



HELLCAT

By

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Cover art by Kat Richards, © copyright April 2006
ISBN 1-58608-871-8
New Concepts Publishing
Lake Park, GA 31636
www.newconceptspublishing.com

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CHAPTER 1

The young woman crouched low in the undergrowth, listening for signs that she wasn't alone. She was painfully aware of the risk that she was putting herself in by being here, and there was no such thing as being too cautious. Reflexively she gripped the dead wild rabbit tighter in her hands, slowly drawing it to lie flat against the back of her leg and out of plain sight. She waited, patiently biding her time until she was certain that it was safe to venture out from under the protective shadows of the forest that skirted the base of a towering mountain.

This was a planet of danger; all children born under the mountain's obscurity knew this. It wasn't just dangerous because of the various inhuman races that lived here, although many of the beings were indeed deadly, but at the top of the mountain laid the real danger of living here, chiefly if you were a young woman.

There was a monster known as the Death Drake, a deadly dragon seldom seen up close. Those that did get a good look at him never survived long enough to tell of it, and they weren't meant to. But there was one thing that could offer solace here. As long as the King's held up their part of an agreement to offer the dragon four human sacrifices during the year, the beast would be confined to the mountain where he would be unable to wreak the carnage that he was fully capable of.

There was also a horse, not the deadly threat like the dragon, but he was a legend in his own right. The young woman had never met anyone that had seen the animal, nor had she ever heard of anyone seeing it firsthand, but it was spoken of as if it were a myth born of an ancient tale by now. She had heard the story many times, and the story seemed to grow bigger and more unbelievable with every telling.

Supposedly the creature had wings like Pegasus, with three enormous spiraling horns that it would use to gore potential attackers, and it was black, blacker than the night sky during an eclipse. He could breathe fire from his nostrils, and flames poured from his feet. He was also reputed to be huge, nearly as large as the dragon, but with twice the temper. The stallion was said to be so wild and aggressive that after it succeeded in killing anyone and everyone who tried to tame him, a band of angry hunters forced him to retreat to the top of the mountain, where he had not been seen since.

Of course, there was also the dragon's rider, the Death Drake's keeper. Said to have wings just like the dragon and the stallion, but the rider's face and body were never revealed, always shrouded by a hooded black cloak. The few that had lived to hear him speak could say only that he was a man, and that his eyes were such a garish sapphire that they commanded attention even from under his cover.

The young woman continued on her way, still careful to keep her quarry obscured behind her back as she followed a snaking river. The water was clear and blue in the forest, untouched and pristine from the mountain where it had run off, but the nearer she came to the village the darker it became. The bubbling ripples began to chortle with grime and human waste as they churned their way to the sea, flushing the filth out into a

vast expanse of water that none had ever dared to explore.

She finally reached her destination, a small mud hut that lay off to the side of the murky stream. She paused and looked upward at the mountain before going inside. She wondered how anyone could survive up there, alone on the top of the summit. The summer wasn't so bad, in fact the mountainside was brilliant from the spring thaw on into fall, but when winter came the mountain became an icy peak, covered in snow as the temperature dropped.

There was a point of darker shadow about three fourths of the way up the mountain where the crest jutted outward, becoming so steep that it was impossible ... unless you had wings to fly over it, and that was where the dragon rider and his dragon, along with the winged stallion were said to live. The woman shivered in the fading light. She could see only darkness and shadow, lined with trees and brush that climbed the mountainside in an attempt to defy gravity.

"Where have you been, Rayne? I was worried sick!"

The young woman adjusted her eyes to the darkness of the dimly lit hut. She could see her mother limping toward her as she spoke.

She didn't say a word but held the hare up in response, proudly displaying her prize. Her mother shook her head in consternation.

"I know where you have been, Rayne. You've been hunting on the King's land."

Rayne looked away, "It's not the King's land. It never was." Her mother flashed a warning glare in her direction, and Rayne set her jaw in reluctant acceptance, "It's the only place to find game anymore, Mother."

She looked down at the dirt floor, nudging the soil absentmindedly with an earth-caked toe. It may be the King's land now, but it hadn't always been.

"Rayne, there are other places to find food ... *safer* places." Her mother scolded as she took the rabbit from her daughter's hands.

"There may be safer places, but the land has been hunted dry. The King has claimed most of the public land for his own, he's forcing us to hunt closer to the sea ... there's no game near the sea, Mother."

"Then we go without, Rayne!" Her mother cried as she whirled around, bracing herself against the wall before she could stumble forward and fall. She was weak, even with her back turned Rayne could see the weariness in her frail body and the slight tremble in her shoulders as she gasped for breath.

Rayne took a step forward, "How can you say that?" Her violet eyes were moist with tears that were on the verge of spilling forth.

"You know what will happen if you get caught hunting on the King's land!" Her voice lowered to a soft hush, "You will be killed, Rayne ... just like your father." She swallowed hard and kept her back turned, keeping her daughter from seeing her eyes welling up with sorrow.

Rayne was silent; she took a deep breath to gather herself. She didn't need to see her mother's pain to hear it in her voice. There was no use in arguing with her. Her mother had resigned herself to the way things were, and her only priority now was protecting her children and keeping them safe, and Rayne trespassing on the King's land was hardly staying in safekeeping.

Rayne's eyes found her younger sister leaning against the side of the hut while holding their little brother on her lap. Her sister was only two years younger than she

was, barely a woman at her young age, but hardly able to enjoy her youth. She should have been out with friends, flirting with boys and having the time of her life. But instead she was here, caring for her little brother and a mother with failing health.

Her sister smiled weakly and Rayne snapped out of her stupor. They were poor. Nearly everyone on the island was. Internal war had ravaged the four segmented villages years ago, and while the other quadrants were slowly rebuilding, the fourth quadrant was left to sully in the wreckage of the past. King Desoto would have it no other way, keeping his people poor and hungry kept them tightly under his thumb. If you didn't work for the King you had nothing, and if anyone ever challenged his way of doing things he wouldn't hesitate to threaten breaking the agreement with the Death Drake's rider. No one was brave enough to find out what would be worse: living in poverty under an unjust King, or living in fear of a hungry dragon with the freedom to kill and destroy at will.

Somehow though, despite her failing health, Rayne's mother found a way to work in the King's fields. The pay was meager and the job itself would never bring honor, but it paid for what they needed and it kept a roof over their heads.

Rayne watched her mother as she skinned the hare on a long flat wooden slat near the fire. She was weary and weak from working, and her thin frail body shook with effort as she dressed the rabbit. The knife that she was using was a simple piece of sharpened triangular stone, and her blood-slicked palms struggled to hold the dull edge of the rock as she carved the meat from the bone.

Her mother suddenly stopped, letting the knife slip from her bloody hands as she began to wheeze. Her sister set her little brother down and stood to her mother's side, helping her to a small cot against the wall. Rayne could only watch in a numb trance as her mother gasped for breath, drinking from a cup that was handed to her by her sister.

Her sister turned her attention to the rabbit and without hesitation she began where her mother left off. Every day it seemed that this was becoming the norm, with each passing day their mother became weaker, sicker, and tasks that she normally did without even thinking about were becoming impossible to complete.

Rayne felt a tears tugging at the corner of her eye as she watched her little brother climb from the floor into their mother's cot, curling up beside her. He had only seen seven years ... he was much too young to lose his mother. His cheeks were dirt stained, and his deerskin tunic was torn in several places. His hair was as white as snow, a sharp contrast from his bronze skin. His indigo eyes blinked sadly toward her. Rayne swallowed. He was so thin.

The smell of smoke and fat drippings drew her from her trance and Rayne shot her eyes over to her sister once more. Willow was cooking the rabbit on a spit over the fire, too busy to notice that she was being watched.

Rayne stepped forward, "Willow, let me do this."

Her sister backed away to allow her room in the tiny kitchen space. Her eyes were troubled. "Rayne," She whispered to keep her mother and younger brother from hearing, "What are we going to do? If there's no food, and with Mother being sick ... what's going to happen to us?"

Rayne's gut tightened and she took an uneasy breath, "Everything is going to be fine. Mother will get better." She looked away, unable to look her sister in the eye.

Willow shifted slightly, and she threw her sister an irritated glance. She knew that she was being lied to. Their mother was dying.

Rayne lifted her eyes, softening when she saw the quiver in Willow's lips. She took her sister's hand for reassurance, "Even if we have to leave this place, Willow, I promise that it will get better, you have my word."

Her sister nodded, and something sparkled in her eyes that Rayne thought to be optimism, "I hope you're right, Rayne."

Rayne shouldered her playfully, "I'm always right, Willow." She turned her attention back to the cooking rabbit. She didn't want her sister to see the worry in her eyes, or the fear that she could be wrong.

CHAPTER 2

Rayne carefully lifted the buckskin flap door on the hut, sneaking outside in the cool morning air. She had hunted every day now for the last two weeks, staying on the public land which stretched outward to the deep ocean. She had even made the journey all the way to the sea, camping under the stars for the several nights that it took just to reach the water, and all she returned with was a basket of dead fish. She caught as much as she could carry in her worn out woven basket, but it still wasn't enough. If she and her family were to survive on fish as their sole meat source she would have to make the long trip every couple of days, and that simply wasn't practical.

Today, though, she was going to the forbidden forest to hunt. She had no choice; they needed the skin for clothing, the meat for food, and everything else that a mammal would have that a fish simply did not. She felt like a criminal, sneaking out before someone would see her. She had just started to follow a dirt worn path when she heard the flap door on the hut open again. She froze when a low voice called her name, and she slowly turned to face her sister.

"Rayne," Willow whined, "You promised you wouldn't go on the King's land anymore!"

"Willow!" Rayne snapped impatiently, "Shut up or someone will hear you!" She looked around nervously, seeing if anyone had overheard.

Her sister did the same once she realized her mistake. The King had spies everywhere, informants that would gladly surrender their own mother for a shiny gold coin.

"Rayne, you're going to get in trouble!" Willow protested.

"Only if you tell on me," Rayne glared over at her sister, "besides, you want to eat, don't you? Or do you just want to eat fish and potatoes for the rest of your life?"

"Fish and potatoes aren't so bad..." Willow pouted, but then her eyes met her sisters and they betrayed her, "Alright, so it's not my favorite, but it's better than you getting caught! I'd eat fish every day as long as you were here, Rayne."

Rayne smiled and walked the few short steps back to her sibling. She hugged her close while whispering into her ear, "I'll be fine. Do you remember what I told you? I promised that it will get better, and it will. But first," She pulled away from her sister with a wink, "I'm going hunting."

Her sister watched her go with pleading eyes that begged of her to stay, and her mouth fell open in a protest that she was never allowed to voice.

"I'll be home soon ... I promise." Rayne called back to her before Willow could say anything more. Then she turned and trotted away.

Rayne followed her familiar route toward the forbidden forest, pretending to be searching for wild vegetation as she went along. It was easy for her to be dismissed by the King's outriders. She never made eye contact, keeping her head bowed at all times, and with her worn deerskin tunic she looked like a typical peasant scrounging for anything edible. They rode by without acknowledging her, continuing on their way

without lowering themselves to even look at her.

She waited for an opportune time, and when the moment was right she casually slid through the bordering meadow into the protective shadows of the forest. She crouched low against the thick brush and slunk along noiselessly. She would stop and listen occasionally to be sure that she was not being followed, and only continue when the sounds that met her ears were that of nature.

She slid up behind a thick round bush that lay just behind the stream and sat down to wait. The branches were parted slightly in the center of the shrub, and it offered a broken but suitable view of the layout before her. The sound of the bubbling stream just beyond the bush filled her keen ears. This was an ideal place to hunt. She was right where she needed to be, in the crosshairs of a game trail.

She inhaled softly before noiselessly slipping to the edge of the brush. Here she could see just beyond the cover of green leaves and across the rippling water as it splashed along the bank.

She didn't need to sit for long when a wild pig came up to the stream for a drink, leading a group of piglets along behind it. The pigs were much less cautious than the hare had been, and they approached almost recklessly. She knew by the size of the mother that there was no way that she could carry her home. She scanned downward to the piglets, fixing her eye on the largest. It was just small enough for her to carry, and yet it would supply much needed meat and fat, as well as a thick hide.

She delicately removed two stones from a pouch at her side and withdrew her weapon, a simple, but deadly slingshot. With the utmost care not to arouse suspicion from the wild swine, she silently set two round stones into the curved leather pouch of her slingshot, preparing her weapon with practiced delicacy. She shifted her weight until the pigs were within her sights. She drew back on the sling. To an onlooker it wouldn't have looked like she had moved at all, she was that skilled.

With a smooth and expert aim she raised her slingshot, releasing the two stones within as they hurtled forward. The pebbles thumped into their target, one, and then two, as the piglet jumped back in alarm, shuddering once before collapsing motionless onto the ground. The mother sow squealed loudly as she spun around and raced into the thicket while being followed by her panicked young.

Rayne held still, listening for sounds of danger that might lurk nearby. She was listening for voices, for the sound of horses, for footsteps, anything that would signify that she was not alone. She heard nothing and peeked around her cover. She couldn't see anything and the forest was still, the silence only broken by the occasional call of a bird in the treetops. She slipped from around the bush and cautiously made her way to the brook, still glancing over her shoulder and looking around suspiciously.

She felt the cold ripple of the water against her bare feet as she slipped into the gentle current. She wore only a soft tan deerskin tunic that hung to mid-thigh with a thin rope belt that was securely cinched around her waist, accentuating her feminine curves. The cool water rose to meet her thighs, brushing her with cold licks as she proceeded through it. She slid through the river until she was on the opposite bank. She scooped up her reward and hunkered down, still listening. When her ears were met with silence she slithered along beside the undergrowth, using it for cover. She froze in her tracks.

There was the distinct sound of hoof beats behind her, and she slipped into the brush. She forced her breathing to be shallow when she heard masculine voices beside

the bank of the brook. Her heart was beating so loudly that she couldn't hear what they were saying, or even if they were human. With trembling fingers she parted the leafy bush.

There were two of them, dressed in the bright red and silver colors of the King. They were large, probably seven feet tall and easily weighing four hundred pounds per man. She recognized them as Red Giants from the planet Crimsonia, probably brought here specifically to guard the King's property. Their skin was entirely pinkish red, and they sported tusk like teeth from their lower jaw, which gave them an almost warthog like appearance. They had small protruding snouts that allowed them to smell better than any hound, and tiny pointed ears that could hear the slightest of sounds. They had a reputation for fierceness, but were sadly lacking in brain function.

She saw one of them point to the ground, flowing upward with his clawed hand until he was pointing at the very bush where she sat hidden. She looked down and gasped as her face went molten with dread, her stomach clenched into a ball and she felt sick. Her piglet was bleeding from the nose, leaving a trail of red that led right to her. She had committed a severe oversight, one that could cost her dearly.

She had been in such a hurry to leave that she hadn't even looked to see if her kill was bleeding; it was a stupid mistake, and one that she knew better than to make. The two Giants stepped toward her, and she knew that they would find her if she didn't move. She left the pig and turned to flee, again freezing in her tracks. She stood to her feet and looked at the man before her.

"What have we here--a poacher on the King's land?" He was human, and for a brief moment she was thankful that he wasn't one of the Red Giants.

"Is this the King's land?" Rayne tried to play dumb, but she doubted that it would work. If it were one of the Red Giants he might have fallen for it, but he was entirely human, and entirely not believing her.

"Don't play coy with me, peasant!" He spat the words back at her before roughly seizing her hair in his grasp. She screeched when he pulled her backwards.

"Release me at once!" She demanded while thrashing about with her arms and legs.

She managed to elbow him in the face and chest several times, but he refused to release his hold. They struggled together in an awkward wrestling bout, she trying to fight him off to escape, and he desperately trying to find the means to control her.

"There," He huffed when she was finally restrained with her hands tied securely behind her back, "that ought to hold you."

The man turned his attention to the Giants, and Rayne could only follow his gaze and watch in horror. They were tearing apart the wild pig, devouring it raw. She heard the human swallow in disgust, and when the two beasts were finished he summoned them in a foreign tongue. He gestured gruffly to Rayne, and one of the Giants grabbed her by the waist.

She could smell the blood on his hands, and she screamed and thrashed in a panic as long clawed fingers wrapped around her small frame. His nails bit into her skin for a brief but painful instant, and in the next he had released her and left her thrown over the back of a big black charger, dangling sideways across the skittish horse.

The human man exhaled with relief, perhaps because he finally had her under control, or maybe it was because the Giants had moved away again. Rayne had a feeling

that it was the latter.

She struggled to right herself, nearly falling off of the big horse as she wiggled and squirmed against the ties on her wrists. The man put his hand on her back, grabbing the rope that was tied around her waist as he kept her from moving. His hand slid downward, grazing her bottom before he grabbed the saddle and pulled himself up behind her.

“Do that again and you’ll be missing an arm.” She snarled.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and yanked her upright, “I wouldn’t be making threats if I were you.” He warned harshly as he forced her to sit before him on the horse despite her continued struggling.

She gritted her teeth and threw her body back into him, hoping to unseat him, “Keep your filthy hands off of me or you’re going to lose them!”

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, trying to still her squirming. The steed snorted and pranced sideways, less than thrilled to have such a boisterous passenger on its back. The man pulled on the reins, and his grip on Rayne became tighter, “Peasant, you wear my patience thin.” He growled through gritted teeth.

Rayne ignored his admonishment. She leaned down, biting his arm fiercely and forcing him to unhand her. He jerked away from her mouth, unintentionally yanking the reins backwards. The big horse whinnied and reared, spinning sideways in confusion and nearly losing both of its passengers. Again the man pulled on the bridle, urgently trying to tame the startled animal.

The charger calmed, and Rayne felt her long snowy hair being pulled as the man leaned forward to hiss into her ear, “Foolish woman, don’t think that I won’t call the Giants back so that they may devour your flesh as they did the dead swine.”

She opened her mouth to complain just as a gag was shoved roughly into her mouth and tied behind her head, preventing her from venting her frustration on him further. The gag only infuriated her more so, and she continued to thrash and fight all the while that she was held by the stranger. By the time they finally reached the castle he appeared more than delighted to be rid of his unruly hostage.

He threw her from his saddle, uncaring when she landed shoulder first onto the hard stone road that led up to the great white palace. Her sleeveless tunic offered no protection, and when her skin hit the granite it tore and bled. She cried out and stiffened, curling up into a ball with her hands still tied and her mouth gagged.

“Stand up, peasant!” She was ordered, followed by a painful kick into her gut that made her wail in pain.

She doubled over to ease the hurt in her stomach but somehow found her legs to stand before she could be kicked once more. The gag was removed from her mouth and she immediately began to vomit as her stomach churned from the fierce blow that she had received. She was shoved forward despite her sickness and forced to go where her captors led.

She walked down the long road, clutching her pained abdomen before being shoved forward once more.

“Where are you taking me?” She sputtered.

“All trespassers are taken to the King, he decides your fate.” She looked up to see the man that had tied and gagged her, and then kicked her.

She glanced behind him. The Red Giants were still following in pairs of two,

teetering from side to side with their slow lumbering gaits. She looked at the human man again. He was smirking. He didn't think she would dare to touch him with an entourage of Giants. She glared at him; it wouldn't have mattered if he would have had a thousand of the ugly brutes with him.

She wanted to lash out at him, to attack him mercilessly, but her hands were tied securely behind her back no matter how hard she tried to free them. She snarled inside, hands or no hands she was going to hurt him, make him feel the same pain that she did. Impulsively she threw her body in his direction, kneeing him in the groin with a powerful strike.

He groaned and doubled over, grabbing himself between the legs as he knelt down. Rayne leaned over and bit him in the shoulder, biting as hard as she could before one of the following Giants yanked her away.

Blood lined her lips, evidence that she had at least made him bleed. She spit at him when he regained his composure.

"So, you like the rough stuff, eh? I'll show you what rough is, you fucking *Cherish*." His backhand found the side of her face in the next instant, and his blow sent her flying to the ground. She rolled and seethed, spitting blood onto the earth.

He pulled her to her feet, "Don't *ever* bite me again, you foolish elfin half-breed."

She turned on him again, ignoring his threat while spitting blood in his face. Again his knuckles found her cheek, and she was left on the ground. This time though, he stood over her and knelt down, wrapping the gag once more over her mouth. He yanked her to her feet and pulled her forward.

She screamed through the cloth on her mouth, tasting the metallic tang of her own blood on her tongue. She flailed her body, awkwardly trying to free her wrists of their restraints until one of the Giants lifted her off her feet, tossing her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. She writhed and punched her fists against the Giant's hard-shelled armored back, causing discomfort to only herself as her sides began to ache and her muscles burned with effort. She heard the human dust his hands off and turn to the Giant.

"There, that should make her more controllable, a little less hostile ... don't you think?"

The Giant grunted in response.

Rayne dangled over the big creature's shoulder for what seemed an eternity, staring down at the stone road until they ascended marble steps, flowing through until the floor became a white glossy desert of stone.

She wrinkled her nose; the Red Giant's smell was pungent and overwhelming. He stunk of animal hair and mildew, a bitter blend of must and muck. She was relieved to have the pristine white floors to stare at; it took her mind off of the overwhelming scent of the beast.

She began to feel dizzy, and her head pounded painfully against her temples. The floor seemed to spin beneath her, twisting and turning into an empty white abyss, and she squeezed her eyes shut just to block the vertigo from her mind. Finally, after the blood had drained down into her head so fully that her nose began to bleed, she was harshly dropped down into a cold cell and her mouth was freed from its wrap. She opened her eyes and watched in silent rage as the man left, leaving two Red Giants to guard her.

She wondered just how vulnerable the two oversized warthogs really were, and decided to test their IQ once her head had ceased its painful drumming.

She looked around, silently taking in her surroundings. The room was illuminated by torches that bounced light off of the close walls and flickered between the bars on her cell. Her gaze settled on a small patch of shadow in the corner of her chamber where the light missed, leaving only darkness. It was the only place in the room that the Giants would be unable to see until they were almost on top of it.

She looked between the shadow and the Giants, finally throwing them the bait, “What in the world is that?” She asked while nodding towards a shadowy area of her cell. She leaned down, pretending to get a closer look.

One of the Giants shook his head with a grunt, but the other looked through the bars with interest, scanning the shadow with his beady little eyes. She knew that with her hands still tied behind her back there was little that she could do physically to them, but perhaps she could trick them.

She continued to stare at the small triangular patch of shadow as if it would come to life, peering into darkness at the cold stone floor that only she could see. “Seriously, I’ve never seen anything like it ... and it’s so small....” There was nothing there, but she kept her eyes rapt on the darkness as if there were.

This time the other Giant turned his body so that he, too, could see through the bars. His intrigued eyes twinkled in the dim light as he looked down by her. She leaned over awkwardly and struggled to touch the cold floor with her bound hands.

She whispered softly, “Wow, this is really incredible ... I’ve never seen anything like it.” She cast a sidelong glance to her guards, checking to be sure that she had their interest, “I think I’m going to keep it. It’s probably worth a lot, and once I’m out of here I’ll need the money to get back home.”

One of the giants opened the iron door impatiently and stepped in beside her. She gasped and twisted her shoulder painfully, reaching inside her leather pouch, full of stones that she used with her slingshot, withdrawing a stone.

She dropped the pebble into the darkness, struggling to roll away as he strode towards the corner of the cell, “On the other hand, you can have it.” She righted herself and leaned against the wall, edging away from the Giant as his own shadow blocked out any lingering light that reached the corner wall.

The other Giant was quick to bully past his comrade and Rayne slipped by the preoccupied duo as they clamored for the gem, squealing and grunting against each other as they fought for the stone. She slammed the barred door shut behind them.

She ran to a nearby torch, carefully edging it from the wall so as not to extinguish the flames. With careful precision she burned the rope from her wrists, suffering the heat on her hands until the rope snapped free. She tore the restraints from her wrists and ran forward, stopping with a gasp when she ran right into King Desoto himself. She swallowed and backed away.

CHAPTER 3

Rayne shifted her eyes from the King to the human. She reached instinctively for her slingshot, but it was no longer there. The man stepped before the King and impatiently grabbed her, twisting her right arm behind her back before she could say anything.

“Sire, I apologize. I told you that she was quite a handful....” He glanced over at the two Giants that were still locked within the barred cell, too preoccupied in their fight over the tiny stone to even realize their predicament, “But still I have underestimated her.”

The King raised his hand. He was an older man, made obese by a generous diet. His ruddy face was round and shaved clean, and his eyes were small and rounded, like little black gems that twinkled with animosity. His upturned nose was small, and seemed almost pug-like at this close distance. His hair hung in lifeless brown strings from beneath a sparkling golden crown. He wore a red cape with diamond encrusting that lined the large covering. He spoke and saliva spilled from the corners of his mouth.

“So this is the peasant woman that you caught trespassing and poaching on my land?”

“Yes, Sire,” the man responded. He still held Rayne’s hand behind her back as he detained her.

The King studied her for a lasting moment. Even through the dirt stained streaks on her face and the dried blood beneath her nose and corners of her lips he could see that she was a beauty. Her wild snow-white hair hung down before her seductive violet eyes, cascading over her shoulders and back in soft layers. Between her high tan cheek bones was a small narrow nose. Her lips were full with a look of pouting, and they were the color of raspberry. Her ears were slightly pointed, and she bore a circular purple birthmark on her temple. It was a distinct marking, and only elves had the symbol. It was individual for every elfin family, and although she was clearly half human he knew that she must have had elfin blood coursing through her veins.

He glanced down at her figure. She was only wearing a deerskin garment that barely reached her thighs. It had tears in it that revealed slips of her bronze skin through the material. Her legs were lean and long, giving her the deceiving appearance of being taller than she truly was. Her curves were womanly, with a round bottom, slender hips, and a perky bosom. He grinned to himself.

“She will have her uses, I believe.” He motioned to the man, “Take her to my quarters. I will introduce her to my harem ... make sure that she has had a bath and is in some decent clothing first. If she’s going to please me she mustn’t look like a filthy field rat.”

Rayne grunted as the human guard abruptly yanked her past the King. She was dragged down a long hallway and through several rooms until she was thrust roughly into a dimly lit chamber. She heard the man give orders to somebody before exiting the room, slamming the door behind him as he left her alone.

She stepped backward, slowly spinning as she took in the room. It was lit by hundreds of thick wax candles that burned softly, illuminating the chamber. There was a large oval bed to the side, jutting outward from the wall. The room seemed to be shrouded in red. The expansive floor rugs were red, the blankets and the downy pillows on the bed were red, and even the candles were all red.

"Please, come with me." She turned with a start to see a small old woman standing quietly behind her.

For a long tense moment she just stared at the woman, not knowing what to do. The woman gently took her hand, suggesting for her to follow as she hobbled forward. Rayne raised her chin and followed the woman guardedly as she led the way through a veil of crimson beads. She ducked beneath the beads, finding herself in a bathroom where a porcelain tub was full with hot bath water. Thick frothy soap bubbles foamed at the top, swimming back and forth across the liquid.

"Take off your clothes and climb in." The woman stated with a sweeping gesture of her wrinkled hand.

Rayne looked at her skeptically for a moment, deciding whether or not she wished to trust this woman. She had lines in her worn tan face, twinkling green eyes, and silver hair that was pulled back in a tight bun. She smiled with her thin lips and her grin was kindly and reassuring, like that of a patient grandmother.

Rayne felt like she was in a shock-induced trance as she stepped from her clothing and climbed into the tub. She couldn't speak and she could hardly move, as if her whole body had become numb. She felt a basin of warm liquid rush over her hair and she jumped with a start, torn from her daze.

The woman patted the water gently, "Please, you mustn't be alarmed. I'm just going to wash your hair."

Rayne looked at her with distrust, but calmed and sat back down. It was too late to fight about having her hair washed when she had just been doused. She didn't allow the elderly woman too much time to fuss on her, though. The moment she was clean she climbed from the tub, wrapping herself in a thick towel as she searched impatiently for her tunic.

It was gone; the only garment in the room was a purple arrangement of some sort. The old woman was suddenly beside her once more, and she lifted the article of clothing despite Rayne's look of complete apprehension.

Rayne backed away, shaking her head adamantly. There was no way that she was putting that thing on. There was hardly any material to it, and what there was of it seemed completely transparent.

"Don't be nervous my dear," The woman cooed as she smiled warmly at Rayne, "This is just something clean for you to wear. You don't want to be naked, do you?" She chuckled at her own question as if she had made a joke, and Rayne visibly eased, succumbing to the woman's insistence upon her changing.

She allowed the elderly woman to swathe the collar of the garment around her throat, tying it tightly as it swung forward to drape over each breast, barely covering her with the sheer cloth before tying it around her back once more. The woman then grabbed the bottom half. It was a short matching purple skirt that was angled from her hip, only just covering her most feminine places on the right side as it slanted downward to flow against her left thigh.

“Now we do the hair.”

Rayne frowned impatiently, and opened her mouth to protest but was shushed as the woman set to work sweeping her silky powder white hair up and off of her neck. When she was finished the woman stepped back and admired her, nodding in approval before placing a jeweled head piece over her forehead. It was much like a bandana, but the intertwined webbing that held it together was covered in amethyst. The largest jewel dangled just over her forehead, swaying with her movement.

“Come, you are to join the King’s harem.” The woman informed her as she took Rayne’s hand and led her through another curtain of scarlet beads.

Rayne tried to resist, but the old woman was not as weak as her frail body would suggest, and she forcefully pulled her along.

The woman pulled her into a sizeable open room. There was a large group of women already here, all wearing the same attire, but with different colors and shades. Rayne wanted to get away, to run from this awful place, but there was nowhere to run. The other women seemed oblivious to her presence, and they sat and sprawled out upon rich velvety red furniture as if they were accessories to the fixtures.

The comforting older woman left her side and suddenly Rayne felt very exposed and alone. She swallowed a lump down her throat. She promised her sister that nothing would happen, and now she had broken that promise. She walked to a corner where a bubbling water fountain was cascading downward over the thick white marble walls of the castle.

She looked around. There were no windows from which to escape, no unmanned vents or ducts even. The beaded curtains that she had only moments ago walked through were guarded by two large soldiers. She could guess by their size and stature that they were Vynon warriors. They were nearly as large as the Red Giants, but twice as smart and much more human in appearance.

She glanced over at a full-figured buxom brunette who was watching her with interest. The woman slid from her velvet seat and approached her when she had made eye contact.

“I’m Chaska,” She extended her hand in greeting, and Rayne noticed an unusual texture of ribbed veins in the woman’s arm, “where did King Desoto find you?”

“Rayne,” She took the woman’s hand in her own briefly, “I was hunting on your royal highness’ land...”

“You’re lucky, that normally would have gotten you killed.” The woman looked Rayne up and down briefly to assess her.

“Just because I’m not dead yet doesn’t mean that I won’t be.” Rayne responded bitterly.

She knew far too well the punishment for trespassing, and just because the King thought he’d have a little fun with her first didn’t mean that she was off the hook yet.

“You’ll wish you were dead soon enough,” The woman laughed emptily, “Just wait until you are expected to gratify the King.”

Rayne thought about her words, standing beside her in silence while watching the other women interacting. They appeared to be in orderly clicks, each group being different from the next. Some were groups of entirely human women, where others were of mixed race, and there were others still that had no trace of human being whatsoever. Some of the women were obviously close, laughing and joking like school girls, while

others were catty and made jeering comments back and forth to one another.

Rayne looked at the woman beside her, who appeared to be doing the same. "Excuse me, but, is there a bathroom nearby?"

The woman shifted her eyes away from the center of the room, "Of course ... right over there, through those beaded curtains."

Rayne thanked her and followed to where she had pointed. She slipped through a set of unguarded curtains and stepped inside. There were large mirrors adorning the walls, and a whole row of bathroom stalls but no means of escape whatsoever. She clenched her teeth in frustration and walked back out.

She found her place back beside the indoor waterfall near Chaska and leaned against the wall. The brunette cast a sidelong glance at her.

"Perhaps you should rest. You look troubled and weary."

The sound of the other woman's voice made Rayne turn her attention back to her, and she smiled feebly. She needed rest. She needed time to gather her thoughts, and when she was refreshed she could go about finding a way to get out of here ... even if it meant killing the King himself.

"Come, you may rest on our spread if you like." Chaska pushed off from the wall and led Rayne to a large circular sofa full of thick downy pillows.

A group of about ten women were already sitting on it; some talking, some doing their nails or fussing with their hair, but they each stopped what they were doing to acknowledge her. Rayne was introduced to each of them, and found them all to be warm and inviting. She found it interesting that they all looked to be of mixed lineage, much as she was. She rested in their comforting circle, thankful for the companionship. She wasn't even aware of when she fell asleep, drowning out the din of feminine voices and sonorous chuckles as her eyes closed.

When she awoke she was being poked in the side by someone. Her eyes shot open. She could see that she was alone on the spread; the other women were standing apprehensively off to the side looking helpless and exposed. She shifted her gaze to the source of the poking in her ribs. One of the guards was jabbing at her with his weapon, a glossy metal shaft with a spear-like point at the tip.

"Get up, woman! The King demands your presence in his chamber." He gruffly prodded her side again.

She sat up, hesitating for a moment too long.

"You can either walk to his royal highness' chamber or I can drag you on your knees, slave!" He commanded while jerking her impatiently from the sofa.

She seethed under her breath as she climbed to her feet, throwing a glare at the Vynon guard. He responded by jamming the butt of his weapon into her ribs, compelling her forward.

She gripped her side in pain, but continued to follow where he directed. She went through the beaded curtains into the tiny individual bathroom, and again through the next set of beads until she was back in the original room. She watched the guard as he turned and retreated back the way he had come. She thought about trying to attack him while his back was turned, but a voice to her front forced her to redirect her attention.

"I am eager to sample my new harem girl."

Rayne turned her eyes forward, squinting as her eyes adjusted to the dimly lit room. She blanched when she saw King Desoto sprawled out across the oval bed, his

mass scarcely covered by a lavish red robe.

He snapped his fingers and a small servant boy came from the doorway upon his command. He whispered into the servant's ear and the boy was quick to find his way to a nearby corner. He touched a few buttons on a small silver box, prompting the fixture to come to life before he slipped out of the room. A sensual rhythmic pulsing beat began to pour from the box.

"Dance for me, Slave!" King Desoto commanded with a clap.

Rayne raised her jaw defiantly, but began to sway her hips seductively, appeasing him for the moment at least. She had never danced for a man before, but she had seen the way the temptresses danced at festivals, and when she and her sister were young they would imitate the seductive moves that were performed. She must have been imitating the dance satisfactorily because he seemed pleased.

He was watching her hips and her breasts, particularly when she would draw attention to them by use of her hand. She slid her hands around her breasts, watching his eyes closely. Wherever her hands went his eyes seemed to follow, like a fly attracted to the light. She grinned, feeling her power over him. All she had to do was keep him focused on her body while she searched the room for a weapon by which to slay him.

She caressed her hand down her exposed stomach and scanned the room. There was nothing but candles ... *burning* candles. She grinned again and turned around, twisting her hips and winding them suggestively. She pretended to raise her skirt just slightly, enough to tease him with a glimpse of the naked flesh beneath it. She looked at the door. There were still two guards just outside of it, so she would have to be quick about killing him. Of course, there was no way to burn him quickly.

He clapped again, more demanding this time, "Come to me, Slave!"

She turned and felt sick to her stomach. He had thrown the robe from his body, revealing his readiness for her beneath his corpulent stomach. His manhood was small in comparison to the rest of his body, and as she neared him she noticed that he had an odor about him. He smelled of sweat and grease, and something that she couldn't quite place - but at this moment she didn't care, as long as it was flammable.

He shifted in an effort to thrust his small shaft upward, trying to draw her attention to him. She swallowed back bile in her mouth, and forced a grin of mock pleasure.

"Put it in your mouth, Slave." He ordered.

She raised a candle from a niche in the wall, "I have a better idea. It's so cold in here, why don't we get warmed up, first?" Her voice carried a slight tremble as her nerves betrayed her, and the King frowned.

He watched her warily, "What are you doing, Slave?"

She knelt on the edge of the bed between his legs, moaning softly while upturning the candle. The hot wax of the candle began to drip down onto her cleavage in a searing stream, burning her skin with blistering pain for a split second but cooling before it became unbearable.

The King smiled with interest, "Perhaps I can allow that...."

She continued to pour the wax over her skin, stopping only to climb over him on all fours until she was leaning over him. She bit her lip and winked at him playfully, still pretending to be enjoying every bit of this. She turned the candle and dripped the wax down onto his wide stomach, watching the wax pour and dry over his sides. He smirked

as she continued her exotic trick.

“Go down on me now, Slave ... put me in your mouth.” He raised his hips with a grunt, tapping her naked skin with his member, an action that nearly made her throw up right then.

She became serious and her amethyst eyes narrowed as she glared down at him, “I would rather die than put your vulgar breeding tool in my mouth.”

His smile vanished and he grabbed her roughly behind the neck, bruising her skin as his fingers bit into her flesh. “Die you shall if you fail to follow my orders! I’ll give you one more chance, you peasant *Cherish*. Either place me in your mouth or die!”

That word, *Cherish*, it was the equivalent of calling her a worthless whore, and it incensed her. She leaned over, spitting angry words from her tongue like a foul taste, “And I told you, I’d rather die than place you *anywhere* in me.” With that she thrust the candle into his hair, leaping from the bed as the pillows burst into flame behind his head.

He violently thrashed at the flames on his scalp as he rolled from the bed. The guards rushed in, coming to his aid and putting out the fire that was now consuming his bed. His hair fell from his head in singed powdered lines, falling to the floor as ashen dust. Smoke streamed from his head, and his cheek was bright red where the skin was peeling away, yielding to the burning flesh.

He glared at Rayne, and his eyes rounded in fury, “You peasant elfin *Cherish*, how dare you!” He spewed his words, smugly wrapping his robe around his naked body and watching his guards as they grabbed Rayne by either arm. “You’ve made a grave mistake, Peasant. In four days we must submit an offering to the Death Drake ... the offering shall be you.”

CHAPTER 4

Rayne sat in her prison cell, just waiting for the day that she would be yanked away and brought to the foot of the mountain for sacrifice. She thought about her sister, and about breaking her promise. It occurred to her that she wasn't very good at making promises ... she always broke them. She thought about her mother and her little brother. It was her sister, though, that she felt the worst for. Her sister would now have to take on the responsibilities that they had shared; those burdens would be hers alone now. She would have to hunt, cook, clean, do the housework, and take care of both a sick mother and a little brother, all on her own.

She had been so careless, and indeed it cost her dearly, more dearly than she ever would have thought. She sighed; at least there was a silver lining. Now the King would not have to send his outriders through the villages, pillaging homes in their search for a young woman to sacrifice to the Death Drake.

It had become a ritual from years passed. All quadrants had to offer a female sacrifice every four months to keep the Death Drake at bay. It was said that before the Kings of the past began to offer sacrifice that the beast would come down from the mountain and burn entire cities, ruining fields and crops, while eating humans and livestock by the hundreds.

People in the village had recently begun to take extreme measures to keep their daughters safe from the outriders now. It was as if their fear had been transferred from the dragon to the King's own men. The villagers built hidden cellars and attics in their homes, hiding their daughters within them to keep them out of sight from the outriders.

The Kings were getting wise to the tricks, and now the outriders tore through homes like they were raiders instead of guards, ruining homes as they tore through. They would leave with the screaming girl on horseback, while the girl's mother would be left standing outside crying for the return of her child as tears poured from her cheeks. All the while the village would look like a hurricane had struck, with door flaps torn from the doorways and lying in the dirt, meager furniture thrown all over, and people standing helplessly outside while their belongings were torn apart.

Rayne inhaled; at least she had spared one mother and daughter. Her sacrifice would keep a girl with her mother for at least four more months. She leaned against her cell wall. What had her sister said before she left? Ah yes, "I'd eat fish and potatoes every day if it meant you were here."

Rayne groaned, how could she let her sister down like this? How could she let her family down, when they needed her most? She shook her head. It wasn't over yet, as long as she was still outside of the Death Drake's stomach it wasn't over.

The days passed by slowly. Her cell was cold and lonely. She ate only stale bread and water, which was actually more than she expected. But when the King finally collected her for the sacrifice she was ready to go.

She was made to take another bath, and this time she was adorned in a long lacy white dress that dipped low in her cleavage, with a slit on both sides that ran clean up to

her hips. A diamond collar was placed around her neck in the hope that the glitter and sparkle of the gemstones would attract the dragon.

Her hands were bound behind her back again and she was thrust into a locked carriage, left alone in stifling darkness as the cart rocked and shifted over a bumpy road. She struggled against her restraints in an effort to free herself, but was unable to so much as loosen them. She could hear the sound of hooves against concrete at first, but then they dimmed as the horse drawn carriage found its way off of the road.

The carriage bounced over the rugged surface, and Rayne found it hard just to stay in one place. With her hands tied she was unable to brace herself as she normally would have, and when the cart bumped roughly she had to throw her shoulder against the side of the carriage just to keep from falling to the floor. She winced in pain, reminded of the cut on her shoulder. Something warm and wet slipped down her arm, and she knew that her injury had been reopened. She gasped in the oppressive heat of the cramped space, feeling like her lungs were drying up.

It seemed forever before the carriage finally stopped and she was pulled from the cart by the human guard. She landed on the ground with a thump, drinking in a welcome breath of open air before sinking to her knees as her legs went weak. She was hot and tired, and strands of loose hair clung to her flushed cheeks and throat. Beads of sweat tickled her collarbone as two Red Giants pulled her forward, dragging her to the bottom of the mountain. She screamed and kicked like mad, but to no avail. She was overpowered by the Red Giants, and before she knew it they had her firmly strapped to a long post that jutted from the ground.

King Desoto approached her, and a self-righteous grin parted his thin lips, "You should have put me in your mouth, Waif, and perhaps you would have lived longer."

She sneered at him and spit into his face, "I have only the regret that I didn't kill you when I had the chance."

He swiped the saliva from his cheek in disgust and his hand lashed out to strike her across the cheek. Rayne smirked and let out an antagonizing chuckle. The slap had left her cheek red with the imprint of his hand and it stung like hell, but there was no way that she would give him the satisfaction of knowing that he had affected her in any way. He turned away in exasperation, no longer entertaining her attention. She heard the horses snorting as their riders mounted, and the sound of drumming hoof beats distancing themselves told her that she was now alone, left to face the Death Drake and whatever else that might come.

She wiggled her arms, fighting the restraints that held her to no gain. The sun was warming her skin and her body, and her arms were becoming sore. Her shoulders felt like they were being slowly torn from their sockets with the strain on her limbs, and her back was aching having been left so stiffly in this rigid position. She shifted, but her movement was too restricted, and it wasn't enough to make a difference. Every part of her was beginning to hurt. She was near tears when the sound of rushing wind met her ears. She looked up into the sky and gasped with fright.

All she could see was a black outline, and a bright orange center that swooped overhead. Just as soon as she had seen it the shadow vanished from view around the side of the mountain. It repeated the process twice more; diving to the side of the mountain, making her think that it was just a bird and that she was overreacting. She inhaled dryly; the heat of the sun searing into her skin was making her delusional.

A rush of air washed over her and she shivered, chilled to the bone despite the sweat that glistened over her flesh. She looked up to the sound of wind whipping, like a streamlined spacecraft zipping through the sky at the speed of light. There were no spaceships on this side of the island. They had no airstrips. There should be no reason for that sound.

The air current continued to fall down on her shoulders, but she couldn't see anything in the sky. She began to shiver under the cold breeze, and goose bumps cropped up all over her body. She knew then that the sound of air ripping and the cold breeze was all a product of something behind her, beyond her field of vision.

Rayne craned her neck but she couldn't see anything, her movement was too limited. The leaves in the trees around her were trembling violently to match her shivering, and the trunks of even the largest trees were swaying like drunken giants. There was a deafening thud and the earth shook beneath her. For a moment she expected the ground to open up and swallow her whole. She stumbled as her feet were jarred out from underneath her. The only thing that kept her up was the cutting restraint on her wrists, which held her steadfast despite her loss of footing. The sound subsided and the air stopped blowing.

Rayne tried to swallow, but the moisture had left her lungs. She could hear soft breathing, and suddenly the air around her became blisteringly hot. She inhaled, catching the scent of smoke and ash in her nostrils. Somebody jumped somewhere behind her; she heard the thump against the earth, followed by crunching twigs and foliage. A shadowy form came around her left side and she gasped.

The man walked around to the front of her, looking at her with the most unbelievably intense blue eyes that she had ever seen. She thrashed, trying once more to escape the ties that bound her. He laughed in amusement and threw the black hood from his head, admiring her fully.

Rayne stopped thrashing, he was handsome ... heart stopping would be more like it. She blinked anxiously while he watched her, looking her up and down with those unbelievable eyes of his. His face was beautiful, with a narrow jaw and well defined features. His smile was charming as he flashed a row of shiny white teeth between his pink lips. Stray pieces of hair fell in loose black strands to the side of his face, slightly shielding his eyes. He had two matching navy blue tattoos just beneath them at the top of his cheekbones, a dark stripe colored each side of his face, accentuating the overpowering blue in his eyes.

Long dark hair fell past his shoulders, and several braided pieces hung near jagged pointed ears. Tiny silver metal hoops hung from his earlobes.

He nodded behind her, and his low voice tore her from her appreciative daze, "You should come and take a look at her ... she's a beauty."

The earth shook and trembled again as something leapt over her, sending a rush of air darting down her spine. Something massive crashed to the ground with such force that again the trees shook over their roots. Rayne lost her footing once more, and she noticed that the man was kneeling to keep from losing his own balance. He rose up and addressed the beast that was now behind him.

"I told you she was something. I'll enjoy her more than you will, I think."

The beast chattered and Rayne focused on the source of the noise. All she saw was a mouthful of teeth ... long, sharp, curved daggers that were gnashing together just

feet away from her. Green eyes rolled in a big black head to stare at her, and the beast's thick dark lips curled to expose his twin rows of fangs once more. Her heart pounded and lurched into her throat as adrenaline sent a shock charging through her veins. She screamed. Her cry echoed off of the mountainside and sent birds fluttering from the treetops.

Panicked, she threw her body frantically against the restraints, fighting with every ounce of strength that she had left. The man stepped quickly to her and placed his palm flat over her mouth, stifling her earsplitting cry while using his body to pin hers down and keeping her from thrashing.

"Calm down, he won't hurt you ... You're alright." He said calmly as she continued yelling against his palm and staring in wide-eyed horror at the monster before her.

Rayne trembled against the man's warm body, never taking her eyes off the dragon to his back. It was the Death Drake, she knew it. It was enormous, towering over the man as it stood the height of the tallest trees. It had a large elongated head full of razor sharp teeth, with slender nostrils that puffed out a thin trail of smoke. It watched her with narrow green eyes that shifted to catch her movement. Giant black horns lay flat against the back of its skull, spiraling against its neck when it stretched. They had to have been the length of two giants, she thought.

His neck was long and muscular, rippling with feathery spikes that lined the top of it. His wings were large and black, with an orange lightning bolt pattern through the center. His tail curled around, it had the same soft feathery spikes over the top of it as were on its neck. The base of the tail was a weapon, a blunt three pronged barb that looked like a heavily armed club.

His tail was bright orange, with black undertones, much like the rest of his body. His legs were surprisingly lithe, with long claws at the end that dug into the ground. He was light for his size, appearing agile and supple despite his thick muscles and height. His carriage almost struck her as looking like that of a sight-hound, strong and sleek.

Rayne felt the hand move from her mouth, and she sucked in a deep breath.

"Are you ready to go?" The stranger asked huskily when she remained spellbound looking at the dragon.

For a moment her heart skipped, his voice was low and tempting, thick and sexy. She glanced over at him, nearly melting beneath his intense stare. She shook herself internally, reminding herself where she was and tearing herself away from him as she screamed breathily, "Screw you ... let me go!"

She didn't care how unbelievably handsome he was, she wasn't going with him willingly. She began to buck wildly again, only stopping when she was out of breath. Her bosom was heaving with the effort and the man took notice.

"You're welcome to screw me any time you like, but I'm not letting you go ... no negotiations." He smirked devilishly and raised his eyebrows, staring directly at the sweat that was trailing down her collarbone and slipping between her breasts. "You look hot, are you ready to go yet or are you going to keep fighting? Personally it doesn't matter to me, I'm comfortable, and I could watch you get flustered and wet all day if you like."

She glared at him; if she could move her hands she would have slapped him. Suddenly the Death Drake made a hissing growl and its long tongue slithered out to touch her skin, gently flicking her with its feather soft touch. But even that soft touch was too

much for Rayne.

“Aw, how *sweet*. He likes you....” The stranger growled in annoyance.

Rayne felt the dragon’s forked tongue slide like warm velvet across the skin on her throat, tickling the diamond necklace as it curled around her neck, licking her, *tasting* her. She swallowed, choking on air that refused to pass in her lungs. Her eyes widened in alarm as she felt searing breath on her exposed flesh. She shook in fear. The dragon had edged closer. His mouth parted slightly, and his teeth seemed to grow sharper and larger in that instant. She felt a rush of air leave her lips in a scream that never came, and she trembled violently. Her whole body went numb in a trance as fear overwhelmed her, and her eyes rolled back into her head, leaving her in darkness.

Rayne opened her eyes. She had to adjust her focus in the dim light where she found herself. The air smelled of an unusual combination of smoke and damp rock, with a hint of wildflowers. She was in a cave, she could tell by the moist rock that surrounded her and the cavernous opening where light filtered in through another passage. On the far wall a torch was burning softly, illuminating the limestone with a flickering orange glow.

A shiver tore down her spine, and Rayne listened for sounds. Somewhere to her side through the walls of stone she could hear crying, the wailing of a woman ... or perhaps several. She tried to tune out the weeping, and somewhere amidst the sound of tears she heard bubbling water.

She sat up stiffly, bracing herself against the rock wall as she looked down at what she had been lying on. It was a long slab of granite, raised up from the damp floor. She heard another sound. This time it was masculine, and she turned her head to the noise. A low hissing growl met her ears, followed by large teeth chattering in a rough clapping cadence. A voice responded to the chatter, though she couldn’t make out the words. Her memory returned with a dizzying wave of recognition that left her feeling light-headed, and she realized then that she must be in the Death Drake’s lair.

She gasped when the familiar man with intoxicating blue eyes walked through the mouth of the inset grotto. She could see that he still wore the long black cloak, and he smiled impishly when he saw her.

“Well, well, well ... you’re awake, my fighting little Hellcat.” He glanced over his shoulder as a serpentine hiss announced the arrival of his monstrous companion, “But Drego here sure calmed you in a hurry.”

Rayne’s eyes turned into saucers at the sight of the Death Drake as he hovered over the man. The beast’s emerald eyes seemed to glow in the darkness as he turned his massive jaw to look at her. All she could see were rows of razor sharp teeth, all housed in that massive dark mouth from which there would be no return.

As if it knew she was watching its mouth, the big creature began to chatter its teeth, jogging its jowls in rapid succession.

The man laughed softly and approached Rayne, studying her as he drew near. She stood apprehensively and moved sideways away from him, listening as the dragon began to chatter once more.

Suddenly the man threw his eyes over his shoulder to look back at the beast; he frowned and shook his head, “What do you *mean* she’s too thin?” To Rayne’s disgusted surprise he unexpectedly lashed out and swatted her firmly across the rump, sending a shiver of excitement racing down her spine, “She has plenty of flesh on her. Just look at this nice bottom of hers.”

She tore her attention from the dragon and glared at the man, raising her jaw defiantly, "How dare you!" She reached out with her hand to strike him, but as one hand reached out her other was jerked backward against the wall, the momentum nearly throwing her off balance.

She looked down at the contraption that held her, rotating her wrists in the iron manacles that were attached to each hand. Chains jingled as she moved, and she scowled in annoyance. The man laughed again, a low, sultry chuckle.

He stepped towards her, grabbing her shackled wrist in his hand, "Isn't this the neatest little restraint system you've ever seen? See, how you're tied? You're actually attached to yourself." He looked down at her, feeling the heat between them as he stood so near to her. She cast her eyes upward, caught in his liquid blue stare as her cheeks burned red with a dangerous mixture of anger and desire.

Rayne tore her eyes away from him, refusing to acknowledge the effect he was having on her. She looked back at the wall, gritting her teeth as she eyed the chains. Indeed she was tied to herself. Both of her wrists were shackled by a thin metal chain that looped around on a big circular ring that was attached to the wall, sliding through it like a pulley. She frowned and absently pulled forward on her right hand, as if she had to prove to herself that it worked. Her left hand in turn went backward, compelling her body to turn as well.

She inhaled deeply and raised her jaw, glaring at the handsome man, "Release me at once...."

CHAPTER 5

The man flashed a charming smile and held his hand out to her. "Before I release you, I feel there are some things that we should get out of the way, starting with introductions. My name is Stryder, and yours is?"

She pushed his outreached hand away stubbornly, catching her breath when she felt the heat race up her arm from the simple touch, "Rayne ... now release me." Her voice wavered slightly as she thrust her shackled wrists out to him, demanding her freedom.

He smirked and pushed her wrists away just as she had his hand, "Not yet my dear ... there are rules. The first rule should be obvious. Don't touch Drego. He's sensitive, and if you upset him you'll be eaten before you even realize that you've made a mistake." The big monster blew out a plume of smoke from his nostrils, ostensibly to endorse the statement, "The second rule is no one goes beyond the blue corridor ... it's a long tunnel entirely lit by blue light - and it's off limits. And the third rule, there is no fighting with the other girls. Any questions?"

She looked him up and down for a moment before raising her wrists again. "Yes. Why am I chained?"

He chuckled absently, "You seemed like you might be a bit unfriendly ... I thought it might be a tad dicey to leave you free until you knew the rules."

She nodded in understanding and nudged his solid chest with her hands, blushing with heat to find him so firm beneath the black coat. "Okay, I know the rules, now release me." She swallowed hard when he turned his blue eyes on her, and she felt a flush of desire wash through her veins. She turned her face away, trying to avoid his penetrating stare.

He grabbed her wrists and with a quick flick of his finger he simply popped the restraint free. He saw the frown settle on her face and it brought a smile to his.

"You see, you could have freed yourself the whole time. Your captivity here is all an illusion, Hellcat." He winked at her and turned away, walking towards the Death Drake as he slipped around the wall.

Rayne watched him go, wondering about his parting statement. Did that mean that she was free to go any time that she liked? She sighed and leaned back, rubbing her sore wrists. She could still hear the mournful wailing beyond the wall, and it was grating at her sensitive ears. She pushed off from the stone barrier and left the little grotto to explore the larger expanse of the cave.

Stepping out into the damp cavern she paused to take in the initial view. The ceiling was elevated and seemed to rise into a sort of black nothingness. She looked to her left. The opening of the cave wasn't far from her, and sunlight streamed through to light the cavity and all of the passages within it. Wildflowers lined the mouth of the entrance and a soft breeze was swaying them inward, sending their sweet fragrance wafting within the cavern and its cold walls.

Rayne turned her attention to the right. The sound of crying had lessened but was

still echoing throughout the damp stony domicile. She walked slowly towards the sounds of sadness, peeking inside the first passageway. It was a spacious hollow built into the side of the mountain, and Rayne could see that there were seven women inside of it. None of them acknowledged her presence. Three of them were mourning, crying and whimpering about their families as tears spilled from their red rimmed eyes. Two of the other four were consoling the three in tears, and the final two were sitting off to the side, staring with a numb and detached apathy.

Rayne looked at the center of the room. There was a clear round pool where bubbling water drained from the side of the rock. She stepped towards it, slipping her hands in the cool clear water as she cupped a mouthful in her palms and brought it to her lips, finally quenching the dry thirst in her lungs. She cast her eyes to the far side, noticing that the wall was lined with small but finely made beds full of fluffy down pillows and rabbit fur blankets.

“This is where we sleep.”

Rayne glanced over, surprised to see that one of the women had finally addressed her. She was a full figured blonde, and looked to be about her age. She was comforting one of the girls in tears. Rayne smiled in gratitude, but pulled away when she could no longer take the weeping of the other three women.

She continued her exploration, finding rooms in which to eat, rooms in which to shower and bathe, a lavatory, and finally the long blue hallway. She stopped and turned around, making her way back to the entrance. Once she reached it she looked back into the black abyss of the cavern, wondering where Stryder and the Death Drake had gone to. She was glad that she didn't see them. It would make her escape much less complicated.

She stepped out into the golden sunlight, knee deep in wildflowers and lush green mountain grass. The splits on the sides of her white dress allowed the wild vegetation to tickle her bare skin, and she paused to grab a wildflower before she continued. She plucked the purple and white bud from its stem and inhaled its sweet potpourri.

“Are you going somewhere?”

The voice made her jump in alarm and she swung to the side, gasping to see Stryder leaning against a large rock. She clutched her chest to ease her frightened breathing.

“I'm leaving,” She composed herself just long enough to blurt out the statement before her beating heart sent her nerves into a quiver once more.

“You're free to go any time you like, Hellcat. As I said earlier, your captivity here is all an illusion.” She cocked her head to stare at him skeptically, and he shrugged his shoulders as a puckish smile of amusement crossed his features, “If you can find a way off of the mountain, you're free to go. I won't stop you.”

She searched his expression for traces of hostility or insincerity. His arms were folded across his chest as he reclined against the rock, and he was watching her with an amused grin. His sapphire eyes were twinkling with interest as he studied her, looking her up and down as if he could undress her with his eyes.

Rayne gasped when the rock that he was reclining against suddenly shifted, and narrow green eyes slid open to regard her.

“The temperature will be dropping soon, so he warms himself while the sun is still up. The heat makes him change color; it brings out the black in his scales.” Stryder explained when he saw her staring in shock.

She nodded numbly, but couldn't seem to take her eyes from the monster.

"So where are you leaving to?"

The question forced Rayne to bring her attention back to Stryder, and she blinked away her fear of the dragon, trying not to see him as she focused on the man instead. "I'm going home."

"So soon?" he asked.

"Yes," she responded while fiddling with the flower in her grasp, "it's not soon enough ... I promised my sister that I would be home days ago."

He nodded solemnly in understanding. "You've broken your promise then."

She frowned, wondering why she had let that slip to him in the first place, "Yes, I have." She let him absorb her words for a moment, and then she sauntered through the long grass, making her way down the mountain without another word.

Stryder watched her go. Her strides were graceful and flowing as she walked away. The mountain breeze caught her dress causing it to glide to the left, revealing her smooth tan skin on the back of her legs and thighs. He found himself wishing for a stronger wind, one that would force her gown over even more so to reveal other, more concealed areas of her body. Drego hissed and groaned behind him.

"She'll be back. Once she realizes that there's no way down the mountain she'll have no choice." He said, responding to the Death Drake's vocalizations.

Rayne walked downward until she was out of sight, no longer able to see the dragon or the man. She walked straight down the smooth slope, but had to stop once she reached the edge. There, at the rim of the slope that ascended to the peak of the mountain, was a sheer drop off. She looked over the lip of the mountain and swallowed, stepping back unconsciously. The view was making her dizzy with fright, and her head swirled.

The drop was steep and stones littered the dry craggy mountainside. About halfway down trees and scrub brush began to grow, filling in the barren landscape with their green foliage as far as the eye could see. Rayne looked beyond the mountain. Down below, past the forest and the meadows, there was an expanse of brown. From here it looked like nothing but dirt and rocks. She could only just see the tiny lumps of dwellings, and people were moving specs that could barely be seen even when she squinted hard and focused almost painfully. She could see the muddy river winding like a snake through the valley before spilling into the vast expanse of blue sea.

She couldn't tell for sure if this was her quarter of the valley or not. The view was simply too imperceptible, and she had never been outside of her own partitioned village to know what the others would look like. She turned and walked along the edge of the slope, looking for an accessible way down.

She knew the moment that she crossed into another neighboring quadrant. A high wall bordered between the divisions, keeping them separated, the only way through was to pay a toll. The houses were more visible here, they were larger and closer together, and the river that trickled through it was small and overshadowed by the larger homes. She kept walking, still looking for a way off of the mountain, even when she crossed into yet another of the four quadrants. Again the familiar barrier told her that she had passed into another realm, but the homes were much the same as the other, and the river still seemed small and overshadowed by the homes. She walked on and passed another long stone wall.

This was the first quadrant, there was no mistaking it. She could see the glittering

road that stretched from the forest clear out to the sea. It was the airstrip in the first quadrant; it was the only airfield on the whole island. It looked like a sparkling road lit by diamonds, standing out amid tiny houses that were finely built with white marble, quite contrary to the little mud huts that lined her village. For the most part only the wealthy could afford to live in this quadrant, or even afford to pay the high tax that it took just to gain access to it. However, even here the destitute could be found. Like a stray dog that is kept outside and out of the way, here huddled in a small corner near the sea were tiny earth made homes. It was the only place in the quadrant that those who were not wealthy could afford to live.

Rayne kept walking, and walking and walking. She passed the first quadrant several times; letting her know that now she was indeed walking in circles. But with every pass she thought that maybe she had missed a way to get down the mountainside, and so she would set out again to double-check her route. She finally stopped amid the thick wildflowers and plunked down on the rich velvety grass, staring out at the blue ocean.

She glanced downward once, thinking that perhaps she could jump down and hope for the best. But her common sense was too strong for such a careless action. The fall alone would break a leg, if not both of them, and the momentum would send her rolling downward, unable to stop until she crashed into a tree or a boulder. The force of the impact would kill her. She shivered at the thought and hugged her bare arms. Her eyes shifted to the heavens. The sun was almost nonexistent and the air was cooling rapidly. She had been so absorbed in finding a way down that she stopped noticing the sky.

She sat shivering in the cool evening air, staring down below at the tiny brown huts that looked like pebbles from this distance. She missed her family, and if this was all the closer that she would get to them then this would do. If she couldn't be with them then she would watch them from afar.

* * * *

Stryder stood in the mouth of the cave, listening to the smoky breathing behind him. There was warmth over his shoulder and he reached up to give the big scaly nose a rub. "She should have been back by now ... it's dark out."

He cursed inside. He never should have told her that she was free to go if she found a way off of the mountain.

The beast chattered lowly beside him, making ticking sounds with his long forked tongue. Stryder sighed, listening to the guttural clicks of the dragon. He understood every snap of the teeth, every hiss on the tongue as if it were his own language. Drego had been with his family for generations, and Stryder had learned to communicate with the giant beast from the time when he was a child. He couldn't imitate the guttural sounds that the serpent made, just as Drego was unable to create human words, but they understood each other and were able to share information by utilizing both forms of dialect.

The chattering stopped and Stryder cast a sidelong glare at the dragon, "I didn't say that I was worried about her, I just said that she should have been back by now. It was a statement, and that's all. Don't read into it, Drego."

The creature hissed and growled, clacking its razor sharp teeth together, prompting another response from the man. "I know that it's cold out ... and believe me, when she gets cold she'll be back. Besides, she shouldn't have left in the first place."

This'll be a good lesson for her."

The dragon continued to chatter, pausing only to nudge Stryder's head with his long scaly muzzle.

"How can she get lost? There aren't a whole lot of places to go up here." More chattering ensued, faster this time, "You don't really think she'd try jumping, do you?" He glanced back anxiously at the dragon, who continued his tittering and clicking with his teeth.

"I'll go look for her but the minute I bring her back, you're eating her." The big monster huffed out a plume of charcoal gray smoke from his nostrils and hissed. Stryder groaned and turned, "This one's going to be trouble. I can *feel* it."

He left the mouth of the cave and set out to look for the beautiful stranger that he couldn't seem to keep out of his thoughts. He should have told her that she was forbidden to leave the cave, that she had to stay with the other women, but he had never had a woman defy him like this before. In all of his years no woman had ever made up her mind to simply leave. In the past they had resigned themselves to hide in the dark recesses of the cave, cowering in the shadows and clinging to each other as each awaited their fate. But this one, *Rayne*, had told him she was leaving, she said she was going home, and she meant it. There was boldness about her, an alluring self-assurance, and it made his loins tighten with excitement.

He finally found her beneath the starlight, shivering against the cold night air as she sat in the soft grass on the rim of the slope. Her skin seemed to glow like liquid silver in the moonlight, and he was quiet when he took his black cloak off, draping it over his arm as he stood just behind her. A part of him just wanted to watch her, leave her undisturbed as she looked over the mountainside. She shivered again, trembling as she clutched her shoulders tightly for warmth. He had to say something to her.

"So this is where you've been hiding. I thought you were going home."

Rayne turned at the sound of his thick warm voice, and what she saw made her heart leap into her chest. She jumped up, staring at the man standing just behind her. He wore nothing but a tanned loincloth that hung over his nether region, scarcely covering him. It was cut so that it draped down between his legs until it reached just above his knees, leaving the outside of his muscular thighs clearly visible by the white starlight. Her eyes flew upward to his broad chest; it was hard and defined with a light dusting of black hair. She could see his rippled abdomen just below it, glowing bronze as the pale moonlight struck it.

She caught a glimpse of something over his shoulders, and a frightened screech caught in her throat as it tightened painfully. This man had two leathery wings behind his back, apparently attached to his shoulders. All she could think of was *Demon*, and she backed away in horror.

Her foot slipped on the rim of the cliff and she went backward, feeling herself freefalling on her back for a sickening instant as air rushed over bare skin. Her arm was grabbed fiercely and she was yanked back to her feet, pulled tightly to the man. She gasped and just before a scream left her lips she caught the stranger's stare. Brilliant blue eyes were looking worriedly back at her.

She exhaled in relief, still feeling her pounding heart like a hammer in her chest, threatening to break through at any given moment.

"Don't die yet; you're no good to me dead." Stryder forced a chuckle, trying to

hide how afraid he was that he had almost lost her over the cliff.

He looked into her panic-stricken eyes. Her purple irises were twinkling with tears on the verge of release, and he impulsively clutched her tighter to him.

Rayne looked into his wonderfully vibrant eyes, trembling against his firm body. Suddenly her fear and cold drained away, replaced by soothing warmth. She felt the urge to cling to him, to wrap her arms around his strong neck and never let go, but instead she just swallowed her desire as she forced it inward. Suddenly she wanted to get away from him; distance herself from the heat of his body against hers, but with the edge of the cliff so near there was nowhere for her to go but in his arms.

He spoke and his breath burned her icy cheek, "You're cold ... put this on."

She felt him wrap his black coat around her shoulders before he stepped away. He reached out for her and she hesitantly took his hand. Her breath was still hard pressed in her lungs, and she struggled to gather her composure. She swallowed, finally following him as he led her back up the slope until they were inside of the cave.

Torches were lit all around the rock walls, and in the light she could see Stryder much clearer. She wished for dark. Here in the light she could see his every defined muscle beneath his bronze skin. It made her feel like a panther in heat ... wanting to pounce on him and press his body to her own.

She looked at the soft bat-like winged appendages that clung to his shoulders and pressed down against his back.

"What *are* you?" She asked through skeptical eyes as he moved around the cave.

Confusion and hurt flashed momentarily in his eyes, but then he grinned roguishly and looked sideways at her. "I'm a lover, I'm a fighter, and I'm a sinner. What are *you*, Hellcat?"

She raised her jaw, "I'm a half-blood, half human, half elfish...." She waited for a scathing comment from him, but when he responded it was nothing like she expected.

"Is that all you are, Hellcat? Are you merely a half-blooded being on this lonely planet, with only a race to define yourself?" He smirked in her direction.

"You know what I'm asking, Stryder. Are you a *Demon*?" She asked bluntly, seeing that he was intent to evade the question.

"You know, Hellcat, there are many different breeds of Demon, and not all are evil, many, in fact, are quite benevolent." His smirk slipped away.

"That doesn't answer my question."

Suddenly he was beside her. She felt him grab her around the waist and pull her toward the Death Drake, who had been lying near the wall silently as he unobtrusively watched the interaction between his master and the foreign female.

"Here, I went and got her for you. Now eat her! Spare me the torment of dealing with her and devour her *now*...." He grumbled in annoyance, and he lowered his voice gruffly, "I should have let her fall off the edge of the mountain ... the hell with waiting for the onset of winter to be rid of her. That's too long for me to have to tolerate her." He shoved Rayne toward the dragon and stalked away, disappearing down the long blue corridor.

Rayne stumbled into the dragon, bracing her hands on his massive chest to keep from falling. She shivered, whimpering as tears of dread tugged at her eyes. Her heart was pounding wildly as she braced her flat palms against the cold scales beneath her touch. The smell of ash and rock surrounded her, overwhelming her sense of smell.

She could feel the individual plates of his skin shifting against her cheek as the beast moved. She swallowed the lump in her throat, forcing her paralyzed legs to move. She took a step back, but a clawed hand reached around her, encircling her with its vice-like grip and keeping her still. She closed her eyes, hoping that her death would be sudden and painless. She waited on baited breath for what seemed an eternity, letting silent tears slip down her cheeks.

Hours passed and Rayne finally opened her eyes. Her lids parted nervously; she was afraid of what she might see. She was still trembling violently in the cold grasp of the monster. She looked up hesitantly, but the Death Drake's head was no longer above her. She heard a soft hissing sound and slowly looked to the side. The great beast had his neck stretched out before her and he was sound asleep. She reached out tentatively and tried to move, hoping to escape his grasp as he slept, but he only tightened his grip when he felt her shift.

She reached out almost fearfully, thinking that perhaps she could rouse him just long enough to get him to release his hold on her, and in his dazed state she could get away from him. Her palm hovered in the air for a hesitant moment. She drew in a deep resolving breath, lowering her hand to the dragon's spiny neck. She stroked the fine bristles on the top of his neck, amazed by their softness. His spikes were like hair they were so supple and silky.

There was a loud noise down the blue corridor, and suddenly the spikes stiffened, becoming rigid spears in her palm. Her hand stilled and the spines softened once more. She was so lost in the sensation against her hand that she forgot all about her objective ... or the first rule. She glanced down and froze. The dragon's green eyes were watching her intently. He nudged closer, encouraging her to persist, and a smile of awareness traced her lips.

"Does this feel good, big boy?" She whispered as she massaged the spines and rubbed the muscles along his neck.

She watched in amusement as he craned his head into her. She would survive, yet. If she could only get the dragon to befriend her, to see her as something more than a food source, perhaps she could save herself.

She looked over at him. He had fallen asleep once again. She looked down at her waist. She was still held tightly in his grasp, unable to move.

CHAPTER 6

“You were supposed to eat her, not sleep with her.”

Rayne opened her eyes dreamily; feeling the stiffness and aching in her body from being hunched over all night long. She looked sleepily over at Stryder, who shook his head in unvoiced disgust as he approached her. He tapped Drego on the foot, prompting the dragon to release his hostage. Rayne slumped to the floor now that she was no longer being held in place.

“This is no good. I can’t have the other women seeing this. Drego, this is very bad, she needs to sleep with the others. We can’t get attached, *remember?*” He scolded the giant beast, who discarded the admonishment and left the cave, gingerly stepping over Rayne as he went.

Stryder looked at Rayne as he turned to regard her, and there was hardness in his eyes, “From now on you spend most of your time with the other girls.”

He twisted away and walked back down the long hall, leaving her alone in the mouth of the cave before she could even open her mouth to object.

Rayne straightened, gasping with pain as her back cracked back into alignment, and then she reluctantly found her way to the room where the women were hiding. A few of them looked up upon her entry, but not one of them said a word to her. She stood with uncertainty in the doorway, feeling like an unwelcome stranger in their presence.

Her gaze shifted around the room, stopping on a half eaten plate of food that was set off to the side of the cavern. Several leftover pieces of cooked deer meat were drying to the plate, surrounded by picked over wild berries that were scattered here and there.

Her stomach growled, reminding her that it was all too empty. She went unobtrusively into the room and snatched some of the juicy vittles. She popped berries into her mouth and looked at the other women. They were watching her suspiciously in return, and she wondered of their peculiar mistrust of her. She was brought here the same way that they were, she was still a sacrifice for the dragon. She looked at the floor; perhaps because she had been chained when she was first brought here they thought that she was unfriendly, or maybe even *dangerous*.

Rayne casually walked to one of the beds, sitting down while still under scrutiny from the others. One of the women, a short and plump brunette, snapped at her the moment that she sat down.

“That’s my bed!” the woman announced with a snarl.

Rayne’s eyes flew open in alarm, “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize.” She smiled apologetically when her shock wore off, she didn’t wish to make enemies so soon, and rule number three was no fighting.

She stood and went to another bed, but before she could even sit another woman commented, “Don’t even think about it ... that one is mine!”

Rayne offered another apology; no matter where she went it was the wrong bed. Finally, after several more mistakes, the buxom blonde that had spoken to her the day before offered a suggestion.

“The five beds near the farthest corner are available.”

Rayne smiled gratefully, but still wondered why it had taken her so long to speak up. She sat down on one of the beds and twiddled her thumbs, listening as the women began to chat amongst themselves, ignoring her like she was a shadow on the wall. There were no friendly faces here, nobody that she could deposit trust into. She shivered inside, she had never felt so vulnerable or as insecure as she did here, surrounded by the gloom of dank stone walls and women who knew their fate was upon them.

She thought of her sister, and pain hit her in the stomach, it sank into her, burrowing into her gut and soul until she felt sick with aching. Her sister was so much more than just a sibling; she was also her best friend, a shoulder to lean on. That was another reason that she felt so awful about breaking her promise. She had lied to her sister, and she had let down her *friend*.

The pain of missing her family swept down upon her like a vulture, preparing to eat her inside out, and she drew her knees up to her stomach while burying her head in her arms. It was a weak but effectual way of blocking out the outside world as she drew inside herself.

The hours passed slowly, and Rayne had pressed herself up as tightly against the wall as she could, as if she could melt right into it and disappear. She had chosen a bed that was nearest the wall, using it for a sense of security, no matter how false it was. She sobbed to herself, content to let the other women ignore her as they were doing. She wondered what her family was doing, and the pain that the thought brought with it made her double over with inaudible tears that wet her cheeks.

She was leaning against the wall, drying her eyes when a masculine form appeared in the doorway. The women went silent, watching as Stryder looked at each of them. His gaze swept the room slowly. Finally he nodded to a quiet brunette in the corner, ordering her to follow him as he turned from the room.

He glanced over at Rayne before he left the room, and to see her eyes red from crying stung him. He almost asked her if she was alright, but stopped himself. He dropped his head and turned away, he could feel no affliction for her, no concern.

The women watched as their companion left the room, and the minute the duo disappeared from view one of the girls smirked dryly.

“You’d think that he would feel guilty doing that, but obviously not.”

One of the girls that had been sobbing and pining for her family suddenly stopped and looked at the one that had spoken. “Feel guilty about doing what?”

“He fucks us ... and then he’ll turn around and feed us to the Death Drake.”

The girl looked shocked, and she stuttered, “How do you know for sure that’s what he’s doing?”

The other woman laughed, “Because he’s had each of us.” She gestured to her three companions, including the full figured blonde, “and pretty soon he’ll have each of you ... and when the last four women are brought in, he’ll have them, too.”

“But how do you know we’ll be eaten? How do you know that?” The girl’s eyes were pleading, begging for even a hint of doubt from the other woman.

“Because he told me that when he fucked me,” The woman sneered, “I got smart with him, and he informed me that I would be little more than a memory by the time winter was here, that I would be inside of Drego’s belly.”

“How can you blame him for being so eager for a woman?” One of the other

women teased as she digressed to a lighter subject, wishing to ignore the inevitable, "He goes all winter by himself with no female companionship whatsoever ... it's bound to wear on a guy. It's no wonder he acts like he's been deprived."

"Hey, he can keep me alive just for sex if he wants ... I'd rather be a sex slave than eaten, no matter how rough he is." The first woman to speak said.

Rayne listened to them babbling on, sharing stories about men that they had back home, and comparing them. She finally stood to her feet and left the room. Her mind was spinning with the uncertainty of her future. Suddenly it occurred to her that being eaten by the Death Drake wasn't her only concern. She thought about Stryder, about his deep blue eyes as they looked at her, and his hard body pressed against hers ... she blinked, tearing her thoughts away as a shudder of unexpected desire washed over her. No, she wouldn't give herself to him, she *refused* to. He was the last man in this world that she wanted right now.

She scowled in silent resentment. He had told her she was free to go if she could find a way off of the mountain. He had played with her, toyed with her desperation; there *was* no way off of the mountain. And then he had thrust her into the grip of the dragon, demanding that the beast eat her. For whatever reason though, Drego hadn't. She sighed as sunlight from the entrance of the cave glazed over her face. It didn't matter why Drego hadn't eaten her. What mattered was that he hadn't. She had survived to see another day, and she was going to find a way off of this godforsaken mountain, come hell or high water.

She slipped from the cave, passing the Death Drake as she left. He was sun warming his body when she passed, and he chattered softly as soon as he saw her. She smiled and looked back at him, wishing that she knew what he was saying amidst his clicking teeth and clucking tongue.

Turning, she trotted through the wildflowers as she made her way down the slope unhurriedly. She spent her day outside, never bothering to return to the room which the women shared; she didn't care if she ever saw that room again. She would use her freedom now to explore the mountaintop, looking for anything that might give a clue as to how to escape from here. All she had succeeded in finding though was a berry patch. She finally resigned herself to sitting at the edge of the cliff, watching the softly rolling sea in the fading light.

* * * *

Stryder was troubled when he noticed her gone. He had specifically asked that she stay with the other women, and what did she do? She disobeyed, going outside and disappearing until it was dark out again.

He looked at Drego as he paced the cave entrance, "I told you that she was trouble, didn't I? I told her to stay with the other women." The dragon chattered and he stopped pacing to lean against the cave wall. "The other women alienate her. Don't think that I don't know what goes on in my own home, Drego."

The dragon continued to chatter, nipping the air with his sharp teeth as he clicked and snapped his words.

"She shouldn't be out so late ... she'll freeze to death." There was more chattering and he turned on the dragon, "I'm not worried, I'm just thinking that if she's dead before winter she's useless." He shrugged absently before walking into the darkness, pretending not to be bothered, "You're the one that should be worried. It's your

stomach that will be empty, not mine.”

He cursed to himself as he walked into the dark of night. The moon was hidden by cloud cover, and there were no stars to light the sky tonight. She would be hard to find in the darkness. If it weren't so cold he would ask Drego to find her with his nocturnal eyes, but it was too risky to ask it of him.

Why couldn't she just stay inside like a normal person would when it got so dark out? He smiled to himself just thinking about her. She wasn't a normal woman. She was beautiful, beautiful beyond compare. He had beautiful women before, but none had struck a chord in him like this one. She was strong willed and determined, and a part of him knew that she would not be easily subdued. She would be a challenge, and the thought alone was a huge turn-on.

He walked through the thick grass, searching for her in the blackness. He finally found her sitting at the edge of the slope, hugging herself as she rubbed her exposed shoulders to stay warm. He came up beside her and sat down. She didn't acknowledge him but rather continued to look off into space.

“I asked you to spend most of your time with the other women.” He said to break the silence, “But instead you come out here and don't return.”

She flashed her violet eyes in his direction, “You also told me that my captivity here was an illusion, and that I was free to go whenever I liked.”

He laughed lightly at her insinuation and looked into her eyes before she could tear them away. She had a hard outer shell that she was building around her. The other women cried and wailed, openly displaying their misery to being away from home, but Rayne kept it to herself. Nevertheless, he knew that inside she was hurting; she was missing someone that she loved. He had seen her red eyes earlier, and they told of the hurt within that she tried to conceal. She had also let her emotion slip when she told him about her broken promise to her sister. She felt guilty.

“Rayne,” he whispered gently, “Why do you feel guilty about breaking your promise to your sister? It wasn't your fault that you were taken from your home.”

She shot her eyes over to him, thinking about his words, and her lip quivered ... she did feel guilty, and if she had only listened when her sister begged of her not to go she wouldn't have broken the promise.

“It *was* my fault, and I wasn't taken from my home.” She jumped to her feet and climbed the slope, eager to dismiss both him and the conversation.

He hurried to catch up to her, grabbing her arm and seizing her in the entrance of the cave as he swung her towards him. “What do you mean you weren't taken from your home?”

She tried to pull away from him to no avail, “I left my home freely, after my sister asked me not to go.” Her voice was soft now, and pain crossed her delicate features.

He frowned in disbelief, “You left home to willingly become a sacrifice?”

“Of course not!” She hissed at him, again fighting to escape his grip, “I left home to hunt on the King's land.”

His eyes widened, and a smile of recognition suddenly parted his lips, “So the King was angry with you for trespassing on his land?”

“No,” Rayne grumbled while still trying to jerk her hands free, “The King was angry because I tried to kill him.”

His features took on a look of shock, and his blue eyes danced with amusement.

“You tried to kill the King? You’ve got brass, Hellcat.” His eyes softened and he released his hold on her, “Why would you do something like that? He could have executed you.”

Rayne walked to where Drego was lying and absently began to stroke the spikes on his neck. “You don’t know what King Desoto has done to my family, or the people of our village. And he *has* executed me ... from what I understand I am to die before winter.” She said the words casually, as if it were pretense.

Stryder was silent as he watched her stroking the Death Drake; he didn’t dare to respond to her statement. He frowned when he heard the other women talking amongst themselves, and watched them leave their alcove to go to another passage off to the side. He exhaled gratefully when they failed to look over and see Rayne petting the dragon. If they were to believe that he was so tame with all of them he would have a major problem on his hands.

He didn’t know why Drego was so tolerable of Rayne or why he seemed to be partial to her, but the dragon was a beast of mystery and enchantment, and often there could be no questioning his actions.

“You’re breaking rule number one, Hellcat.” He reminded her when he heard her cooing to Drego in soft undertones.

She flushed and removed her hand from the beast, which caused him to lift his great head and begin chattering in protest.

“I know you like her ... and it puts us both in a rather compromising position, now doesn’t it?” Stryder demanded as he suddenly approached the dragon.

Rayne stepped away nervously as the monster hissed and growled. He rose up slightly, puffing his chest out as he began to switch his thorny tail back and forth to display his irritancy. Stryder set his jaw, unthreatened by the dragon’s obvious irritation.

“You’re supposed to eat her or have you forgotten that?” He glared at the beast, challenging him despite the obvious size difference between the two species.

The monster stood and chattered, rattling his jaws together rapidly.

Suddenly Stryder’s tan face paled, and his magnetic eyes shot over to Rayne. She was pressed against the wall, watching apprehensively as the dragon and the man argued. He shook his head and walked to her in several quick strides, grabbing her wrists in his hands.

He took a deep breath and so did the Death Drake, hissing out a gust of smoke as he relaxed.

“You foolish overgrown lizard, you’re going to kill yourself,” Stryder cursed under his breath as he forcefully led Rayne away from the entry.

Rayne dug her heels in when they reached the blue corridor, and she struggled to free herself. “Let me go, Stryder! Where are you taking me?”

He jerked her forward, pulling her in tightly to him as he looked down at her with his fierce cobalt eyes, “I knew that you were trouble the minute I saw you.” He turned and continued forward, compelling her to follow.

“What’s going on? I didn’t do anything!” She cried as she fought his stronghold on her.

He pulled her into a room that was entirely lit by a ghostly blue light and he left her sitting on a large bed. “Don’t move until I come back, Hellcat.”

She scowled, watching as he slid a blue marble door shut behind him as she was left alone. She looked around the eerie room. The only fixture here was the large bed, but

beyond the tiny grotto was a small passage, another chamber lit in blue. She stood, looking in wonder at the slim hallway. She couldn't resist her interest, and she walked through it, curious as to its secrets.

She gasped. A deep clear round pool swirled in the center of the room as it was fed by a tiny tributary that trickled in from the outside. Rayne was in shock, she could see the black night sky beyond the opening, and she wondered if this was the exit that would take her home.

CHAPTER 7

Rayne started for the exit, gasping with alarm when she was held back by a firm grip on her arm. She whirled around to see Stryder glaring back at her.

"I leave you alone for five minutes and you're already looking for trouble." He chastised while trying to pull her away.

Rayne stubbornly pulled her weight back.

"What is this, Stryder? Is this the way down the mountain?" She asked in disbelief.

He laughed and shook his head. "You have a one-track mind, Rayne. It's all about escape." He sobered and pulled on her again, "That is definitely not the way out."

She looked up at him skeptically, still remaining steadfast against his grip, "Then what is it?" Her eyes narrowed in challenge.

He scowled in frustration, "You won't believe me until you see what this is, will you?" She didn't answer, but he knew what she was thinking, "Of course not. Well, fine, if you want to see what this is I will show you."

He made a soft whistling noise and Rayne thought that she heard an animal snort. A large black horse came from around the corner and she felt her throat tighten, her breath squeezed out as an anaconda wraps itself around prey.

Standing before her was the most beautiful stallion that she had ever seen. He was as black as coal, with a long wavy mane that hung down over his eyes and neck. In the center of his forehead was a spiraling silver horn that actually looked like three individual ones that had become twisted together as they spiked to the sky. His back supported two large downy wings that were at rest against his sides. He was both tall and long. Rayne couldn't believe her eyes. This was the legendary horned Pegasus.

Stryder approached the horse and affectionately rubbed his neck, patting him as the stallion stood proudly beside him. "Rayne, this is Unisys. He's a little untrusting of strangers at first, but he warms up." He beckoned for her to come around the pool beside him.

Rayne drew in a profound breath. She felt her stomach clench with uncertainty. An instinctual part of her was afraid of the animal. She knew his reputation, could see that spear-like horn and his intimidating strength, and yet at the same time she was intrigued and awestruck by him. Like a fly to light she found herself captivated, unable to resist getting a closer look at the horse. She edged closer, blinking to be sure that she wasn't seeing things.

Once she was near enough Stryder grabbed her hand, stepping back beside her as he guided her hips closer. Rayne couldn't refuse, she felt numb, under a trance to be so near this mythical beast of such great beauty and power.

Stryder raised her hand to the large charger's muzzle, allowing him to smell her palm with a snort. Rayne winced and pulled away fearfully when he dropped his head, but the man behind her held her fast. The spiraling horn was inches from her face, and she thought of all the stories that she had heard about him goring people to their deaths.

“As long as you respect him, he will respect you.” Stryder whispered warmly into her ear, guiding her hand further up the stallion’s muscular neck until she could feel his smooth black velvet hide beneath her fingertips.

Rayne gasped and pressed herself closer still to Stryder, whimpering when the beast dropped his head again.

Stryder groaned inwardly. She kept pressing herself into him, letting him feel her curved backside against him. His breath brushed her collarbone, and when he looked down he was able to see her silky skin and the hollow of her cleavage. He wanted to wrap his arms around her waist, bring his hands up to cup her breasts and feel her body in his grasp. He squeezed his eyes shut. He had to do something to take his mind off of her, before she felt his growing excitement.

He reached out, playfully tugging on the horse’s horn as he twisted the animal’s head away. The stallion took the cue and turned, walking back out into the night air. His tail was long and wavy, trailing behind him like a train as he slid into the darkness.

Rayne followed Stryder when he abruptly turned away from her, still holding her hand in his grasp but keeping his back to her, “There, is your curiosity sated, Hellcat?”

She was still in a trance left by the awesome beauty of the stallion, and Stryder had to repeat himself before she responded.

“He’s beautiful....” She whispered while looking over her shoulder, paying no heed to where he was leading her.

The stallion was indeed beautiful, but after seeing him in the flesh and actually touching him it was clear that much of the myth that surrounded him had been exaggerated and fabricated. His nostrils were red, but there were no flames firing from them, and his hooves, too, were flameless. Even his size had been embellished--he was certainly large--but nowhere near the size of the Death Drake.

When Stryder finally released her she found herself back in the main chamber. He offered no explanation for his mysterious behavior or for the argument with the dragon.

He winked and nodded towards the recess where the other women were already asleep, “Try to become one of the girls, Hellcat.”

She caught sarcasm in his voice but didn’t have time to call him on it. He was gone before she could question him.

Through the dimly lit grotto Rayne found her place on the bed nearest the wall. Sleep was hard to find though when she was surrounded by the cold damp of the rocks and unfamiliar women who held no predilection for her. She shivered and tossed, turning in a fitful sleep. No matter how tightly she pressed the fur blankets against her she just couldn’t seem to find warmth or comfort.

The sound of the bubbling liquid in the center of the room did little to keep her mind still. Her thoughts began to drift off, thinking of the words between Stryder and the dragon. The words floated in her mind like tiny bubbles in a champagne glass. She was supposed to be eaten by the Death Drake, but amid his chattering and guttural sounds Stryder had gotten the impression that Drego was not entirely keen on eating her.

She turned in her bed. She couldn’t help the flare of optimism that fired in her belly. If Drego refused to eat her she would have to go home. There would be no sense in Stryder keeping her here if she had no further use. She smiled to herself, as long as she was still outside of the dragon’s stomach there was hope left, and she was going to do whatever it took to keep it that way. She would see her family again, and she would

finish what she started with King Desoto.

A wash of relief and encouragement rushed over her, allowing her to think more peacefully. She thought about the great winged stallion, about his smooth skin beneath her fingertips, and she absently rubbed the hide that covered her.

She yawned, and sleepy images of vibrant blue eyes regarding her flashed into mind. She could see the navy blue tattoos beneath his eyes, and his soft dark hair as it fell over his shoulders. She imagined his hard bronze body against her, and she felt a rush of heat and desire flood through her. The feel of his sweet breath against her ear when he had whispered into her seemed to brush against her now, a blistering reminder of how close he had been to her. She closed her eyes, drowning in the bubbles of her champagne glass of thought.

In the morning she awoke to the sound of female voices and the faint smell of cooked meat. She sat up to see the other women huddled around a platter filled with roast venison, chatting to each other as they ate their fill.

Rayne approached the group of women; they had left no room in the circle for her, and in fact appeared to bunch in tighter when they saw her draw near. The action didn't dissuade her, and she merely reached over them to swipe a piece of the roast deer meat.

She grabbed up one of the wooden cups that had been set aside for drinking, noticing that the women had stopped talking and had become somewhat tense with her in their midst. No, it was more than tense; they had downright clammed up and gone rigid.

She frowned in bewilderment to herself and walked out of the room, finding her way to a dimly lit passage that was just beyond the little grotto. Inside there was a fissure where the mountain water dripped from the ceiling, creating a shower of cool liquid. She ate and drank quickly before undressing and climbing under the stream of water, washing her body and hair. She grabbed up a block of ivory colored soap, inhaling the subtle scent of wildflowers as she scrubbed at her skin and massaged the suds into her scalp. When she had finished rinsing off she even grabbed up her dress to wash it beneath the falling torrent. When she was through she was sopping wet, but at least she was clean.

She traversed the passage to leave, stepping out into the open mouth of the cave. A layer of her wet snowy tresses had fallen before her eyes, and when she swiped them away she was arrested by two blue eyes that looked back at her. She blushed and looked past him. A young woman was walking ahead of him, returning to the inset grotto where the other women were waiting.

It was Stryder's turn to blush. He saw Rayne looking at the other girl, and he knew that she was aware of what he had been up to. He took in a deep breath, absorbing the woman before him. He should have looked away, but he couldn't tear his eyes from her. She was captivating, stealing his attention as he let his eyes drift across her form. Her gown was wet, translucent and sticking to the tan skin beneath it. He could see her full breasts through the sheer fabric, their small rigid cores barely concealed by a veil of colorless material.

He swallowed, unable to remove his attention from Rayne; he could see her every womanly curve beneath the cloth. He glanced down at her legs. She was standing with her hands together, resting them on her left hip, concealing her most feminine places, places that he found himself yearning to taste and touch.

His gaze shifted back to her face. She was watching him with an intrigued and

almost embarrassed flush. He caught her eyes glance swiftly down at his body, and the instant that she had seen that all he wore was his loincloth her eyes betrayed her. Her lavender irises flared wide in surprise, and she immediately tore her glance away, looking toward the wall. She smiled bashfully and her cheeks colored prettily.

Stryder kept his eyes on her, even when she shifted uneasily under the weight of his stare. Her wet hair was clinging to the sides of her cheeks and her shoulders, unsuccessfully concealing her blush as it deepened in color. He stepped closer to her, gently swiping the hair from her face before cupping her blushing cheek in his palm. Her skin was smooth and tender in his grasp.

Rayne felt her breath catch as his warm hand touched her skin. She had to get away from him, get away from the heat of his touch and the shiver of excitement that he sent crawling up her spine and tingling between her legs. She reached up and softly removed his hand, passing him as she left the cave into the sunlight. She looked over her shoulder at him, seeing if he was still watching before she turned away.

Stryder groaned to himself as she stood in the bright open air. He could feel his arousal between his legs as he watched her. The sun bathed her in a golden glow, and in that moment she could have been nude, it was as if the dress didn't even exist. He could see her hips swaying as she descended the slope, disappearing from view. He growled to himself and turned away, reassured that this woman would be trouble. He would have to fight for every ounce of his self-control just to keep his sanity around her.

Rayne walked through the flower-rich fields, thinking about her family as she made her way to the edge of the incline. She sat down, reclining in a bed of fragrant blossoms as she stared at the blue sky. It was beautiful on the mountain top, and if she could only block out the reminder that she was supposed to be eaten she might have enjoyed the situation that she found herself in.

She frowned, remembering the discord between the Death Drake and Stryder the previous night. She had meant to question him about it when she saw him, but the moment she ran into his captivating eyes she forgot about everything but him and his all too hungry stare that made her blood run hot just thinking about touching him.

She stood to her feet and walked back up the hillside. She didn't have to go far to find her quarry. Stryder was leaning beside Drego as the giant was busy warming himself in the sunlight. He smiled broadly when he saw her and his charming grin and barely clothed body almost made her forgetful again. She sucked in a ragged breath, desperately focusing on her words instead of him.

"I almost forgot that there was something I wanted to talk to you about." She smiled in return, trying to seem unaffected by his charisma.

"You have my attention, what would you like my dear little Hellcat?" He mocked a bow and she gave a halfcocked grin of amusement.

"You can speak to Drego," She began as she stepped nearer to him, "You were arguing with him last night, as if he wasn't so sure that he wanted to eat me."

He looked down into her violet eyes, grinning with appreciation for her perception as he spoke. "He doesn't want to eat you ... *yet*. But trust me, when he gets hungry enough he'll change his mind."

"You said that he likes me." She turned her head when voices floated through the cave.

Stryder looked over his shoulder; this was a conversation that he didn't intend to

have in front of the other women. He grabbed Rayne gently by the hand, "Come on. Let's talk in private."

The other women saw him lead the fair haired woman down the blue corridor, but thought nothing of it other than his want for sexual fulfillment.

Stryder led Rayne to the eerily lit bedroom, and to her surprise he brought her directly down the passage to the side. He brought her around the room to sit on a dark skin covered seat that was discreetly placed along the rock wall. He sat down beside her and leaned back, inhaling her feminine scent while she was so close to him. She smelled like the softly perfumed wildflowers that grew on the mountain.

Rayne looked up at Stryder, drawing his eyes down to her. "You said that Drego likes me, and he doesn't want to eat me. Why is that?"

He laughed and looked away, "Any woman as troublesome as you must have vinegar in her blood, and you probably taste rather sour." He nodded then, smirking slyly in her direction, "You're most likely poisonous."

She shouldered him good-naturedly, instantly regretting it. The feel of his firm warm flesh against her skin made her tremble with desire, and she had to struggle just to keep her mind focused on her objective.

She looked down at the floor, trying to forget the feel of his body beside her, or his hip as it brushed hers, "I mean it. Why doesn't he want to eat me now?" She glanced back over at him, relentlessly pushing her body to refuse its desire.

Stryder looked down at her, swimming in her beautiful purple stare. "Who knows, he's becoming fickle. Too much pampering. First it was because you were too skinny. Now it's because he thinks I like you ... damn dragon will starve to death if he becomes a picky eater." He tried to seem as detached as possible, tearing his eyes from hers as he spoke.

Rayne didn't respond at first, she didn't know how. She frowned, why did he say it like that--Drego *'thinks* I like you'? Did that mean that he didn't? She was over thinking it, and it didn't matter whether he liked her or not, it didn't change her objective of going home. Besides, he must have liked women in the past ... weren't *they* eaten?

She stared at the floor, unable to refuse the question that was building in her stomach, "Do *you* like me, Stryder?" Her eyes widened when she realized the implication of her inquiry, and she hurried to fix it, "I mean as a friend, another being. I wasn't insinuating you know, that you would *like* me, like me. I just meant ... you know. Maybe you don't like me, after all," She felt like an awkward schoolgirl, tripping over her own tongue with nervous chatter. She had to change the subject, and quick. "You told Drego to eat me so that you could be spared the torment of dealing with me."

Laughter to her side made her look up at Stryder; he was looking away, chuckling to himself. "I did say that, didn't I?" He glanced back at her, seeing that she wasn't joining in his amusement, and in fact appeared rather hurt, "I'm sorry, Rayne," He stopped laughing and lifted her chin, compelling her to look at him as he whispered thickly, "I do like you, Rayne, I *like* you ... and if I didn't think that you'd punch my teeth out I'd have had my way with you already."

Her eyes rounded in shock, and she pushed him away from her, "You bet I'd punch your teeth out!" It was a lie; she was practically begging him to rip her clothes off right here and right now.

"That's what I was afraid of, Hellcat." He nudged her gently, "If I'm going to

have my way with you, Drego had better eat you afterwards, or you'll come after me and make me gum my food for the rest of my life."

She looked upward into his entrancing blue eyes. They seemed now to reflect off of the navy stripes just above his cheekbones, making his stare seem darker, hungrier. Her heart beat faster. She wouldn't mind letting him have his way with her, but she wasn't about to tell him that.

A snort made her turn her eyes away. She had almost forgotten that the stallion was just beyond the opening of the cave.

"I looked all over the peak of this mountain for an escape route, Stryder, and never once did I see Unisys. How does he hide so well?"

"Come, I'll show you," He reached out for her hand, and after looking at him skeptically for a moment she took his grasp, following where he led.

He brought her to the stallion's enclosure. It was spacious with plenty of room to graze and run, but entirely surrounded by high reaching stone pillars.

"You would have thought that it was a part of the mountain," Stryder explained.

She watched the black stallion approach the man, stopping beside him to receive a scratch on his soft velvety nose.

"How is it that you can share your home with such unusual beasts?" Rayne questioned softly as puzzlement crossed her features.

He smiled broadly, "We make good roommates, we're all male, we all have wings," Stryder grinned roguishly and gently rocked the horses spiraling horn back and forth, "and we're all horny."

Rayne rolled her eyes and turned away to go back inside, she didn't want him to see the blush that tinted her cheeks or the charmed smile that parted her lips.

CHAPTER 8

Rayne found her way back to the little alcove where the other women were staying, and with the greatest reservation she forced herself inside. She was going to do her best to obey Stryder's orders and become 'one of the girls,' but they certainly weren't making it easy on her.

The moment she walked in they stopped talking, appearing to freeze up at her mere presence. They watched her every move like a hawk watches a mouse in a field, and she wondered of it. She almost felt like they were biding their time, just waiting to attack her. She sat down on her bed, shifting her eyes when she saw that the seven women were staring at her, not uttering a sound.

"Please, don't stop talking on my account." She said through a deep breath, readying herself for a confrontation if necessary.

The women turned their heads from her and continued to talk amongst themselves, resorting to their old tactic of pretending that she wasn't there. She didn't care, it wasn't friends that she needed right now, it was a way home. The thought alone spurred her into action, and she left the space again, leaving the cave entirely to search the mountaintop.

The days passed by quickly, turning into weeks and months, and the only thing that changed was her growing desire for Stryder. She couldn't help herself. Every time his magnetic blue eyes glanced in her direction she felt a shiver through her whole body, like unexplainable lightening through her veins. Just the thought of his warm breath against her ear, the brush of his body past hers, it made her tremble with anticipation. She couldn't explain it, didn't understand it. She almost hated it, the way he made her body burn for him with a simple glance or touch.

Rayne knew that her body wasn't the only one aching with desire. Stryder, too, seemed to be feeling the pull between them. His eyes seemed hungrier, more intense when he looked at her, and his arousal was not as easily hidden as hers. Indeed, his scant clothing hid little from her eyes. He was also edgier, as if unable to bear standing beside her for long periods of time. He seemed restless, as if he wanted to reach out and touch her, but just couldn't. There was a distance there, a space that neither of them would cross and it created an unspoken tension.

Rayne enjoyed her time spent walking the mountaintop. It was the only thing that kept her mind off of him and the burning that he created within her. Her thoughts of her family and the chill of the pending fall air never failed to cool the heat swimming in her veins.

A way down from the mountain was never revealed to her, but every day she scoured the peak, looking under rocks and shrubbery desperately seeking a hidden cave or path that might present an escape route. She didn't care that every night Stryder came looking for her, insisting that she not stay out so late, she would do it again the next night, and the night after.

The women never warmed to her either, they continued to avoid her like a plague,

and they never gave a reason for it if they had one. Only the full-figured blonde ever spoke to her, but her words were concise and she never pursued a conversation that could be construed as friendly towards her.

Rayne tried not to let the others' chilly reaction to her bother her, but the weeks were passing into the shadow of fall, and the lack of friendship made the days seem colder and lonelier. The only time that she was even reminded that she had a voice was when Stryder would speak to her, and when she left early in the morning she wouldn't see him until he would come looking for her at night, and by that time he was usually cross with her for staying out late.

There was something else that bothered Rayne, though there was no way that she could ask of it when the other women were so formal toward her. When she asked Stryder he dismissed her question, refusing to answer and telling her that some things were best unknown. Two of the women had gone missing, taken by Stryder to presumably fulfill his never satisfied lust, but then they had never returned. The other women were silent about it, and no one dared ask what could have happened to them. In their hearts they all held the fear that their companions had become lost in the jaws and stomach of Death Drake.

Today though, Rayne wasn't worried about what had become of the two missing girls. She was more concerned about the frigid wind that bit at her skin. When the temperatures were dropping she could feel the icy burn sinking all the way down to her bones, and she shivered uncontrollably in the wake of the gusts of wind that sheared through her barely clothed body. Her clothing was a joke; in this cold she may as well have been naked.

She shivered, trembling in spasmodic jerks as she overlooked the mountainside. She knew this was her quadrant of the mountain, and she pretended that her family was down there somewhere. She imagined her sister being one of the specs rushing about in preparation for winter, her little brother a dot playing in the dirt. Her mother would be inside resting. When the weather changed seasons her sickness acted up. She would be coughing worse, and her joints and muscles would ache and stiffen.

Rayne wondered if her sister remembered how to make the therapeutic herbal tea for her. It was the only medicine that eased her pain and her coughing, but given too strong a dose it could kill her. She shook, she had to put faith in her sister, and she had no choice because there was nothing that she could do from up here. Warmth surrounded her and Rayne clung to it, turning to see who had shielded her from the cold. She didn't really need to see who it was for her to know. Her heart skipped just to feel Stryder beside her. He was so strong and firm, and yet soft and warm at the same time.

"You're going to catch your death of cold if you don't stay inside, Rayne." Stryder spoke with his usual charming smile, but his voice had a tone of warning.

She nodded and smiled in return, but her smile faded to a frown when she saw what he was wearing. He had given her his coat and now he wore only his loincloth. She knew from experience that the cold must have been biting into his flesh, and she removed the cloak from her shoulders, handing it back to him.

"You're wearing less than I am right now ... you should be wearing this." She slipped a sidelong grin in his direction before she looked away, feeling her heart racing under his masculine presence. Even in this cold the heat that he sent rushing through her blood was enough to make her forget about the chilly air for the moment.

He impatiently replaced the coat on her shoulders and grabbed her hand, "It's not me that I'm worried about right now. It's bad enough that I have to take care of a finicky dragon, don't make me have to tend to a sick woman, too."

Rayne shook her head but didn't reply. She knew that though he joked there was a serious connotation behind his words.

To say that he walked with her back to the cave would have been an understatement, it was more like he took her hand and drug her back to the cave, offering her no other option. At first she was a bit resentful that he was giving her no choice in the matter, but the cold wind reminded her that it was in her best interest to yield to his insistence.

He released his hold on her once they were inside, freeing her to go where she liked as he went to warm his hands on a fire that was slowly building in the mouth of the cave. She noticed that Drego was curled up beside the fire, and she assumed that he was the source of the blaze. She felt a twinge of regret that she had not been able to see him display his ability to breathe fire, but at the same time she knew that there would probably be other opportunities.

She walked to Stryder's side, handing him his coat as she stood beside him warming herself by the flames. Just to feel his hand graze hers as he took the coat was enough to make her insides turn to jelly. She swallowed, resisting the urge to look at him, afraid that she would throw herself into his arms just looking into his eyes and seeing the longing within them.

Stryder's gaze flicked sideways and he shifted away from her, hardly able to stand her nearness. The cold had made her nipples harden, pressing against the thin fabric of her dress. He wanted to grab her, press her against him as he touched her breasts and felt their softness in his hands. He licked his lips. He could almost taste her on his tongue, sweet like honey and soft as silk. What he wouldn't give to have her flesh in his mouth, an eager nipple between his teeth as he sucked and pulled until she was crying his name. He cleared his throat, shifting his body once more to give himself more distance from her.

He looked into the flames of the fire. He had to harden himself to her, ignore her beauty and the attraction that he felt for her. He could have no affection for her, feel no affliction for her. Of course, after what he was about to say to her she was going to hate him anyway.

He drew in a quiet breath, "I don't think I want you going out anymore, Rayne."

She shot her eyes upward. She couldn't believe what he had said and assumed that he must have been joking. His grin was gone and he was staring into the fire, his blue eyes were bothered and narrowed in thought.

"I won't go far...." She assured him, but she knew that it was a lie. The moment that her feet hit the cold grass she would need to go look for her home again.

"You're right; you won't because you're not going out anymore." He answered solidly.

"You said that I was free to go any time I liked, Stryder. You can't forbid me to go out!" She was getting angry, she didn't like being told what she could or could not do.

"The rules change, Rayne, and they're *my* rules, so you *will* listen." His voice was steady as he gazed into the fire.

"You can't change the rules and I *won't* listen ... I'll still go out, and I'll still look

for a way off of this mountain.” She challenged him, stepping back with a gasp when he turned on her.

“You will listen, or you will be punished.” He stared coldly into her eyes, seeing the defiance in her lavender irises. He was so close to her now that he could see the black eyeliner on her eyelids, a trait possessed only by those with elfish blood.

“What are you going to do, feed me to Drego?” She was pushing even when she knew that she shouldn’t, “Go ahead, he won’t eat me....”

Suddenly Stryder smiled, and he grabbed her hips, pulling her into him, “Do you remember, Rayne, when I first brought you here and you were chained to the wall?” She glared back at him, matching his penetrating stare, “I have other ways of restraining you, making you a prisoner here if that’s what you want, and these restraints you can’t just ‘pop’ off. These will hold you, Rayne.”

She swallowed as she looked up into his sapphire eyes, nearly liquefying beneath him and begging him to take her right then and there. Her jaw twitched as she fought to regain her composure, and she inhaled, “Nothing that you can do to me will keep me here, I will never be a captive ... to *anyone*.”

He chuckled and tightened his hold on her, pressing her so firmly to him that she could have melted into him, “Oh yes, my dear little Hellcat, if you go out one more time - just once, Rayne, you *will* be my captive.”

She took in a sharp breath and her eyes narrowed. Again she had to force herself to keep from dissolving beneath him, and she barely found her voice to utter the words, “You wouldn’t dare....”

He smiled, looking into her defiant stare and feeling himself wanting to devour her. Her lips were inches from his. They were so full, slightly parted and trembling with rage, like red blossoms on a rose being tickled by an angry wind. He groaned, unable to resist her as he leaned down and claimed her lips with his own, crushing her to him as his hands found her snowy white tresses.

Rayne felt her body go limp, in this moment she was his for the taking. She felt his tongue commanding her, and his hand in her hair preventing her from pulling away. She closed her eyes, yielding to him unquestioningly as her mouth struggled against his.

Her mind abruptly snapped her out of it, reminding her that he was trying to subdue her, threatening to enslave her against her will. Furiously she lashed upward with her hand while pulling away from him.

Her wrist was arrested just inches from his face, and he quickly grabbed her other one before she tried again. He chuckled and licked his lips provocatively, tasting her deliciously sweet kiss on his tongue. “So fiery, so wild, my little Hellcat is.”

She jerked her wrists away from him, and threw daggers in his direction with her eyes, “You can’t chain me up like an animal, Stryder, and I won’t be a captive.”

He laughed again, “Behave then, Hellcat, and you won’t be chained.”

She whirled away angrily, returning to the room where the women were hiding. The women were cold and inhospitable, but at least they weren’t threatening to hold her captive, hell, they would have been happy to tell her to go play outside in the cold.

She plunked down on her bed, listening in silence as they spoke to one another. She was happy that they ignored her, it allowed her to silently blow off steam without anyone pressing and asking what was wrong.

“He’s leaving tomorrow to get the final four sacrifices, you know.” One of the

women told another.

“How do you know?” Another asked.

Rayne listened intently, pretending that she was asleep as they chattered openly to one another.

“I’ve been marking the wall, keeping track of the days, and tomorrow will mark the third sacrifice.”

The others were silent, another one of them had disappeared that morning, and until Rayne reappeared they assumed that she had, too.

The full figured blonde finally spoke; Rayne recognized her high alto, “Well, at least that means he won’t solicit the rest of us for sex anymore. He’ll be eager to try out the new girls.”

One of the brunettes countered her statement, “Yeah, and guess what else that means? Haven’t you ever heard of the saying, *‘out with the old and in with the new,’* Heather?”

The blonde frowned but offered no retort.

“That means that when the Death Drake is hungry again; guess who’s going to be the first to go? Us.” The brunette snarled bitterly.

Again silence washed over the room. There was an air of sorrow in the atmosphere, as if every one of them could feel death looming like an inescapable shadow, just waiting to fall upon them and cover them in eternal darkness. Rayne almost wished that the Death Drake would desire to eat her. She didn’t understand why she should live and the rest die. Although she didn’t know what was worse, living here alone, away from her family never to see them again, or dying and only seeing them in the afterlife. It was the same thing as far as Rayne was concerned.

CHAPTER 9

Stryder was standing in the mouth of the cave. He had his dark cloak on, ready to pull the hood over his head. Drego was warming himself beside the bonfire, lazily maintaining his energy levels by not moving and keeping his scales heated. The man looked over his shoulder at the resting giant for a moment before turning back to the outside world. Winter was coming early this year; he could feel it in the chill of the wind. It was going to be a long winter. He shivered in the breeze, turning when he heard soft footsteps padding towards the fire.

Rayne was warming her damp body beside the fire, shaking as her wet hair covered her shoulders and back. He shook his head; she was determined to freeze to death.

Rayne trembled in the orange glow of the blaze. She could feel the warmth emanating from the flames, but it still wasn't enough to penetrate her muscles and cease her shaking. She saw Stryder approach her out of the corner of her eye, but she refused to look at him, she was still furious that he had threatened to take away her freedom.

Warm hands lifted her wet hair from her exposed skin, the cold chill replaced by hot breath that burned the nape of her neck. "It's a bit cold for a shower isn't it, Rayne?"

She flushed, raising her jaw defiantly, "It's never too cold to be clean." Her voice came out jagged and broken, interrupted by her shivering.

She heard him titter and mumble to himself, and then he turned on the resting monster to her side. "Are you ready to go yet, Drego?"

The dragon chattered softly, prompting a response from the man, "I'm not being impatient, but the sun will only be up for a short time, and you need to fly fast today." He looked at the dragon as it sighed, drawing its massive ribcage from the floor. "You should eat before we go. You'll need the energy, Drego."

The dragon hissed with closed eyes, and suddenly Rayne felt her hips being grabbed as Stryder told him, "Here, I have sustenance for you right here. Eat this ripe little Hellcat and we'll go."

The dragon chattered this time and opened his green eyes, hissing again when he saw Rayne. His tongue flicked out to tickle her cheek briefly in warmth, but then his eyes closed and he went back to resting.

Rayne giggled, charmed by the big beast. She gasped, looking up in alarm when her hand was grabbed suddenly. She saw Stryder shaking his head negatively, and he began to lead her away. She pulled against him, glaring at him. His eyes flew back in her direction. The blue in his gaze swirled with a mixture of anger and worry. She looked away, giving in as he drew her forward once more. He brought her back to the alcove where the other women were, but before he released her he pulled her in close and whispered into her ear.

"Don't go out, Rayne, stay here ... I'm warning you. Don't even come out to the entrance of the cave until Drego and I have left." He squeezed her side and watched her retreat to her bed.

He couldn't help but notice that the other women threw her distasteful looks and refrained from acknowledging her. He looked at a brunette who was continuing to glare at Rayne and called her over. She was hesitant, they all were by now. Most of the time when he called a woman with him she returned, but sometimes she didn't. The woman finally made her way to him and he disappeared around the corner with her.

One of the women commented on it. "Oh, please, don't tell me that he's going to have a quickie before he goes. Can't that man control himself long enough to go one day without sex?"

Rayne dropped her eyes, she had heard the comment that Stryder had made to Drego. The brunette wasn't coming back. The three women that were left with her began to talk amongst themselves, fully believing that their companion was returning. Rayne listened through the walls, but she didn't hear anything. Through the silence somewhere she finally heard the rush of wind as it tore through the cave, followed by a chilling gust of air. She heard the beating wings of the dragon as he took flight, and once more the cave was silent.

The three women that were left with her were wide eyed. Finally one of them spoke in stunned shock, breaking through the empty still as her voice echoed off of the damp walls. "Where is Jane? Why didn't he bring her back?"

The other two were silent; they knew the answer.

The silence didn't last long as the shrill rush of wind bounced off of the walls, announcing the return of the Death Drake. The sound dissipated only to return three more times before there was a heavy thud that shook the cave, trembling everything within, including the water. The women waited breathlessly as the sound of wailing and crying met their ears.

The wailing and crying stopped as Stryder said something to the women responsible for the noise, talking briefly before bringing them to the alcove. Four women were led inside as Stryder slipped from the opening, vanishing around the corner. The women stared at the strangers, and the four new women all looked like they were on the verge of tears, ready to spill fresh ones over the old ones that had already moistened their eyes and salted their cheeks.

The short buxom blonde stood to greet them. "Hello, I'm Heather." She pointed to her two companions, "This is Danielle, and this is Nicky...." Heather paused as she looked over at Rayne, still unnoticed by the others as she sat in the corner on her bed, "And that's...." she paused, realizing that she had never been properly introduced to her.

"She's a bloody elfin half-breed!" One of the new women announced in disgust.

Rayne looked up in alarm, wondering how she got at the end of an unprovoked attack. The woman was taller than she was, with golden blonde hair and light blue eyes. If Rayne hadn't disliked her already she would have thought she was beautiful, but her temperament was anything but.

"Look at her horrid pointy little ears," The woman hissed, pointing at her, "and those creepy purple eyes ... normal people don't have purple eyes with permanent eyeliner around them ... it's *unnatural*."

Rayne unconsciously raised her hands to her ears, feeling vulnerable suddenly. She wasn't prepared for such an unwarranted attack. She couldn't help any of these things that the other woman was pointing out.

"And just look at your hair, my grandmother has white hair! *Old people* have

white hair.” Her words were spat with such venom that Rayne felt sick inside, she didn’t think that she had ever met anyone who had hated her immediately. The woman glared at her, “God, you’re ugly ... I’d like to hit you on that stain you call a birthmark in your temple.”

Rayne felt only livid heat within her soul. The damp chill around her was lost as an inferno of wrath and hatred surged through her veins. She sprang upon the blonde, lashing out with her fists. With her arms still flailing she was pulled from the blonde, lifted clear off of the ground by strong arms that placed her in the hallway. She whirled around to maintain her attack but was prevented; her way was blocked by a hard body and blue eyes that held her at bay.

“Settle down, Hellcat, and let me deal with this.” She backed away from Stryder when he spoke, still full of rage but unable to refuse his command.

He turned his body to face the group of women and she bolted to the mouth of the cave. Her eyes were burning with angry tears that begged release. She passed Drego, hearing him chatter softly when she went by, but by the time she turned to look at him her eyes were so swollen with tears that she couldn’t even see him.

Her feet tensed when they hit the frigid ground outside, but she didn’t care, she just wanted to get as far away as possible from here. She ran through the crisp mountain grass, barely able to see through her tears. She was not an ugly half-breed! How dare that wretched woman refer to her as if she were a mongrel dog on the street! Her body trembled with cold and pain. The woman had not only insulted her, but her family as well, and in her eyes they were beautiful.

She sat down on the edge of the cliff, overlooking the tiny town below. It made sense now why the other women distanced themselves; she was not one of them. More tears slipped down her face, and the wind was so icy cold that they froze to her cheeks. She hugged herself close, clinging to her bare arms as they felt the wrath of the cold air. Her legs twitched, feeling the burn of the breeze. She shouldn’t care what was said about her, she hardly knew the woman, why did she let a stranger hurt her like this? Her chest hurt, her heart ached. She was being oversensitive. She missed her family, she missed home, and she missed having someone to love that loved her, too.

She curled up in a fetal position. She should have knocked the blonde’s teeth out, but Stryder didn’t give her the chance. He said that she was trouble, and now she had proven him right. The gusting wind tousled her snowy hair, blowing it in front of her eyes until all she saw was a misty white veil before her. She closed her eyes, shivering inside and out as the cold sank deep into her bones, freezing into her blood.

Why wouldn’t Drego eat her? Why couldn’t she jump off of the slope? At least try to escape, and if she died trying at least she could say she tried. She closed her eyes again to shut out the cold, envisioning herself in front of a warm fire as the chilly air bit into her.

Suddenly she was back in the small log home of her childhood days. She was sitting on her father’s knee as he read to her in front of a warm fire. Her sister was on his other knee, and she was innocently looking at his small elfish ears, fondling them with tiny fingers before trailing forward to trace the bluish purple birthmark that was encircled upon his temple. Their mother was in a rocking chair with their baby brother, lulling him to sleep as she cooed to him. This was a time of innocence, a time before King Desoto had decided to claim the forest for his own. The village was still impoverished after years

of war, but here in the woodlands they were far from the spoilage of the city. She was too young to know that her father was struggling to keep their home, fighting for every coin he had just to pay the King's ransom.

She looked up into her father's purple eyes, and she recalled naively asking if she would ever meet a man like the one in the story he was reading. He smiled and chuckled, and she could hear his response clearly in her mind.

"Someday, Rayne, you'll meet a man like this, and he'll be your hero, just like this one ... someday, Rayne, your hero will come." He laughed and kissed her forehead, "But I know my daughter, and it might take awhile for her to find that hero. You had better find one that can tame you first, kiddo."

She smiled whimsically; she could sure use that hero right about now ...

Rayne opened her eyes hazily, there was heat all around her, but she still felt chilled to the bone.

"Drink this," She was ordered, "it'll make you feel better."

She blinked through the haze, trying to gather her senses. She couldn't move her muscles, feeling as if she was tied up by lead weights. A warm cup was brought to her lips and she drank slowly. It hurt just to swallow, but the liquid was soothing despite its awful bitter taste.

Her eyes finally cleared and she found Stryder standing before her, staring down at her with a mischievous grin.

She blinked numbly and tried to move again. A frown settled firmly upon her lips. She realized then why she felt like she was tied. Her wrists were shackled over her head, and her waist had a secure brace around it to keep her in place.

"Release me, Stryder," she demanded.

"I can't do that, Rayne. You broke a rule, and as promised you are now my captive." He could see the renewed fire in her eyes as she looked up at him.

"I am not your captive, and I never will be, now release me before I hurt you!" She threatened while twisting her arms in a desperate attempt to escape her chains.

He laughed and tilted her chin upward with his hand while staring down at her, "I don't know if you're aware of this, Hellcat, but you really aren't in a position to be making threats." He stepped back, "And as far as not being my captive ... you already are, darling."

"Stryder," She warned him, "if you don't release me you'll regret it!"

"Like I said earlier, Hellcat, there will be no escape from these restraints. I've got some things to do, but why don't you just hang out here until your temper improves?"

She watched him walk away in disbelief.

Her jaw dropped in shock, and while thrashing her arms and body she yelled to him, "Stryder, you can't leave me like this! Stryder, please, release me!"

He didn't come back and she dropped her head. He had left her alone. She looked around her, there was an eerie blue light that illuminated the ceiling and the walls, and she knew where she was. But this didn't look familiar to her; the room was empty save for the various containment devices that were against the walls, clearly meant for keeping captives.

Her shoulders were sore and stiff, but the more she wiggled them the worse they felt. She had to take her mind off of them. Why was she shackled anyway? She let her mind drift before remembering that she was forbidden to go out, and she did anyway. He

had fulfilled his promise to punish her if she disobeyed.

Perhaps if she told him why she had gone out he would forgive her, and he would release her. She waited, but he still hadn't returned. She began to wonder what would happen if he were to forget about her. She'd slowly starve to death.

She started to think about what the blonde had said earlier, and her cruel remarks. At first it had hurt her feelings and made her sad, but sadness became rage to think that anyone could be so callous, but now she was sad again. She wanted to wallow in self-pity and feel sorry for herself. She had never been picked on before like that, and she felt completely unprepared. The verbal assault wounded her, and it made her feel even more vulnerable than before, and vulnerability was a feeling that she hated.

She felt outnumbered and alone when they were in that small space, and right now Rayne was appreciating her confinement. She didn't have to face the other women, and she didn't have to feel their tension when she walked in the room. There were no disparaging glances here, only an empty blue room.

After what seemed to have been hours Stryder finally returned, releasing her when she simply bit her lip in greeting rather than thrashing about and demanding release.

"Your temper has improved," He stated as he released her, stepping back guardedly at first until he was certain that she was not going to attack him.

He allowed her to use a nearby bathroom as he disappeared for a few moments.

When he returned for her she followed him compliantly, too unwell and tired to argue with him. She trailed him as he led her through the hallways until she was in a cramped grotto. There was a small but deep pool of water in the center of the floor, and steam emanated from it, surrounding the tiny space with its heat.

"Go on," he nodded, "take your clothes off and get in. The steam will make you feel better."

She blinked back at him, "You aren't going to stand there the whole time, are you?"

He laughed, "Of course," She glared at him and he shook his head, "I'll be back for you in a little while."

Once he had gone she removed her clothing and climbed into the temperate water. It soothed her weary muscles and filled her with heat, finally ridding her bones of their imbedded chill. She soaked until Stryder reappeared, leaving her a soft hare-skin towel to dry off with.

She expected him to leave again, but this time he stayed, watching her as she bashfully wrapped the towel around herself, keeping her body concealed by use of the scant amount of material. He grabbed her dress before she had a chance to grab it herself and he began to walk away.

"Stryder," she hissed at him, "I need that to get dressed!"

He laughed as she followed behind him, tiptoeing as if she were afraid that someone else might see her half nude.

"Stryder!" She yelled at him again, "Give me back my dress!"

Without her even realizing it he had brought her back to his room, dangling her dress before her like carrot before a mule. She wasn't paying attention to where he was taking her; her attention was solely on her gown. He smiled with self satisfaction once he had her in the separate chamber, and as she stood staring at him with those seductive

violet eyes of hers while clutching her towel tightly against her he couldn't help but think that he should just throw her down and have his way with her.

He held out her dress and she reached out to snatch it from him. He didn't release the material, and used her own momentum to pull her closer so that he could whisper thickly into her ear, "If you want the dress you have to put it on in front of me."

She looked appalled at first but regained her poise, yanking the fabric from his hand, "Fine, but stand back there ... and *stay there*," she ordered, watching to make sure that he had backed away to a satisfactory distance.

He smirked and watched in amusement as she turned her back to him. The towel dropped, revealing the arch of her back as it led down to her small bottom. She threw her head over her shoulder, and seeing his blue eyes so rapt on her nether region made her blush a deep crimson. She quickly stepped into the white dress, hoping that she had maintained what little modesty that she had left.

When she turned, Stryder was right there. His eyes were intense with yearning and his lungs were filled with ragged breaths. He grabbed her wrists and led her to the wall, holding her arms above her head as he pressed himself against the swell of her breasts. The feel of his body against hers was enough to make Rayne swoon, and she closed her eyes, inhaling his masculine scent beside her. She heard a click and her eyes flashed open. He had chained her once more.

"Stryder," she cried as he turned, "Why are you doing this to me?"

"Hellcat, I told you that I would keep you captive, and that's exactly what I'm doing." He winked and smiled, "I'll be back. Stop thrashing or you're going to hurt yourself."

"Stryder," She called, "Stryder, please don't leave me like this! Stryder, get back here and untie me, damn it!" she sobbed to herself, but he had left her again.

CHAPTER 10

Rayne was frustrated; she had been left alone, again. She sighed and looked at the floor. No matter how much she wiggled her restraints refused to come undone. She picked at the locks, trying to undo them, thinking that there must be a trick to it but to no avail.

A shadowy form entered the room, and she looked up. Stryder had returned. He sat on the dark fur covered bench and looked at her with his incredible blue eyes, calmly watching her wrestle with her shackles. He had been in here several times and heard her complaints, heard her demands to be freed, but he paid no attention.

She sighed and went silent. Finally, after looking around the room for awhile she decided to find an answer to what had been bothering her. She was willing to face the reply whether she liked it or not.

"Stryder...." She began, unsure of how to ask her question. She nudged the floor with her foot, wondering if it was too late to withdraw her subject.

But she already had his attention.

All at once he was standing before her, looking at her expectedly, and when she failed to respond he pursued it, "What's on your mind, Hellcat?" He expected her to ask why he was tormenting her so, or to demand release again, but what came out of her mouth made his eyes bulge and nearly knocked him off of his feet.

"Do you think I'm ugly ... that I'm just a *half-breed*?" She was afraid to make eye contact with him. She'd know it if he were lying just by his voice, she didn't want to see it in his eyes, too.

He frowned and stepped closer to her, lifting her chin gently with his finger and compelling her to look at him. "No, I don't. Why would you even ask that?"

She shrugged, "The blonde girl said that I was ugly, and she was so pretty ... I guess if anyone would know beauty she would...."

He laughed and leaned down to her, "You don't know much about jealousy, do you, Hellcat?" He saw her flick her eyes downward, a streak of pain within them, "Rayne, you're beautiful...."

She glanced up at him through a blush, smiling weakly before shaking her head, suddenly feeling very naive, even if she were ugly, he'd never tell her.

She dropped her eyes under the weight of his stare, feeling her face redden with heat. She could feel his hands softly reach up into her hair, his fingers tangling into her soft snowy white tresses. Her eyes found his, and a surge of desire flooded her. Her blood raced and her skin was on fire, burning for his touch. No matter how hard she tried she couldn't refuse the aching she felt for him.

Suddenly his lips fell upon hers in a kiss so deep and warm that she thought she'd drown in it. His tongue probed her hungrily, tasting her sweet lips as he embraced her. Rayne made mewling protesting noises against his mouth, writhing in her restraints as she fought his hold on her. The more she struggled the more intense his embrace became, and she found herself closing her eyelids and yielding to his touch. Feelings like she had

never felt before were aroused in her, sensations that she didn't even know she had were awoken, and she found herself returning his kiss with unbridled passion. She wanted to feel his skin against hers, wanted to feel his desire for her, wanted to truly feel a man for the first time in her life.

She felt his free hand as he traced the curve of her side, gliding downward until he found the slit in her dress, reaching up her silky thigh until he was back up at her hip. He reached between her legs, parting them to accommodate his hand as he brought it up between her warmth. He groaned huskily to feel her moist excitement on his fingertips.

Rayne gasped against his mouth. She felt his fingers exploring between her thighs, sliding into her warmth and wetness. She was excited as she had never been before, spurred by his touch as he manipulated her in his grasp. She twisted in the restraints, crying out as his fingers gently rubbed the small piece of flesh that awaited his knowing touch. He continued his slow torture, bringing her so close to release that she could taste it, but then he would stop, refusing to grant her that which she desired.

His lips left hers, and she watched him breathily as he knelt down before her, shifting her dress to reveal her most feminine area. She was wet and dewy, moist with yearning. He kissed her warmth, tasting her tang on his lips and his tongue. She cried and closed her eyes, writhing against her chains in helplessness as he slid his tongue into her delicate core, searing her insides with the softest of touches. She gasped and wailed as he licked and nuzzled her, seeking her pleasure by way of his tongue.

But again, just as she was nearing the point of release he refused to give it. He pulled away and drew up to her, kissing her passionately once more. She could taste herself on his tongue. He reached up and undid her restraints, freeing her to wrap her arms gratefully around his muscular shoulders as she fell into him. He lifted her like a lithe doll, bringing her to the bed where he laid her down gently.

He bent over her and kissed her, moving his lips from her mouth to her throat, kissing his way down to her collarbone. He slid the strap of her dress over her shoulder, pulling it down as he repeated the action on the other side. He continued to kiss his way down her salty skin until he had reached her breasts. They were full and round, her nipples erect and inclined to be touched. He obliged them, putting them in his mouth as he suckled and nibbled on them, gently tugging with his teeth while bringing cries of excitement from Rayne's lips.

He kissed his way down her smooth stomach, lingering on her abdomen as he rid her of the dress. His tongue made slow winding circles across her skin, slowly trailing downward until he had once more found her sweet wet interior between her legs. He licked and caressed her, nuzzling against her warmth and wetness until she was writhing impatiently beneath him, raising her hips in ecstasy. He rose over her, untying the loincloth that covered his manhood, letting it drop over the side of the bed.

Rayne gasped, and real terror surged through her. She had never seen a man like this before, and it was nothing to what she expected. His shaft was shaped differently than any average man's; it was almost spear-like. And besides being long, it was unbelievably thick. She whined imperceptibly, in addition to the size of his member it was colored differently, deep purple with arousal, and it had small ridges encircling it from the base to the peak.

Stryder saw the concern in his lover's eyes, and he kissed her lips feverishly, pausing only to whisper hoarsely against her, "I'll be very gentle, Rayne...."

She nodded but whimpered pleadingly, "But I've never...." she couldn't finish her sentence; it was lost in her throat as it tightened.

Stryder soothed her, stroking her side reassuringly before reaching down once more with his hand to make sure that she was ready for him. The wetness that covered his fingers confirmed her arousal, and he placed himself gingerly between her legs, drawing her knees up with his free hand to aid his entry.

Rayne shivered with a mixture of excitement and fear; she felt him slide into her with short slow strokes at first, edging closer to her barrier. She trembled when she felt him go as far as he could without violating her, and suddenly his mouth found hers again. His lips trapped her scream as he plunged into her, breaking through her virgin obstruction. She felt a tear stinging at the corner of her eye as he eased himself into her entirely. She felt as though she was being impaled, and she clung to him as though her very life depended upon it.

"Just relax, darling, you'll get used to me in a moment," He waited patiently for her to relax, easing her grip on his shoulders while also unclenching her thighs, "I'll go very slowly at first."

She moaned into his shoulder, burying her head into him as he began to pull in and out of her once more. At first it was painfully uncomfortable and she just wanted him to stop. She felt like she would break in two beneath him, but as she relaxed she became more accustomed to him, and pain and pleasure were allowed to intermingle, even if ever so faintly.

"Rayne," He whispered throatily into her shoulder, "please forgive me."

She didn't understand at first, but then his thrusts became more intense, and all she felt was incredible pain. He no longer had the control to go slow, his will power waned in her tight opening and he released his force upon her. She cried out as he plunged recklessly in and out of her, finally making one last thrust into her as he filled her sore and aching inside with his liquid heat. She clutched his shoulder as his warmth escaped to wet her thighs.

She was breathing heavily when he began to slide in and out of her once more, and she felt her heart pounding so swiftly that she thought it might burst. He smiled and kissed her tenderly. With his manhood still rigid but no longer painfully full he began to massage her insides, sliding in and out of her until she was rocking her hips against him, begging for release as she encouraged him. This time he granted it. He moved with her, gently caressing her from within until she gripped his shoulders fiercely, bearing down on him as she found her pleasure. He felt her tense just before a shudder shook her trembling body.

She released her fierce hold on his shoulders, lying back in spent bliss as he looked down at her. She was beautiful, with her perfect breasts rising through ragged breaths that escaped her scarlet lips, her thick powder white hair tousled and clinging to her glossy tan skin, and her wonderfully violet eyes that looked dreamily back at him.

He kissed her forehead, and set a lingering kiss upon the intricate birthmark on her temple before withdrawing from her. There was blood on his shaft, confirmation that he had deflowered his lover who lay content but sore in his arms. She snuggled into him, protected against his strong body as she drifted into a weary sleep.

He sighed, feeling thoroughly sated. He couldn't remember a time that he had felt more fulfilled. He lied beside her, inhaling her sweet womanly scent as her warm body

drowned away the cold emptiness of the dark walls and eerie blue light. He watched her bluish-purple eyes flutter open to look at him before they closed again.

He whispered a promise into her cheek; "The next time, Rayne, it will be better, it won't hurt as much." She smiled softly, forgetting her anger, her hurt, everything but him as she fell asleep.

When Rayne awoke she was lying on the bed alone. She shivered, remembering that she was nude as she wasted no time in locating her dress. She gingerly stepped out of the room. The flesh between her legs burned still from the recent violation that it had incurred, and she wished that she could somehow numb the pain away.

She walked through the blue-lit hallway, wondering where Stryder had disappeared to. She didn't see him even when she left the blue corridor. She saw Drego lying before a blazing fire in the mouth of the cave, warming himself under the chill of the damp cave, but Stryder was nowhere around. The dragon was so large that if he hadn't been off to the side he would have blocked out the light entirely.

Rayne shivered again and made her way to the alcove where the other women were at. She entered, finding the room to be emptier than when she had left it. The pretty blonde was gone, and so was another of the girls. The women glanced up at her briefly, but still refrained from acknowledging her presence.

She sighed and made her way to her bed against the wall. She was all too used to their cold shoulder treatment by now. At least the cruel blonde was gone, where she was Rayne neither speculated nor cared. She climbed under the covers, shaking from a combination of cold and pain that trickled through her veins.

She was just drifting off to sleep when Stryder peeked into the room. He found her immediately with his eyes, and a wry grin of amusement slipped over his lips.

"Rayne," He beckoned towards her with a tilt of his chin, "come with me."

She groaned in protest, but slid from the bed obediently. She reached him and he looked down at her, watching as she strode gracefully past him. The remaining women looked on in wonder. He had never said any of their names before, had never even seemed interested in learning them, but he knew *her* name.

Rayne looked over her shoulder. Stryder was watching her, but he had yet to follow, prompting her to stop. She waited for him as he pushed off from the wall and approached her, wrapping his arm affectionately around her side as he led her back down the azure corridor. He squeezed her tenderly as he led her back into the bedroom, bringing her into the separate grotto before setting her down on the seat beside the wall.

She gasped as he leaned down to her, holding her arms at her side as his lips met hers in a long intimate embrace. His tongue stroked hers as he gently explored her mouth, and she responded without a struggle.

Stryder smiled to himself as he kissed her; she was so receptive and warm, like sunlight breaking through the clouds on a rainy day. He hated to do this to her, but it was for her own good. He couldn't bear the thought of losing her now, and she was so reckless with her desire to be out in the cold, as if she would rather die than risk not being able to see her family from afar.

She was submitting to him and allowing him to maneuver her without knowing it. She was too preoccupied with his affection to comprehend what he was doing with his hands.

Rayne trembled inside, clenching her legs tightly together. She was still sore, the

effects of her recent breach still too fresh for her to yield fully to him, and he seemed to know it. He withdrew from her mouth, tugging softly on her bottom lip as he drew away from her. He smiled almost apologetically and stepped back, turning and leaving before she could utter a sound. She was in a lethargic daze, still picturing his masculine body before her. She could see his wings as he turned away. She was so accustomed to them that she hardly noticed them anymore; they were simply soft appendages that were a part of him.

She wanted to lie down, to rest and ease her aching. Stryder hadn't told her to wait for him; he hadn't told her that he would be back. He had simply kissed her and left, leaving her free to do as she wished. She stood, preparing to return from where she had just been. The gentle clinking of metal and a tight grip on both wrists made her look down. He had left her chained once again.

"Stryder," She pleaded into the empty space, "Stryder, damn you, let me go right now!" She hung her head down and pouted, curling up into the dark fur on the seat as weariness and exhaustion found her. "Stryder, please don't leave me here...."

CHAPTER 11

Rayne opened her eyes with a start. She felt as if she had been sleeping for hours, and it wasn't the restless sleep that she had grown accustomed to, it was a long, deep, peaceful sleep. She shifted her arms, the soft metallic jingle reminding her that she was still shackled. It was another of the many things that she was getting used to. Stryder had kept her chained for over a week now, and she was beginning to believe that his punishment would never end. He hadn't said much to her, probably because she never really gave him the chance. Whenever he entered the room she was less than welcoming, immediately demanding release and cursing at him for holding her prisoner.

For all of her temper that she lost with him though he was surprisingly patient and tender, never losing his when she went on a tirade. He would simply laugh and tell her that she was being unruly or wink and taunt her from afar where she couldn't reach him with her fists. Of course, her fists never posed much threat to him. Whenever he got near enough for her to lash out at him he would get a hold of her, and without so much as a sound he would remind her that she was severely overpowered and outmatched.

He was never rough with her, but he would hold her writhing arms against her side effortlessly while he looked down at her with his absorbing blue eyes. He would then kiss her, throwing her already confused mind for a loop as she was torn between biting his tongue out and returning the kiss with greater passion, and to her own dismay she always responded with the latter.

She blinked and looked through the open tunnel outside. Unisys was grazing in the cold night air. His black coat was hardly visible, but his glossy eyes were glowing under the moonlight.

Rayne flicked away the sleep from her eyes. Something was different around her. She frowned and scanned the room. A fire was burning in a niche in the wall that she hadn't noticed earlier. The flames warmed the cave, drying the damp walls as the yellow and orange firelight fought with the blue radiance for space to illuminate.

Voices echoed around the walls and she sat up halfway to hear them clearly. She recognized Stryder's deep masculine voice as he ordered someone to take off their clothes. A soft, high pitched and almost whiny feminine protest followed his command. She bristled, feeling a twinge of jealousy surge through her.

Rayne leaned against the seat, trying to block out the voices. She felt like she was intruding, listening in on a conversation that was not meant for her ears, and she really didn't *want* to hear it, either. She raised her shackles helplessly, there was nowhere for her to go. She cursed inside; Stryder must have known that she could hear through the walls ... didn't he? If he didn't she wasn't about to tell him and let him know that she was listening, or that a part of her was jealous and resenting his being with another woman.

Another harsh command was given to the girl as she was told to cover her eyes and sit on the bed. He wasn't being friendly, Rayne thought to herself with a morbid hint of relief. At least when he had taken her he had been kind, but hearing him now he was

being anything but. There was no calm and charismatic tone to his orders, only weighty authority that the woman was unable to defy. Her resentment ebbed away, replaced by sympathy when the woman began to cry. She may have been jealous, but she wasn't heartless.

Rayne's heart bled for the woman. She heard her scream, and she could imagine the pain that the woman was feeling. She looked at the cold floor, trying to think of something else, anything to drown out the wailing behind the wall. The shrieks of anguish continued, followed by pleading and begging as the woman told him that she didn't want to die. Rayne frowned, was he being so forceful that the woman thought he would kill her? She blinked in confusion. Perhaps if he had been so rough with her she would have done the same. Stryder evidently paid no heed to the cries because they didn't stop.

Rayne was puzzled; he had never shown a side of cruelty to her, never shown a side of him that could be less than compassionate. There must have been a reason that he was being so rough with the woman, Rayne thought. It was the only justification that she could think of, if there was any to be had at all.

There was a growling sound, followed by a hiss that sent shivers up her spine, and Rayne figured that it must have come from Drego somewhere in the vast cave.

The shrieks of pain ceased abruptly and Rayne was left alone again, surrounded by empty silence. The hours ticked on as she played and toyed with the chains around her wrist, still prying relentlessly at them, trying to figure out the secret to unlocking them.

"You're the most stubborn woman that I have ever met, Hellcat. I've told you a thousand times that you can't undo your restraints, and yet you persist."

Rayne jolted upward, stifling a screech when she saw Stryder watching her intently. He was standing beside her, so close that she could still smell the other woman on his skin. She gasped for breath, and once she had collected herself she pushed him heatedly away from her.

He laughed and paced just out of her reach, "You're in a mood again, Hellcat ... where you want to hurt me, I think."

She glared at him, feeling deceived by him. His kindness towards her was all a façade; in reality he was cruel and heartless, no better than King Desoto. Hatred boiled within her, and she inhaled deeply. She had given herself to him, and in this moment she hated herself almost as much as she hated him.

"Release me, and I'll show you what I'd like to do to you, Stryder."

"You're being unruly again, darling," He smiled impishly, "I'm starting to think that this is your nature, to be so ready to fight, so indignant."

"Why did you hurt her, Stryder?" Rayne demanded to know.

"Hurt who, Rayne?" He looked puzzled as he crossed his arms over his broad chest.

"The girl I heard you with ... she was in pain ... you *raped* her." The words barely came out, and she felt her throat swelling.

Stryder swallowed hard, and for the first time since she had known him he appeared to have no response, no reaction at all save for the appearance of confusion and hurt that crossed his features.

She scowled, clenching her jaw tightly as she addressed him, "Stryder, why did you rape her; how *could* you?" The words made her sick to her stomach, and she placed a

hand subconsciously over her abdomen to keep from throwing up.

"I did not rape her, Rayne!" Stryder paled and he looked wounded, "I did what I had to do..."

She seethed under her breath, "You really are a Demon!"

She squelched a scream as he grabbed her harshly by the arms and threw her against the cold wall, keeping her pinned beneath him as he hissed into her cheek, "You know, Hellcat, there are worse things in the universe than Demons ... I could be one of those worse things, so don't question what I'm doing behind that fucking wall!"

He stepped away from her when he saw the fright in her eyes. She was terrified of him in this instant.

She swallowed and took a breath, quaking inside and wishing that she could run.

Stryder looked down, he hadn't meant to scare her, hadn't meant to be so callous and edgy. "I'm sorry, Rayne, but you wouldn't understand..." He could see her features trembling with terror, and her beautiful violet eyes were glistening with unshed tears.

"Why did you hurt her?" Rayne's voice was so shaken that she wondered if he would even understand her.

"I didn't ... I didn't hurt her, Rayne." His jaw jerked with tempering his emotions.

"What did you do to her then? I heard you tell her to take her clothes off!" She felt sick and turned her cheek to the cold wall.

"You know, Rayne, there are some things that you don't need to know." He swallowed nervously, and his blue eyes settled uneasily upon her, "Drego has to eat before winter ... and he can't digest certain material."

Rayne gasped, she felt a surge of nausea wash over her. She dropped to her knees and looked up pleadingly at Stryder, "You don't mean that he just ... Oh, please don't tell me that..." he tore his eyes from her and looked away. "Oh my God," She whimpered as sickness overwhelmed her.

So that was the hissing and the growling sound. It had been Drego.

"I'm so sorry, Rayne, I ... I didn't want this to happen. I didn't mean for you to have to--"

She glanced up at him through tears. He was sickened, and she could see it on his face. She climbed to her feet, bracing herself against the stone wall to her back. She knew in the back of her mind that the dragon ate humans; it was why he was so feared. But being here when he did it made it so *real*, there was no denying it.

She swallowed the queasiness in her stomach, "Stryder, why can't you feed him game? There must be deer in the Kings forest ... even cattle, why can't he eat cattle, Stryder, why?"

Stryder turned his head, still unable to look into her eyes. "Four hundred years ago your Kings' ancestors came to mine, asking for an agreement. Drego would be held at bay; he would no longer be free to hunt for himself, no longer free to search for food by burning villages and taking what he needed to survive. No longer free to hunt the local forests. He would be kept here, safely confined on the mountains peak, where humans and other beings couldn't reach him and kill him. In exchange, he would be given twelve maidens as a food source.

"It seems to be a good trade. Drego could easily kill hundreds of people ... only able to eat a fraction of them, but his nature forces him to hunt recklessly, seeking by

destroying. Twelve women a year is not so bad, when you consider that it could be a hundred.” Stryder took a deep breath, finally finding Rayne’s stare as she listened to him, “He could also easily kill hundreds of cattle, only able to eat a dozen or so ... his carriage doesn’t allow him to have heavy meals, or he’ll lose flight. He couldn’t hunt in the woods for deer and wild game. He’s simply too big to maneuver, and he’d end up burning the trees to the ground in his search.”

Rayne frowned, her face was ashen. “Why didn’t the Kings simply sacrifice a dozen cattle then, rather than give young women?”

Stryder shrugged, “Cattle were a main source of food for the people as were deer; they were too priceless to give up. On the other hand, the two-legged population was booming, and people were not as priceless. It cut down on the mouths to feed, and enabled others to eat more.” He smiled feebly and stepped towards her, “The Kings sacrifice young women because they are the most fertile, the most likely to cause another population explosion....”

Rayne inhaled as he edged nearer to her, unconsciously shrinking further away, “Why didn’t the Kings just order Drego to be killed?”

Stryder reached her and pulled her to him, clutching her to him tightly as he wrapped his hands into her hair, “The Kings needed Drego for population control ... it made them look like heroes while Drego looks like a man-eater thriving on human blood. In all actuality most persons, no matter what breed, are his least desirable of prey ... you’re bony and thin.”

Rayne leaned into Stryder, resting on his broad chest for support as her legs went weak, “Why don’t the Kings just feed him some Vynon warriors, or a couple of Red Giants?”

Stryder laughed lightly, “Vynon warriors and Red Giants are from other planets, they’d have to be imported just to be fed to Drego. I suspect that the Vynon nation and the Red Giants would get suspicious awful fast when they never came home.”

Rayne pulled away dumbfounded, “The Kings import them just to patrol the forests ... the woods are crawling with the vulgar beasts.”

Stryder looked down at her, digesting her words, he knew that since Drego had lost command of the skies that spaceships came in and left more frequently, but he never questioned the people aboard the spacecraft. It was none of his business and he left it that way.

Rayne tensed and pulled further away from the man beside her, “I hate to tell you this, Stryder, but I think the Kings are the ones who got the better deal here ... your agreement seems a bit outdated.”

“You wouldn’t be saying that if you were safe at home, Rayne.” He looked down at her sympathetically.

She glared at him, he wasn’t taking her seriously, and it was insulting.

“You really don’t get it do you, Stryder? King Desoto has taken all of our land for himself. My family has to hunt near the sea for food. We have nothing. The King has everything,” She narrowed her eyes at him, “and you’re partly to blame for it.”

“Rayne, I didn’t say that the agreement benefited everyone, but the vast majority of people--”

“You’re not listening, Stryder!” Rayne screamed at him angrily, “There is no vast majority on our quadrant. The only people with anything are those that work for the King

and the King, himself. Why do you think I tried to kill him?" He looked helpless under her outburst, and he watched the anger flash in her eyes, "He deserves to die after everything that he has taken from me and my family. If you really wanted to keep a monster at bay you would kill King Desoto; he's the one killing the people, not Drego."

"Hellcat," He smiled calmly and even let a chuckle escape from his lips, "you're too ambitious for your own good." She watched him as he shook his head and walked out of the room, leaving her to herself.

Rayne opened her mouth to protest, but snapped it shut when she realized that it would do no good.

Stryder would never understand. He would think she was exaggerating, crying because she was one of the unlucky few women that were chosen for sacrifice. Besides, he was holed up here at the top of the mountain where he would be oblivious of the changes over the years; hell, he seemed completely unaware that there were Vynon soldiers and Red Giants on this planet. And had he slept through the wars that happened not even half a century ago? And he talked as though they were still in the middle of a population crisis ... the population was depleting steadily every year, while the King became fat on feasts that should have been shared among the people.

She pursed her lips; he had said his ancestors ... where were the rest of his family? Why was he alone up here with Drego? She rubbed her sore wrists, adjusting the metal on her skin. She would have to wait until he returned to ask him about it, because right now she was staying put, whether she liked it or not.

CHAPTER 12

Rayne looked out past the opening of the small grotto from where she lay. The days were becoming bitter cold, and the big black stallion, Unisys, spent most of his time inside, eating hay that Stryder had harvested for him in the summer months. The stallion blew plumes of white air from his fire red nostrils, and Rayne was glad to have the magnificent beast to keep her company. His body heat alone seemed to keep the area warmer, and he made the space feel homier somehow.

Something beyond him caught her attention, and she sat up to get a better look. White powder was falling to the ground. It was snowing.

She stood and moved towards the big horse. He nickered in welcome when she approached him. He was not only used to her by now, but he even seemed to enjoy her company as much as she did his. She had been a captive in this room for several months, and he had plenty of time to grow fond of her soft voice as she spoke to him and her gentle caress when she would stop to stroke his sleek coat.

Rayne didn't mind her chains too much, it was another of the things that she was growing accustomed to, and they were like strong metal bracelets that she never took off. She had enough slack in her manacles to move around the big room, and she was given all of the comforts that she could ask for, including a soft warm pair of deerskin pants and a long-sleeved shirt to match. It was a wonderful reprieve from the cold white dress that she had been wearing.

Stryder had given her the material she needed to make the clothing, and it kept her busy while she was trapped here. Of course, she never *told* him that she was comfortable. Every time that he would enter the room she would demand release without fail, listening as he laughed and gave her some lame excuse for ignoring her requests. If she wasn't being too hostile about it he might have even come over to embrace her, kissing her adoringly before leaving again to take care of things for winter, or at least that was what he told her.

She reached up and touched the big stallions hide, tenderly caressing his rigid muscles beneath the pitch black skin. Her fingers stroked the downy feathers on his wings. He was magnificent, glorious in his appearance. The only part of him that she was still respectably cautious around was his horn, and for obvious reason.

She had spoken to Stryder about his family briefly, finding out that he was the last surviving member of his tribe, a clan simply known as the *dragon riders*. His mother had died giving birth to him and his father and grandfather had both died long ago, leaving him alone with Drego when he was still young. He never offered further explanation to the fate of his father and grandfather, dismissing the subject and causing her to shelve it as well. Drego was the only family that Stryder had, and he would protect him with his entire being. It offered Rayne a little insight, too, as to why Stryder never pursued her interest in killing the King. If the King was dead and the agreement was broken, Drego was at risk to be hunted, and he would have to find his own food, a task that could prove dangerous and chancy to a dragon with such a high price on his head. That was too much

for Stryder to risk.

Rayne gasped sharply as she was clutched around the waist, feeling strong arms tighten around her midsection. She had been so absorbed in her own thoughts that she hadn't even heard her captor come in. Her arms were pulled backward, and one after the other her restraints were taken from her wrists. She smiled and whirled around to embrace Stryder; feeling like two lead weights had been taken from her.

"You set me free." She whispered into his ear against his dark hair, "Is it for good this time?"

He didn't respond but lifted her gracefully from the ground onto his waist. She wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his hips as he brought her back through the hallway before setting her down on his bed. He didn't need to say a word; she saw the look in his eyes, his need, and his hunger for her.

She smiled warmly but held her reservations. The last time that he had made love to her was the first time, and though he had been affectionate with her since then they had never been intimate apart from kisses and occasional fondling ... and the memory of the pain that she had endured made her reluctant to surrender to him again.

He kissed and nuzzled her throat, "It's been too long, Rayne."

She rocked her head back as he licked her skin with his thick tongue, setting her flesh on fire with his touch. He pulled her shirt over her head, capturing her full breasts with a long indrawn breath. He kissed her lips while cupping his hand under her bosom, squeezing it roughly as he savagely claimed her mouth. His tongue struggled against hers while his fingers gingerly toyed with the pink buds in the center of her breasts.

Rayne moaned through panting breaths as he left her lips, trailing down her tan skin until he had reached her breasts. He kissed them and sucked on them, leaving no part of them untouched. She yielded to him, losing her fingers in his dark hair as his mouth trailed down her stomach. Her pants were pulled from her hips, and he wasted no time in finding the soft core between her legs.

She cried out in ecstasy as his searing tongue lit her insides, stroking and rubbing her from within until she was rocking her hips against him. Her heart was pounding in her chest, begging him to continue when he stopped and drew up to her.

She was panting hard when his lips fell upon hers once more. He undid his loincloth to reveal his readiness for her, but before he could pursue his lust she braced her palm on his chest, halting his movement.

"What's wrong, Rayne?" His question was tainted with panic.

"May I try?" She asked innocently, relieving his concerned stare.

"Of course, darling, what do you want to try?" He was baffled, but kept a smile on his face to hide his perplexity.

"What you do to me, you know, to get me wet, to make me want you so badly...." She made an incomprehensible gesture with her hand, and he rolled over on his back when he was at a loss for words.

He watched her adoringly as she kissed his lips, working her way tentatively down his broad chest and rippling abdomen.

His skin was salty on her tongue, and she relished the flavor as she worked her way down to his dark pulsing shaft.

Stryder smiled knowingly when he saw what she was up to, "Oh, so that's what you meant—ah ..." His voice was lost in a moan as he felt her hot moist lips wrap around

the tip of his thick member, drawing and pulling as she licked and sucked as much of it as she could possibly take. She supplemented her sucking with her hands, tenderly stroking his ribbed manhood while licking him as well until she could taste salty drops of fluid on her tongue.

He cried out and fiercely grabbed her underneath her arms, pulling her up to him as he rolled her beneath him.

“Rayne, I can’t wait any longer....” He saw her nod perceptively and she brought her knees up to aid his entry.

He closed his eyes and groaned as his member sank deeply into her, feeling like he would explode at any minute. Rayne cried out for a moment, and the pained yelp was enough to bring him from his own pleasure, focusing on her as a flush of embarrassment tainted his cheeks. He made up for his selfish carelessness by kissing her lips with deep absorbing passion, waiting until she was relaxed and ready before moving inside of her.

She was still deliciously tight, and when she wrapped her legs around his hips he nearly lost all of his self control, forcing himself to fight for every ounce of it. He gently rocked back and forth against her, drawing soft cries from her ruby lips.

Rayne clung to his shoulders, despite his gentle rhythm she still felt as if she would break in two. He rose up and when she looked down she could see him joined with her, in that moment they were one, locked in a lovers embrace. He reached down with his hand and manipulated her fleshy mound with his thumb, sending cries of pleasure - not pain, from her mouth. She began to gyrate fiercely against him, begging for release as he climbed with her, accelerating his thrusting to match her frantic pace.

He plunged forcibly into her only to draw out again, rubbing her from within as she moaned into him. He felt a rising in his loins, and when she tensed and shuddered beneath him, clinging to him for dear life he burst within her. His sticky concentration was released inside of her in wave after wave of heat until they lay in each others arms gasping for breath.

He chuckled and rolled over with her still connected to him. His wings wrapped around her, folding her tightly into him as she leaned down and kissed him.

Rayne closed her eyes, his wings were so soft and smooth against her bare skin, and she felt as if she were in a protective cocoon hidden from the dangers of the outside world. She snuggled into Stryder’s warm body, not wanting to let go.

Stryder knew when Rayne had fallen asleep beside him. Her breathing had become shallow and relaxed, and her body had gone limp as it rested against the hardened muscle of his chest and abdomen. He watched her sleep, feeling a new sensation of contentment and fulfillment within his soul.

She was like an angel beside him. Her flawless skin was aglow with glittering beads of perspiration that had come from their lovemaking. With her eyes closed he could see the dark lining that contoured their seductive shape, hidden vaguely by a few soft cream colored hairs that had fallen over her face.

He smiled to himself and looked down at her chest. Her perfect breasts were rising and falling with her gentle breaths, like the slow swells that washed onto the beach far below the realm of the mountain. He kissed her forehead and closed his eyes, drawing in her womanly scent. She was so warm and soft, and she smelled faintly of wildflowers and mountain grass. He smiled to himself, even when the snow was falling outside she reminded him of summer.

* * * *

Rayne shivered to consciousness. She opened her eyes and looked at Stryder. He was sound asleep. His wings no longer held her securely against him, and the warmth that they had held between their sleeping bodies had melted away. She slid from him and pulled her clothes back, shivering as she dressed. She silently pattered from the room, not wanting to risk rousing him. She slipped into the blue lit passage, wincing as she immediately felt the chill on her bare feet.

The cave was silent. There were no feminine voices echoing off of the walls, no wailing, no giggling, nothing save for the empty dripping of water from a fissure somewhere beyond the hallway. She cringed as the cold on the soles of her feet intensified the closer that she came to the entrance of the cavern.

She stopped when she came to the front of the passageway, peeking out into the cold mouth of the great cave. Snow was blowing inside, creating high drifts as it blew inward. Rayne shook violently. The arctic chill was more than she could take. The wind bit her cheeks and the floor beneath her seemed to turn into a sheet of ice, burning her feet with the bitter cold. She turned and fled back down the hall.

When her feet were no longer freezing and she was able to walk more comfortably she inspected several of the rooms, finding the passage full of new space to explore. Some of the rooms she recalled, like the grotto with the steaming pool of water, but others were new to her. She even found a narrow hall that opened to a large room where the snow was falling freely within. Carcasses of skinned deer and small game hung frozen against the walls, while baskets of dried meat and vegetables were placed on the floor. The room was freezing, and Rayne was quick to leave.

She continued her little exploration until she reached the back of the cave. Here a flickering orange glow conflicted with the blue light for space to illuminate. She could see the ochre blaze dancing from the side; it was in another room but was expanding into the hallway. The closer she came to the light the warmer she became. The smell of ash and burning timber met her nose, inundating her until it burned in her throat. Blistering heat was emanating from the side chamber, flooding into the hallway. She placed her hands on the stone to the side of the hollow, but recoiled instantly. It was like hot iron on a stove.

She moved so that she could see into the space. The room was as vast as the entrance itself, and a swollen fire was burning within it. She stepped back. The heat was drawing the blood to her face, and perspiration trickled over her skin. She could see Drego lying contentedly to the side of the bonfire. He appeared to be unbothered by the heat as he soaked in the warmth, and he even looked to be sleeping.

A warm hand touched hers and she looked to see Stryder beside her, guiding her away from the hot entrance.

"He has to hibernate in the winter. Without the fire he'd freeze to death." He explained as he drew her near to him.

"I can't believe he's not being cooked alive in there." Rayne chuckled as she wiped sweat from her brow. She had been so entranced with the sight that she hadn't realized just how hot she had become.

"As winter progresses the fire will slowly die, so he'll need all of the heat that he can get."

"What about his wings, won't they burn?" She asked as he led her away.

Stryder looked down at her and a laughing smile parted his lips, "He's a dragon, Hellcat,"

"But his wings can still be burnt, can't they?" She inquired artlessly.

"I suppose, but they never have before." He saw further questions in her eyes, but she didn't voice them.

She allowed him to return her to his room, and together they walked through the narrow corridor beyond the bed. Unisys nickered in greeting, and his coal black coat was dusted with powder white snow.

Rayne watched curiously as Stryder shook his head and walked past her, producing a brush from somewhere off to the side. He began to affectionately sweep the snow from the horse, rubbing his damp coat down with a small piece of rabbit skin that he held in his other hand. Rayne let her eyes drink in the sight; she had never seen the paternal side of the enigmatic man. He was treating the big equine like a child that had been out too long and was at risk to catch a cold.

She let her mind drift off to a simpler time, and she found herself back to one occasion in particular that stood out in her mind. She had been playing outside in the dead of winter, and the longer she played the further from home she became. She was lost by the time that nightfall had come, and she sat on a log crying in the frightening lonely wilderness. She'd never forget the relief that washed over her when she heard her father's voice echo from the trees around her.

"I'm here, father!" She had cried, and when she saw him plunging through the white wall of snow she knew that she was safe. He had brought her home, and she was made immediately to take off her wet clothes and get dry. She could almost feel the snug blanket around her as she stood warming herself before the hearth.

"Rayne...."

She blinked; the sound of her name snapping her from daydreaming, "What?" She asked with a shudder as sudden cold swept through her.

"Is everything alright?" He questioned. He had seen her in a daze, and when she failed to respond at first he got nervous.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I was just watching you with Unisys. You're so sweet to him; he's like a child to you. You love him." The distant look crept back into her eyes, and Stryder wondered where her thoughts were drifting to.

"Rayne," he nodded to her, "come here."

She obliged without question, still trying to shake her thoughts clear of her memories. Stryder grabbed her hips when she was close enough, and he pulled her in front of him, placing her between the stallion and himself.

Rayne flushed. She could feel Stryder's physique against her, and she quivered inside. He positioned the brush in her right hand, and the skin in her left. Stryder's hands covered hers and she closed her eyes when she felt his soft breath over her shoulder. She opened her lids again, focusing on the animal before her as she tried to drown out Stryder's influence on her.

Unisys smelled sweetly of straw and oats and his body heat radiated off of him, warming her skin. His nostrils blew out soft clouds of air as he breathed, and with every stroke across his body Rayne could feel his athletic muscling. He was truly a beast of myth and legend, beautiful beyond compare. By the time they were done brushing him the magnificent stallion was gleaming, and his splendor was more apparent than ever.

Rayne leaned into Stryder and she nearly jumped forward again. She blushed; she could feel his erection against her backside.

Stryder bit his lip when she tensed. She had pressed back into him and felt his desire for her. He couldn't help himself. Every time that she leaned forward to stroke the big horse's flesh her backside would brush against the front of his pants, and he started thinking more about her than the horse. It was a good thing that she had taken over brushing the large beast, because his mind was elsewhere and he had lost his concentration.

Rayne turned to face him and looked up into his blue eyes. They were full of longing and want, and try as she might she found his desire hard to refuse. She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him downward as she kissed him deeply and hungrily. His tongue welcomed her, and he quickly took control of the kiss, eagerly matching her tongue strokes with his own.

He groaned and pulled away from her. His eyes were troubled and his brow had lines of confusion. He gripped her shoulders tightly, nearly bruising her skin with his fingers as he held her.

"Why do I want you so bad, Rayne? Why do I need you like this?" He looked pained, his blue eyes were wild and turbulent, "Drego was supposed to eat you ... what would I have done if Drego had eaten you?"

Rayne smiled demurely, and when she felt his grip relax on her shoulders she stepped near to him, rising up on her toes to whisper in his ear, "But Drego didn't eat me, so what will you do with me now that you have me?" She stepped back with an impish grin, "I hope it's more than just ask me questions."

His eyes widened to her saucy response, and in an instant he grabbed her to him again. His hands tangled into her hair as his mouth claimed hers in a crushing embrace that made her head spin. Rayne moaned into him as he undid the string on her pants, and she stepped from them quickly.

He pulled her hair, compelling her to her knees as he sank with her. He needed her *now*, his longing was painfully rampant and he had to fulfill it before he thought he'd explode. He pulled his own bottoms off and threw them aside. He didn't care that the cold floor was rubbing his bare knees; his discomfort was far from his mind. He grabbed Rayne's shirt and pulled it over her head, revealing her full perky breasts. Her nipples were hard with excitement and he longed to feel them against his skin. He looked into her eyes. Her purple irises were deep with desire, and when she gave him a provocative glance he didn't hesitate to pull her to him.

Rayne gasped as he grabbed her hips and impaled her upon his rigid member. She cried out weakly as he filled her entirely, and for a brief moment it felt like she was on a skewer. Her faint outcry had no effect on him if he had heard it, he had no reservations, and his movement was determined and almost fierce.

He wasted no time in gripping her sides, guiding her as she rode his manhood like an ocean wave. She rose against him only to fall down upon him, gradually increasing her pace as he directed her. His hands cupped her round bottom as she plunged down onto him.

Rayne could feel his ribbed shaft stroking her insides. The faster she rose and fell on him the more excited she became. She could feel herself losing control. She felt like she was nearing a cliff and would go over the edge at any moment. She moaned and

Stryder thrust hard into her. She felt his liquid heat within her and it spurred her own release forward. Wave after wave of pleasure rocked her and she clung to Stryder, digging her nails into his skin as she clutched him.

“Ouch,” Stryder grinned with amusement as he removed her nails from around his back.

Rayne blushed through heavy breaths, “I’m sorry....”

He winked and kissed her adoringly, silently forgiving her. A spiraled horn dropped down beside him, followed by a velvety black muzzle that sniffed curiously at Rayne’s hair. He laughed; he had been so hell-bent on having Rayne that he had forgotten Unisys was still here.

“I know your stick is bigger than mine, now stop bragging about it.” Stryder grabbed the stallion’s horn and pushed him away; dropping his eyes back to Rayne’s when he could feel her staring at him.

Her purple eyes were twinkling with adulation and she wrapped her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly.

Stryder gripped her fiercely; he’d never let go if he didn’t have to.

CHAPTER 13

The days went by slowly, turning into weeks without Rayne ever knowing it. She only knew that one day would pass into another, and another, but as long as she had Stryder with her, time was all she wanted. She was free to wander wherever her heart pleased, but she rarely left the blue hallway. The winter was bitter cold, and it carried its frosty chill right into the open mouth of the cave. The blue passage was always warm and inviting though. The fires that burned within warmed the area and kept the cold of winter at bay.

Rayne watched Stryder as he put his heavy winter clothing on. She knew that he was leaving even though he hadn't announced it. He had to go hunting every couple of days, although if he brought home a large deer or mountain sheep he could stay home longer. She wished that he would let her go with him, but he refused, insisting that it was too dangerous for her, despite her pleading and informing him that she had hunted on her own for years. He ignored her begging, evading her protests by reminding her that she had never hunted on the mountain before, either.

He grabbed his spear and examined the point. Rayne was waiting for him to say something, but he didn't. He knew that she hated it when he left because she protested enough to make sure he'd never forget how much it bothered her.

She felt like she was being abandoned. He forced her to rely solely on him, he provided her with food, shelter, clothing, and companionship. In a way she had come to need him as she had never needed anyone before. She wasn't sure she liked having to depend on him, and when he left her he was leaving her to chance. If something happened to him and he never came back what would she do? She had no way to get off of the mountain to hunt, and she had no idea how to care for a dragon. Unisys would be easy to care for, he had a full supply of dried grass and oats to keep him satisfied, and when spring came he would graze. But she didn't know what she'd do when Drego would awake hungry.

"You're pouting," Stryder said as he threw her a sidelong glance, "why is that?"

"You're leaving me again." She sulked.

He shook his head, "I have to, we need the meat, and you like the animal hides, don't you?"

She looked down and absently rubbed her arm. She did like the animal skins. He gave them to her to do what she wished with them. She could do many things with the hides, from making soft leather for clothing to constructing soft rugs for the cold stone floors and even blankets from the fuller, fluffier haired skins.

He edged closer to her, raising her jaw with his hand when she didn't respond, "Rayne, I'll be back before you know it."

"And if you're not?" She countered while looking up at him with a frown.

He smirked, "I know my little Hellcat will find a way to survive without me, she has until now."

Rayne cocked her head at him, defiance on the verge of anger flashed in her eyes,

"I'd be stuck up here, there's no way off the mountain crest without killing myself."

"Oh yes there is, you just haven't realized it yet." His smirk became a full smile of intrigue as he watched her expression.

"If there was a way off of here I'd have found it a long time ago, Stryder." She grumbled.

"You've already found it, Rayne; you just don't know it yet." He kissed her before she could question him about what "it" was.

His lips commanded her attention, and now more than ever she wanted him to stay with her. She grasped for a piece of him to cling to, but he was already slipping away from her.

He pulled away and walked down the hall, turning to his right as Rayne rushed after him. Her feet stopped on a warm fur in the entry of the passageway and she peeked around the corner.

Stryder looked back at her before going out into the snowy background. Her lavender eyes were watching him closely; tears were nipping at their corners. He couldn't tell if it was sorrow that she was being left alone or just the wind that burned at them. Her soft hair was being tousled by a blowing gust and she shivered against the icy breeze.

Rayne watched Stryder as he looked back at her. She waited for him to leave, but instead he was just standing there in the cold staring at her.

He suddenly spun on his heel and was before her in the blink of an eye. He bent down and kissed her lips fiercely. He couldn't imagine never seeing her again, and he refused to even entertain the idea.

"Rayne, I'll be back, I promise...." He drew away from her and parted, vanishing into the powdery field.

Rayne let the wind kiss her cheeks and burn her eyes until the tears froze to her skin. She could see fresh snow falling outside and she pulled back into the hallway. She hated how lonely the cave would suddenly become without Stryder. She wandered down to the end of the hall, peeking in at the sleeping dragon once. He was resting peacefully, completely unaware of the cold outside. She went back to the bedroom, but found again only a restless feeling that accompanied the emptiness.

She paced and went in to see Unisys. He nickered a soft greeting, and she was delighted for his company. He made her feel a little less alone. She picked up a brush and began to comb his black coat. She needed something to pass the time, something to fill the void around her. She brushed the stallion until his coat was gleaming like black ice, and she stood back to admire him. His mane and tail were thoroughly brushed out, hanging on him like strands of silk, and his coat was immaculate.

Once she was certain that there was nothing left of him to brush she moved on to a piece of hide that she had been working on. She didn't know what she would use it for yet, and as she held the large hide in her hand she looked at the black horse. When the weather was warmer he liked to play in the snow. Perhaps he could use a blanket that would keep him warm and dry while he played.

She walked over to the stallion and gingerly placed the blanket over his back. She expected him to shy away but he stayed calm and stood firm, fully trusting her not to harm him. The hide was large enough for him; she just had to figure out a way to secure it to him. She gave him an appreciative pat for holding still and went back into the bedroom to figure out the details of her project.

Night fell and Stryder had yet to return. It wasn't unusual for him to be gone for several days at a time, but it didn't ease her worry any. At one time he had been gone for nearly a week, and she was certain that he was never coming back. She was so relieved to see him that by the time he returned she grabbed him and drug him down to the floor in the hallway and made love to him right there on the ground. It had become a ritualistic habit for her to throw herself into his arms right when he got home. She missed him so much when he was gone that all she wanted to do when he returned was hold onto him.

She tugged at the fibers of the blanket as she nestled into the empty bed. The space beside her was bare and she stroked it mechanically. She tossed and turned, unable to sleep without a warm body beside her. She finally threw the blankets from her and went into the adjoining room. She found the dark sofa beside the wall, shifting the chains that had held her for so long as she lay down.

She hated this loneliness; it gave her too much time to think. She started to wonder what her family was doing, and how her mother was faring in the winter weather. She had to put more faith in them. They would live on without her, her sister would make her mother's medicine, and she would be fine. Rayne let her misty eyes travel over the room.

Unisys was already lying on the floor in a bed of half eaten straw. This room was slightly colder due to the exposed opening in the wall that led to the stallions pasture, but at least she wasn't alone. She watched the flames flickering in the hearth against the wall and got up to throw more pieces of wood on it before lying back down. She closed her eyes and tried to dream. There was an aching in her stomach and she knew that it was just Stryder's absence dwelling in her abdomen. She could eat something, there was dried jerky and fruit in one of the small fissures that lined the passage, but she knew that wouldn't fill the void in her soul.

Her eyes fluttered open and she forced them to close again. She was falling in love with Stryder; she could feel it in her heart. She needed him more than anything, and when he was near her worries and her fears were lost. She wished he would come home, return his security to her, but she knew that it could be days before she felt that refuge.

There was something she feared even more than his failure to return, and that was his failure to love her as she was falling in love with him. She couldn't bear the thought of her feelings being unrequited, and if he was unable to feel for her what she was feeling for him she didn't know what she'd do ... it would be heartbreak.

Her thoughts were only squelched when dreams finally found her. She awoke the next day only to find that the cave was still empty, and she was surrounded by a feeling that could only be described as longing. She tried to fool herself into believing that it was cabin fever, and that the only reason she longed for Stryder was because he was her last human contact. It worked, but never for long.

The day alone gave her plenty of time to let her thoughts run wild. She even thought she found a way to prove her feelings for Stryder false. He was the only man that she had ever been with, and thus she had none others to compare him to. But in the end it didn't matter. She would think of the young men from her village, and other attractive, even stunning men that she had seen passing through. None held a candle to Stryder. None of them had the intense piercing blue eyes, the soft delicate wings, or the easy smile that he saved just for her.

She hated being a prisoner to her own emotion. The days were long and fraught

with worry when he didn't return. She awoke looking for him, she spent the entire day waiting for him while pretending to be too busy to concern herself with his absence, and at night she would lay on the fur covered bench wishing that he were here with her. It had been almost a week, she was sure of it, and she was thinking that he wasn't coming home. She pictured him lying somewhere on the mountain, injured with no one to help him, waiting to die.

How could he do this to her, after he promised that he would return? She swallowed hard. God, she thought to herself, *now she knew what her sister had felt*. She had promised that she'd be home, and she never returned. Her sister probably thought that she was dead. It was probably for the best. Trapped here away from the rest of the world she was as good as dead anyhow. She hoped that her mother had not worried too much, though she knew that she would have. Worry would only make her mother sicker, and Rayne's heart sank with guilt. She would be the cause if her mother were to agonize herself to death. She frowned. No, her family was stronger than that; they would find a way to survive without her, because they had to.

Rayne closed her eyes as she lay on the bench, only to snap them open again. It was dark out, but the full moon lit the white earth in a blue hue that twinkled off of the ice crystals like shimmering silver diamonds. She could see the picturesque view just beyond the black stallion, and it gave her something to think about in her dreams.

Rayne inhaled and closed her eyes; she had to get some sleep sometime tonight, she felt like she hadn't slept in days. She heard Unisys snort and stand to his feet, pawing the earth with a front hoof. He nickered lowly and Rayne shot her eyes open again. She jumped up. The horse had keen senses, and he always seemed to know when Stryder returned home.

Rayne flew from the room, leaving the bedroom as she ran into the hallway. Stryder was nowhere to be seen. She trotted down the passage, stopping when she reached her soft fur from which to stand upon. She peered out at the winter landscape. The moon was glowing down upon the land, lighting everything that she could see, but Stryder was nowhere within her sights. She waited and waited, leaning against the cold rock until she was shivering violently and her face had become numb. She finally relinquished her hold on the wall and retreated back to the bedroom, dismissing Unisys's anticipation as a mistake. He must have thought he heard something.

Rayne shook with cold; she was exhausted and sore from so many nights of sleeping on the dark seat. She took off her clothes and climbed into the big bed, snuggling into the blankets dejectedly. Sleep came quickly, but her dreams were still tormented. She envisioned herself alone, lost without Stryder and not knowing how to get down from the mountain.

* * * *

Stryder snuck into the bedroom. It was late at night. He could have camped outside for another night, but it had been almost a week and he was desperate to come home, so he had pushed on in the darkness. Rayne was sleeping and he didn't want to wake her, or at least, he didn't think he did until he caught sight of her. She was beautiful under the soft light of the cave. The blanket barely covered her hips, and she had one leg lazily slung over the top of the covers. He could see her small rounded bottom jutting out from beneath the furs.

He drank her in with his eyes, following her womanly curve all the way up to her

supple bosom. Her breasts were exposed and her nipples were hardened from the cold. They looked like they were aching for his touch. Her breaths were shallow, and he heard her whimper in her sleep. Her raspberry lips parted slightly and she looked troubled.

He noiselessly removed his clothing from his body and neared the bed. He slipped in alongside her, trying to be as graceful as possible so as not to wake her, and yet, a part of him *did* want to wake her. Whenever he returned from hunting she always greeted him enthusiastically. She would hug him, she would kiss him, and then she would practically tear his clothes off and make love to him any way that he wanted it. It was enough to make any man want to hurry home.

Just thinking about sex with her was enough to reflexively bring his member to life. His loins pulled and he yearned to grab her. He crept nearer to her, gradually slipping closer until he could feel her backside against his hardened manhood. He wrapped his strong arms around her small frame, keeping her pinned to him.

Rayne's eyes flew open. She felt the strong embrace on her, and the hard body beside her. She looked over her shoulder, thrilled to see Stryder in bed with her.

"Stryder, you're back!" She tried to turn towards him, but he held her steadfast. She frowned in confusion, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," He replied while nuzzling into her hair and her neck.

He reached downward with his hand, gliding over her smooth stomach and down to her receptive mound between her legs. His fingers delicately massaged her soft core, gently manipulating the rigid pink flesh that met his eager fingertips.

She moaned and rocked her hips against him, smiling with recognition now that she knew why he was not allowing her to move. He was so expert in his touch; he knew right where to stroke her to bring forth her arousal. She felt moisture between her thighs and she parted her legs, draping one awkwardly over his hip, silently inviting him to her welcoming depths. She felt like she was in heat, an animal driven by instinct desperately seeking fulfillment from her mate.

He gently used his finger to pry her open and explore her, being certain that she was ready for him before he invaded her. She was wet and cried out with his touch. He groaned, he couldn't hold out any longer and he thrust his ridged shaft up into her, sinking in her warm dewy inside as she shrieked in pleasure. He began to glide in and out of her, barely able to maintain his self control when he felt her soft buttocks grazing against him.

He grunted with effort, noticeably trying to keep from releasing his need inside of her too soon. He reached down again and began to fondle Rayne's sensitive core. She was swollen with desire, and his slightest touch made her moan and whimper, calling his name as she neared the brink of her satisfaction. He continued to slide in and out of her, expertly rubbing her aching part until she was gyrating against him, supplementing his hand with her own.

Rayne cried his name, she was so close now, and her whole body quivered with excitement. She felt him inside of her, lighting her with a burning fire as he stroked her inwardly. She moaned and tensed, feeling her satisfaction rush forward in a throbbing fulfillment between her legs. Stryder moaned throatily into her ear, roughly plunging into her as he filled her with his essence.

They lay intertwined in trouble-free silence. Rayne was content to have him hold her, and Stryder was pleased just to do it. He leaned over to kiss her as he pulled his spent

shaft from within her. A small gasp escaped her lips, brushing his as he placed his mouth over hers. He smiled and rested against her, falling asleep with his strong arms around her.

Rayne too was fast asleep before long. She could finally fall asleep without tossing and turning endlessly.

CHAPTER 14

The winter was long and hard for Rayne. Whenever Stryder left her she became homesick, and she hated to be so alone. When the weather was nice she would sneak outside and explore, but she was still far from home. She was relieved when the days finally began to warm, and the cold winter snow began to melt into the wet earth.

Suddenly the silent mountain had become awake with the sound of water spilling through the crevasses and filling the icy pools within as the snow capped peak started to dissipate under the spring thaw. The liquid snow was allowed to filter through the craggy mountain cracks, spilling onto the hard stone floor beneath or splashing into water filled pools as it fed downward. It slipped from the mountain, draining in a steady flow as it spilled out into the ebbing rivers down below where eager townspeople were awaiting its arrival.

Rayne looked into the open room where Drego was beginning to show signs of waking. He grumbled and puffed out clouds of dark smoke from his nostrils, every so often opening his eyes in little slits to see around him. The large fire that had warmed him all winter was now a pile of ashen wood and spent rock. It had died away almost a month ago, and yet the heat had remained locked inside of the cavern where he lay.

Stryder came up behind her and slipped his hands around her waist. She felt his warm breath on the nape of her neck, and it tickled her soft skin.

"Soon," He began as he nuzzled into her hair, "Drego and I will need to leave the mountain to collect the first four sacrifices."

Rayne pulled away from him, she didn't like that word ... *sacrifices*. It sounded so heartless, so cold falling from his lips.

"Why can't you come to another agreement with the Kings, Stryder? Why can't you demand cattle in place of women?" She turned to face him slowly, almost hesitantly, "Cattle would provide more meat than any woman ... and you would have hides, it wouldn't just benefit Drego, it would benefit you."

They had been over this conversation before, and Stryder had no way of making her understand his position. "It's not as simple as that, Rayne, and you know it." His eyes were compassionate as he looked at her.

"All you have to do is go talk to the Kings." She saw him shake his head negatively, and it angered her that he was dismissing her words without even hearing them, "Don't you realize what you're doing, the lives that you are helping to take away?"

"I do what I have to do to protect what is mine, Rayne!" He snapped impatiently at her.

She swallowed and backed away, "No, you do what you have to do because you're afraid of what will happen if you try to change things."

He glowered at her and his eyes were hard like blue coals, "What would you have me do, Rayne?"

"Talk to the Kings; make another agreement!"

"I have talked to the Kings, Rayne! My family tried to come to another agreement

with them, and do you know what happened? My father and grandfather were killed and the Kings threatened to terminate the agreement entirely! Who will protect Drego from hunters if that should happen, Rayne?" He inhaled deeply and looked away, "do you know how much a single dragon tooth will attract in coin?"

She shook her head numbly.

"I don't have to tell you, because you know damn well that it would bring more than you can imagine."

"No one would be foolish enough to hunt Drego!" She hissed, "It would be suicide and you know it!"

"How in the hell do you know, Rayne?" Suddenly he softened as he looked at her once more, "He's more vulnerable than you know. And for people who need money so badly, there is no danger too great to sacrifice life and limb for."

Rayne shivered as tears built in the corners of her eyes, her family was part of those *people* that he spoke of, "My mother, my sister, my little brother ... they live in poverty, and they always will under King Desoto's rule. It's not the fault of the poor if they should hunt Drego. It's the man who keeps them poor." She let the tears slide from her violet eyes, "My father *died* because of King Desoto. Our family was starving, and he was hunting for food ... on *our* land. But the King declared it his, and my father was executed for trying to provide for his family. So don't ever tell me about vulnerability."

"It's not just the poor who will hunt Drego, Rayne. Nearly every being on this island would benefit from Drego's death. The parents of the women that Drego has eaten want revenge, there are men who want to be heroes by declaring themselves a dragon slayer, and *everybody* wants the gold that a dragon's death will fetch."

Rayne's jaw quivered defiantly, "Who benefits from his life?"

"I do!" Stryder screamed in irritation.

"No," Rayne shook her head desolately, undaunted by his temper, "The Kings do ... and you know it." She looked up into his eyes. He was shaking, visibly thrown by her words. "The Kings need Drego to keep their followers obedient. If they should rebel the Kings threaten to terminate your agreement with them and unleash Drego upon the island. Your dragon has become the King's fucking guard dog. Don't let them forget who holds his leash...."

Stryder watched Rayne as she turned and left the room without another word, disappearing down the hallway. He heard Drego hiss, and when he looked at the beast he saw that he was awake, and listening to everything.

* * * *

Rayne peered around the corner of the cave wall. She could see the big dragon as he sat in the mouth of the cave. He was waiting on Stryder. His long neck turned, and he chattered softly when he saw her. She smiled, but it was a heavy smile, burdened with guilt and remorse. She had barely seen or spoken to Stryder since they had argued weeks ago, and she got the impression that he was avoiding her. Even now, as he brushed past her without a word, it made her feel unwanted, and somehow *used*. She cringed inwardly. She wanted him to feel the same guilt, the same pain that she was feeling. She looked at him and when she caught his stare in hers she was unable to keep her hurt inside.

"The only reason you kept me alive all winter was because Drego refused to eat me ... otherwise I would be as dead as the others, and as dead as the new *sacrifices* will be." She spat the words at him, forcing her pain upon him.

In the light of the mouth of the cave she saw him clench his jaw and narrow his eyes, he turned to face her. "You know damn well that's not the only reason that I kept you alive, Rayne."

"Right. You needed someone to keep your bed warm at night." She knew the implication of her words, and so did he.

In an instant he was before her, and his hand lashed out to grab her, jerking her out of the hallway and pressing her against him before she could escape. He glared down at her with his glowing blue eyes, daring her to say something more. She gasped mutely and looked up at him.

Stryder stared down at her. She was on the verge of tears as he held her tightly to him, and to see her violet eyes twinkling with the impending teardrops made him want to abandon everything. To hell with the Kings, to hell with their hold on him, to hell with the sacrifices, he had everything he wanted right here in his grasp. A gentle hiss behind him reminded him why he could never be so careless, and he eased his grip on Rayne.

He kissed her warm lips tenderly, it had been weeks since he had felt her embrace, and he wished that he could make this moment last forever. He smiled weakly and pulled away, "Time will make this right, Rayne. Be patient."

He walked to Drego, looking back once before he mounted the serpents back. Her cheeks were damp with escaped tears that trailed them. In time she would get used to the way things were, she would understand and she would accept it.

Rayne watched Stryder as he leapt onto Drego's back. The great wings over the giant's sides extended and with a thunderous flutter he had left her alone in the cave. She shivered against the resounding breeze that pulsed through the cavern and its recesses before retreating back into the hallway.

It didn't take long before she heard the sound of wind thrusting off of the walls, followed by cries of confusion and fear. She trembled inside; she knew what was going on in the minds of the women. Their screams of torment and misery brought the once peacefully quite cave to life again, brimming with new sounds of terror. It shook her to the bone.

She liked the peace of the winter solitude, and she liked knowing that she didn't have to share her new home with other women, particularly with ones who never seemed very hospitable. It was probably best if they were distant though, Stryder had already warned her against forming bonds with the *sacrifices*. She shuddered again, he made them sound like cattle, and they could never be cared for as pets because they were being saved for slaughter.

The wailing and crying intensified, echoing off of the walls as the women were brought into the little room on the opposite wall. Rayne heard Stryder telling the women the rules. She waited in the hallway, leaning against the cold rock walls and refusing to look down the corridor. Stryder brushed past her, but he didn't say a word to her. She looked up at him, puzzled.

"Stryder," She called to him when she saw that his back was turned to her.

He stopped and went rigid, but didn't turn, "What?"

"Why won't you face me?"

He turned slowly to look at her, and she frowned to see him. He was as white as a ghost, and he looked like he had seen one.

She searched his eyes frantically, "What's the matter? What's wrong, Stryder?"

“Stay away from the *sacrifices*, Rayne ... in fact; I want you to stay in the room for awhile.” He shook when he spoke, enhancing to her fear that something was terribly wrong, “Promise me that you won’t go out there, Rayne, promise me....”

She shook her head negatively, “I can’t do that, Stryder. I can’t stay cooped up in here all year long.”

“It’s not for a long time, Rayne, just for a little while, only a few months.”

“A few months?” She asked in shock, “How is that only a little while?” She gasped; he couldn’t ask that of her. She needed to be able to look over the edge of the cliff and see her family.

“Promise me, Rayne,” He pleaded.

“I won’t ... I can’t, Stryder.” She shook her head again.

“You will ... or I will chain you up again.” His threat was serious, but it was pained.

He didn’t want to do that to her, he didn’t even know if he could, but he had to keep her from seeing the other women. His eyes searched the birthmark on her temple, and he blanched.

“You can’t do that to me, Stryder. I ... I love you. How could you do that to me?” She stammered, hardly believing the words that fell from her mouth.

She meant it, she did love him, but this certainly wasn’t the way that she had planned to tell him.

Stryder went blank, and hurt flashed in his blue eyes. He didn’t know what to say, but he knew that the moment she saw one of the other women that her love for him would die in an instant, and he couldn’t lose her love.

He set his jaw, forcing his pain inward, “Stay away from that goddamn room, Rayne, please, for both of us, stay away from the other women.”

Rayne let her lip quiver with tears on the brink of falling. He hadn’t returned her words, he had merely warned her to stay away from the other women. She nodded in acquiescence to his demand as tears moistened her face. A warm hand cupped her cheek, and her tears were swiped away with the gentle caress of a thumb. She flicked her violet eyes open, looking up through hazy eyes at Stryder.

Stryder swallowed, wishing that he could kiss her tears away. He was always making her cry it seemed, and it hurt him to know that he was the cause of her pain. He took her hand and pulled her into the bedroom with him. He didn’t know if he loved her or not. He had never loved a woman before. He had never let himself. It was too risky where Drego was concerned, and he had become adept at shutting women out from his heart, it was the only way that he could do what he did for the great dragon. Rayne was no ordinary woman though. Somehow she had fought the hardness in his heart and made him soft for her. He pulled her to the bed, wrapping his arms around her hips as she climbed onto his lap.

Rayne clutched Stryder’s neck. She could feel his warm breath on her skin as she straddled him. He pulled away from her and cupped her face in his hands, and then took her mouth with his own, claiming her tongue as he kissed her passionately. His loins tightened, and he could feel his shaft rising beneath his waistcloth. His readiness brushed the material between her legs, and her soft cry followed by the rocking of her hips told him that she wanted him as much as he wanted her. If he couldn’t tell her that he loved her, he would show her how he felt.

He stripped her quickly, removing the leather tunic that she wore as he inhaled her sight. His mouth found her rising breasts as she panted against him, and he cupped her small buttocks in his hands. He slipped one hand between her smooth thighs, and was met by wet heat. He groaned and threw his loincloth off to the side, then grabbed her hips and impaled her urgently upon his shaft. She screeched in ecstasy, and began to jog her hips against him. He kissed her throat and nuzzled her collarbone as she gyrated against him, thrusting and grinding against his ravenous manhood as her cries rose in his ears. She clung to him as pleasure overwhelmed her, and he couldn't hold himself back any longer. He released his need into her warm depths, sending a course of pulsing heat to meet her own desire.

He clutched her tightly to him, never wanting to let go. He kissed her dreamily, feeling like he was asleep, and this was the sweetest vision that he had ever had. He pulled her down to the bed with him, closing his eyes as he held her fast.

Rayne opened her eyes lazily beside Stryder. She frowned. A voice had awoken her. It wasn't that the voice was loud, or even that it had said something that jarred her. It was the voice itself, it was *familiar*. She slid from the bed, untangling herself from Stryder's sleeping form. She dressed and crept out into the blue light of the hallway, tiptoeing down the corridor until she was peeking around the corner unnoticed. She forgot about what Stryder had told her, what he had begged of her. It was all lost when she saw what had awoken her. Three women were talking amongst themselves against the wall, while the fourth was left alone by her self.

Rayne gasped, and her lungs squeezed shut as heartache slammed into her stomach. She saw the birthmark on the fourth woman's temple. No, no, no ... she fought for breath but found only pain and tears. She whirled around and stumbled back to the room. Not Willow, not her little sister ... it couldn't be.

CHAPTER 15

Stryder looked at Rayne. He knew the moment that he had seen her that she was aware of his reasons for wanting her to stay away from the other women. He saw the tears streaking across her face, and when she released her pain and her rage upon him it felt like his world was collapsing. His heart sank and his stomach churned, he didn't know what to do. She had called him *selfish*, told him that he had betrayed her. Her words cut sharper into him than any knife blade could have.

Right now, though, her screaming was finished. Right now she only stared at him through tears as she sank to her knees on the floor, looking more helpless and alone than she had ever been before. He wanted so badly to make it right, but he just didn't know how. No amount of comforting would ease her pain.

"Stryder, *please* let her go ... you have to let her go." She begged as she instinctively clutched her tunic tighter to her body, clinging to the fabric for comfort.

He whispered painfully, "I can't do that, Rayne."

"Why not, why can't you?" She sobbed in disbelief, swiping away sniffles as she stared in shock at him.

"Two reasons ... one, I'd be violating the agreement between the Kings, and two ... Drego..." His voice trailed off, he didn't have the heart or the energy to finish his sentence.

"To hell with the Kings!" She cried, "And if Drego needs more to eat *I'll* hunt for him! Hell, if he wants to, he can eat me! Please, Stryder, don't let him have my sister." She inhaled a raspy breath, dropping to her knees before him and staring up at him in a moment that nearly tore his heart from his chest, "If she dies I'll never forgive you."

Stryder was aching, every bone, every joint; every part of him was in pain. To see Rayne in distress was more than he could suffer, but he didn't have a solution to make it right, either. And the thought of her hating him forever ...

"Rayne, this is the way it has to be." He held his hand out to her, pleading, begging her to understand.

"What?" Rayne was stunned; she couldn't believe what he was saying. "It doesn't have to be like this, Stryder. You can change it!"

"We talked about this already, Rayne," He told her indignantly, "This is the way it is." He saw the sadness in her eyes and he softened.

She didn't say a word, but dropped her eyes to the floor as pain and helplessness washed over them. He couldn't stand to just sit here and watch her cry, to see the hurt that he was causing her. He wanted to hold her, to tell her that it would be alright, but she had already told him that his touch would sicken her. He had to get away. He stood to his feet and walked past her through the hallway, walking through the cave until he found Drego in the mouth of the cavern.

The dragon chattered upon his approach, and the silver of the full moon glinted off of his rows of sharp teeth. The big serpent lifted something large with his front left leg, holding a shiny mass in his talon. Stryder stopped short, catching his breath in his

lungs. Fear seized his blood, freezing him where he stood.

“What have you done?” He questioned incredulously when he saw what the dragon held. “Are you that ignorant, that foolish, that *stupid*, Drego! Why would you risk your life for something like that?”

The dragon chattered rapidly and tossed his fish at the man. Stryder stood in wide-eyed shock. It was a large sea shark, only found in the great water surrounding the island. In order to get the fish Drego had to leave the mountaintop, and that was a direct violation of the agreement made between the Kings and his family.

“What if somebody saw you, Drego? You can be hunted and killed for such a violation!” He chastised, his voice wavering between rage and shock. The dragon chattered in response.

“I don’t care if it’s dark, there’s a full moon out, and you are still easily seen you foolish lizard!” He yelled at the great beast, who responded by sending forth another wave of chattering and guttural clicks, “What would possess you to risk your life like that, anyway?”

The dragon made one undeniable chirp, and Stryder felt his heart skip. “Is Rayne’s sister worth dying for, Drego?” The dragon jogged its jowls. Willow was not the one that Drego was concerned about. It was Rayne.

“Is Rayne’s happiness, her love for her sister, is that worth dying for, Drego? Is Rayne worth dying for?” Stryder watched the dragon as he hissed and swung his barbed tail.

The fish was a replacement for Willow, and it would keep Rayne happy to have her sister alive. Stryder may not have said it, but the dragon knew that he loved Rayne, and he would die for the woman his master loved, if necessary.

Stryder looked up, desperately pulling tears inward, and then he nodded. He had to bring Willow home, it was the only way.

Stryder turned and walked to the grotto where the four women were staying. He pointed to Willow and commanded that she go with him. She followed obediently, and he couldn’t help but chuckle. She was much more docile than her hot tempered Hellcat of a sister. She looked at him in confusion for a moment when she heard him laugh, but said nothing as he led her through the blue hall, leading her into a bedroom. She gasped and stared in shock at the woman sitting on the bed before her.

“Oh my god, Rayne, is that really you?” She asked in astonishment. She was so certain that Rayne was dead, she never thought that she would see her alive again, and even now, she wasn’t sure that she believed what she was seeing.

Rayne jumped to her feet and rushed to her sister, “Oh, Willow!”

Stryder stood back and watched the two sisters as they embraced and talked excitedly between one another.

He interrupted them, “I’ll take her home tomorrow night, when it’s dark out. It’ll be safer that way ... and it will give you time to spend with each other before she goes home.” He nodded to Rayne, and then slipped like a shadow out the door.

Rayne let her jaw drop in bewilderment. *He did care*; he was going to let her sister go home.

Willow grabbed Rayne’s hand, drawing both her attention and her shock away from the door. They shared stories about Rayne’s family, and about the world below the mountain. Rayne’s mother was unwell, and she hadn’t been able to work since the fall.

Willow was forced to put her life on hold. She spent her days hunting, cooking, and caring for her sick mother and little brother. When the Kings outriders took her from her home she thought certain that her family was doomed. Her mother would die without her medicine, and there would be no one left to care for their little brother. Their neighbors couldn't afford to feed another mouth, and the child would be left to fend for himself.

Willow wanted to know what happened that fateful day that Rayne disappeared and never came home, and Rayne told her about the King, about trying to kill him, and ultimately about ending up here in the dragons keep.

Willow sighed and looked at her sister. Rayne was happy; it was a look that she hadn't seen in her sister for a long time. Her purple eyes sparkled with contentment, and she still couldn't believe that she was looking back at those eyes which she never thought she'd see again. She shook her head and looked around.

"Rayne, where are the other women?" She asked when she noticed that Rayne seemed to be alone here with Stryder.

"There are none ... it's just me." Rayne sobered quickly from the euphoria of seeing her sister.

Willow frowned in confusion, "Why is it just you? Weren't there other women here with you?"

"There were others ... but now it's just me. The Death Drake won't eat me for some reason."

Her sister nodded solemnly. She didn't understand fully, but when Stryder walked through the room and her sister's eyes followed him tenderly she knew that there was more to the story.

"What about the dragon's rider?" She pried, bringing Rayne's eyes back to her own, "What's he like?"

Rayne blushed, realizing that Willow had seen her watching the handsome man, "He's very nice."

"You like him ... I see why; he is quite attractive." She smiled faintly and watched as Stryder left the room again, "Do you think he will bring you home, too?"

"I doubt it, Willow."

Her sister bit her lip absently. It was the answer she had expected, but it still hurt to hear it.

The rest of the night and the next day passed quickly, too quickly as far as the two sisters were concerned. Before either of them knew it Stryder had returned to the room, and he had a pair of leather reigns slung over his shoulder. Rayne scowled. The whole time that she had been here she never once saw Stryder use a bridle on Drego. She heard him whistle around the corner, followed by the snort of the black horse.

Stryder reappeared around the wall; he was leading Unisys behind him. He stopped to let the big horse eye the stranger who would soon be on his back.

Willow gasped, like Rayne she had heard the legends of the horned Pegasus, but she never imagined that she would see him, and she never could have fathomed his beauty.

"What are you doing with Unisys?" Rayne asked in confusion as her eyes darted up to meet Stryder's.

Stryder smiled warmly down at her, "Do you remember when I told you that there was a way off of the mountain, and that you just hadn't realized it yet?" He winked and

raised the horse's reins, "Well, my dear, here it is."

Rayne cocked her head and a sly grin traced her full lips. She had never once questioned if the stallion could be ridden, the thought hadn't so much as crossed her mind.

"Come on, it's getting dark out, and we should be going."

Stryder nodded to both women and led the black charger out into the hallway. He brought him to the entrance of the cave where Drego was sitting patiently, and when the dragon heard the clipping of hooves against the hard stone he swung his great head around to see where the cadence was coming from.

Rayne followed Stryder as he led Unisys up to Drego, leaving him standing beside the Death Drake. She almost expected the stallion to panic in being so near to the big monster, but he stood solidly without so much as flinching, as if he were used to the beast and knew that he was no threat.

"Willow," Stryder held his hand out to her.

She glanced back at Rayne helplessly, and she smiled half-heartedly.

Rayne was glad that Willow was going home, but a part of her wished that she could stay here, with her. She blinked away a tear from her eye, and watched as Stryder effortlessly lifted her sister onto the back of the winged horse. To her surprise Stryder suddenly turned to her, offering his hand. She stepped back involuntarily.

"Aren't you coming with to see that I get her home safely?" He asked when she stared dumbly at his hand.

"You're actually going to let me come with?" She asked as her eyes shot up to meet his.

"Of course, if I leave you here alone you'll find trouble." He flashed an affectionate wink, and she blushed while stepping towards him.

He grabbed her around the waist and set her upon the large horse before swinging effortlessly up behind her. He pulled her hips tightly to him, and wrapped a muscular arm securely around her abdomen. He leaned forward to whisper into her ear, and she flushed to feel the heat of his breath lick at her skin.

"Hold on tight and don't let go." He waited for her to put her arm around her sister's waist, "Willow, wrap your hands in his mane, and don't look down. Are you alright?"

She nodded rapidly. She was scared to death, but what else could she do than hold on tightly?

Stryder squeezed the horses sides with his legs, and the stallion lurched forward, racing out of the cave with giant ground eating strides. He picked up momentum as he sprinted through the meadow, running hard down the slope. Stryder felt Rayne's breathing catch; she had seen the drop off over the cliff ahead.

Rayne squeezed her eyes shut, she couldn't watch. She could feel the horse's muscles bunching beneath her as he rushed forth, and suddenly he leapt into the air. His muscles stopped tensing, and he seemed to be floating over the ground. She opened her eyes a sliver, and when she saw nothing but earth below her she slammed them shut again, holding onto her sister for dear life as she leaned into Stryder for comfort. The air current that was brought on by Unisys' waving wings brushed her bare legs, tickling her skin with a strange excitement. She felt her sister lean into her, much as she had with Stryder.

Moments slipped by to the rhythm of Unisys's soothing flight. Rayne hardly even noticed when he had so gracefully dropped to the ground, galloping forward as he strode through the dark meadow and on into the village. Before she even knew it he had slid to a stop, and when she opened her eyes she gasped in wonder to find that they were outside of the little shelter that she called home. She didn't question how Stryder knew which one was hers, and she didn't care.

Stryder slipped from the stallions back and looked around. The air was pitch and the people of the village had resided to their domiciles for the night. He inhaled gratefully; nobody would see the unusual stallion in the darkness.

He helped Rayne off of the back of the great horse, and waited as she guided her sister down as well. Willow ran into the home, lighting a candle within to bring it aglow with a golden flicker.

Rayne looked up at Stryder, drawing in a deep breath before she followed after her sister. Stryder accompanied her, but he stopped and leaned in the doorway as she continued further in. She looked back at him briefly in confusion, but he nodded and waved her off to greet her family. He was letting her see them again, and in that moment she thought it was the greatest gift that he ever could have given her.

"Rayne, is that you?"

Rayne adjusted her eyes to the light, seeking the source of the careworn voice. Her mother was lying in bed on a cot against the wall, and her arm was outreached feebly.

Rayne dropped down to her, taking her mother's hand in her own, "It's me, Mother." She fought to keep her tears in check, but they refused to let her hide them.

"Where have you been? What happened to you?" She wheezed and coughed in the course of her words.

Rayne watched through tear riddled eyes as her mother began to gag and choke on her own breath, hacking and lurching as the coughing spell gripped her. Stryder left his place at the door and suddenly he was beside her. He withdrew a jar from his cloak, and held it out for Rayne to see. It was a mist; cloudy fog was swirling within the container.

"Give her this and make her inhale it three times a day until it's all gone. Make sure you keep it sealed tightly when she's not using it." He handed the container to Rayne, who looked puzzled.

"What is it?"

"Its dragon's breathe ... a gift from Drego." He stepped away, pausing to bow lightly to Rayne's mother. The woman smiled feebly.

"What will it do to her?" Rayne questioned as she rotated the jar in her palm.

"It will heal her. It will open her lungs, and clear her chest. It purifies the body and cleanses the soul ... it's a rare gift, Rayne." He stepped further away, retreating to the doorway again.

He watched her as she turned from him and opened the container before her mother, allowing her to inhale it deeply before she replaced the lid. A small boy was just waking up on a bed against the wall, and he yawned dreamily, adjusting his eyes to the candlelight. His eyes focused on his two sisters. With a squeal of delight he sprang from the bed and bounded to them. Rayne scooped him up and hugged him dearly. She turned with him in her arms, and her eyes caught Stryder's as he watched her. She blushed and twisted, leaving him to admire the affectionate accord among the small family.

Stryder let the smile slip from his face. Rayne was happy here, this was her home. They needed her, and she needed them, more than she needed him. He watched her laughing and smiling. In the candlelight she was even more beautiful, something he thought was impossible. He wanted to hold her, to bring her to him, to leave knowing that she was still beside him and loving him. It wouldn't be fair to her though to take her away from all that made her happy. She was right, he *had* been selfish, but now was his chance to make it up to her.

He slid away from the doorway and into the shadow of darkness. He walked to Unisys and jumped onto his back smoothly. He couldn't tell Rayne goodbye. His heart would never let him utter the words even if he wanted to.

Rayne set her brother down; he was full of exuberance and questions as he turned his attention on Willow. She sighed and looked over her shoulder, and her smile immediately left her lips. Stryder was no longer in the doorframe. She spun around and walked out into the chilly night air. Unisys was gone, and so was Stryder. Panic struck her like lightning through her veins ... he had left her.

CHAPTER 16

Rayne stood alone in the doorway just looking up at the mountaintop. The bright sun was fading in the sky, and if she looked hard enough she almost thought she could see the shadow of a man overlooking the cliff. It had been aching weeks since she had been left by Stryder. At first she was confused, she couldn't understand how he could just leave her like that. Then she became angry, he didn't love her as she loved him, he couldn't have otherwise he wouldn't have been able to bear leaving her. But now, as she stood staring vacantly up at the mountain, she felt only a deep and profound sadness. He must have felt something for her to allow her to be back with her family again.

She sighed and started to draw back into the house, hesitating when she saw mounted riders loping through the fields towards the village with Red Giants plodding along behind them. It was unusual for them to be coming into the village at dusk when they should have been riding back to the castle for the evening. She withdrew into the shadows of the house, whatever their reason for coming to the village it wouldn't be good, and she knew by experience that it was best to avoid their attention whenever possible.

She heard the sound of hoof beats as they struck the dry earth, pounding along the worn village road as the chargers thundered over the turf. The horses snorted and stamped the dusty ground as their riders pulled them to a halt just outside. Rayne inhaled deeply as her heart began to hammer within her chest. Her amethyst eyes shot like nervous glassy jewels over to her sister, who was holding their little brother as she peered over her shoulder.

"What do they want, Rayne?" Willow whispered as the riders dismounted.

Rayne looked at the cot where her mother was lying. Her health was improving, but she was still weak, and in no condition to deal with the Kings men and whatever trouble they were seeking. She turned her eyes to her little brother. He was clinging apprehensively to Willow, the last time he had seen the Kings outriders they had stolen away his sister, and the memory had yet to leave his young affected mind.

"I'll see what they want. Stay inside." She ordered.

Rayne took a calming breath and left the house, stepping into the cool evening air under the orange sunset, "May I help you?" She questioned as a Red Giant came to meet her.

He didn't reply, but simply held out a rolled up piece of paper with a grunt. Rayne saw the seal of the King on the document, and she snatched it away from the ugly brute. She unfurled the article and read it, having to read it a second time just to be sure that she had understood it correctly. The King was demanding that her mother be taken into custody and imprisoned, all because she had not paid the King any taxes over the winter.

Rayne shoved the document defiantly back at the Red Giant, "This is ridiculous! My mother has been very sick! How in the hell was she supposed to work when she can hardly breath?" She gritted her teeth angrily, "You can tell the King that he will get his money soon enough!"

She started to turn away but the Giant grabbed her arm. She whirled around to face him, and her cheeks became as red as his with her anger.

"Get your filthy hands off of me!" She warned, but he held her fast. Rayne kicked him and punched at him with her free hand, fighting fiercely to escape his severe grasp.

Her struggling had brought several other guards to the Giant's aid, and as she was pulled away and restrained one of the guards suddenly stopped the conflict with a raised hand. Rayne swallowed hard, and her heart bombed into her gut. She recognized him. He was human, and by the way that he was looking at her she knew that he, too, recognized her.

The man glared at her after the look of shock had drained from his features, "You ... you're the elfin half-breed that tried to assassinate the King!"

Rayne glowered at him with an equal stare of loathing, and when she felt the Giant who held her relax his grip ever so slightly she tore her arm away. Her fist connected painfully with the jaw of the human guard, but the pain was well worth it to see him jerk back in shock. He snapped forward, fury flashing in his eyes.

His temper had improved little since he had last seen her, and he slapped her in return, nearly sending her to the ground with the force of the blow. The only thing that kept her up was the one armed hold that her captor still had on her.

Suddenly a young woman's voice cried out behind her and Rayne rolled her eyes, muttering under her breath and cursing her sister's boldness.

"Willow, get back inside!" She yelled to her, disregarding the ache in her face.

"Unhand my sister you ugly animals!" Willow ignored her sister's command and rushed forward to help Rayne, but one of the Giants backhanded her away, dispelling her to the ground with the force of the blow.

Rayne fought harder to escape these monsters, now more than ever she wanted to lash out at them, to kill every one of them. They would think twice before touching her sister when she was through with them.

"Guards!" The human yelled to the larger Giants as he pointed at Rayne, "Seize her! Take her to the palace, and then the King can decide her fate." He chuckled sinisterly before mounting his horse and turning his eyes tauntingly at Rayne, "Burn the home...."

"No!" Rayne screamed, "My mother and my little brother are in there! You can't destroy our home ... please!" She begged.

She was bound amidst her cries and flung over the back of an awaiting steed as her pleas went unheard. She could hear the man's disturbing laugh lingering in her eardrums despite the pounding hooves over the earth and the heavy breath of the warthog-like Giants that were accompanying them as she was taken away. Even as the horse raced up the marble road leading to the castle, all she heard was that god-awful laugh.

One of the Red Giants tossed her over his shoulder and brought her through the palace, finally dropping her roughly on her back to the cold stone floor with such roughness that her head bounced off of the marble beneath her. Her hands were unbound and the Giant stepped back.

Rayne rolled with a grimace and saw bare feet before her face. She looked up to see the King staring down at her with a puzzled expression. Suddenly his face went ashen, and for a moment it looked like he had seen a ghost. He frowned as wrath tightened his round jaw, and he mechanically reached up to touch the side of his face. His

fingers traced the scarred and disfigured flesh where he had been burned.

“What are you doing still alive?” he hissed.

Rayne didn’t answer, but moved to get up. She drew her knees underneath her and thought about her defenses. The Giant had a sword against his hip, and if she could just grab it she might be able to fight her way out of the situation that she found herself in.

The King could see the deliberation in her eyes, and he knew from past experience that she was a loaded gun waiting to go off in his face. He snapped his fingers and ordered to the guard.

“Take her to the dungeon!” He glared at her as the red being grabbed her snow white hair and yanked her to her feet, “Tomorrow she will die.”

Rayne raised her chin defiantly. She wasn’t about to let him take her life so easily when she had lived this long. With her arms still carelessly free she reached back and stole the Giant’s sword, swinging it around and slicing the brute’s abdomen. He grunted and released her as he stepped back defensively. His skin was thick, and the injury was merely a flesh wound to his tough hide.

“You insolent fool, grab her!” The King hollered at him when he remained dumbly holding his gut in surprise.

The Giant snapped out of his stupor, and just as Rayne turned to wield her weapon on King Desoto he grabbed her wrist, detaining the sword blade just inches from the King’s vulnerable throat.

The King growled irately, pretending not to notice the sharp silver edge of the blade beside his skin, “Tell the executioner that I will dispose of this one myself.”

Rayne fought with every ounce of remaining strength that she had left as the Red Giant drug her away to await her fate. She hardly noticed the direction he took or the walls and hallways they passed as she thrashed wildly under his restraint. She even took to biting his hands when he refused to release her wrists against her kicking and flailing. She regretted it immediately. The beast was as vile tasting as he looked, and his hard skin was unfazed by her small teeth. She tried to spit the dank bitter taste from her tongue and mouth to no avail. Even as the brute chained her wrists and shackled her ankles to the wall she could taste the foul tang on her tongue. It made her gag and want to vomit.

She struggled against him, desperately trying to escape the heavy iron chains that he was fastening to her, but considering that he outweighed her by nearly four hundred pounds it was more than a little difficult to flee from him. He stepped away with a contented grunt and ambled to the doorway of the cell. She could see his broad shoulders as he stopped beside another Giant, guarding the entrance should someone try to free her.

She wanted to cry just thinking about it. There was no one that could free her in here. Stryder was gone, and she was left to live and die right where her hell had begun. Her home was burned, and maybe her family had been too. She didn’t have time to see if they had made it out alive, she was taken before she had the chance.

Tears burned at her eyes, and her stomach clenched itself into a painful knot. What if they had been killed, either burned alive or slain by the hands of the Kings outriders? God help the King if they had been killed. She clenched her jaw and swallowed her tears. As soon as she was free she would kill him, she would lop that fat little head of his clear off his shoulders. She would claw his eyes out, tear his throat out with her bare hands if she had to. She would have her vengeance.

She hung her head. It didn’t really matter if she were executed in the morning.

Her family was dead; she would be a fool to hope otherwise. The Kings outriders were merciless; they would have killed her family by hand if the flames didn't get them first. The man she loved had left her; he had abandoned her, left her to her fate. No, that wasn't true, and deep down she knew it. In his final act of kindness to her he had freed her from his keep, and returned her to her family as she had always wanted. In a way, it was she who left him. She was the one who wanted so badly to return home, it was he who fought to keep her while she was fighting to escape.

Rayne felt sick to her stomach. She missed Stryder, god how she missed him. She would give anything to feel his touch again, to feel his breath against her skin, to feel his lips against hers. But now, she would never see him again. He was lost to her, and she never even got to say goodbye.

She was ready to die. Her future was dim in life, here in the shadow of the mountain she would always be a peasant under the rule of a heartless King. In death she would be reunited with her family, with her father. Yes, she was ready to die, hell she welcomed death at this point. Tears slipped from her eyes in glistening beads of misery. In the morning she wouldn't struggle, she would surrender to her fate unflinchingly.

* * * *

Stryder scowled as he knelt over the ridge of the mountain. He could see the smoke trailing in a thin line into the sky, slithering clear up into the heavens like a long gray snake. Orange and yellow flames licked a small earth built hut in the tiny village. This was Rayne's quadrant, this was her village.

He reached up and gestured behind him, signaling the resting monster to his side. The dragon chattered and gracefully made his way to the edge of the mountain, looking down at the village with his keen green eyes as they became slits in his skull.

"Tell me what you see, Drego." Stryder demanded as he stood to his feet.

The dragon chattered, and Stryder felt his heart still for a moment. Rayne's home was burning, and it was no accident. The King's outriders were still there, making certain that there would be no survivors.

"Are you willing to die for Rayne, Drego?" The dragon snapped his jaws affirmatively, and Stryder leapt onto his back, withdrawing his blade from its sheath as he pointed to the village, "Let's get to it, then."

With that the big beast took off from his perch on the ledge, flying effortlessly through the air as he rushed down upon the village.

Unlike the horse the dragon was swift and streamlined, and he shot from the sky like a wind born rocket, crashing to the earth with such force and intensity that when he landed the ground trembled beneath him.

The King's outriders stumbled over the quaking ground, and their horses bolted leaving them stranded before the dragon. Drego drew back and inhaled a deep air sucking breath. The Kings men stared in shock, immobile even as the beast exhaled, sending forth a great burst of flame that consumed them in a wash of blazing death.

Stryder jumped from Drego's back and looked through the smoke and flame that was engulfing the home. Rayne's little brother was crying in the doorway confused. His face was covered in soot and ash, and he was red with a kiss of flame. Stryder grabbed the child and handed him to the dragon, ordering him to keep the boy away from the fire.

He could hear Willow pleading with her mother inside, trying to help her to escape the heat of the blaze, and he plunged inside. The smoke burned at his eyes and his

lungs, and if he hadn't been able to hear the coughing of both Willow and her mother he was certain he wouldn't have found them amongst the smog.

"Where's Rayne?" He asked once Willow and her mother were safely out of the home and away from the flames.

"The King's outriders took her!" Willow answered as she pointed helplessly to the road leading away from the village.

Stryder nodded knowingly and walked to Drego, taking the scared little boy from his grasp and gently handing him to his sister. The King would kill Rayne. He might not do it immediately, but he would kill her nonetheless, and this time he would be certain that she was dead before he turned his back on her. Stryder could only imagine the horrible things that the King would do to her. He would torture her, he would torment her and use her, and then he would execute her.

CHAPTER 17

Rayne followed obediently as the two Red Giant guards led her through the castle. She didn't fight or struggle, but her apparent submission didn't put the Giants at ease. Both of them seemed unusually cautious, as if they expected her to explode at any given moment. They figured that this was one of her mind games, a trick to catch them off guard. They had been warned and informed by the King himself of her crafty and treacherous ways.

But she didn't get angry, nor did she fight, and as they led her into the foggy mist of the morning she numbly complied as they left her to stand before the King.

King Desoto grinned jeeringly. He would finally have his revenge on the woman that tried to burn him alive. He looked at her with a pleased satisfaction that bordered on perverse sexual gratification to see her beaten before him. She was defeated, he had crushed her will. Her wild eyes had dimmed with surrender, and her entire being seemed broken, succumbing to the fate that he was all too eager to deliver.

Rayne bowed her head; she had no desire left to live, no reason to fight. The man she loved was gone, her family was dead, and her home was burned. One of the guards ordered her to her knees before the King and she dropped down without protest.

"It's such a shame that you are so much trouble half-breed, I almost regret having to kill you ... I would have enjoyed your many...." He trailed off as he looked down at her, "womanly gifts."

Rayne felt sickened by his words, but she didn't respond. She wished that he would just shut his mouth and get on with it--stop talking and kill her already.

The King snickered when she didn't act in response, and he grabbed the sword that was handed to him by a nearby guard.

Rayne felt the cold steel against the back of her neck as the King readied his blade. She heard him raise it into the air, and she closed her eyes to prepare for the impending strike. Suddenly the air whistled, and something zipped overhead in the misty fog. Rayne shivered as a current of wind gusted onto her exposed skin.

The King ignored the screaming breeze and let his sword descend forcefully upon its target. Rayne felt the draft cascade over her shoulders, and suddenly a loud crunch filled the air. The King's sword dropped. The edge of the blade slipped by her face, grazing her cheek and cutting her with the faintest scratch before falling to the earth with a metallic clang beside her. She looked up in confusion. The King was gone, vanished into thin air. The guards were looking in shock and awe into the heavens, mystified by what they had seen, and yet hadn't seen.

The earth trembled and shook, and unsteady guards fell to the ground in disorder. Rayne stifled a scream as a deafening roar bellowed through the fog. She saw guards running in every direction, screaming and yelling mindlessly. Some ran away, while others had their swords and weapons drawn and at the ready. Through the mist she could hear the slicing sounds of metal into skin, and the dying cries of soldiers and guards as they fell bleeding to the earth. She was in a daze, watching numbly as a shadowed figure

made his way through the fog carrying a double edged obsidian blade. He sliced and struck at the bold assailants who dared to challenge him, sending each to the ground with skill and precision as his sharp edge found flesh and bone.

He wore a hooded cloak that obscured his face, but when he looked at Rayne with his incredible blue eyes she felt her heart skip and tears of hope and relief sprung to her eyes.

He smiled warmly as he approached her, and a sharp snapping sound to his back made her look beyond him. He was being closely followed by Drego, who was using his massive jaws to snap up potential foes before spitting their limp lifeless bodies back onto the ground.

Stryder stepped to her in one graceful motion, sweeping her from the ground as he held her tightly against him. His lips found hers in a sweet and desperate embrace. He caressed and kissed her lips with a fevered passion that she had longed for every moment since he had left her.

Rayne returned his kiss, nearly taking him off of his feet with her enthusiasm. He chuckled against her lips and grabbed her waist, clutching her to him as if she would disappear forever if he didn't hold her tight enough. His free hand found her hair and the silky white threads tickled his fingertips in a tantalizing brush.

Stryder took a deep breath and pulled away from Rayne. His lungs were tight with panting breaths that escaped his excited lips, and an angry screech from Drego was the only thing that was able to tear his attention away from the woman in his arms.

Stryder looked behind him to see that Drego had one of the Kings men in his mouth, but the clever guard held a long spear upward in the great jaw of the beast. If the dragon were to bite down on him the weapon would impale the roof of his mouth.

Stryder gritted his teeth angrily, and with an irritated and defensive jerk he swiped the guards own sword from a sheath at his waist. He slashed outward with the blade, killing the guard instantly. The man's limp body slumped down in the dragon's mouth as his spear fell away to the ground, freeing the big monster to spit him to the ground distastefully.

The dragon chattered, and both Rayne and Stryder looked around into the foggy air. They were alone amidst fallen bodies and abandoned weapons. Silence settled over the land, and Rayne bit her lip apprehensively. Stryder had returned to save her life, but now he had done what she never thought he would. He had killed the King, and at this moment the very agreement that had kept Drego safe for all of these years was broken.

Stryder turned and looked into Rayne's violet eyes. She looked back at him speechless, words couldn't express her feelings. She was confused and frightened, relieved and so incredibly in love all at once. She parted her lips slightly, but in place of words came a disbelieving breath. She couldn't believe that he had come back for her, or that he had risked the unthinkable to save her life.

Rayne whispered the only words that she could find, "You came back...."

Stryder smiled and wrapped his arms around her slender waist, pulling her to him, "Of course, did you think that I would let you die?"

She frowned, "No ... but how did you know, how did you know that I was here?"

"When I saw your home burning I--"

Rayne felt her gut tighten with panic, and she interrupted him before he could finish speaking, "My family, did you see them? Are they okay?" She paled, waiting for

an answer that she desperately didn't want to hear, but expected nonetheless.

"They're fine, Rayne. But your home, it's gone. I'm so sorry, Rayne." His brows were heavy with sadness and regret for her.

Rayne exhaled gratefully, she didn't care about her home, she was just grateful that her family was alive and okay. She looked into Stryder's eyes, so deep and full of affection for her. There was no doubt in her mind that if her family was alive she had him to thank for it, just as she had him to thank for her own life. A tear slipped from her eye, and she blinked, looking down to escape the intense gaze of the man before her. She loved him now more than she ever had.

"Please don't cry anymore, Rayne, I can help you build another home for your family...." Stryder tried to comfort her, assuming when she hadn't said anything to make him think otherwise that her tears were for her lost home.

She cried harder as more tears followed the first, and a weary chuckle escaped her, "I'm not worried about the house, Stryder. It's you; the fact that you came back for me ... you saved my life." She wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders, clinging to him for support as she rested her cheek against him, dampening his cloak with her tears.

He pulled away from her and raised her jaw with his hand, "I would never let anyone hurt you, Rayne. I love you." Those words, words that he thought would be so hard to say came out as easy and natural as breathing, he didn't even bat an eye to say them. He loved her, and he would live and die for her.

Rayne swallowed and she flung her arms around Stryder, crying against him as tears of affection and love poured from her eyes, "Don't ever leave me again," She told him with a broken voice, "I've missed you so much."

He chuckled and kissed her marked temple, squeezing her tighter into him, "Never again, Rayne, I promise." He would do whatever he had to do to change things, and as long as she was with him he wouldn't have to do it alone.

Rayne sank into Stryder, inhaling his masculine scent and familiar presence as if this would be her last chance to. If only she could stay in his grasp forever. His arms were so securing, and she felt like she was right where she belonged.

Drego chattered to the side of her, and she mechanically reached out to rub his long scaly snout, "I love you, too, Drego." He made a low rumbling purring sound in response.

Stryder pulled away from Rayne, and his deep expressive eyes glimmered down upon her, "Are you ready to go?"

She frowned in puzzlement, "Where are we going?"

He smiled mischievously as he held his hand out to her, "We have three more Kings to do business with."

She cocked her head to the side, not sure that she knew what he was implying, but she took his hand trustingly, not questioning his plans. He led her to Drego's side, and she froze, bracing herself against Stryder's chest. He wanted her to climb onto the dragons back.

Rayne turned her head when Drego began to titter again, clicking his teeth together as he looked over at her by way of his long neck. She took a profound breath and forced her hesitant nerves to move. She climbed onto Drego's back. There were no reigns, no saddle, no anything to hold onto.

As if reading her mind Stryder gracefully leapt onto the winged beasts back. He

wrapped his arms lovingly around her taught stomach and pressed her securely against him as he whispered into her ear.

"I won't let go of you, Rayne, and I won't let you fall. Neither will Drego." The giant turned his head and chattered, as if to support Stryder's statement.

With a slow swipe of his great wings the dragon lifted lithely from the ground, gracefully rising until he was soaring over the earth with the fluidity that was notorious of his kind.

Rayne gasped and leaned against Stryder, reassured by his strength as he held her tight. She began to relax, noticing the differences in flight between the horse and the serpent. Unisys had been much more controllable, but his motions were surging and lunging as his muscles shifted beneath her. Drego was smoother; it was like riding on the wind itself, but he was unrestrained, shifting along the air current at will and with such speed that he was like an unpredictable rollercoaster. It scared her to death, and yet thrilled her beyond her wildest imagination. Her hair was whipping against the breeze, and her eyes were tearing as the wind tore moisture from them.

The dragon howled and slipped around the mountain, and Rayne looked down impulsively. The earth was hidden beneath a thick gray fog that covered the ground like a billowy hoar colored blanket. The dragon slowed, and as his beating wings eased he gracefully dropped to the misty ground.

Stryder leapt from the dragons back, and he helped Rayne to do the same. At first there was no sound, but soon the silence was replaced by echoed screams of panic, and the distinct clang of metal weaponry being engaged.

"Drego," Stryder yelled to his back as he grabbed Rayne protectively by the hand, "fly up to the top of the castle and wait there until I tell you otherwise."

The dragon bellowed and disappeared overhead, but it was clear when he had landed upon the great stone fortress. Rock fell from the castle, along with guards that had willingly jumped from the towers to escape the giant monster.

Stryder leaned into Rayne as he led her with him, and when an armed guard approached from the shadow of fog he pulled her behind him, shielding her with his body. He spoke before the guard could become aggressive.

"I don't come for war; I come to see the King of the first quadrant." Stryder addressed the man, who stopped short and appraised him before responding.

"Who is it that seeks the King Granger?" The guard's voice shook with fear despite his attempt to remain steadfast before the stranger.

The sun was starting to shine in the mid morning air, and the fog was beginning to lift from the ground. The man was now visible where he stood, and his expression gave away his fear and hesitation. He was as pale as a ghost, and when Stryder turned his powerfully demanding blue eyes at him the guard looked like he would faint.

"Tell the King that the dragon rider is here to see him." Stryder commanded the man, who spun around and raced up the stone stairway, disappearing from view behind the walls of stone.

Rayne inhaled sharply from behind Stryder, she saw a large man in a blue diamond coated robe descend the steps while being flanked closely by a whole entourage of bodyguards. The man was not so different from King Desoto. He was corpulent, and had an air about him that suggested great arrogance. When he saw Stryder, however, any hint of arrogance was washed away from his features, quickly replaced by reservation

and terror. He cautiously approached Stryder, stopping several feet from him.

"Stryder, the revered and secretive dragon rider, I am King Granger," he bowed unsteadily in greeting, "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

Stryder smirked with amusement, "We have a problem, your highness."

The King swallowed, and his brown eyes darted nervously around, "What is the problem? Have I not sacrificed the most beautiful women to your beast, have I not honored my promise to make sacrifices?"

"The problem, your Highness, is that my dragon remains hungry. Women are a poor meal for such a large beast. He needs something larger, something ... fatter."

The King didn't miss a beat, "So I shall sacrifice only large women, dragon rider. Surely this will resolve our problem."

Stryder had to keep his every bit of will power to keep from laughing out loud, "Actually, you're Highness, I was thinking more like cattle."

The King made an *O* with his lips, and bowed cordially, "Then cattle shall replace the human sacrifices."

Stryder bowed in return, and before he turned to leave he made one final note, "Oh and there is one more little thing, your Grace. These stone walls that border your land ... tear them down at once. From now on there will be no separating of the quadrants, all beings should be able to live in peace amongst each other."

The King chuckled nervously, "But dragon rider, how am I supposed to rule my kingdom if I have no boundaries by which to define it?"

Stryder smirked, "Your Highness, *you* no longer rule this land. From this point on you are merely a link to the people and myself. *I* rule this land."

Rayne thought she felt her heart stop beating from where she stood behind Stryder. What was he thinking?

The King tittered uneasily, and suddenly he raised his arm in the air, prompting his entourage to raise their weapons at Stryder, "Years ago your father and grandfather came to the four of us Kings, asking that we offer up cattle and sheep in place of women for a sacrifice. At first, we thought that this was acceptable, but later, we realized the folly of this plan. You see, Stryder, people, be they human or inhuman, only understand one thing ... and that's fear. If your dragon suddenly stops eating people, then there is no fear of him, and no fear of us as leaders."

"Tell your guards to put down their weapons." Stryder growled.

The King ignored his demand, "Your father and grandfather had to be killed for their foolish ideas and stubborn lack of acceptance. Do you know how easy it would be for me to kill you, and your winged snake? You don't want to become like your forefathers, do you?"

Stryder raised his finger into the air, pointing to the castle towers, "The same fear that you use to keep your people under your control can be used against you, Granger. King Desoto is dead, because he threatened to take away something that I loved ... now you are making the same mistake."

The King followed Stryder's outreached finger with his eyes, freezing in horror when he saw the dragon perched high above the castle, *his* castle. The beast was growling in irritation while keeping his narrow green eyes fixated on the group of men. The King stepped away, silently conceding his Kingdom to Stryder. The dragon could destroy everything with one intake of breath, burning everything before him with a lethal exhale.

Stryder watched as Granger removed his cloak and set it upon the ground, “My Kingdom is now yours ... Dragon Lord.”

Stryder smiled with satisfaction, stepping away as he signaled the Death Drake to him, “The castle remains yours. The job of governing the people and the land is still your responsibility, but remember that everything you do is done by my will, and if you fail me I will replace you with someone who will honor their people ... *my* people.”

The dragon dropped to the ground gently, shaking the earth and destabilizing the men as they fell to the soil floor.

Stryder waited for Rayne as she climbed back onto the dragon’s back, and he jumped up effortlessly behind her, turning his attention to Granger one last time, “Don’t forget to tear down those walls, governor.”

The ex-King stared in disbelief. He had only now noticed the woman that the dragon rider had with him. He looked around him at his bewildered bodyguards. He was no longer the King.

CHAPTER 18

Rayne cuddled into Stryder. She nuzzled his neck, reveling in his warmth and masculinity as he slept. He would be waking before long, and she wanted to hold him until he left to survey the land with Drego.

Stryder smiled and took her small hand in his, squeezing it as he rolled over to face her. He kissed her lips sweetly and dreamily opened his eyes to gaze at her. She was beautiful, absolutely glowing his Hellcat was. Her violet eyes looked lovingly back at him, and he kissed her once more. This time it was long and lingering as his tongue probed her warm and receiving opening. He let his hand trail down her collarbone and over the swell of her engorged breast, gliding down to caress her growing belly. He brought his hand down between her legs, gently rubbing her womanhood with delicate strokes.

Rayne moaned and rocked her hips against him. He knew right where to touch her to make her beg for more. He climbed over her and kissed her, working away from her mouth and on down to her moist place of pleasure. He tasted her on his tongue, and when she was thoroughly excited and ready for him he braced his palms on the bed beside her.

He kissed her abdomen gingerly and whispered, "I'll be very gentle."

Rayne looked up at him trustingly; he had never been anything but with her. She cried softly as he delicately plunged into her receptive warm interior, filling her completely with his desire for her. He began to glide tenderly in and out of her with loving strokes, caressing her from the inside as she gasped and cried against his mouth and his tongue as he kissed her fervently. She moaned into him, grinding her hips against him as he made love to her. She could feel herself reaching a point of release, slowly, gradually climbing a peak of pleasure.

Stryder groaned, quickening slightly despite his best attempts to hold his want in check. He was so close that he could taste it, and when she cried out and clung to him with a wave of satisfied pleasure he filled her with his own satisfaction, stowing her with his molten heat. He withdrew from her lazily and pulled her tightly to him. This was heaven for him. He had everything that he could ever want right here in his grasp.

Rayne heard the familiar chattering in the blue lit hallway, and it drug Stryder out of the bed. She watched him as he climbed to his feet and put on his clothes, and she decided to do the same. If she was in no condition to go out with him on his appraisal of the land then she could at least watch from the edge of the mountain.

She followed him hand in hand through the hallway, letting him lead her into the mouth of the cave where Drego was waiting impatiently for his morning flight. He chattered excitedly when he saw the two lovers approach, and paused only to receive an affectionate rub from Rayne. He nuzzled her abdomen with his long muzzle, and then quickly turned and stepped outside into the open air.

Stryder donned his black coat and waited patiently as Rayne put on one of her own. She smiled up at him when she was ready, and followed behind him while holding his hand as he brought her to the edge of the mountain top. It was late autumn, and the

weather was cool but not cold. The leaves were falling from the trees below, and there was a warm breeze on the air that ruffled them.

Stryder turned to face Rayne, raising her delicate jaw in his hand as he bent down to bestow a lasting kiss upon her lips. His hands became entangled in her hair, and he held her close. She smelled like the wildflowers that grew on the mountaintop.

He drew away with a wink, "I'll be back before you know it." He jumped onto Drego's back with a practiced leap, turning to her briefly, "Don't stay out here too long, Rayne." She rolled her eyes and he laughed to himself.

She would stay out however long she liked, she never listened to his request that she stay inside, she never had, and she never would. His wild little Hellcat would never be tamed, she simply refused to be.

Rayne watched as the dragon launched himself from the mountain, floating on the air like a weightless snake until his great wings began to thrust against the wind, sending him faster down over the land. She knew what they were seeing; before she was so heavily pregnant she had seen it, too.

It was a free land, being slowly rebuilt from years of poverty and war. There were no borders barricading one group of people from the next, and where the river once ran muddy it now ran clearer, cleaner due to new inventions that would purify the water. Wealth was finally known to more than just one circle of people. With the high walls no longer keeping villages separate from one another people were free to trade and buy the things that they needed, and they no longer had to pay a tax just to enter between the realms.

Yes, the land was improving. Still, she knew that the coming years would be hard. There was still so much that needed to be done, damage that needed repairing, jobs that needed filling, and even the people themselves, they needed healing as well. For years the walls had been up between the sections, erected after the wars had separated people and place. For some, bitterness was a taste that never left the soul, and it would take years of peace to undo the damage. But as Stryder had told her once, time would make everything all right.

She could see the dragon as he floated over the villages. The villagers would look up and watch the magnificent beast as he flew overhead, but they didn't run when they saw him, there was no fear, and no anger as Stryder had felt certain that there would be. No, if anything he was now revered and respected, praised as the cause of peace among the land. Many of the villagers even took pride in seeing who could raise the fattest livestock for the great dragon to eat before winter.

The ex-King's however, were not so fortunate. Their years of superiority and cruelty to their people had paid them back with irony. All three of the King's had surrendered their title as landlord to Stryder when he used Drego to remind them of his own status, but as Stryder had left them to govern the lands they found that their followers were quick to turn on them. Without fear to keep their minions under their collective thumb, each perished unexpectedly, all slain by members of their own sentinel.

The deaths left positions open, and Stryder appointed the people to find their own leaders, which they did, appointing trusted members of the villages to rule. Hence, men that were once poor and unrecognized were now esteemed, and with their own personal experiences from the past to lead them they did everything within their power to make certain those future generations would not suffer as they had.

Rayne watched the dragon swoop down over the castle of what used to be her quadrant. There was a new family living in the castle now, and she knew them well. She grinned to herself. Willow now lived there with their mother and little brother, and when the cold of winter would come, she and Stryder, along with the new baby would live there as well. She rubbed her stomach. Drego and Unisys would also stay at the castle.

It was ideal for Drego, since the mountain became so cold in the winter. The castle was roomy enough to accommodate his enormous size in the central room, and since the hearths were always burning he would be plenty warm. And for Unisys, the royal stables were now his home away from home. He was always surrounded by mares, and Rayne was eager to see if he was able to mate with any of them, and if so what type of offspring he would produce. She would love nothing more than to see a whole herd of horned Pegasus horses.

She looked on as Drego shifted his flight pattern to return home, and a mischievous grin parted her lips. She would be ready when Stryder returned. She would do her usual, the moment that he slid from the dragons back she would rush to greet him, and then she would kiss him with the utmost passion and adoration while making love to him wherever and however he pleased.

She stroked her swollen belly again. She wondered what their child would look like. Would the baby have wings like Stryder, lavender irises like hers? Would it have her family birthmark on its temple? She knelt down as Drego landed to the earth, causing the ground to shiver with his alight.

She stood with a smile as the dragon chattered excitedly at her. One thing was certain, she thought as she approached the giant and his rider, no one would ever make fun of her child or call it a half-breed, not with a pet like Drego to watch over it.

THE END