she asked. Again, she had to know. The whole team thing. They had to work as a unit.

Randall's expression revealed nothing but trust. "I have faith in you and Dakarai," he said, simple and to the point. "Finish the drawing."

"Here goes nothing." Gina figured the magic would work no matter how clumsily she drew. Switching the pencil and spear between right and left hands, she applied the soft lead to her sheet and drew.

Her dragon's head and muzzle appeared on the vellum. Gina shuddered in distaste as she drew in the razor-keen teeth in the long muzzle. The pencil moved on its own and created a fireball being expelled from the dragon's jaws. She heard a crackling sound, as if the fire were actually there and burning.

She tensed.

And waited.

And waited.

And nothing happened.

Gina let go of the tension thrumming through her body and went slack. "Okay." She drummed the picture with the eraser end of the pencil. "This is what our boy looks like. Does this help, Dakarai? Randall?"

Less than you might think.

"Shit!" Gina jumped back, knocking the stool to the ground. It clattered away.

On the page, the dragon turned his head. He leered at them, eyes glittering with malice despite being no more than pencil lines. *Knowing what I look like has no bearing on what I*

can do. And why should I wait for you to puzzle it out? You swore to protect the city, Gina. Let us see if you can shield it now.

"Erase the head!" Dakarai scrambled for Gina's pencil. "Quick!"

Like she was going to go slow! Hastily, Gina scrubbed her eraser against the vellum. The lines smeared, curls of rubber piling up in their wake. She didn't stop until half the dragon's trunk was gone -- and then it was only Randall's hand on hers, pulling her fingers open, that made her stop.

"Easy," he soothed. But he didn't promise everything would be all right. Neither did Dakarai, whose fists were working in and out of tight knots.

Pandora's Box was open, and all hell was about to break loose.

Chapter Twelve

Randall shouldered open the hidden rear entrance to the shop -- which, as Dakarai had informed them, he'd been very careful the police did *not* know about -- and made his way toward the front. "God, it's sizzling outside."

"You're back." Gina turned to him in relief and then took a second look of appreciation. To counter the increasing heat outside, he'd stripped down to a black muscle tank top, but still gleamed with sweat. He held two bulging plastic sacks, one in each hand. The weight of them pulled the handles to the breaking point. There were red welts on each set of fingers where he must have had to stop and adjust the burdens he carried.

He didn't seem to care. "What's the news?"

Before sending Randall out to the hardware superstore to get anything he could find that might work as a spear head, Gina had gone to work on Dakarai. Dakarai had hemmed and hawed about brain rot and mental pabulum, but in the end he'd produced an ancient black and white TV from the inner bowels of his shop.

"It probably won't even work," he'd warned as Gina sat down tailor-style in front of the thing. "God only knows how old the thing might be."

"Circa 1970s, looks like to me." Randall had leaned on Gina's shoulder, peering at the station dial, then adjusting the foil-coated rabbit ears. "See what you can find out. I'll go take a look for myself while I'm outside."

All the while he'd been gone, Gina had only been able to pay half her attention to the TV set. Despite the way it flickered and the picture rolled up and down, making it look like scrambled porn, she had been able to tune into a local news station.

What she'd seen wasn't good.

"Glad you're safe." Gina unfolded her legs from beneath herself and rose to wrap her arms around Randall's neck. She gave him a rough squeeze and then, because she was there, a quick kiss. "I thought something might have happened."

Randall looked slightly startled when Gina pulled back, then grinned and ruffled up her loose strands of hair. "Nah, no worries about me. I'm the bodyman, remember? Your strong right arm. Although, no lie, it's one hell of a mess outside."

"Tell me about it." Gina eased herself back down and nudged at the humming TV with one sneaker. "From what I've been able to make out, things are going insane."

"Insane is a pretty mild word." Randall put his shopping bags down. Their contents clinked and clanked against one another with a comfortingly hard metal sound. "Everywhere I went, people were at each other's throats."

"Yelling, screaming, in everyone's face?" Gina guessed wryly. "But no one actually did anything much worse than use their fists."

"How'd you know?"

Gina gestured to the TV. "No reports of shootings, knifings, or other attempts at murder. No rapes."

"Probably not for long." Randall was such a big man, broad through the shoulders and strong in the legs, he had a hard time hunkering down, but he did his best job at self-compaction and joined Gina. He gave her a sober look. "Like I said, it's getting rough. Men are pushing at women. Vice versa, too. I broke up one crowd of hysterical women surrounding a cute twenty-something guy."

Gina chuckled and nudged her ex. "So you noticed he was cute, huh?"

Randall pinkened. "Yeah, well... no matter what else is going on, I'm not blind."

"Is he okay now?"

"Should be. He was right on his apartment steps. I told him to drop everything, go inside, and lock the door. Never saw anyone move so fast before." Randall added a noncommittal noise to the end of his speech. "If the ladies don't go up and knock his door down, I guess he'll be okay."

Gina made a fist and pounded the floor. All she accomplished was sore knuckles and a brief moment of steadiness on the TV screen. "I should be out there," she complained. "I need to protect the city."

"Gina." Randall took her hand in his own, chafing the fingers. "You're not one of the X-Men, okay? The best way for you to get these people safe is to kill the dragon. Once he's gone, the rest of this stops."

"If he shows himself." Gina scowled. "Why's he hiding? All he's doing is pissing me off."

"I think that's what he wants."

Gina fell silent and stared at the TV. The dragon had been in hiding since his picture came to life -- although his influence was, as they'd both observed, definitely at work. The pervasive anger and sexual heat were proof of that and still appeared to be his weapons of choice.

If he'd just come out in the open where she could get a crack at him!

"This is Tamara Sykes reporting live from the steps of City Hall," a woman declared on the TV. Her expression was stamped in an ugly scowl. People wrangled behind her, one of them jostling her forward, almost into the camera. "Conditions in town continue on the verge of a riot. Hey! Hey, aim the lens at me, not them!"

The picture had drifted away from the reporter to the men tussling behind her. She grabbed the lens and wrenched it back to focus on her, tangled hair and all. Professionalism and pure wrath were clearly at war deep under her skin. Her words came out clearly, but almost snarling.

"Police have been called out in force. Some say this is the result of the earlier firebombing that, as yet, has no explanation. There are rumors that the exploding missiles are meteorite chunks. There are also rumors that this is part of an alien invasion. And if you believe in that, you probably believe Elvis is still alive, too." Tamara snorted. "Back to you, Neal, the fathead who thinks he's better than me because he sits behind a desk. Your hair's fake, Neal! You think you've got everyone fooled, but you're as bald as a baby! Yah!"

Gina sighed and twisted a dial to turn the volume down. "And so on, and so on, and so on." She turned to Randall. "What kind of stuff did you get?"

"Whatever I could grab in a hurry. I didn't want to be out there too long." Randall tugged one of his heavy bags over and began sorting through the contents. "A lot of hand gardening stuff. Hand rakes, spades, digging knives. Not the best or strongest metal, but they're a start."

"Yeah. They don't exactly sell swords or good old-fashioned killing spears at Lowe's." Gina took a trowel as Randall passed it to her. She tested the edge. Pretty blunt. "You think Dakarai could put an extra-sharp edge on these?"

"I don't see why not." Randall glanced around them, then looked puzzled. "Where is Dak?"

Gina pointed up. "Aerial feed."

Randall tilted his head back, and contrary to Gina's expectations, grinned. "Leave it to Dak."

Dakarai had his feet firmly planted on the ceiling, his arms spread out wide as if for balance. Hair floated around his face, sparks of static electricity jumping from curl to curl. His eyes were shut tight but his mouth moved nonstop, speaking some whispery, spidery language Gina knew she didn't have a prayer of understanding.

"I guess he's up to some mage stuff," she suggested with a grimace. "He wouldn't tell me much. Just said he was going to do what he could. Then he went airborne."

They regarded Dakarai for a moment. A glance at Randall told Gina he knew better than she did about what Dakarai was up to. "Spill," she said with a nudge to his ribs. "What's Mr. Wizard doing?"

Randall laughed without humor. "Protecting the city. Not letting contact with the ground poison his magic. Keeping all that rage, all that lust, from spilling over. It's why the place hasn't exploded yet."

Gina eyed her levitating mage. "Uh huh. And what happens if he lets go?"

"Once he's finished the spell, it'll hold for a while. It'll still only be a Band-Aid, though. Anything we do right now is just a stopgap."

A prickle of curiosity teased at Gina. "How do you know that's what he's doing, anyway?"

Her ex didn't take his eyes off Dakarai. "Educated guess," he said after a moment. "I got put in charge of the physical -- weapons, armor; wasn't able to get a Kevlar vest, by the way -- so it stands to reason he'd work with the metaphysical. Besides, it's like him. He can't stand by while others suffer."

Gina rolled the thought over in her mind. No, Dakarai couldn't, could he? The kind of man who'd ward and shield so many had to have a heart for the people. He wouldn't stop trying to protect them if he was able to help it, and she'd bet it would just about kill him when his hands were tied. She had to admire the man. Whether it would have been years before they'd run into each other, or whether they'd spent their whole lives apart, Dakarai would have kept his skills honed sharp in case he were called on to help her.

He wasn't all about magic, though the power was a big part of him. The magic came from the man himself, one Gina had learned was a decent guy, bighearted and exuberant.

She could see why Randall had fallen for him.

Randall sat close enough to touch, so Gina reached out and brushed his bicep. The tattoo she'd noticed before was an addition since they were last a couple, something heavy and tribal with jagged edges. It didn't have the professional look of most tats she'd seen. "Dakarai do this?" she asked, tracing the design. "Is it a charm?"

"Kind of." Randall reached to touch, brushing against her. Their skin snapped with static electricity where point met point, a small blue crackle in the air. Gina flinched away, then put her hand back. "It's magic. Guess you could tell." He gave her a rueful look. "Dak's idea."

"To protect you?"

"Partly. And partly just to put his mark on me. For the ordinary world, it's like a... not a wedding band exactly... I'm not sure what to call it. But when it comes to the mystical, it shows I'm under the protection of a master mage."

"Bet you could defend yourself." Gina fondled Randall's rock-solid bicep. "Which is kind of what I'm counting on you to do."

Randall flexed his arm experimentally. "I know." He frowned as he watched his muscles bulge and ripple. "Bodyman to the last of the Georges. Arms carrier, shield bearer, the hero -- heroine's -- battle bodyguard, just like in the legends. I didn't see my life going this way, but I'm not sorry."

The moment grew awkward. "So, what other tricks does Dakarai have up his sleeve?" Gina tried as a conversational gambit.

"Mmm. He can raise the dead."

Okay, not what she'd been expecting. And -- damn. He was that strong? "You're kidding."

"I've seen it happen. Only once or twice. Only when someone *really* needed to cross back over. It's not pretty. But he has the know-how."

"Remind me to stay on his good side."

Randall chuckled. The tension between them eased.

Gina shifted partially onto her hip, leaning against Randall's solid bulk. They remained quiet for a long moment. "I guess there isn't much to say about what's in the past," she finally offered. "Except -- I'm glad to have you on my side."

"Nowhere else I'd rather be." Randall let Gina rest against him. She closed her eyes briefly to look at the cords binding them together and found his pulsing with warm red light. Soothing, like the steady rhythm of a heartbeat. His actual heart thudded beneath her ear, a regular *thump-thump* which calmed her. He smoothed back her hair. "You and Dak. I wouldn't be by anyone else's sides."

Randall and Dakarai... Gina moved restlessly. "Tell me what it was like when you got together."

"You've heard the story." Randall sat still, placid. "He found me when I was lost and looking for something I couldn't figure out."

"You were missing me?"

"Always." Randall wrapped his arm around Gina, supporting and holding her close. "I wish you'd told me back then everything you knew about the dragons. How dangerous they really are. I could have prepared better. I might have been able to really help you, instead of getting blown away."

"Yeah. I could say I was a kid, I was a moron, I didn't know any better, and all of those would apply, but you're right. I should have said more." Gina tilted her head. "Would it have changed things?"

"Maybe. I don't know. After what happened, I had no reason to doubt Dakarai and his abilities. It was easier with him. A lot of things were. Falling in love was just natural between us."

"This big epiphany about you belonging together?"

"Not really. What we are just sort of grew out of being together every day. He kissed me, and I liked it." Randall moved his shoulder. "Things went from there."

"Went a pretty long way," Gina observed drily. "You'd have been happy with him the rest of your life if all this hadn't started, wouldn't you?"

Randall shifted so Gina lay more firmly against him. "Not exactly. No matter how good things were with Dak, I couldn't stop wondering about you. I think in the end I would have had to look you up."

"What about Dakarai?"

"He knew. Mage, remember? He saw my heart, and he knew it was divided." Randall began to play with a strand of Gina's hair. "No matter what happens, I'm glad we got to straighten things out between us. Which we have, right?"

Gina couldn't stop herself from lowering her fingers to stroke Randall's thigh. "Sort of. I can handle being part of a threesome when it comes to fighting. And we're pretty amazing when all three of us are naked together. But it feels like there's something... missing."

"Like what?" Randall dropped Gina's hair and laid his hand between her breasts. He didn't touch or suggest anything, but seemed to be waiting for her to make the next move.

Gina reached down inside herself and summoned a ball of courage. "Like one more time with only you and me," she whispered. Moving again so she was on her knees against Randall's leg, Gina reached out to caress the angle of his strong jaw. "It's the Three Musketeers now, I know. But I want you all to myself this once. Is that wrong?"

Randall turned to study Gina. She waited for his judgment, heart in her throat. This mattered. There was history behind the two of them which needed some closure, and she hadn't gotten it yet. Every gaping hole needed to be sealed.

"You are so beautiful," he said at last, mirroring her touch with rough fingers on the angle of her own jaw. "I never did forget what you looked like. Every time I closed my eyes and thought about you, there you were. I wanted you. Dreamed about having you under me again, legs around my waist." He voice roughened. "Fucking you."

Gina began to tremble in anticipation. "Please." The spot between her legs began to tingle. "One more time."

Randall hesitated. "Dakarai?"

From above their heads, they heard a chuckle. "Dakarai understands very well what needs to be done," the mage said, breaking off his chant. "I won't stand in your way."

"Thank you," Randall breathed. When he looked down at Gina, his gaze was hot, as if he'd been infected by dragon flame. With a thrill of delight, though, she knew this wasn't the result of any magical influence. The fire was all for her as a woman and a warrior. He cracked a grin. "You want a spear?" Removing Gina's hand from his face, he lowered it to rest over the crotch of his jeans.

Gina inhaled sharply as she felt the hard swelling beneath. "Now that's what I'm talking about."

Randall moved in a little tighter. "What would 'Mary' have done?" he teased.

"Screamed and ran."

Randall came closer. "What would Gina do?"

"Sit here and wonder what's going to happen."

He leaned in nearer still. "And Georgina? What about her?"

"She's going to tear your clothes off and have you right here." She felt strong; anything was possible, whatever she wanted. Slipping her hands under the shoulder bands of Randall's black tank, she gave them a hard jerk and heard them rip as the cloth parted.

Randall looked startled, then delighted. "Georgina doesn't play around."

"You bet your ass she doesn't." She felt reckless, like a biker about to slip her legs around a thousand-pound Harley and feel it roar to life. She shoved Randall's ruined shirt down out of the way and attacked his chest. From one tough pectoral to another, she showered him with hard kisses, leaving small bruises in their wake. When she reached a nipple, she twisted it hard between her fingers, bit, and then sucked.

"Oh, God!" Randall arched under her touch. "You do that again and I won't be able to keep my balance."

"Who says I want you balanced?" Gina gave Randall a shove, not too hard, pushing him over onto his back.

He laughed shortly as he settled onto the floor, then opened his arms wide. "Go to it, warrior woman."

Gina wasted no time. She knew what she wanted. His nipples were great playtoys, but her goal was further south -- Randall's tempting, hard erection pressing up against the fastening of his jeans. Didn't matter that she'd had a good look within the last forty-eight hours. Gina wanted to see again. Fondle. Taste.

"Easy, easy," Randall soothed as she eagerly pulled on his button fly. "One at a time. God, at least it's not a zipper."

"No waiting."

"Not if you don't want to."

Gina didn't. Like herself and Dakarai, Randall had had to do without underwear after the first few rounds of sex. As soon as the buttons were undone, his cock sprang clear of the jeans and out on display for her.

She ran her tongue around her lips, getting them good and moist. Memories of doing this when they were younger crowded thick and heavy in her mind.

"Get ready." Gina wiggled down between his knees and bent her head, a curtain of hair fanning out across Randall's stomach. He'd always gotten turned on by not being able to see, to only feel what she did.

"Do it," Randall said, hoarse. "Gina."

She was too hungry for him to wait any longer. Grasping the base of Randall's steely erection in one hand, she took the head of his cock in her mouth and sucked roughly. When he gasped, she took a light nip and then soothed the sting with her tongue. Her tongue swirled down as she drew more of his dick into her mouth. Never still, she teased him with fingers and lips and tongue until she tasted the first salty drops of pre-come.

Randall swore and rose up halfway, pushing at Gina's shoulders. "Stop."

Gina looked up through the tangle of her hair. "You weren't enjoying it?"

"Whoo. Too much." He managed to grin. "You almost pushed me over the edge."

Gina gave another teasing lick. "Not such a bad way to go," she said, wicked.

"Nope. But a quick suck isn't what I wanted, not after all this time." Randall wriggled until Gina sat up, sweeping stray locks out of her face. "You've seen what I've got. Now it's your turn. Take off your jeans. Let me look at your pussy." He ripped away the remains of his shirt.

She shivered deliciously at the crude turn of phrase, and her body rushed to obey. Scrambling to her feet, Gina made quick work of her zipper and scooted the denim down her legs. She kicked it aside and stood above Randall, cupping her labia. Damp for him, her curls gleaming with juice. She saw him notice, his nostrils widening as he breathed in her scent and his tongue flickered out as if he wanted a taste.

"Do you want to lick me?" Gina offered herself to him. "Use your own tongue on me? Turnabout is fair play."

"Oh, no." Randall's grin stretched broadly. "I'm dying to get inside you. Ride me, Gina."

She hummed with pleasure. Oh, God, yes, this she could definitely do. Her body remembered how, sinking down with a knee on either side of Randall's hips. She poised the entrance to her pussy above his cock, teasing him with the wet, warm drops beading on her edges.

Randall groaned. He curled his hands into fists. "Now," he ordered.

Gina felt the power soar through her as she lowered herself onto his cock. The penetration felt different from their new angle. Deeper. She clenched her internal muscles around his organ to make him writhe.

Then, flying high on the waves of energy spilling from their joining, Gina rode him. She slid up and down, her pussy's juices lubricating Randall's cock until he glistened. The feel of his cock inside her, so hard and so thick, stole her breath and left her panting. Randall thrust in time with Gina's movements, matching her stroke for stroke.

Unbelievable...

"Good," Gina managed to say as she bore down. "Good?"

"God, yes," Randall groaned.

"Yes," Gina hissed, picking up the pace. It was a wild ride that had her soaring, even as his hips cradled her on each downstroke.

More, more, more. She needed more.

"Randall," she gasped. "Move."

Her breasts bounced beneath her red crop top, swollen and aching for attention. Randall was right there for her, though. He reached up and seized them in one of those hands that knew her so well. His other set of fingers went to her pussy as it moved on his shaft. After teasing at her labia for far too long and yet not long enough, sending tingles through her, he slipped one finger inside and circled her clitoris.

"Yes?" he asked, rubbing the button with quick flicks. "Yes?"

Gina tossed her head, hair cascading down her back. She covered both of Randall's hands with her own, the one on her breasts and the one on her pussy, and rode him like a woman possessed. He thrust and bucked beneath her. Sweat began to roll and spray as they thrashed, getting in Gina's eyes, but she didn't care.

"Oh, fuck." Randall's hand tightened on Gina's breast. "Gonna. Can't wait."

"Don't," she said, reckless. "Touch me again. We'll do it together."

Randall's eyes rolled back into his head. Somehow, though, he managed to take Gina's clit and give it a rough jerk, the shaft of pleasure/pain rocketing through her stomach. She howled as her internal muscles bore down crushingly hard around Randall's cock, and she was propelled from one orgasm to the next as his hot seed splashed inside her, coating her channel.

Gina gasped for air, still clutching Randall's hands. Her body trembled with aftershocks. "Ohhh," she managed. "Randall."

"Gina." His fingers flexed weakly under hers. "Come here."

Gina slipped off Randall's cock and draped her body over his chest, their faces at just the right level for kissing. She wanted to taste him again and dragged him into a long embrace, tickling the roof of his mouth with her tongue while he thrust between her lips in a mimicry of the fuck they'd just had.

"Beautiful," a voice said, startling Gina. "And beneficial. The past is truly put to rest now."

Randall turned his head. "Dak," he said, stretching. "How long were you watching?"

"From up there, I saw and sensed all you did. I haven't been on the ground for long." Dakarai traced his hand along the edge of Gina's shoulder blade. "This was healing. Both of you needed it."

"We're not pushing you anywhere, but you're not worried about being third man out?" Gina asked. Once again, she needed to know the answer.

Dakarai radiated peace. "Not at all. Whether we come together as two or three, it builds the ties between us. And the magic." He reached up as if gathering a handful of pixie dust, and gazed at the nothingness between his fingers. "It's like salt in the Dead Sea. So thick. I can scoop it up and tame it to my will." His eyes began to glitter. "This is what we needed. This is the true force to fight the dragon with. To conquer him at our whim."

There was a pause. Gina shifted uneasily. "You shouldn't have said that."

"You really shouldn't," Randall agreed, raising himself.

"Damnation!" Dakarai began to sketch sigils in the air--

Too late. Gina felt a vast sucking on her back, as if she were being drawn through a straw, and was overtaken by the black. Traveling, she now knew, through the reality veil into the dragon's shadow land.

But as she went, she heard the dragon snarl: *This is not the true force, mage. You are mistaken. Again.*

Gina tensed in the freefall.

Well... shit.

Chapter Thirteen

Oh, no. No way was she going to land on her ass this time.

Gina wasn't sure which way was up and which was down in the void through which the dragon called her, but she could still feel her body, and that was good enough. Tucking her arms around her legs, she coiled into a tight ball and tensed her muscles. Waiting.

This time, when the hands began to brush at her, they flinched away. Some grazed her skin, jerked back, then fluttered their fingers over her again in -- what? Fear? Approval? Respect?

Gina could only hope.

She rolled her eyes in the pitch blackness of the void. Honestly, the dragon needed to learn a new trick or two. This inky nothing had been a mind fuck the first few times around, but now Gina knew that game, it wouldn't hurt her, and even if something in the void tried to harm her, she had Dakarai and Randall figuratively at her back. Their power was joined, braided in an unbreakable chain.

"Come on!" Gina gave a wild shake of her head, feeling hair lash her cheeks as she tumbled past the last of the hands. "Show yourself already!"

The darkness jerked to an abrupt stop, as if someone had freeze-framed a DVD. Gina found herself hovering in midair above the rough-hewn stones of the dragon's lair, not floating, just frozen.

"So eager to play," the familiar voice scoffed. "What do you intend to do, little warrior, if I keep you there at my leisure until I stroll over and slide a sword into your stomach? If I watched while you twisted on the blade? Drank your blood as it poured down my mouth?"

Even though she was pointed headfirst at the ground, Gina found her mental and physical balance and held on tight. "So what's stopping you? Do you want to play, or do you just not have the balls?"

The dragon huffed, a hot sulfuric blast of air, and let Gina fall. She and her men hadn't practiced this, but her reawakened strength and agility knew how to handle the drop. She tucked and rolled, doing a flip in midair, and landed squarely on her feet. The impact ricocheted up her spine, but she stood firm and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Look at you," she brazened. "Dressed up in your old man Jones outfit again. What's the matter, couldn't keep the old Godzilla action going?"

The dragon, back in his man-shaped form and solidly planted on his throne, coiled both fists on the arms and hissed at her again, forked tongue oscillating like a pinwheel. The sight made Gina laugh, which seemed to further enrage him.

"You are so puffed full of foolish pride," he spat. "If I were to prick you with one talon, you would deflate like one of your children's idiotic balloons."

"Nope." Gina thumped a hand over her heart. "Maybe once upon a time, when it was all show, sure. But now, what you see is what you get."

"We will soon discover the truth."

"Damn right we will." Gina faced off against him. "But what is with the human getup? Aside from some scales, those teeth, and a few wicked-looking nails, you could pass for any Joe walking down the street. Okay, a weird one, but still." She adjusted her position. "Thought you hated humans. We stink, we're weak, we're pathetic."

The dragon man snarled. "Push me no further."

"Sorry, can't stop now. I'm on a roll." Gina leered at the dragon man, goading him with her words as if they were spear points. "See, my boys and I were talking earlier. Figured it took a lot of strength to maintain such a huge lizard body. You need one or two of those special blue pills to keep it up."

"Blue pills?" The dragon frowned. "I need no medicaments."

"Doubt it. My guess is you burned out a long time ago. All those fights." She spun and delivered a sideways kick at a pile of dragon ashes. "Got to take it out of a guy. You don't have enough fire anymore to get the job done. Why else would this place be so cold? Your juice is running low, dragon. You're not all you could be."

"Pfah! I am no mortal that I should fall prey to any weakness." The dragon man spat, a steaming stream which was, no doubt, full of venom. "I am strong as ever I was."

Gina snorted. "Right. Big talk, little action. You say I'm wrong? Prove it. Change into the beast and show me I'm wrong. Let's see one more time just how rough and tough you are."

Gina waited to see if her goading would be enough. If she could just piss him off good and hard, she'd get him off his guard...

No joy. The dragon man's eyes narrowed but he kept a grip on his control -- mostly. He leaned forward on his throne, hissing, his scales flashing deeper and lighter blue. "Are you so

eager for a fight, little mortal? Even knowing what I can do to you -- what I *have* done to you?"

"I know what you can try to do. And yep." Gina felt a thrill and realized she was enjoying this. "Let's get it on. I want this over and done with."

"You stand there half-naked with no weapons and challenge me?" The dragon man gave a dry, crackling laugh. "Your confidence in your puny human ability amuses me."

"I'm not just any human." Gina's muscles thrummed, ready for the jump into action. "I'm a George, the last of the line. I can bring you down." On impulse, she stripped off her red crop top -- for once she'd been at least semi-clothed when passing through the veil -- and flung it to the ground. Being unencumbered by clothes made her feel like an Amazon queen, needing nothing but her own strength against the enemy.

Although a spear would have been really, really nice.

The dragon man scowled at her. "Your current audacity is not what I expected."

"I've been hearing that a lot lately." Gina thumped her hands together. "So, what were you hoping for? That everything I've gone through would leave me whimpering? I thought you wanted a worthy opponent."

Maybe not this worthy, she chuckled to herself; she could feel the power humming in every muscle. If she was right and the dragon man didn't have enough juice to change, she *could* bring him crashing down, weapons or no weapons.

"Cat got your tongue?" she goaded, urgent in her need to get the fight started despite her earlier arguments with Randall and Dak about rushing into things. "Huh? Or are you having second thoughts? Maybe you're not sure you can beat me."

Oh, those words hit home. The dragon man stood, flexing his muscles. They were big and strong, yeah, corded and tough, but Gina had Randall to compare him to. She wasn't impressed at the result.

"This is the battle that will be recorded in history," he hissed. "If you are ready to begin, then we begin."

Gina grinned, knowing she looked savage. Like one of her ancestors, facing down the beast. On the field, in a lair -- didn't matter. This was her heritage, and she could handle herself. She was sure of it. "Go."

Then, for good measure, she added: "Hoppy-toad."

The dragon man roared, infuriated by her insult, and launched himself off his throne. His powerful legs and something unique to his particular form propelled him further than Gina would have liked. He could have landed on top of her and smashed her skull against the paving stones, but even with the extra boost he fell a little short.

Baring his teeth, fangs down and glinting in the eerie half-light of the vast area, the dragon man rattled at her. He sucked on his tongue and spewed more venom. Drops landed on Gina's skin, sizzling where they made contact with her flesh.

Stung like hell, but she wouldn't back down. Dakarai could fix her up after the battle.

"You call a little razzle-dazzle a threat?" Gina asked, shaking stray droplets off. "I outlived your bite. Come to think of it, I beat your lust flame and your fireballs. None of your anger even touched me. Now, is it just me, or are you losing your touch?"

The dragon man lashed out with his talons, scoring four deep gashes across Gina's naked abdomen. If she hadn't jumped back, he would have opened her up and guts would be spilling. But she *had* moved, some lightning-quick impulse, and he only got into her skin.

The pain didn't weaken Gina. It made her angry. "Are you waiting to see if I scream and run away like a little girl? You'll be holding your horses for a long time. I'm not the innocent Mary I turned myself into but a George woman. I think I told you once before about the kind of power women have."

Blue lips curled back over the dragon man's vicious teeth. He didn't make a move, though.

"You're afraid, aren't you?" Gina guessed. "You think I can actually take you down." She deliberately looked at the dragon man's belly, where to her delight she saw a ragged-looking scar. "Got you pretty good with my spear, didn't I?"

"A flesh wound."

"Doubt it. I had that thing sunk deep in your underside." Gina feinted to one side, then quick as a flash of light, she jabbed the dragon man in his fading injury. *Ah!* Her blood sang as the dragon man winced and stumbled back. *Point to me.* "From weak to weaker."

"I will not lie down and die for you," the dragon man warned, even though his hand went protectively toward his abdomen. "Neither will I provide you with any more weapons. What do you have that makes you think you have a prayer of winning this fight, once it is begun in earnest?"

Gina laughed long and loud. "History," she said, and threw herself at her foe.

He made a choked sound as the impetus of her weight and the element of surprise knocked him off his taloned feet. Gina hung on for the ride, hands locked around the dragon man's scaly wrists, until they hit the ground with a meaty crunch.

She was smaller, but she knew how to use her size to her advantage. Gina twined herself around him in a parody of making love, drawing still more dynamite from the memory of her joining with Randall. "What about if I kill you with kindness?"

The dragon man choked. "You reek!"

"Home-brewed love juice." Gina rubbed herself against his scaly hide. "Finger-lickin' good."

He growled. "Damn you, woman! The scent of your wiggling human copulations never ends. What sort of whore have the Georges produced?"

"A damn good one, baby." Gina kissed the dragon man on his cold blue lips despite the bitter stink of his mouth, deliberately dragging her tongue along them.

He gagged. "Such a foul stench!"

"You don't like the bouquet, sugar?" Gina breathed into his face. "Smell me? This is what's going to bring you down. Me, my mage, and my bodyman. They're not here, not in the flesh, but they don't have to be. I have a part of them inside me." She rocked against where the dragon man's groin would be. "You ever hear of *la petite mort*?"

"Enough of this!" The dragon man writhed, his strength renewed and surprising. He rolled them over so Gina lay on her back, then freed his wrists. He could have thrown her -- it would have been the smart move -- but damn, he couldn't take any hint of an insult, could he?

Pride's gonna getcha every time, bucko.

His eyes were inches from hers and his rotten breath streamed into her face. "You mock me with the suggestion of mating. I would never release my seed into you. It would be blasphemy."

Gina struggled against the dragon man's weight pinning her down. "You never know," she managed to brazen out. "Bet I could suck the life out of you."

"You will not have the chance."

So I could have, Gina realized. Damn!

"It ends now. A pitiful fight after all my preparation, but I have no stomach for more." The dragon man pressed his forearm against Gina's neck and applied pressure. "Die, little human. The game is over."

Gina fought to breathe. It took a long time to choke a human to death, she knew. But to knock them out? A hell of a lot less. Which meant the clock was ticking. She clawed at the dragon man's arms, but they were hard as stone and all she got was stabs of pain as her fingernails split down to the quick.

No. It couldn't end like this. She was *not* going down.

Closing her eyes against the fading room, Gina reached out with her mind and found the strands of power binding her to Dakarai and Randall. Both were thick and healthy, pulsing with strength.

She jerked on them with all her might, shouting inside her head: *Get your asses down here!*

A taloned hand slapped Gina's cheek. "Look at me," the dragon man ordered. "I want to see your eyes as the life drains out of them."

He wanted to gloat. Gina kept her eyes firmly shut. She tried kicking with her legs, but bare feet were useless against something hard as marble.

The dragon man laughed. "How easily you die. Disappear into darkness, little George, and know I have won the fight between our kind. The last of the Georges falls to me. Me!"

"Not yet."

The dragon man howled, arching up. His arm left Gina's neck as he bowed backward, shrieking with rage. Gina got the hell out of the way, as far as she could go, scrabbling along the floor, rubbing her neck and shaking her head to clear the sparkles from her vision.

She looked up and laughed in glee. "You made it."

"Wouldn't have missed this." Randall said from where he'd moved behind the dragon. He pulled out a gardening spade, honed to a dagger point, dripping with dark and steaming blood, then strode to her. "Dakarai figured out how to get us here. He sent me ahead to be your bodyman. To help you with weapons. He's coming himself in just a second."

"How?"

"Later." Randall pushed Gina aside and brought his trowel up in a sharp jerk, piercing the dragon man's hide under the ribs as the creature rushed them, incoherent with rage.

The two stood for a long second, the dragon man writhing on the edge of Randall's weapon. He glared at them, diamond-shaped pupils ablaze with a diabolical light. "A good try," he said, lips flecked with blood. "But not good enough."

He grabbed Randall's wrist and bent it sharply to the right. Randall gave a yell of surprise and pain over the sound of bones breaking, automatically letting go of the homemade dagger. One solid kick to the chest and Randall was down.

Down, but not out. "Gina, behind you," Randall bellowed. She took a whip-quick look over her shoulder to see a canvas bag marked "Dakarai's Place," stuffed to the brim with bristling weapons.

Unfortunately, the dragon man spotted them, too. He growled and lunged at Gina again. A little knowledge was no bad thing, though. Gina spun out of his path, leaving him stumbling to a stop.

"Do not think yourself clever, human," he warned, rounding on her with a hiss. "That dodge was a lucky move."

Gina chortled. "I don't think so. Catch me, catch me, if you can," she taunted.

"You are *mine*," the dragon man roared. He leaped for her again, but the blood loss was making him sloppy. He missed his grab at Gina, then slipped in his own fluids.

Gina snatched a three-tined hand rake from the bag, now beside her, and waved it in front of him. The points were keen as daggers. "Give it up, Puff. Game over."

"You think so?" The dragon man began to glow. Light burst from his skin, rippling in waves. When he spoke, it was through a distorting mouth. "I think we've only just begun."

"Shit. Down!" Gina flung herself to the floor, careful of the sharp edges of her weapon, and covered her head. "Randall!"

A mighty roar echoed through the chamber as the light reached a blinding crescendo. Gina peeked out through slitted eyelids, cursing to herself as she saw the form of the beast solidify above them.

The dragon heaved out a ball of fire which blasted a dark spot against the floor, missing Gina by inches. The ensuing heat felt like it would crisp her skin.

Okay, so this is how the story ends, she thought to herself, gathering her strength. *Dragon chow. But I went out with a bang, not a whimper. And there's glory in one last stand.*

Scrambling to her feet, Gina ran hunched underneath the dragon's belly. She jabbed up between its forelegs with her rake, hoping to find a vulnerable spot -- but the gardening tool hooked in a scaly patch and hung there like an earring. "Shit!"

The dragon chortled, each chuff filled with deadly satisfaction. He stretched out one surprisingly agile forelimb and dealt Gina a hard blow, knocking her on her back. The weight of his foot pinned her in place like a concrete beam, pressing hard enough to strain her ribs and poke holes through her bare flesh.

"You can't keep this up," Gina panted. "You wasted too much strength holding that other shape. You're weak. I'll take you down."

He raised his chin arrogantly. "I hold my own."

"You'll crumble any second."

The dragon's eyes narrowed. "You know too much, little human. If I fall, I fall, but not before I tear out your throat and your heart." He lowered his muzzle to nose at Gina's neck. It was the most delicate of movements, and the most deadly. His hot, foul breath made her head spin even as she felt the edges of his fangs teasing the underside of her throat.

"This," he whispered, voice echoing off the stone walls, "this is victory."

"Yes." Dakarai's voice. "I would say so."

The dragon snarled and turned his head in aggravation. "Did you think to take me by surprise? Fool. When *her* bodyman came across, I knew you had found a way through to the reality veil. It took you long enough, for all I understand your ancestors knew of the necessary arcana. They taught you poorly, or you are stupid. What did you plan, to catch me off guard by delaying the appearance between bodyman and mage? Ha! You know me ill. And now that you are here, tell me, what can you possibly do? I have her at my mercy."

"True." Dakarai spread his hands wide. He began to glow, the radiance emanating from the ankh he wore. "You have one woman pinned. But I have an army."

"What trickery is this?" the dragon demanded. He pressed his foot harder against Gina's chest. She choked, imagining she could feel things inside begin to tear and rupture. "I see no army."

"No?" Dakarai clapped his hands together. "Look again."

Mist plumed from nowhere, cold as the grave, filling the chamber with its curls and wreaths.

"A fog?" the dragon scoffed.

"Not exactly." Dakarai beckoned to no one Gina could see. "Now. Come!"

The bellow of a mighty, massed force raged into their hearing. From out of the smoke, the shapes of men and women began to coalesce, each one dressed in battle armor, carrying either sword or spear or both. The heaps of dragon ash rose up into smaller beasts, their eyes glowing red with fury.

"No. How?" The dragon lifted his foot from Gina's chest. She lay where she'd been pinned, struggling for the energy to move her arms and legs, staring in wonder at the growing army of ghostly shapes. "What magic is this? What are you doing? Who are these creatures?"

"The Georges," Dakarai said with deadly calm. "And others who, I think, hold a grudge against you." He tugged at his ankh. It shot out a beam of purple light. "Attack!"

The shadows swarmed the dragon, weapons slicing and teeth grabbing scaly hide. The living dragon screamed, thrashing to and fro, trying to shake off the relentless shades. No good. As soon as he bucked off one, another surged in to take its place.

Blood spattered in thick gouts, painting the floor. Gina's dragon raised his throat, howling in pain. "No!" he roared. "I have worked too hard to be so cheated -- I have lived and breathed so long for this -- you cannot--"

"Can and will." Gina gathered her legs beneath herself. She was shaky, aching, and bruised, but not broken. "Randall?"

He had risen, too, his tattoo gleaming with an echo of the light coming from Dakarai's ankh. He cradled his broken wrist, but it didn't look like he would let the injury slow him down. "Name it."

"The best you've got."

He grinned fiercely at her and moved to his sack. What he withdrew with his good hand took Gina's breath away. It had once been a shovel, but the staff had been sawed off and the digging end honed into a deadly point. He held it out to Gina, urging her to take the thing.

No pressure necessary. Gina snatched the weapon and made for the dragon. Taking a gamble, she began to climb up the hordes of shadow figures. They supported her weight, even pushing her further up. How it was possible, she didn't know. But Dakarai -- leave it to him, eh?

One thing she had to be sure of, though.

"Who are you?" she whispered to a massive man who offered her a hand.

He grinned, teeth flashing in a thick, bushy beard. "A George."

Gina punched the air with her makeshift spear. *Hot damn!* Then, although she didn't have the time to stop and stare, much less cry, she smiled, eyes moist, when she saw familiar faces -- her parents, brothers, and grandfather.

The dragon's head whipped to and fro as Gina reached the top of her shadow pyramid. She could see blood leaking from the corners of his muzzle, from his nostrils, and from his eyes. But he seemed to sense her presence and stilled, those vicious colorless orbs glaring into her own.

Poising, Gina raised her weapon to strike.

"This is not how I would have this end," he hissed, voice a bare remnant of what it had been. "I will not be bested by a woman, a human woman!"

Gina studied him briefly. "Tough luck."

She drove the weapon home between the dragon's eyes, strength beyond any she'd ever felt pushing the shovel deep, shattering skull bones and digging into the soft meat inside.

The dragon bellowed, tossing his head. His tail uncurled and began lashing out at the shadows, at the stones of his realm, at the army attacking him.

"Gina, down!" Randall shouted.

The final George held up his hands to give her a boost. Planting her bare toes in his wispy palm, Gina lifted off. As if she didn't hurt at all, she tucked and rolled, somersaulting in the air and landing in a controlled ball on the floor, coming up on her feet.

She stared at the dragon, flailing in his death throes. He was slowly going under the shadows, their forms covering him in a misty blanket -- but he wasn't dying easy. Every thrash of his tail against the walls and pillars sent down showers of masonry dust. Chunks of stone began to fall like deadly rain.

Dakarai ran to her side and took one hand. Automatically, Gina reached out for Randall with her other.

"We did it," she said, glowing with pride.

"Georgina's dragon is no more." Dakarai pulled them around into a triangle, each bracing against one another's arms. "Ready to go home?"

Gina laughed. "Does 'home' mean a place with you? Both of you?"

"Always," Randall swore.

"And with me," Dakarai promised. "It won't be easy, but--"

"What worth having *is* easy?" Gina grasped their arms. "Get us out of here, mage. I want to go home and celebrate with my lovers."

"Might want to hurry," Randall suggested as a block of stone landed too close for comfort. "This place doesn't look too sturdy."

"The dragons made it their own. Invested it with their magics. Now that the last of them is gone, this particular shadow land will crumble. We must be safely back on Earth, or we, too, will be destroyed."

Gina glanced back. The Georges had backed off, and only the dragon ghosts were left to gnaw on the soft underbelly of the beast. It bucked one last time, weakly, then lay still. "What happens to them?"

"Dust to dust. The Georges I called up will sleep again, and the spirits of the dragons will rest once they've had revenge, if they're not obliterated in the fall of the shadow realm. Speaking of which, we *must* hurry."

"It's over," she whispered. "Over." A thought struck her and she chortled. "What the hell do I do with the rest of my life?"

Dakarai leaned in to kiss her, followed by Randall, their soft lips a counterpoint to the crashing, crumbling destruction of the chamber. "Finding out, Gina," he said softly, "will be the fun part. There are no more dragons to fight, but I think the world can always use a heroine. There will be other battles, and we will stand by you as mage and bodyman."

"And lovers?"

"If you'll have us."

"As if I wouldn't." Gina pulled them close, her lovers, her men. "Take us home, Dakarai. The future awaits. To the Batmobile, away!"

Dakarai hooted and Randall groaned and Gina giggled as Dakarai's magic flooded through them and the shadow land disappeared. Gina screamed with glee as they soared through the black.

She was Georgina, last of the Dragon-Killers.

And she would be Saint Georgina, first in a line of other heroes and heroines. She and Randall and Dakarai would be the start of another legend. She *knew* things would start happening as soon as they touched down. Challenges, duels, sorcery... love.

Bring it on, Gina thought excitedly. I can't wait!



Willa Okati

Although a relative newcomer to the field of e-publishing, Willa Okati has been writing since before she was old enough to pick up a pen. She thinks she knows where those dictated stories are hidden, but she'll never tell.

Willa is also very interested in the paranormal: magery, Wicca, New Age philosophy, transgender studies, and of course, writing. You can drag her away from the computer if you really fight, but you'd better be prepared for a battle.

She is owned by far too many cats, all of which have serious attitudes, and addicted to anything made out of chocolate or involving coffee. She is quiet, but has a very wicked sense of humor that springs out when you least expect it.

She loves to hear from readers, and always responds. You can contact her at willshenillshe@gmail.com, or visit her website to check out her work at www.willaokati.com.